

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Research: Rebuilding life at the border: assistance and attention to migrants on the Northern Border of Mexico<sup>1</sup>

#### Introduction:

This executive summary is intended to present the main issues and results achieved in the report *Rebuilding life at the border: assistance and attention to migrants on the Northern Border of Mexico*, held at the Madre Assunta Institute (IMA)<sup>2</sup>, a home of the Scalabrinian Sisters in Tijuana.

This research is part of a broader research program developed by CSEM since 2015, which aims to analyze how migrants and refugees live and face situations of risk and uncertainty, as well as the socio-pastoral actions developed in response to migratory challenges in border regions between Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo; Mozambique and South Africa; and Mexico and the United States.

#### Context:

The city of Tijuana, given its geographical location, has for many years been a center of attraction for people from all over Mexico and other Central and South American countries seeking a better life in the United States. Faced with a context in which most migrants lack family support networks, they are vulnerable because of unprotected deportation, susceptible to the action of assailants, border police and the indifference of society, IMA poses as a place of support and reference.

The IMA provides essential support for the reconstruction of the lives of women passing through. More than just food, there is a comprehensive care that involves medical attention, psychological counseling, legal advice, access to the media to contact family members, such as telephone and internet, and work grants. In addition, there is a personalized service that comforts them from the feeling of humiliation and frustration as a result of deportation, or sometimes because they cannot cross the border. It is estimated that 20,000 women have passed through the Institute since its inception in 1994.

#### Objectives:

Analyze the socio-pastoral actions carried out by the MSCS Sisters with migrants in border regions, specifically in Tijuana, on the Northern Frontier of Mexico, from the Madre Assunta Institute.

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<sup>2</sup> We use the abbreviation "IMA" to refer to the Madre Assunta Institute, referring to the Spanish name *Instituto Madre Assunta*.

### **Specific objectives**

- Analyze broadly the activities carried out by the shelters in the border region with migrants;
- Understand the specifics of the MSCS Sisters' socio-pastoral action;
- Highlight the good practices of the socio-pastoral actions developed by the MSCS Sisters with migrant women and children;
- Explore whether sisters' actions towards migrants develop autonomy and protagonism or relationships of dependency.

### **Theoretical aspects:**

The conceptual basis that scientifically underpins research is centered on the Protagonism of migrants and refugees (CSEM, 2018), the Core Guideline of the studies and CSEM research. Its adoption implies an understanding of people in mobility as subjects of rights, resilient and autonomous to make decisions about themselves and their families and to exercise their agency, with the ability to focus and transform the challenging situations that present themselves and their meanings.

By focusing on migrant women, the research assumes that their trajectories move between empowerment and fear; between processes of subjection and subjectivation (MEZZADRA, 2015). It also considers that the dimensions of vulnerability and protagonism go together, revealing the complexity imposed by migratory dynamics.

### **Methodological Issues:**

The research was developed methodologically from two main instances, both marked by an interaction between the theoretical and the empirical part. The first, called the exploratory phase, included contacts and semi-structured interviews with the Scalabrinian Sisters who had previously worked at the IMA, developed from August to September 2017.

After transcribing the interviews conducted in the exploratory instance, the systematization of the narratives was based on the identification of meaning core (BARDIN, 1997). Three meaning core were defined, which guided the process of constructing analytical categories, in a constant and interactive movement between bibliographic readings and collected empirical data.

- a) *Rebuild life*: refers to the moment of passage of migrants through the IMA, as a stopping point when faced with the need to decide the next steps in their life trajectories when they arrive in Tijuana, either after deportation or with the objective of crossing the border towards the United States. Understanding this core involves two perspectives: that of migrants – their migratory project, the trajectory they traveled and their passage through the IMA; and that of the sisters - their welcoming work, the Scalabrinian spirituality and the integral care they seek to offer.
- b) *Migration Industry* refers to the set of actors that provide services that facilitate, restrict or assist in international migration, what we call the migration industry (Sørensen, 2017)

and their relevance to understanding migration dynamics and flows. The research adopts a comprehensive understanding of the migratory industry, which includes both those actors who actually “profit” from the big business that has become migration – small business owners, facilitators, criminal networks, etc. – but also others who often play the role of governments and provide services to migrants, including assistance.

- c) *Gender*: which seeks to explore how this category focuses on the life and trajectory of migrant women and, consequently, about the demands and the service directed to them. Under this meaning core, it is considered the implications of the IMA being a specific shelter to receive women and the idea that the migrant should receive care that creates conditions for her to feel free to decide about her migratory project, for example. In addition, it suggests following the profile of the people served, as well as broadening the understanding of the gender category, beyond male and female, to include other gender identities in care.

These meaning core formed the basis for the development of the deepening phase, in which the field research was conducted in Tijuana by two researchers over a five-week period in the city, between January and February 2018.

The field research involved an ethnographic immersion within the IMA in order to observe the dynamics of care, the operation of the house and accompany the migrants assisted there. Observation activities, informal conversations with the MSCS Sisters, staff / volunteers and migrants at the IMA were held while participating in daily house activities (help with food preparation and distribution, cleaning, internal celebrations, etc.) as well as semi-structured interviews, which were made after a few days of coexistence, when the presence of our researchers came to be more integrated with the daily life of the IMA.

Another instance of the field research involved activities outside the IMA, in which informal talks, visits and observation activities were conducted at other institutions that provide care to migrants in Tijuana and that somehow dialogue with the IMA and the migratory reality. This look at the activities carried out by similar shelters helped to understand the dynamics of these institutions, as well as the specificities of the socio-pastoral actions developed at the IMA.

## **Results:**

The methodological path allowed the identification of good practices and challenges to the care provided at the IMA. The following are the main results of the research.

### ***Good practices***

- a) *Focus of action*. The fact that IMA is a shelter for women and children has made it a reference and a safe place where these people will have their specific needs met, which reinforces the credibility and trust in the work of the MSCS Sisters and other staff;

- b) *Integral attention.* Providing comprehensive care means welcoming migrants and treating them as human beings. That is, to support them in every way possible in whatever they need. This means offering multidisciplinary care that goes beyond the basic assistance of providing a place to sleep and feed. It includes spiritual counseling, medical care, psychological counseling, legal advice, access to the media to get in touch with the family, donation of clothing and personal hygiene items, referrals to other institutions if necessary and introduction to the job opportunities offered by some public agencies and city services.
- c) *Listening Service.* Many of the women attended go through traumatic experiences in their trajectories. Having a space, however temporary, where they can be listened to and met in their needs is important for the reconstruction of their lives. It is this listening service that makes every migrant feel welcomed and believe their stories matter. This method of work particularizes the work of the MSCS Sisters and refers to accumulated knowledge of reference for those working at the frontline in the care of migrants and refugees.
- d) *IMA's daily discipline and order* enables the interaction between the people assisted during ordinary activities, favoring the formation of social networks among migrants themselves, spaces for sharing and helping each other, and, furthermore, can help them in their own mental and inner organization, something valued by the migrants served.
- e) *Religiosity as a factor of reconstruction.* The performance of religious activities was considered important by migrants to cultivate, or even redeem, the faith. Therefore, it is an important tool in their psychic recovery process.
- f) *Respect for the ways of living the religiosity* not only of migrants, but also of employees and volunteers. Being a Catholic house that welcomes migrant women and children does not require people to participate in Catholic celebrations or practices in their daily life at IMA.
- g) *Fostering research and production of scientific knowledge.* At IMA, students and researchers or volunteers interested in migration find an opening for collaboration and knowledge production on the migratory theme, which, on the one hand, values the work performed there and, on the other, can contribute to the improvement of services there, to spread the work of the MSCS Sisters and to raise awareness of the rights of migrant people in society at large.
- h) *Network articulation.* The IMA is part of the *Coalición Pro Defensa de los Migrantes*, a network formed by some of the city's most traditional shelters, which is an important strategy for institutional strengthening, as well as to expand the range of services, as it can redirect different migratory profiles for the shelters that make up the network, redistributing the demands and thus focusing on its specific, which is to serve migrant women and children.

### ***Challenges***

- a) *Emotional health of those who provide the service.* An equally important point about direct care to people in vulnerability is the mental health issue of those who perform the function of welcoming, listening and providing. To maintain quality personalized service, it is critical that institutions care about the emotional health of all involved. Not only of the migrants assisted, but also the sisters, employees and volunteers.
- b) *New flows in migration: LGBT population.* It is a major challenge to care for migrants, which is to broaden the understanding of the gender category beyond male and female, to include other identities. Working with LGBT audiences (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) may be a relatively new issue for some institutions, which poses challenges for the service not only of the IMA but also of other humanitarian homes. The shelters themselves realize the need to have a specific space to give adequate attention to the LGBT community, and especially to those who identify themselves as transsexual, transvestite or transgender, and to report cases of prejudice and rejection by other sheltered migrants which makes it even more delicate to establish a more inclusive welcome.
- c) *Institutional cooperation.* Strengthening work with cooperation networks and other institutions linked to migrant care is strategically important and should be prioritized when making decisions about the distribution of work and setting priorities. The demands that come to the IMA, such as the case of LGBT migrants or women who are victims of domestic violence, which are urgent and need an immediate and humanized response, are concrete cases that can be passed on to the network and, in a way more articulated with organized civil society, it could be taken to governmental bodies in search of better public policies for the migrant population.
- d) *Projects and fundraising.* Developing strategies that balance IMA's internal care activities and provide other opportunities for alternative cooking and household care activities would allow them to break the cycle of sexual and racial division of labor, favoring women's reintegration into work. To achieve this, it is essential to increase the capacity for fundraising and institutional articulation to carry out longer-term follow-up and to guide the promotion of courses in Tijuana that open other possibilities for women to work, as well as taking up children's free time while their mothers can train themselves.

### **Final considerations:**

The comprehensive care service provided by the IMA is fundamental, both historically and today, in the face of an increasingly challenging situation, in view of the ever-increasing demand for care for migrants and refugees in such a complex reality as Tijuana.

Reflecting on the reconstruction of lives in this context implies considering emergency and immediate assistance as a fundamental element for the physical and psychological recovery of women and children who experience adverse situations and whose life projects are interrupted either by deportation or fleeing situations of abuse, violence and / or a context of poor prospects for life improvement for themselves and their families. On the other hand, it also involves

targeting the development of more lasting actions to enable these women to reintegrate into the Tijuana society, if they wish. Regardless of the choices they make about their migratory and life paths, the care offered at the IMA reflects the Scalabrinian Charism and ultimately seeks an intervention to promote the autonomy and protagonism of migrant women.