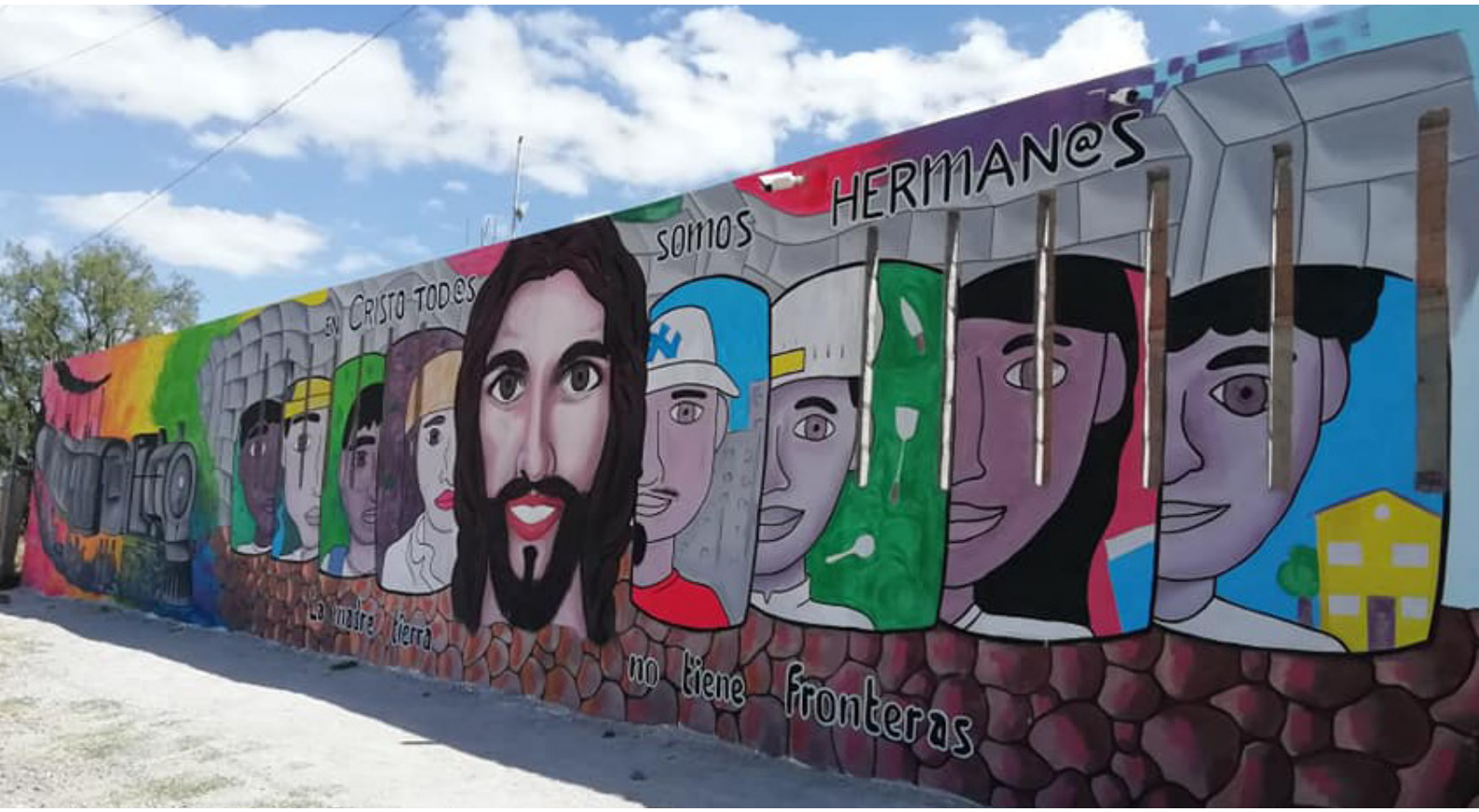
Migrant Shelters and Food Insecurity in Mexico City and its Metropolitan Area During the COVID-19 Lockdown

Fernanda Vázquez-Vela and Guenola Capron



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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically exacerbated vulnerabilities among migrant populations globally, and Mexico was no exception. This paper examines the experiences of four migrant shelters in Mexico City and its metropolitan area during the pandemic lockdown, highlighting how these institutions responded to the twin challenges of public health and food insecurity. The study draws on ethnographic and documentary research to analyse the coping strategies developed by managers and volunteers at the four shelters. These shelters serve diverse and particularly vulnerable groups, including undocumented migrants, women and children fleeing violence, and members of the LGBTTIQ+ community. Despite facing increased demand, reduced donations, and limited support from federal authorities, all four shelters remained operational during the pandemic, innovating their practices to ensure health safety and continued food provision. Strategies included modifying intake procedures, community-led cooking, rationing and adapting donated food, creating sustainable food sources, and seeking new alliances. The paper situates these responses within broader discussions of vulnerability and food insecurity, arguing that the resilience and solidarity displayed by shelter staff and residents during the crisis reveal the limitations of state assistance and the vital role of local actors and civil society. The paper underscores that migrant shelters are not only humanitarian lifelines but also transnational spaces where care, community, and resistance are enacted in the face of systemic neglect and intersecting crises. These experiences offer critical insights into how institutions navigated an unprecedented emergency and responded to the unique needs of mobile and marginalized populations.

Keywords

migration, food insecurity, COVID-19, shelters, migrant caravans, vulnerability, Mexico City

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Cover Image

Mural at the shelter entrance in Huehuetoca, Mexico, carrying the message of inclusion and tolerance: "In Christ, we are all brothers and sisters. Mother Earth has no borders." The mural depicts *La Bestia* ("The Beast") freight trains used by Central American migrants to travel through Mexico on their northward journey. Photo credit: Fernanda Vázquez-Vela

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Introduction

In early 2020, the world experienced one of its worst contemporary humanitarian crises due to the emergence and rapid spread of SARS-CoV-2. Following the declaration of a health emergency by the World Health Organization on 30 January 2020, many countries implemented policies to contain the spread of the virus, including mobility restrictions, residential and business lockdowns, mask wearing and social distancing, and the total closure of borders with other countries. Along with the COVID-19 health emergency came an economic global recession. Public health measures to control the spread of COVID-19 had major negative effects on economic activity, placing many migrants in a precarious situation. In 2020, the world economy shrank by around 3.4%. Gross Domestic Product declined by 6.7% in developed countries and 8.5% in Latin America (Statista, 2023). More than 26 million jobs were lost in the Latin America and Caribbean region, of which 80% (or more than 20 million people) left the workforce. This led to higher levels of work informality and insecure economic income. As many as 34.3 million people fell into extreme poverty during 2020 (United Nations, 2020). There was also a major increase in food insecurity across the country (Gaitán-Rossi et al., 2021).

In Mexico, the first case of COVID-19 was detected on 28 February 2020. The speed of the spread of the pandemic led the Mexican Ministry of Health to declare a national health emergency on 31 March 2020, introducing voluntary residential confinement under the slogan 'stay at home', maintaining the earlier suspension of schools and non-essential activities in the public and private sectors, and reiterating the need for social distancing (Dunn & Laterzo, 2021; Legier, 2025; Ramirez & Castillo, 2023). On 21 April 2020, the Mexican health authorities declared that the country was in Phase 3 of the pandemic, indicating that the transmission of the disease was already widespread. Mexico was one of the countries most affected by the pandemic, with around 7,633,355 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 334,336 deaths (World Health Organization, 2023). Furthermore, some estimate that there were more than 300,000 excess deaths, which would bring the total COVID mortality to more than 600,000 dead (Dahal et al., 2021).

Globally, the pandemic increased the vulnerability of all population groups (UNESCO, 2021:17) to food insecurity. However, the effects were "particularly strong for people in the lower tail of the food-insecurity distribution" (Smith & Wesselbaum, 2020: 2855). The impact was most severe in countries with weak institutions and in countries that were already dealing with various crises. Pandemic-related food insecurity in these countries forced many to search for alternative livelihoods, including through migration (Smith & Wesselbaum, 2020). Migrants were a particularly vulnerable population for various reasons. Many who leave their country of origin are forced migrants, whether due to violence, poverty, or natural disasters. The vulnerabilities they carry with them from their point of origin are compounded by the journey itself with its especially poor health conditions and traumatic stress linked to the violence to which they are exposed during their trip (Fernández-Ortega et al., 2024; Leyva-Flores et al., 2019; Servan-Mori et al., 2014). Other challenges include targeting by organized crime (Arista, 2023, Asmann, 2018; Hernández-López & Lucero-Vargas, 2021), malnutrition, fatigue, lack of legal protection, and violation of their human rights (Ramírez-García & Lozano Ascensio, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic further limited their access to health services and food. It also limited their mobility and access to temporary visas, asylum, or refuge.

This paper focuses on the impact of COVID-19 on human mobility in the migration corridor between Mexico and the United States. This corridor is the largest in the world, representing 3.9% of global migration and 11 million people in 2020 (CONAPO, 2022; IOM, 2022). Migrants transiting through Mexico used to be primarily from Central America (El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua). However, there are now increasing numbers of transcontinental migrants in this migration corridor (Amahazion, 2021; Mingot & Zepeda, 2022). People on the move generally cross the Mexican Republic in various ways depending on their migratory and economic conditions. Migrants without documents and with few resources do so on foot. Many use the train known as *La Bestia* ('The Beast') or 'The Train of Death' to advance more quickly, putting their lives at risk if they fall off the top of the cars. Throughout their journey, migrants generally live outdoors, taking shelter under trees or in caves, train cars, city squares, or parks.

The COVID-19 health crisis in early 2020 led to an initial drop in migratory flows (OIM & ONU, 2020) to and through Mexico as many borders closed. However, thousands of international migrants were also trapped on Mexican territory for two reasons. First, hundreds of migrants in the caravans of late 2019 and early 2020 were stranded in Mexico. Second, the US 'Remain in Mexico' policy meant that asylum seekers arriving at the Mexico-US border had to remain in Mexico while their claims were adjudicated. When the pandemic began, an estimated 60,000 people were stranded waiting for asylum in the United States on the northern border of Mexico (Romero, 2021). Shelters throughout the Mexican Republic began to receive many more people on the move than they could handle. There are studies of this period on the experience of shelters on the northern border (Bojórquez et.al., 2021; Bojorquez-Chapela, 2022; Coubès et al., 2020; Infante et al., 2022). But despite that, very little is known about the role and experience of migrant shelters in Mexico City and its metropolitan area during the pandemic.

Migrant shelters play a critical role for those who transit through Mexico. Along the migrant route in Mexico there are now more than 100 shelters. Many of these institutions started working after the legal reforms and a new migration law that took effect in 2011 (Angulo-Pasel, 2022; Wilson-Forsberg & Parra, 2022). Since then, migrant shelters have been protected spaces and small sanctuaries that offer various services, including food, clothing, legal guidance, and physical, mental, and emotional health support for this highly vulnerable group. During the COVID-19 pandemic, migrant shelters faced significant challenges in complying with health guidelines. Three important questions arise: How did the shelters in Mexico City and its metropolitan

area respond to the lockdown? What measures did they take to avoid the spread of COVID-19 among migrants in shelters? And how did they cope with the food security challenges facing migrants in shelters (Deschak et al., 2022)?

To answer these questions, this paper presents the results of ethnographic and documentary research which aimed to recover the testimony, narratives, and experiences of managers and volunteers at four shelters in the Metropolitan Zone of the Valley of Mexico: (a) Casa del Migrante El Samaritano (Migrant House The Samaritan, hereafter Bojay Shelter) in Bojay in the state of Hidalgo; (b) Casa del Migrante San Juan Diego (Migrant House San Juan Diego, hereafter Huehuetoca Shelter) in Huehuetoca in the State of Mexico; (c) Casa Fuente de Apoyo a Mujeres, Niñas, Niños Víctimas de Violencia A.C. (Source of Help House for Women and Children Victims of Violence, henceforth Women's Aid House) in Mexico City, and (d) Casa Frida LGBT (Frida's House LGBT) also in Mexico City. We chose these four cases to illustrate the varying circumstances of shelters with the greatest vulnerabilities, either due to their location, their form of financing or the groups they serve.

The paper highlights the new challenges shelters faced during the lockdown period and the strategies they developed to solve each health and food problem with the few resources they had and in the absence of government support during the COVID-19 lockdown (Bojorquez-Chapela et al., 2021). The paper is organized as follows: first, it discusses the concepts of vulnerability and food insecurity. Second, develops around Mexico City and its metropolitan area located as a nodal point within the Mexico-US migration corridor. Third, the importance of shelters for migrants in transit is explored. Finally, the pandemic experiences of the four shelters where research was conducted are discussed.

Vulnerability and Food Insecurity

The concept of vulnerability appears frequently in migration studies. It generally refers to a condition that implies fragility and weakness when exposed or susceptible to a threat or damage. Lydia Feito (2007) argues that there are two types of vulnerability: first, it can be "understood as a condition of fragility inherent to the human being, due to his (sic) biological and psychological being, and [second,] a socio-political vulnerability, understood as that derived from belonging to a group, gender, location, environment, socioeconomic condition, culture, or environment that makes individuals vulnerable" (Feito, 2007: 8). Thus, everyone has a certain degree of vulnerability due to the human condition. However, this increases and is amplified depending on (a) personal factors such as age, gender, socioeconomic level, nationality, ethnicity, mental and physical health, and legal and economic situation; (b) social, political, or cultural position within society, social exclusion due to belonging to a certain group, and political participation or its absence; (c) environmental conditions determined by nature, climate change, natural disasters and, additionally, pandemics. Depending on all these elements, individuals have a higher or lower degree of exposure to damage to their health and physical integrity or the risk of losing their lives.

The factors that reinforce a person's vulnerabilities are intersectional. Vulnerability may be due to age, gender, education level, nationality, ethnicity, mental and physical health, legal and economic situation, lack of information, low self-esteem, among other variables. And generally, several of these conditions are intertwined. The groups considered to have the highest level of vulnerability are women, children, adolescents, and members of the LGBTTIQ+ community, since historically they have experienced forms of discrimination (unfavourable treatment or contempt) and inequality (not having the same conditions or opportunities as other groups).

Individuals have both internal (emotional tools, experiences, and information) and material means (monetary resources, access to services, opportunities) to reduce the risk of harm. Without them, risk increases. Thus, it is important to examine the factors that increase vulnerability and their consequences. Institutions such as shelters also face forms of vulnerability, depending on where they are located, the nature of their financing, their care model and the group(s) they serve. During the pandemic, these institutions were more vulnerable than ever. However, they coped with their vulnerabilities by implementing various strategies, including changes in their organizational structure, their alliances, and methods of searching for resources.

One of the most important aims of shelters is to provide food to migrants in transit. During the pandemic, some shelters had severe problems accessing enough food and experienced severe food insecurity. Food insecurity is a multidimensional concept that refers to the economic and social conditions that limit or create uncertain access to sufficient nutritious food (National Research Council, 2006: 43). According to the FAO (2020), food security includes availability, access, utilization, and stability. Food insecurity is experienced when there is: "(1) uncertainty about future food availability and access, (2) insufficiency in the amount and type of food required for a healthy lifestyle, or (3) the need to use socially unacceptable ways to acquire food." The COVID-19 crisis and the policy response increased food insecurity. The most affected groups were the unemployed, workers in the informal sector and vulnerable women, children, and migrants (Smith & Wesselbaum, 2022). The experience of food insecurity also had mental and affective consequences. Worry and anxiety are typically the result of uncertainty. Migrant shelter managers and volunteers experienced these emotions and had to deal with the stress of whether or not to close their shelter. This paper shows that they embraced uncertainty and faced risk in a very particular way, through cooperation and solidarity.

Mexico City and its Metropolitan Area within the Migration Corridor

The Metropolitan Zone of the Valley of Mexico (Zona Metropolitana del Valle de México, ZMVM) includes Mexico City, 59 municipalities in the State of Mexico, and one municipality in the state of Hidalgo. All are part of a significant industrial hub that constitutes the central region of Mexico. Within the Mexico-US migration corridor, the ZMVM has

attracted increasing research attention (Faret et al., 2021; Ortega Ramírez, 2024). First, its location on the train route makes it a nodal point in the transit of migrants to the north. The train routes (often characterized as "The Beast") run from the south to the north of the Mexican Republic and pass through the central area. It is primarily a train that transports goods, but for migrants, it is one of the most important forms of transportation, as it is free. Migrants travel on top of cars in the open air, without any protection, at considerable risk.

Second, in April 2017, Mexico City was declared a 'sanctuary city' (Alejo, 2020; Mexico City's Government, 2016, 2017a, 2017b) and an 'intercultural space.' The Ministry of Rural Development and Equity for Communities of the city created the Hospital City, Intercultural and Migrant Care Program, under which many shelters receive assistance (Faret, 2021). The main support that the shelters receive is prepared food. And third, it is the location of all the important national and international institutions that migrants must deal with if they need to regularise their documents or apply for refugee or asylum status. For Vargas (2024), Mexico City went from "being a sanctuary city (internationally recognized), and "global city" to a "chronopolitical city": a space of forced waiting where migratory mobility is managed. Different government institutions implement practices that force migrants to stay for a long time, waiting for bureaucratic procedures. "This is a question of control that not only organizes the spaces through which migrants travel and stays [those cities where these institutions are], but also the times, the cadence and speed of mobility" (Vargas, 2024: 131).

Immediately before the pandemic, Mexico experienced the arrival of large and diverse groups of migrants in organized caravans. Caravans were a new phenomenon that represented a dramatic and highly visible change in how migration works (Marchand, 2020; Rosas-Lopez et al., 2023; Wurtz, 2020). In January 2019, a caravan of 2,000 people entered the southern border of Mexico. In October 2019, another arrived made up of 3,000 migrants. Then in January 2020, 600 migrants arrived in Chiapas. As noted above, another change in the migration corridor occurred when the United States unilaterally implemented its Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) in January 2019. Before the MPP, migrants could cross illegally into the US, request asylum, and be allowed to remain until they had a response to their petition. Under the new policy, known as 'Title 42', asylum seekers were returned to Mexico and had to wait there for an answer. More than 2.8 million migrants were returned to Mexico this way (Long, 2023), creating a huge problem for the Mexican government. Many shelters collapsed and some had to close in the northern border region. Migrants seeking to stay in Mexico had to go to Mexico City to begin the process.

This city, despite not being a border entity, occupies second place nationally (after Baja California) in terms of the volume of immigrant population, with 104,000 foreign residents, and 18% of the issuance of temporary and permanent residency cards (SEGOB, 2019-2020). During 2020 and 2021, Mexico City and its Metropolitan Area documented the largest number of foreigners' applications for temporary residence and issued the second highest number of visitor cards for humanitarian reasons. This card is valid for one year and the holder may work and transit in the country (except in the case of an applicant before COMAR, Mexican Commission for Refugee Aid, since he/she must remain in the state in which he/she applied for the procedure, in this case Mexico City). The total number of applications per person with refugee status initiated in Mexico City increased from 7.7 thousand in 2020 to 18.4 in 2021 (SEGOB, 2019-2021).

Migrant Shelters and Lockdown

Shelters are transnational spaces of intercultural interaction for migrants in transit and migrants looking for refuge. They provide opportunities for care, support, and reduction of vulnerabilities. Looked at this way, shelters link migration and the transnational ties built into human mobility. Migrant daily lives depend on multiple and constant interconnections across international borders and whose public identities are configured in relationship to more than one nation-state. Migrant shelters are the spaces where those interconnections and practices occur. As places of protection, they also face various challenges and face many vulnerabilities (Doering-White, 2022).

The first migrant shelters in Mexico were established in the 1980s as a response to the increasing numbers of refugees fleeing civil wars in Central America. These early shelters were mainly run by Catholic religious organizations and humanitarian groups. Prior to 2011, there were relatively few shelters, and they were viewed with suspicion and hostility by the state. After 2011, the new Migration Law (*Ley de Migración*) and the Law on Refugees, Complementary Protection, and Political Asylum (*Ley sobre Refugiados, Protección Complementaria y Asilo Poltíco*) marked a new approach to the migration phenomenon. Since migration and institutions that helped migrants were no longer criminalized, many more and diverse spaces of care for migrants emerged, with different profiles and purposes.

The COVID-19 health emergency put many shelters in crisis as they faced new vulnerabilities and had to overcome them. Some shelters had to close (EFE, 2021, El Universal, 2020). Others found ways to keep their work. This depended on their own unique characteristics, care model, and support network. However, all of them had challenges coping with food insecurity during the pandemic.

The Shelters on the Peripheries: Huehuetoca Shelter and Bojay Shelter

There are approximately 34 km between the Huehuetoca Shelter and the Bojay Shelter. *La Bestia* first passes through Huehuetoca and then heads toward Bojay in Atitalaquia. In addition to their strategic location on the rail line, both shelters sought to protect migrants from the high levels of local crime and complex problems that make migrants especially vulnerable. For example, Tula Refinery is in the area and the practice of *huachicoleo* (theft of fuel from the PEMEX pipelines of the Mexican oil company and its clandestine sale)

is controlled by organized crime groups. Drug trafficking cartels have also set up operations in the area. According to the report Organized Crime and Central American Migration in Mexico, migrants are extorted, sexually assaulted, kidnapped or forced to join their ranks (Leutert, 2018, 2020). Migrants represent an 'industry' that provides them with easy profits (Asmann, 2018). Between 2011 and 2020, the National Human Rights Commission estimated that 70,000 migrants were victims of trafficking and kidnapping in their passage through Mexico (Arista, 2023).

Huehuetoca Shelter

In 2012, the Huehuetoca shelter opened its doors as a Civil Association, which allowed it to receive donations. The shelter is supported by the Catholic Church, specifically the Diocese of Cuautitlán. It aims to provide services to migrants in transit for one to three days, so that they can rest, eat, bathe and continue their journey. The shelter has overnight accommodation for between 40 and 50 people. When caravans pass, they accommodate more people by lining the dining area with mats. They also offer food to those staying outside the shelter, which can add up to 200 people in a single day. If someone needs legal advice or companion to request refuge in Mexico, they have the support of lawyers. In such cases, a migrant can stay in the shelter for many months. Although it started as a shelter for men only, it now accommodates the increasing numbers of migrant women, children, and adolescents travelling alone.

The house is divided into two dormitories so that women and children can feel safer. The shelter also has very strict rules, especially for entry and exit to maintain security and because of the risks that migrants themselves face with human traffickers. Residents can only enter from 10 am to 5 pm, and once inside they cannot leave until the following day. Alcohol, drugs, and weapons are strictly forbidden. And residents are required to leave their cell phones, cigarettes, lighters, and medications at the entrance, which are returned upon their departure. Once they have left, they cannot return to stay another night. If they wish to stay longer, they must notify the staff. Many migrants find rules such as surrendering their phones and cigarettes irksome and prefer to stay outside the shelter and rely on it for food and water.

The COVID-19 lockdown in April 2020 took shelter managers by surprise. They quickly had to learn and implement care protocols. As one manager, Friar Lugo, recalled:

> *We had to reduce the number of people we accepted per day to 50% to maintain a healthy distance, especially in the dormitories. When the migrant brothers arrived at the house, the strategy was to check their health status. If they had symptoms, we isolated them from the rest or referred them to the health clinic. Despite the pandemic, the flow of migrants did not stop. More people took advantage of it to migrate. Very few asked us to stay for a long period of time* (Personal communication with Friar Lugo, May 27, 2023).

The activities inside the house did not change, nor did the rules. Before the pandemic, the house relied on the work of a core team, volunteers, schools and universities visitors, and members of nearby churches. During the pandemic, only the core team of four people and the security guard stayed in the shelter and stayed out infrequently to avoid infection. The volunteers, who are older adults, had to stay at home, and when school activities were suspended, the students also stopped going to the shelter as volunteers. This led to an increased workload on the core team. Several weeks after the start of the lockdown, they were exhausted by the stress and the activities they had to cover. On the other hand, since there were no visits from schools and members of the Catholic churches, donations decreased considerably, which caused moments of uncertainty about having the resources to continue with all the services:

> *We went into crisis on some occasions. We have an amount tagged for the purchase of food for a month and it ran out in 15 days. When this happened to us, we immediately asked for support from the parish groups, who at church services ask for donations. However, people were not coming out of their homes for masses and that complicated our situation. So, we had to ask the closest benefactors and our families. I was just asking God to give us health, energy and resources to continue our work, but it was very stressful period. We had to trust that God would send us help* (Personal communication with Friar Lugo, May 27, 2023).

Another pandemic challenge was that the area has a severe water problem. Therefore, the shelter had to pay for water tankers to ensure a steady supply. As Friar Lugo said, "This implies a cost that we have to assume, around 3,000 pesos per water tankers [around USD162] and we need 3 tankers a week" (Personal communication with Friar Lugo, May 27, 2023). During the pandemic, water was an especially important requirement because everything needed to be washed to maintain certain hygiene and cleaning standards. But in this shelter, they had to be careful about how they used the water. They only washed the sheets and blankets once a week and tried to disinfect the beds during the week.

The cost of all food products increased during the pandemic, forcing the shelter to ration their purchase. Before the pandemic, the shelter had relied on a food donation from the local central market, which sent it unsold fruits and vegetables. The donation arrived regularly on Fridays and had to be sorted and cleaned, as some products were rotten. The usable material was stored in the cold room to preserve it. This donation was maintained during the pandemic but reduced in volume. The shelter always had masks, sanitisers, and detergent as the diocese continued to supply these products. The municipality also provided some health support. For example, when there was an infection alert, the shelter requested the help of civil protection, who took the person to local health services. When someone needed to go to the hospital, a member of the shelter staff accompanied them to demand their care. As Friar Lugo noted, "if the migrants go alone to request the service, they are generally

unattended" (Personal communication with Friar Lugo, May 27, 2023). Throughout 2020 and 2021, the shelter had some cases of infection that they were able to control. None required oxygen or hospitalization.

The economic situation stabilized in the first half of 2023. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) gave the shelter a debit card for food purchases at the supermarkets. The level of support was around 20,000 pesos (USD1,080) every three months. "We use this money to buy protein to include in daily meals. We buy ground beef, chicken, sausage, ham, cans of tuna and sardines" (Personal communication with Friar Lugo, May 27, 2023). However, the pandemic crisis also made the core team realise that they had to build greater autonomy for the house. Therefore, they worked on a project they presented to a programme of the Mexican Episcopate that supports sustainable projects and won the funds to carry it out. What they proposed was to install a greenhouse in the backyard of the shelter to produce vegetables for their own consumption and for sale. They also want to have chickens and sheep so they can sell them. For Friar Lugo, this project emerged out of their shelter's experiences of shortages and crises during the pandemic.

Bojay Shelter

The Bojay Shelter began its work in 2012, but its profile and care model are very different from those of the Huehuetoca Shelter. It is located at a railroad crossing where the train slows down and migrants can get on or off. The shelter is primarily a canteen that operates from Tuesday to Sunday from 9:00 am to 2:30 pm (Fundación Aymer, 2021). The site where it is located is much more dangerous due to its proximity to the *huachicoleo* gasoline theft zone which makes shelter staff and migrants very vulnerable. Organized crime groups have threatened the sisters who run the shelter and have also raped some of the migrants. For this reason, it is only a transit shelter, and the National Guard stops by every day to check on security.

The shelter receives men, women, and entire families and directly addresses the greatest need for migrants in transit, which is food insecurity. It offers migrants breakfast and lunch, provides first aid medical attention, the possibility of sleeping for a few hours, showers, personal hygiene items, and clothes to change (Fundación Aymer, 2021; Martínez, 2023). Although the shelter has three dormitories and 24 beds, migrants are not allowed to stay overnight for security reasons. The facility is very small compared to the size of the Huehuetoca shelter and run by the sisters in the church of the Congregation of the Sacred Heart (Martínez, 2023). The house usually has a staff of 3 to 4 sisters, plus the cook and some volunteers. One of the sisters observed that "when there are no salaries involved, it is interesting how the commitment to care is greater" (Personal communication with Sister Luisa, November 26, 2023).

Despite its small size, the shelter can receive a caravan of up to 200 people in the morning and offer food. It usually serves between 700 and 900 people a month. At the beginning of the COVID-19 lockdown, the flow of migrants decreased considerably, although the arrival of unaccompanied children and adolescents was constant and increasing. However, within a few months, the flow was restored to its former levels.

> *We have not had overcrowding of migrants, the flow remains calm, with an average of 60 migrants per day, sometimes 30, 50, 20, depending on whether the agents of the National Migration Institute make raids where they seek to detain them* (Personal communication with Sister Luisa, November 26, 2023).

For Sister Luisa, the pandemic period had its ups and downs. First, they had to decide whether to close the shelter or keep it open. Resources have never been sufficient, and they thought that with the pandemic, supplies from donations would be cut and they would not know what to do. However, it was fundamental not to shut down because the migratory flow continued and the shelter canteen represented a rare place where people could have food, rest, and feel safe. "We will hold out as long as God allows us to," she said. Although there are usually only five people in charge of the work, at some points during the lockdown, only two persons were left to do all the very tiring work.

Second, to cope with the pandemic, they adjusted the way the shelter operated and implemented strict safety measures. In the first stage, entry to the shelter was limited and food, medications, and personal cleaning items were offered outside. In the second stage, the use of masks was made mandatory to enter the house and avoid spreading the virus. The groups of migrants entered in shifts to take food, bathe, and receive medical and clothing attention. In some cases, people with non-COVID-19 symptoms and non-serious injuries were allowed to stay. During 2020 and 2021, Sister Luisa said that they had no serious cases of COVID-19. Those who came with obvious symptoms of COVID-19 or required other medical attention were referred to health clinics for care. However, "the clinics and hospitals always deny them services. We must go and demand their right to receive medical attention" (Personal communication with Sister Luisa, November 26, 2023). Third, in the winter of 2021, the shelter extended its closing time from 2:30 pm to 5:00 pm. The flow of people had increased, and the weather exacerbated the health problems of many migrants. The municipality of Atitalaquia offered to send people to support the shelter services, but by the time they withdrew their support, it was back to its usual operating schedule.

The discrimination and abuse suffered by migrants continued during the pandemic. Sister Luisa noted that migrants were constantly persecuted by agents of the National Migration Institute (*Instituto Nacional de Migración*/INM). These officials did not allow migrants free passage and restricted their mobility, demanding that they obtain transit visas while continuing capture operations at concentration points. In 2022, the National Migration Institute (INM) officially reported the detention of 2,219 migrants travelling in passenger buses, while in the 2019-2021 period, only 1,377 cases were announced. (Belmont et al., 2022). Migrants are also abused by residents of the area:

> *The huge tragedy that the pandemic brought was that it left many migrants on the streets in this area. They didn't continue their journey and stayed here. Some of them are involved in crime, extortions, or they beg for money to survive. They also generate trash that they leave in their path. Neighbours are very angry for these reasons. They don't have empathy for them. When we have asked the neighbours for help in times of crisis, they are not supportive. With the pandemic, discrimination against them increased. Neighbours often seek migrants as helpers. For painting a wall, carrying things, cleaning or tasks that require a lot of effort. In return they are given a few coins that are not enough for anything* (Personal communication with Sister Luisa, November 26, 2023).

The Bojay Shelter is constituted as a Civil Association supported by contributions from its religious congregation, various Mexican and foreign civil associations, and local universities. However, during the lockdown, these contributions were less frequent or stopped altogether. At the beginning of the pandemic, vegetables were donated every week, but as the lockdown and lack of resources began to take effect, vegetables were only sent every 15 days. When this happened, the shelter went into crisis mode and asked their support network for urgent help. For example, the nearby diocesan seminary began to donate vegetables that improved the meals offered at the shelter:

> *The donation of vegetables gave our migrant brothers and sisters a better diet, but they don't like them. Our strategy to get them to eat the vegetables was to hide them in the food. We chop them small and mix them with eggs so that they can eat vegetables without noticing them. Generally, the migrants come already anaemic and dehydrated. For us it was important to be able to give them a balanced diet* (Personal communication with Sister Luisa, November 26, 2023).

The strategy that emerged was to chop the vegetables that needed to be cooked and freeze the rest so that the shelter could distribute it over several days. Another inconsistent source of donations came from nearby parishes and volunteers who visited on Thursdays. Sometimes they brought money or protein in the form of eggs, ground beef, chicken, sausage, and ham. If the volunteers did not come with a donation, then the sisters had to buy ham and sausages.

During the lockdown, the German Catholic Church offered a support programme, and the Bojay shelter applied successfully for the funds. This donation was very important to the survival of the shelter and continued until 2022, but uncertainty returned when the donation period ended. At the beginning of 2023, they began taking donations at masses in nearby parishes. Sister Luisa attributed this to divine assistance: "God always helps us, he never leaves us, when we no longer have anything, suddenly someone comes in a truck and gives us cans, beans, rice, or brings us bread."

As can be seen, this shelter has no certainty about its resources. But the community support network functions on a day-to-day basis to enable the shelter to meet its daily food needs:

> *This is a canteen. we always must have essentials like coffee, tea, sugar, bread, bread, cookies, powdered milk, jellies, cans of tuna and sardines, canned beans, water. When we find it difficult, we go to nearby bakeries, and with a donation of bolillo [a type of bread], we can make tortas [like a sandwich], or we distribute cans of tuna with crackers, cans of beans with a loaf of bread. We give them their bottle of water so they can go on their way, but we always try to give them something. We try not to leave them empty-handed* (Personal communication with Sister Luisa, November 26, 2023).

Women's Aid House and Frida's House: Attention to Women, Children and the LGBTTIQ+ Community

Discrimination and inequality generate various forms of violence, so migrant women, children, and members of the LGBTTIQ+ community are more likely to have experienced violence in their lives. Women's Aid House and Frida´s House are shelters that provide services that protect against violence, as well as provide tools for vulnerable migrants to regain their freedom and autonomy. In addition to being models of care for migrants, both are models of protection for victims and vulnerable communities. In other words, their profile involves much more comprehensive care.

Women's Aid House, Mexico City

Women's Aid House was established legally in 2012 as a shelter for women who have suffered violence in Mexico City. However women from the State of Mexico, displaced women from indigenous communities, as well as international migrant women began to ask for shelter. As a Civil Association, Women's Aid House is not part of any religious organization. Its organization is based on the basic guidelines that women's shelters must follow provided by the. Mexico City Women's Institute, a public institution dedicated to promoting gender equality, advancing women's rights, and addressing gender-based violence in the city. The care provided by the shelter includes protection, psychological support, and legal assistance. Generally, women stay for three months or more, until she has regained her strength.

Women's Aid House has had a stable structure since its inception, although it does not depend on any public sector organization for support. The shelter has a team that can provide psychological, medical, and legal support. Before the pandemic, it received a large daily donation of food from a major national bank. The bank donated food that was not consumed at lunchtime at its headquarters and was more than enough to feed the people in the shelter. The rest was offered at a low cost to households in the surrounding area. The money raised from the sale was enough to maintain

the shelter and all its expenses, including payments to a psychologist and social worker, basic services, rent for the building and salaries to the caretakers.

With the onset of pandemic lockdown, rumours began to spread that the shelter would have to close its doors, and its founder and caretaker, Beatriz Fuentes, became extremely alarmed. First, the bank cancelled the food donation it had been giving the shelter since 2012. The bank activities were reduced to a minimum, and there was no more preparation of food or leftovers to donate to the shelter. Second, there was no way to pay salaries and, due to fear of COVID-19 infection, all her staff resigned. Even when she was left without help, many more women asked for support. She and her son decided not to close the shelter and to take care of everything on their own. At the time, they had carefully managed their resources from the previous year and had savings that allowed them to pay expenses until June 2020.

The capacity of Women's Aid House is usually 35 people or between 7 and 8 families of mothers with three children. The pandemic had led to an increase in violence against women, and many of them decided to migrate (Salcedo, 2024). Therefore, they decided not to reduce the number of women they received. On the contrary, the demand was so high that they had to accept twice as many people as they were used to. During 2020 and 2021, they had between 70 and 80 people in the shelter, with more than half being newborns, children, and adolescents. During 2020, the shelter did not witness any COVID-19 infections as the 80 people who entered the shelter stayed there most of the year and strictly maintained the lockdown. Some women decided to continue their journey, and others arrived, all without being infected. In December 2020, the first infection occurred when a trans person displayed COVID symptoms. Her health situation was very grave; in addition to having COVID, she had diabetes and hypertension. As soon as she arrived, Beatriz took her to the Citybanamex Centre, a place of care during the pandemic for people with moderate to severe symptoms. She stayed there for some weeks and managed to recover.

In 2021, the shelter received many women from Guatemala and Honduras who arrived with symptoms. This led to the shelter's period of greatest infection. At one point, they had about 15 cases of COVID-19 among the 70 people who lived in the house. At that time, it was necessary to isolate them. Beatriz also asked the local health services of the Álvaro Obregon municipality for support. Her strategy to cope with the challenge was as follows:

> *I started to see the possibilities to apply a community work methodology. I didn't pull it out of my sleeve, there is a whole methodological procedure. The women were telling me that they had already gotten on "The Beast", they came with all the possible risks, what else could happen to them? They told me that they assumed the risks if they were infected with COVID, that I should please not deny them access to the shelter. So, we started with a new model. We all contributed to maintaining the house. We all put our money together for ingredients that were necessary. Some helped in the kitchen or taking care of the children, or cleaning. It was a very enriching time together, one with a lot of learning. The women were very supportive of each other and of the house* (Personal communication with Beatriz Fuentes, August 10, 2023).

The community of women inside the shelter supported the care of those who were infected. They brought them food, cleaned the space, washed the sheets, and watched out for each other so that they could take their medications. Two of the infected girls, a one-year-old and a three-year-old, were transferred to Tacubaya Paediatric Hospital and had to be intubated. They were hospitalized for a month until they recovered and returned home. As Beatriz recalled:

> *It was a very difficult time, they did not want to accept the girls, I had to fight with several people at the entrance and with the doctors. Migrants are discriminated for everything. I demanded the service. The girl is dying, she needs urgent attention, and you have the obligation to give it to her, the Constitution says so, there is an Interculturality Law, and this is a sanctuary city* (Personal communication with Beatriz Fuentes, August 10, 2023).

One result of the infection crisis was the implementation of new protocols such as testing people for COVID-19 on arrival at the shelter. Beatriz managed to get a donation of rapid test kits so that she could detect if someone arrived infected. Finally, in September 2021, "we managed to have volunteer support, and since then we have three nurses who take care of running the tests and taking care of everyone in the house" (Personal Communication with Beatriz Fuentes, August 10, 2023). At various times, the shelter ran out of money. The minimum monthly budget to maintain operations is 40,000 pesos (approximately USD$2,282). Beatriz loaned money from the bank in 2020 and 2021 to meet the basic expenses for services, rent, and was still paying off the debt in August 2023.

After a period of paralysis at the beginning of the lockdown, various organizations approached the shelter with offers of support. The first was Doctors Without Borders, which offered courses on social distancing, hand washing, hygiene measures, and basic elements of care in case of infection. They donated antibacterials, masks, and cleaning supplies for almost two years. The second organization to offer support was CAFEMIN at the end of 2020. This is another refuge for migrant workers in Mexico City, with a much more stable and solid network. CAFEMIN receives a lot of support and often distributes it among shelters with the greatest needs in Mexico City. Women's Aid House received donations in kind: rice, food cans, sugar, and beans from CAFEMIN. In 2021, the link with CAFEMIN opened the donations in kind. Other religious institutions throughout 2021 and 2022 began to send donated clothing. The shelter did not need all the clothing, so Beatriz thought that a good strategy was to sell the surplus at a street market. The strategy started to provide enough money to cover the necessary expenses of

the shelter. But this became another job for Beatriz during the weekend, in addition to everything else she had to do at the shelter. It turned out to be a good business but left her feeling exhausted.

The federal government did not have special assistance programmes or policies for shelters during the pandemic. Beatriz tried to apply to an existing program that helps shelters that work with women victims of violence. Beatriz had applied many times without success and again during the pandemic, when she also failed to get support. One of the reasons for rejecting the application was that the shelter should only protect Mexican women.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) also had support programs that they could potentially access. However, Beatriz said that "these are conditional on us ensuring that migrants do not continue their journey to the north but stay and seek refuge in Mexico," She observed that most of the women did not want to stay in Mexico, so she could not guarantee how many refugee applications the UNHCR would receive, which made it impossible to access their support.

In 2021, many institutions realized that they had to modify their model of assistance because the migratory dynamics had changed. Between August and December 2021, a considerable influx of Haitians started to arrive in Mexico City, many travelling in whole families, including men. Women's Aid House had only received migrant women and their children up to that point. However, Beatriz decided to become more flexible and accept entire families, men included:

> *That's where you must ask yourself, should I support the family institution? Should I adapt to the needs of the migrants? I decided to change our model and accept families. It was a learning experience. The family in some cases even included dogs. So, we received their pets too* (Personal Communication with Beatriz Fuentes, August 10, 2023).

At the beginning of 2022, she tried to revert to the original model of accepting only women and children. But this change only lasted for a couple of months as Venezuelans began to arrive in families.

When the bank's food donation stopped in early 2020, there was uncertainty about how to guarantee meals for migrants inside the shelter. During the second half of 2020, they experienced several crisis moments when they did not even have enough food. There was one week when she was completely out of money. Although she took out the bank loan to cover basic expenses, it was insufficient to cover the cost of food, so she went to the surrounding stores asking for help. One day the baker would give her bread, another she would get vegetables, and less meat in the local market. In addition, neighbours would arrive with prepared food. Farmers from Xochimilco (an agricultural production area within the city) also brought them vegetables. In early 2021, Mexico City's Secretariat of Inclusion and Social Welfare (SIBISO), which oversees community kitchens, offered to donate prepared food to the shelter. SIBISO has an industrial kitchen in the northern part of Mexico City, where food is prepared for all community canteens in the city that serve low-income people. Beatriz had to collect the food every day in buckets. However, the food is designed for the Mexican palate: that is, pork rinds in green sauce, rice with chilli, and other dishes. Migrants from Haiti or Venezuela could not consume this food because they are not used to Mexican cuisine.

The strategy that emerged was that the women who lived in the shelter were responsible for the work in the kitchen. Any group who was in the majority decided what to cook. The meals that came already prepared by SIBISO were seasoned to bring the food closer to what the migrants were used to. When the Haitians arrived, they took over the kitchen, and Beatriz convinced the rest to see it as an opportunity to get to know new dishes:

> *This was an interesting experience, to see the construction of our diverse community getting together as a family around the food. It was very tasty, I told the girls that now it was their turn to cook, and some of them helped and with what we had in the shelter, between cans and donations, they made magic every day* (Personal Communication with Beatriz Fuentes, August 10, 2023).

Other challenges related to the organization of activities for children and, in the absence of professional psychological support, generating mutual support and self-help groups when needed. Despite all the difficulties they experienced, Beatriz highlighted the solidarity and support that emerged between women and their families during the pandemic.

Frida's House, LGBT Shelter, Mexico City

Frida's House opened on 13 May 2020 and is an interesting case because it was a response to the increase in cases of discrimination, marginalization, and violence that people in the LBTTIQ+ community experienced during lockdown. Some of these people were expelled from their homes and communities and some became homeless when they lost their jobs. Initially, it was planned as a temporary project, which would only run for 40 days. They were not expecting that the lockdown would last any longer than that. A camp was set up in an office building from which they operated for two months. The staff in charge did not receive a salary and worked as volunteers.

The creation of the shelter was the urgent initiative of a group of people, led by the founder Raúl Caporal. They are organized as a non-profit civil association that seeks to support people in the community who "were left vulnerable due to the COVID-19 pandemic" (Ulises, 2022). The project is a pioneer in drawing attention to the community and to the model it applies. Theirs is a model of comprehensive care which they call the Protection Programme for Victims of Extreme Violence or Crime. Support is provided to any person regardless of nationality. Depending on the situation they are in, people can stay up to three months where they receive psychosocial support, medical and psychological

care, food, physical security, and legal advice. They also participate in workshops that promote cultural, socioeconomic and labour integration. The end goal is to integrate them into a job that will allow them to be economically independent. Cristian, for example, is the coordinator of the local integration strategy for migrants and refugees at home, although he is also involved in institutional development and fundraising. Among the seven or eight people who help in the shelter are doctors and psychologists who are also LGBT rights activists.

The shelter mangers soon realized that job placement was complicated because employers lack empathy with the community. Therefore, they created a programme called *Contrata LGBT* (Hire LGBT) that works to find safe sources of employment for the community and offers training to companies so they can build much more inclusive spaces. In a short time, they have been able to create a network of alliances with companies, a strategy that guarantees employability.

To support migrants, Frida's House created the 'Humanitarian Programme for LGBTIQ+ Mobility'. As part of this project, a second shelter was opened in Tapachula, Chiapas, to receive people fleeing their countries and seeking refuge for humanitarian reasons (Hernández, 2023). Currently, this is the largest programme of Frida's House, as that shelter receives around 200 people per month. They have an office where some of the migrants only ask for legal advice or representation in their migration cases. In mid-2023, Frida's House reached an agreement with the Mexican Refugee Aid Commission (COMAR) for a joint plan related to refugee applications for members of the LGBT community. The agreement includes training COMAR staff on how to assist LGBT claimants, to reduce discrimination, and to build empathy. Refugee procedures are still not simple, and claims are sometimes denied when applicants have a different gender identity than on their papers.

Half of the people who arrive at the house are Mexicans who need to leave their homes for safety reasons. The other half are migrants persecuted or criminalized in their countries of origin due to their sexual orientation. The shelters mostly receive cisgender gays, but also trans, nonbinary people, and lesbian women. Many are sex workers, some living with HIV, with nearly 30% between 21 and 29 years of age (Ulises, 2022). Many come from countries in Central America such as El Salvador where trans people are persecuted; from Nicaragua where all manifestations of LGBT pride are repressed; and from Guatemala and Nicaragua where same-sex marriages are not allowed (Villalobos, 2022). A challenge facing shelters is to extend their service to more people despite their limited resources and limited space. Frida's House in Mexico City has only 16 beds, but can accommodate up to 50 people on mats, especially during the arrival of a caravan. In 2020, for example, a group met in Tapachula, stayed at Frida's House there, and decided to migrate north in a caravan. Approximately 30 arrived at Frida's House in Mexico City. Unlike other shelters that limit their capacity, it was important for Frida's House to do something to accommodate them, especially in the peak years of the pandemic. Accommodation is offered to those who need a safe space, but not everyone needs to stay. Some only require medical or legal assistance.

Like Women's Aid House, Frida's House has a care model that seeks to comprehensively protect the person and provide psychosocial and legal support and tools for achieving economic autonomy. Between 2020 and 2022, Frida's Home helped 423 people, gave 514 psychological sessions, and served 51,120 meals (Villalobos, 2022). Their most important challenge is maintaining constant funding because this depends largely on the solidarity of civil society. The shelter receives in-kind donations, and some companies give them funds for one to three months, but generally, the support is temporary in nature.

During the pandemic, the shelter had to follow protocols to avoid infection while not denying service to anyone. It could not maintain strict lockdown because some of the residents had to go out to work, so entry and exit were not restricted. However, they had very few cases of COVID-19 and none of them were serious. Anyone infected was isolated and the staff took care of all safety measures. But the health of the shelter was and is much more than not getting infected; rather, it has a comprehensive approach that includes physical, emotional, and mental health. Frida's House care program conceives of health not just as an individual matter but also a community issue. For this reason, during the pandemic, it offered medical care and psychological treatment with the assistance of volunteer doctors and strategic actors that support the house. They also have alliances with specialized clinics such as the Condesa Clinic (which treats HIV and AIDS cases) and the Trans Clinic. The shelter has also made links with the private sector. Some companies donated masks, disinfectant wipes, and cleaning supplies during the pandemic. During the pandemic, they also initiated partnerships with pharmaceutical companies such as Genoma Lab, Organol, and Senofi who donated medicines to the shelter.

The shelter operates a food programme to try to ensure that the people they receive have food three times a day and that it has nutritional content. In other shelters, there is usually a cook. In Frida's House, guests prepare their food themselves with the aim of learning the skills to be independent, to know how to balance their food and manage their resources. For Cristian of Frida's House, cooking is an important intercultural process that, when shared, creates community. As there are various nationalities present, shelter guests learn this sense of community by exchanging food and dishes from their places of origin. The kitchen is viewed as the most important space in the shelter, as it is where complete strangers from different countries, who even speak different languages, talk, get to know each other, and become family, building a sense of care and responsibility among themselves.

Frida's House also has moments of crisis when they do not have sufficient resources to buy food. They faced the crises by replacing animal protein with cheaper and healthier alternative proteins such as soya and lentils, these products

are kept in the house in case any of the guests did not eat meat. The other strategy was to request the donation of prepared food from SIBISO. Frida's House received it for some months, but they cancelled the donation because "most of the time it came spoilt or in poor condition. It wasn't just one day, it happened a lot" (Personal Communication with Cristian, August 16, 2023). In the first half of 2023, the House also applied to the International Organization for Migration (IOM)'s special program for shelters and received a debit card to purchase food in supermarkets.

Conclusion

For migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and displaced groups around the world, the COVID-19 pandemic was a period that exacerbated their preexisting vulnerabilities. It limited their mobility, increased their stigmatization, and reduced their access to health services and food, especially for those travelling without documentation. They were seen as a population with a high risk of infection and spreading the virus. However, as this paper shows from the interviews in four different shelters, there was no rapid spread of COVID-19 among migrants and there were relatively few cases of serious infections.

As can be seen from the four cases presented, institutions serving migrants face multiple vulnerabilities, which only increased during the pandemic. Shelter managers had to deal with serious challenges and uncertainty in order to maintain shelter services. They had to find innovative solutions to the health emergency, the increase of migrants, the reduction or termination of donations, and the loss of the volunteer workforce (REDODEM, 2020). Despite these challenges, none decided to close their doors. What must be highlighted is the perseverance and determination of the management to maintain support for vulnerable migrants who needed their help.

One of the most important objectives of these institutions is to provide food for their residents. When resources became scarce, new strategies emerged to deal with shortages. Shelters had to participate in activities such as selling clothes at flea markets, raising money from volunteers and guests, borrowing money from banks, and asking neighbours and local shops for help. The big absentee was the federal government. In all interviews, the lack of federal government support programmes for shelters was mentioned, particularly in times as complicated as the pandemic. Although help was received from local clinics and public hospitals, the service was offered only after shelter managers demanded it, demonstrating that access to this right is not automatic for the migrant population. The local government of Mexico City has a shelter support programme for shelters; however, it only functions as a provider of prepared food. This helped in several shelters, but the type of dishes could not be consumed because Mexican dishes were not something that migrants from other countries were used to. Therefore, food was available but could often not be consumed. Sometimes, the migrants themselves oversaw the kitchen and adapted the prepared food to make it more palatable.

Managers at each shelter spoke of how complex the period of pandemic lockdown was because it generated much more work for the few who remained in charge of all the services. The situation left them physically, mentally, and emotionally exhausted. However, each said that this period brought many good lessons for them. The constant theme was the emergence of solidarity, cooperation, care, and community building in an intercultural context within these houses. They also concluded that what helped them cope with the resource crisis was the support of neighbours, local stores, religious communities, other shelters, their families, their friends, and the migrants themselves. The help of international organizations came only later.

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