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**Intersecting paths: Vulnerability, Gender, and Migration.
*Mental health implications for migrant women in Latin America***

Relatore

Prof. Federico Zilio

Laureanda: Fadia Domínguez

Matricola: 2040728

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Abstract

This thesis critically examines the intersecting dimensions of vulnerability, gender, and migration within Latin America, focusing on the mental health implications for migrant women. With a particular emphasis on Venezuelan migrants and the perilous journey across the Panamanian-Colombian border, this work explores the complex factors influencing their mental health outcomes. I argue that the intersectionality framework, rather than labeling migrants as vulnerable, is the most appropriate for a deeper understanding of mental health-related vulnerabilities of migrant women. First, I describe the notion of vulnerability from the philosophical, feminist, and political perspectives. Second, I discuss the mental health impact of the migration experience, particularly the challenges migrants face and their resilience. Third, I present the topic of gender and migration, particularly the intersectionality conceptual approach and gender differences in migration stages. Finally, I analyze the situation of migrant women and girls in Latin America and the factors that render them more vulnerable, including the socio-political context, economic factors, gender roles, and gender-based violence. This study concludes that more gender-sensitive research that addresses mental health issues using an intersectionality framework is necessary, for appropriate interventions throughout their transit, which may prevent future mental illness and, ultimately, ensure their safety.

Keywords: vulnerability, gender, migrant women, mental health, intersectionality, Latin America.

Introduction

In recent years, the migration of women from Latin America has gained significant attention, not only due to the rising number of women and children crossing irregularly but also because of their heightened exposure to sexual and gender-based violence, discrimination, trafficking, and exploitation at every stage of the journey, all of which leave profound psychological wounds. Irregular migration is closely linked with elevated insecurity, particularly for women and girls, who encounter a persistent continuum of inequalities that not only limit their ability to exercise their rights and access protection, but also contribute to ongoing psychological distress. The psychological toll is compounded by the effects of contextual factors that characterize the region such as political instability, economic crises, gendered norms, and violence.

Many women move northward in pursuit of financial and human security. The ongoing crisis in Venezuela, marked by economic collapse and serious human rights violations, has become a significant driver of migration, with Venezuelans now constituting the second-largest displaced population globally. Limited resources and increasingly restrictive migration policies force many to migrate irregularly and without proper documentation which exposes them to serious risks. Lacking safer options, countless women cross the Darién Gap, one of the most dangerous routes in the world, spanning over 100 km of dense rainforest, steep mountains, and swamps between Colombia and Panama. Despite its extreme dangers, including mass sexual violence, hundreds of thousands of migrants continue to cross in the hope of finding a better future. In 2023 alone, Panamanian authorities reported that over 500,000 individuals traversed the border, with Venezuelans making up a significant portion of this flow. Women who experience abuse are often discouraged from filing complaints due to fear of being re-victimized by perpetrators, lack of information about available resources, and the presence of cultural, linguistic and systemic barriers, all of which allow abusers to evade accountability.

In response to these alarming violations of safety and human integrity, international organizations and governments have categorized certain groups including women, unaccompanied minors, and LGBTQI+ migrants as ‘vulnerable’. However, vulnerability is a vague concept that has traditionally been understood through individualized frameworks. This approach has led to policies and interventions that fail to address the broader structural

and systemic forces that shape individual vulnerability. The intersectionality framework offers a more nuanced lens for understanding how multiple and overlapping social categories, such as gender, age, race, and migration status, intersect and shape experiences of marginalization and inequality. In this context, intersectionality becomes particularly valuable for exploring the mental health challenges faced by migrant women in Latin America, as it allows for a comprehensive analysis that takes into account both personal and structural factors influencing their well-being.

This thesis is structured into four chapters. The first chapter explores the concept of vulnerability through philosophical, political and feminist perspectives. Philosophical approaches argue that vulnerability is a universal human condition, encompassing moral, emotional, psychological, economic and social dimensions, and thereby invoking a general moral responsibility to protect individuals. However, universal protection is impractical, as exposure to harm is not equally distributed. Political perspectives, therefore, focus on how vulnerability is exacerbated by social inequalities and how it can be reduced by systemic changes, moving beyond individualism to emphasize the need for structural reforms. Feminist theories integrate insights from both philosophical and political perspectives, with a focus on social justice and equality, particularly in understanding and addressing women's experiences of vulnerability. Feminism emphasizes relationality, theorizing vulnerability within the context of social relationships and power dynamics. One major contribution is Mackenzie et al.'s taxonomy of vulnerability, which challenges the notion that vulnerability is purely an ontological condition, arguing instead for a fine-grained understanding that distinguishes between inherent, situational, and pathogenic sources of vulnerability, recognizing both inherent and context-dependent aspects. Additionally, this chapter addresses ethical responsibilities involved in responding to vulnerability by discussing the theories of relational autonomy and the capabilities approach, both of which emphasize the importance of empowering individuals while addressing broader systemic factors.

The second chapter focuses on the migration process and its implications for mental health. It begins by defining migration and addressing the complexities of terminology, distinguishing between voluntary and involuntary, and regular versus irregular forms—categories that have raised debates due to the fluid and dynamic nature of migration. Following this complexity, the discussion moves to migration drivers, which are highly

context-dependent and intersect with factors such as age, gender, and geography, to influence migrants' decision-making process. The chapter further examines the multidimensionality of migration, exploring various forms, infrastructures and trajectories that capture the plurality of migration experiences. Subsequently, the dynamic relationship between migration and mental health is analyzed using guiding frameworks from the American Psychological Association, which emphasize resilience, an ecological perspective, and the application of a cultural lens. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory is particularly useful for understanding the psychological impact of migration, as it considers the broader contexts and relationships that either support or hinder adaptation. Major migration and displacement can cause trauma, though in some cases, resilience factors help migrants mitigate these effects. This chapter explores unique stressors pre-, peri-, and post-migration, alongside elements that promote resilience, highlighting the need for a holistic approach that incorporates social, cultural, familial, and economic factors. It also highlights the importance of empowering policies and psychosocial services that support migrants' autonomy and well-being. Lastly, the chapter addresses how vulnerability is conceptualized in migration contexts, cautioning against labeling migrants as inherently vulnerable and presenting a framework for its assessment.

The third chapter turns to the intersection of gender and migration. It opens with an introduction to key concepts and a review of the literature on gender and migration, followed by an exploration of the intersectionality framework and its relevance in understanding migrant experiences. Intersectionality reveals how various social categorizations such as race, gender, and ethnicity intersect, generating compounding effects on individuals' experiences. Its use remains essential in gender and migration research as it highlights the particular challenges faced by migrants and addresses the systems of power and social dynamics that influence these experiences. The chapter also explores how intersectionality can improve vulnerability assessments, challenging homogenized narratives about migrants. The final section discusses the relationship between migration, gender, and mental health. It contemplates gender-based differences throughout the migration journey, and the factors that impact migrant's mental health in the specific contexts of forced migration, including the role of gender in asylum processes, and the links between gender-based violence, vulnerability and resilience.

The fourth and final chapter narrows its focus to Latin America, examining the specific challenges faced by migrant women in the region. The chapter reviews regional factors such as socio-political, economic, and cultural elements, including gender norms and violence, which disproportionately affect women. It culminates with an analysis of Venezuelan migrant women and their dangerous journey through the Darién Gap, exemplifying the intersectional vulnerabilities they face. Drawing on Mackenzie et al.'s Taxonomy of Vulnerability and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the chapter explores their mental health challenges, emphasizing the complex ways in which gender, migration status, economic precarity, nationality, and socio-political structures intersect to shape their experiences and outcomes. This chapter argues that adopting an intersectionality approach enables a deeper understanding of the dynamic and multifaceted nature of their vulnerabilities and informs more effective strategies to mitigate these. It moves beyond individual-focused approaches to highlight how these vulnerabilities are intertwined with structural inequalities encountered at every stage of their journey.

Ultimately, this thesis aims to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on migration, gender, and mental health by advocating for an intersectionality framework. This approach acknowledges the diversity of Latin American migrant women's experiences while addressing the broader structural inequalities that exacerbate their mental health vulnerabilities throughout the migration process. By challenging reductionist viewpoints and focusing on the interplay of multiple social factors, the intersectionality framework offers a more comprehensive understanding of the mental health challenges migrant women encounter, thus providing a foundation for more equitable policies and interventions.

Chapter 1: Understanding Vulnerability: Philosophical, Feminist, and Political Perspectives

Human mobility has always existed. Mobility and adaptation characterize human beings and lead them to find new ways of existence. Migration is one type of movement that can bring new possibilities and change people's lives. As Glăveanu (2020) points out there is a profound connection between human mobility and human possibility, "mobility means transformation and moving leads to becoming. But what we become exactly remains open in the realm of possibility" (Glăveanu, 2020, p.4). Naturally, not all types of mobility carry positive transformations, there are also negative sides, like in the cases of human trafficking, displacement, poverty and inequality.

New approaches to mobility studies and migration emphasize people's need to make sense of their experience and integrate them psychologically (Zittoun, 2020). As individuals traverse borders in pursuit of better opportunities, gender plays a crucial role in shaping their experiences (Sharma et al., 2024). The journey of migration often exposes individuals to various risks depending on the context and other features like age, gender, race, and ethnicity. For instance, women may face heightened risk of gender-based violence, such as sexual exploitation, and trafficking during migration (Freedman et al., 2022). As these differences in migration experiences have become more evident, the global immigration discourse has evolved into a political rhetoric characterized by an emphasis on security that has led to the categorization of groups of migrants as vulnerable. Not having a universal understanding of what vulnerability is has complicated the endeavor of identifying individuals at imminent risk, and simultaneously, has failed to recognize the agency and resilience of some groups, like migrant women, who navigate these challenges daily (Freedman et al., 2022; Walter, 2023).

In this chapter I present a critical discussion about the notion of vulnerability. I will start by defining vulnerability in general terms and discussing how the term is conceptualized in different disciplines. Then, I will present theoretical frameworks to understand vulnerability: the philosophical and political perspectives. A special emphasis will be given to the feminist approach and its topics related to vulnerabilities, including the taxonomy of vulnerability developed by Catriona Mackenzie, relational autonomy, and the capabilities approach.

1.1 What is vulnerability?

The word is related to the Latin verb '*vulnerare*', that means wounding, the noun '*vulnus*', which stands for wound, and the late Latin adjective '*vulnerabilis*', translated in the form of 'vulnerable' into the English language in the early 1960s. A general use of the term correlates vulnerability with other concepts, such as damage, harm, fragility, precariousness, weakness, and frailty, and in connection with terms like need, dependency, care, and exploitation (Forbes-Mewett & Nguyen-Trung, 2019; Määttä et al., 2021; Mackenzie, Rogers & Dodds, 2014; ten Have, 2016).

The topic of vulnerability has been elaborated and used by diverse academic fields and disciplines such as human rights studies, disaster and humanitarian research, ecological and engineering studies, social risk management, public health and food studies, medical and health sciences, development studies, sociology, psychology, climate science, economic and political studies (Forbes-Mewett & Nguyen-Trung, 2019).

Definitions from online dictionaries point out the susceptibility to suffering. For instance, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, to be vulnerable means "to be susceptible of receiving wounds or physical injury; or to be open to attack or injury of a non-physical nature". Likewise, the Merriam-Webster describes being vulnerable as someone who is "capable of being physically or emotionally wounded". This interpretation of the concept, referring to the possibility of being hurt, is commonly used in medical and military settings. Aside from the physical and emotional harm, other features of vulnerability include economic, social, moral, spiritual, and psychological dimensions (Forbes-Mewett & Nguyen-Trung, 2019; ten Have, 2016).

In line with this correlation between vulnerability and suffering, authors Mackenzie, Rogers & Dodds (2014) address the question of what vulnerability is. In conceptualizing the term, they argue that it can first be described as an ontological condition of our humanity; "to be vulnerable is to be fragile, susceptible to wounding and suffering" (p. 4), recalling Fineman's 'vulnerable subject' that conceives vulnerability as arising from our embodiment, and as a universal and inevitable condition (Fineman, 2008). This idea is the basis of the philosophical notion of vulnerability. As a second argument, they highlight the social and relational aspects, focusing on the conditional susceptibility of particular individuals or groups to specific types of harms or threats (Mackenzie, Rogers & Dodds, 2014).

Vulnerability as a component of the social context is the basic premise of the political approach (ten Have, 2016).

The potential for harm also brings the opportunity for prevention and protection, which carries ethical implications (ten Have, 2016). On that account, bioethics has regarded and theorized about vulnerability. In general, it follows the philosophical notion of it being an ontological condition. Within bioethics, the concept has mainly functioned as an indicator to distinguish those who require special attention or care, for example, concerning the decision-making capacities of individuals. In essence, people are vulnerable if they cannot give consent because of their compromised abilities to make choices (Mackenzie, Rogers & Dodds, 2014; ten Have, 2016).

In his book *Challenging Bioethics*, ten Have (2016) argues that vulnerability is more than the contemporary bioethics view of diminished autonomy. He explains that globalization and a new language of vulnerability bring attention to the changing socio-economic conditions that often impair the decision-making capacities of individuals. Furthermore, he relates the concept with internal conditions, such as having a disease, and external ones, like lack of access to quality health care.

Compatible with this idea is Schroeder & Gefenas (2009)'s definition of vulnerability that combines internal and external elements. By external elements they mean being exposed to danger, and by internal elements, the inability to protect oneself. This perspective corresponds to a sociological framework that claims vulnerability includes at least two components. First, the exposure to shock, stresses, or disasters, which are commonly associated with external elements; and second, the lack of capacity within individuals who are contingent upon those events, which corresponds to internal elements. It is the interaction between internal and external components that produces vulnerability (Forbes-Mewett & Nguyen-Trung, 2019; Schroeder & Gefenas, 2009; ten Have, 2016).

Despite everyone being potentially exposed to harm, there are different degrees of exposure, and not everyone is prone to the same kind of dangers. Some groups are especially vulnerable because of their absence or diminished capacity to protect themselves, or by being exposed to several types of hazards. Vulnerable groups or vulnerable populations are categories to describe individuals that have specific characteristics that may put them in

disadvantage compared to others (Mackenzie, Rogers & Dodds, 2014; Schroeder & Gefenas, 2009).

These categories related to the concept of vulnerability have been used in different contexts. For instance, in bioethics, according to Rogers et al. (2012), the Belmont Report specifies at least three characteristics that make the criteria for members of a group to be labeled as vulnerable. These are lack of consent to research, raised susceptibility to extortion or coercion, and increased risk of harm. Additionally, in the Barcelona Declaration, vulnerability is mentioned as one of the four main principles that are considered crucial for making decisions in bioethics and bio law. The remaining three are autonomy, dignity, and integrity. These basic ethical principles are promoted within a framework of solidarity and responsibility, are grounded in the reality of everyday life, and seek to reflect a movement towards global justice and equality. Regarding the fourth principle of vulnerability, it is described as follows:

Vulnerability concerns integrity as a basic principle for respect for and protection of human and non-human life. It expresses the condition of all life as able to be hurt, wounded and killed. Vulnerability concerns animals and all self-organizing life in the world, and for the human community it must be considered as a universal expression of the human condition [...] Respect for vulnerability is not a demand for perfect and immortal life, but recognition of the finitude of life and in particular the earthly suffering presence of human beings (Kemp & Rendtorff, 2009, p. 240).

Another example is in the context of crisis management, in which the term is employed to distinguish individuals who require extra humanitarian assistance or for those who are generally excluded from social or financial services (Kuran et al., 2020). In fact, one of the first attempts to conceptualize vulnerability was in disaster and hazard studies in the 1940s. Originally centered in catastrophes as a result of natural events, the field was dominated by a hazard perspective that eventually changed to include, in the 1970s and 1980s, political and social conditions as human interventions to the contribution of disasters. Consequently, the vulnerability approach came to replace the hazard perspective (Forbes-Mewett & Nguyen-Trung, 2019).

In international protection, it can also reflect a group in need of special aid or protection because of age, disability, or risk of abuse (Määttä et al., 2021). In social studies, it frequently refers to disadvantageous socioeconomic conditions, as in developing countries where people

cannot choose their possibilities. The latter shows another aspect of vulnerability, meaning that it involves not just the access to opportunities but the actual choices that can be made (Mackenzie, Rogers & Dodds, 2014; ten Have, 2016).

As mentioned previously, in research ethics the term ‘vulnerable populations’ is applied for groups of people, like children, who cannot give consent or are propense to exploitation and abuse (ten Have, 2016). Children are considered vulnerable to abuse and neglect because of the asymmetrical relations of dependency and power with respect to their parents and caregivers (Mackenzie, Rogers & Dodds, 2014). Similarly, in the context of aged care, older persons are largely categorized as vulnerable for example based on the decline of their cognitive and physical abilities, or socioeconomic conditions like income insecurity, or psychosocial circumstances like isolation and loneliness. Indeed, vulnerability is considered in relation to different dimensions: physical, psychological, relational or interpersonal, moral, sociocultural, political, economic, and spiritual or existential. This wide range of conceptions sometimes create an overlap between reasons and categories of persons, integrating elements of the philosophical basic notion of human vulnerability, and situational vulnerability, which aligns with the political framework (Sanchini et al., 2022).

Psychology has also addressed the subject of vulnerability. In this field, the term is predominantly linked with stress, resilience, suicide, and trauma (Barros et al., 2020; Demirci et al., 2021; Nobre et al., 2022; Sinclair & Wallston, 1999). Psychological vulnerability signals failure to cope and adapt to stressful situations (Nobre et al., 2022). In order to identify individuals more susceptible to stress, Sinclair & Wallston (1999) developed the Psychological Vulnerability Scale, a validated instrument that is oftentimes used to measure the construct. Conceptually, psychological vulnerability is defined as “a pattern of cognitive beliefs reflecting a dependence on achievement or external sources of affirmation for one’s sense of self-worth” (Sinclair & Wallston, 1999, p. 120). In other words, these cognitive schemes increase the sensitivity to stress which leads to dependence for others’ approval (Demirci et al., 2021).

Perceived dependence, perfectionism, generalized negative attributions, and the need for approval are all related to psychological vulnerability, indicating a deficit in coping mechanisms (Nobre et al., 2022). Moreover, in their study, Barros et al. (2020) developed a Psychological Vulnerability Questionnaire, to analyze the categories that interacted to

conform a state of vulnerability in relation to suicide. Among their results, sociodemographic characteristics such as gender, age, marital status, number of children, school level, occupation, and diagnosis, had an impact on state stems of vulnerability. Personality traits included self-criticism or dependency depressive experience styles and were observed in participants' descriptions.

Additionally, psychological vulnerability is related to mental health problems like depression and anxiety disorders. In that respect, understanding what causes vulnerability may help predict who is at risk of developing mental health illness. Literature shows that genetic factors, personality traits, a history of psychopathology, traumatic events, disadvantaged socioeconomic status, lack of social support, and developmental problems, are instrumental in the formation of psychological vulnerability (Demirci et al., 2021). Furthermore, Swartz et al. (2015) using data from a longitudinal study of 340 healthy young adults, found a neural biomarker that predicts psychological vulnerability to common life stressors, such as grief or financial uncertainty, as much as 1 to 4 years later. Their study shows that threat-related amygdala reactivity predicted higher levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms, which could help identify who is at risk, and contribute to their treatment.

Taken together, using the term 'vulnerable' should be done with caution. Ultimately, when categorizing groups as vulnerable, individuals are homogenized without considering particular traits and contingent factors. Simply put, the characteristics of the group precede the singular features. Moreover, focusing on vulnerable groups stresses the weaknesses rather than the strengths and opportunities of the population, diminishing the importance of alternative discourses of adaptation and resilience (Kuran et al., 2020; ten Have, 2016). Advocating for recognizing vulnerability as consisting of different layers or dimensions that interact in particular ways creating specific outcomes, allows for a more nuanced interpretation of vulnerabilities and vulnerable groups (Kuran et al., 2020; Sanchini et al., 2022).

So far, I have attempted to describe in general terms the concept of vulnerability and how it is understood within different disciplines. In sum, vulnerability signals an exposure to harm and the limited capacity to withstand or protect oneself from it. Moreover, given that there are many ways to interpret these ideas, several disciplines have tried to address this issue and

explain vulnerability in their own terms, like in the contexts of bioethics, crisis management, research, international protection, and psychology, that I have briefly illustrated. Now I will examine other key concepts that are often associated or used indistinctly with vulnerability, in order to attain a more rich and precise definition for the purpose of this paper.

Vulnerability in relation to risk, hazards or threats

A frequent characterization of vulnerability includes elements of risk, hazard, and threat in its definition. According to Paul (2014, p. 1) vulnerability is defined “as an internal risk factor of the subject or system that is exposed to a hazard and corresponds to its intrinsic tendency to be affected or susceptible to damage”. Depending on the discipline that analyzes and measures the risk, the meaning of the word ‘system’ may vary. Stated differently, this could mean the risk of being afflicted by natural disasters, or of not enjoying the same rights as other citizens, or the risk of being infected with a disease (Gilodi et al., 2022; Paul, 2014).

A risk is also deemed as exposure to hazard or as a state of being threatened (Forbes-Mewett & Nguyen-Trung, 2019). Hazards are natural phenomena, sources of danger, with varying characteristics that are considered external forces in relation to vulnerability. In line with the precedent paragraph, that regards vulnerability as an internal factor, an explanation is that a risk arises as the result of circumstances where a hazard and vulnerability coincide. Indeed, hazards and vulnerability are dependent on each other, which means that vulnerability levels of an individual or group can change the degrees of hazards. For example, improving the access of communities to quality health services helps them reduce their vulnerability to contracting diseases. A threat is a broader concept, that includes not just physical dangers, that can pose serious challenges to individuals or systems. One example is in the case of technological errors or risks that can cause technological vulnerability (Forbes-Mewett & Nguyen-Trung, 2019).

Vulnerability in relation to capacity and resilience

Definitions of vulnerability also relate to the idea of capacity. In socio-ecological systems, vulnerability is referred to as low capacity or inability to respond or cope with hazards (Gilodi et al., 2022; Paul, 2014). In research ethics, individuals or groups are identified as vulnerable if they are incapable of protecting themselves and their interests. Similarly, a social-relational view stresses that “vulnerable persons are those with reduced capacity, power, or control to protect their interest relative to other agents” (Mackenzie, Rogers & Dodds, 2014, p.6).

Resilience and vulnerability are generally considered as opposites, especially in psychological and psychiatric literature. Resilience represents positive outcomes whereas vulnerability implies negative results. Previously, resilience was retained as a personal quality and vulnerability was caused by lack of resilience. Later, this conception was modified for a broader view in which resilience was related to external factors such as the family, community, and the environment. For example, in environmental studies, resilience, vulnerability, and adaptation were closely related. Vulnerability was seen as composed of three elements: exposure, sensitivity, and adaptive capacity. In this view, resilience is considered as part of the third element, and consequently, as a component of vulnerability. More contemporary views note that vulnerability is not by definition negative, given that distress and hazards may bring beneficial transformations to individuals. For instance, Gallopín (2006, as cited in ten Have, 2016) mentions the evolution of a social group from chronic poverty and the collapse of an oppressive regime as examples of transformative work achieved through resilience. He explains that it is not just the ability to absorb shocks or cope with threats or challenges, but also the capacity for renewal and development (ten Have, 2016).

Similarly, Forbes-Mewett & Nguyen-Trung (2019) propose that both concepts correlate instead of contradicting. For example, in the context of climate change and natural disasters, vulnerability reflects the exposure of affected communities to climate change and their capacity to handle that exposure. In their view, both resilience and vulnerability appear as pre-conditions that interact with other systems before disasters, but also impact the aftermath. “Vulnerability is not just an antecedent condition but exists in various forms during and after disasters” (p. 16). In other words, the impacts of disasters are pre-determined by pre-existing vulnerabilities and coping strategies; and in post-disaster contexts, those vulnerabilities can either hinder the process of recovery or be a new source causing vulnerability to new disasters.

Vulnerability in relation to dependency and autonomy.

Vulnerability is occasionally formulated as diminished autonomy, and consequently, higher dependency. The connection with these two concepts has been the object of critical debate and analysis in feminist literature, as it generally carries negative connotations. Since it is not the scope of this paper, we will not go into the details of this debate. Very briefly, the main

argument of feminist literature is that modern societies are pervaded by a masculine ideology that sees individuals as completely autonomous, independent and invulnerable. They propose that, by means of our embodiment and social nature, everyone is dependent and vulnerable to some extent (Gilodi et al., 2022).

Moreover, Mackenzie (2014) argues that vulnerability and autonomy must be reconceptualized, and that both terms should not be supposed as opposites. In her work she understands autonomy as relational and emphasizes the obligation not just to respect but to foster it, as it is a matter of social justice. Furthermore, while recognizing the importance of ontological vulnerability, she proposes a more detailed understanding that includes its many forms and causes. Her taxonomy of vulnerability will be reviewed later in further detail.

Vulnerability in relation to inequality and poverty.

Vulnerability is frequently affiliated with concepts of poverty and inequality. Forbes-Mewett & Nguyen-Trung (2019) interpret vulnerability as inaccessibility to resources and power, which prevents the capacity to predict, endure and recover from risks or the impact of disasters. On the other hand, poverty is considered as the lack of resources and capacity to achieve a certain standard of living. This standard is established as the minimum level of conditions, often defined in terms of income, as the poverty line. An individual is considered poor if it doesn't meet the criteria, and thus, is below the line.

In addition, authors explain that being in a non-poverty state does not guarantee not being vulnerable to shock or stress. To clarify, poverty is a state that could be temporary or context-specific, while vulnerability, according to their viewpoint, is an inherently permanent state of the human condition. This means that people are always more or less vulnerable to external threats. Lastly, authors describe another feature to distinguish both concepts, which is temporality. Vulnerability relates to uncertainty or risks, indicating that it is future-centered, while poverty represents present weaknesses.

After reviewing several definitions of vulnerability, some of the ways it has been applied, and its relationships with other concepts, a few common aspects can be outlined. Vulnerability is related to the susceptibility to suffering, to being exposed to harms, and the capacity to cope or overcome threats. This suffering can be caused by means of our physicality or in relation to other individuals or groups. Vulnerability can be attributed to internal conditions, like an illness, or external ones, like the lack of access to health services.

It can be applied to all living beings, on an individual or group level, like communities or whole countries. Because threats can be heterogeneous, there are various types of vulnerabilities. The different dimensions of vulnerability include physical, emotional, psychological, social, moral, economic, legal, political, and so on. I will now address two theoretical frameworks, the philosophical and political perspectives, that have theorized about vulnerability delineating its causes and possible actions to counteract its effects.

1.2 Philosophical perspectives on vulnerability: we are all vulnerable

What all the philosophical perspectives have in common is that they include the basic notion that vulnerability is a defining characteristic of what it means to be human (ten Have, 2016).

Philosophical theories of vulnerability discuss the meaning of vulnerability and why it gives rise to moral obligations and duties of justice (Rogers et al., 2012). To address the question of what vulnerability is, two broad answers are generally considered for its conceptualization. First and foremost, that vulnerability is a result of our embodiment. Theorists who develop this idea understand vulnerability as an ontological condition of humanity, a universal feature. They also link the concept to its derivation from the Latin words mentioned in the previous section, and the capacity to suffer. The second response highlights vulnerability's social and relational traits (Mackenzie, Rogers & Dodds, 2014; Rogers et al., 2012).

Although these two answers might initially seem distinct, they are not contradictory. Instead, they complement each other by providing a more holistic understanding of the multifaceted nature of vulnerability. For example, Catriona Mackenzie's taxonomy of vulnerability, which will be later described in more detail, considers both embodiment and social/relational traits as fundamental sources of vulnerability. This holistic view acknowledges that humans are both biological and social beings, and their wellbeing depends on the interplay between these factors and addressing vulnerabilities in both domains (Mackenzie, 2014; Mackenzie et al., 2014; Rogers et al., 2012).

Concerning the moral obligations and duties of justice arising from vulnerability, according to Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers & Susan Dodds (2014) there are two views. The first one proposes that vulnerability itself is a source of moral obligation. The second assumption does not ground vulnerability to obligations but considers vulnerability as a

warning sign that should alert us to responsibilities that arise from other moral claims (Mackenzie, Rogers & Dodds, 2014; Rogers et al., 2012; ten Have, 2016).

Two of the main areas within this paradigm that have theorized about vulnerability are feminist theorists and bioethics. In mainstream bioethical literature, vulnerability is associated with risk of harm and exploitation, and a limited capacity for autonomy. It is viewed as an ontological condition, and regarding moral obligations, it proposes that ontology and ethics are interconnected (Mackenzie, Rogers & Dodds, 2014; ten Have, 2016).

Further, regarding bioethics and philosophical approaches to vulnerability, ten Have (2016) links philosophical perspectives with two broad philosophical frameworks: the pragmatic approaches, which are based on analytical frameworks, and what he calls the ‘peripheral’ approaches, influenced by Continental European Philosophy, feminist ethics, philosophy of medicine, and non-Western bioethics.

The author explains that a pragmatic approach argues that vulnerability depends on situational factors and thus identifies sources of vulnerability driven by the practicality of applying them in bioethical areas. The focus of the analysis is on identifying the sources of vulnerability to assess their impact and to identify possible actions to repair the vulnerability of subjects (Rogers et al., 2012). This approach proposes a functional definition of the concept, highlighting exposure as one of its main components. It is often combined with the bioethical discourse that emphasizes the principle of respect for autonomy as one of the most important ethical principles; consequently, underlining the importance of decision-making and consent.

The peripheral approaches are called peripheral in comparison to mainstream bioethics dominated by analytic philosophy. The general idea is that vulnerability represents what it is to be human, the essential nature of human beings as frail. “A subject is vulnerable since the human condition necessarily implies vulnerability” (ten Have, 2016, p. 97). This idea can be interpreted in several ways. For example, vulnerability seen as a natural imperfection, or as a bodily corruption, where it “is located at the level of the body itself since it is susceptible to decline, decay, and damage...” (p. 99).

Furthermore, vulnerability understood as an existential experience holds the view that humans are not composed of separate parts but are an integrated unity of body and mind. In this perspective vulnerability is not located in the body but at the level of personal existence.

“Vulnerability is the experience that our world is finite and fragile. The individual is not an autonomous, demarcated entity able to protect itself against the outside world but is fundamentally susceptible to threats since it is an embodied subject” (ten Have, 2016, p.100). Additionally, Quepons (2017, p. 15) in his phenomenological account of vulnerability in the context of moral emotions outlines that: “vulnerability is an essential aspect of moral experiences, particularly experiences of trust, personal love, and responsibility; it discloses the individual worth of the person, their dignity, as something grounded in the fragile set of interrelations and horizons of the concrete circumstances of their existence”.

Another interpretation is vulnerability as relatedness. Expanding the idea that all individuals experience vulnerability, a wider view integrates the dynamic relationship between humans and the world. According to this perspective, a person is not a separated, independent self, but has a place in the world and is connected to other people. This interconnectedness has been articulated in non-Western philosophies, for example, in African philosophy which defines the individual by its community. Furthermore, vulnerability is a common condition because of the relationality of our embodied life, we cannot survive without others. Vulnerability is positioned in the encounter with others, not within the individual alone. It emerges in the relationship between the self and alterity and is characterized by mutuality. Consequently, it is understood not as a biological or existential condition, but as a positive phenomenon in which the body is the basis for exchange and reciprocity (ten Have, 2016).

The last interpretation that I will review regards vulnerability as dependency. The context is that humans are embedded in relationships, but relations are not always between equals. This perspective has been especially studied by feminist theorists. Martha Fineman (2008) asserts that vulnerability is universal and constant. Despite its universality, vulnerability is not the same for every person. Following this logic, vulnerability and dependence are ontological conditions that arise from our embodiment, exposing us to the risk of suffering harm, or of failing to flourish or develop our capacities (Dodds, 2014). It is through the body that our life is marked by dependency. This implies not simply a developmental stage that we overcome, but it defines us because we are constantly dependent on relation to other people (ten Have, 2016).

Dependence is one form of vulnerability that requires the support or help of a specific person, in other words, care. To be dependent means finding yourself conditioned to the care of others to access, supply or assure your needs. In this manner, while everyone is always vulnerable to some degree, we are not always dependent. Our experience of vulnerability as dependence is influenced by factors such as our age, gender, health, abilities, resilience and the support available to us (Dodds, 2014).

As we have shown, emphasizing fragility, not just in terms of physical features but including the moral, emotional, psychological, economic and social dimensions that encompass vulnerability, is a distinctive characteristic of the philosophical perspective (Mackenzie, Rogers & Dodds, 2014; Quepons, 2017; ten Have, 2016). Aiming to understand and address women's experiences, feminist theorists have studied vulnerability especially concerning its relationship with issues like dependency and ethics of care (Hall & Ásta, 2021; ten Have, 2016). In the next section, we will introduce some of the most relevant contributions to the study of vulnerability from a feminist perspective.

1.2.1 Feminist approach

Feminist philosophy is a vast academic field that has both contributed and been enriched by other disciplines. Reviewing all its history and topics is unattainable, and thus, we will not try to represent a comprehensive account of all the work in feminist philosophy. Therefore, the following selected definitions and topics aim to offer an overview of feminist work in particular areas that concern feminist perspectives on vulnerability that also relate to migration. I will start by defining feminist philosophy and its beginnings. Then, I will briefly describe the subfields of ethics and bioethics, and how vulnerability has been theorized. To conclude this section, I will present the taxonomy of vulnerabilities proposed by Catriona Mackenzie and the feminist topics of relational autonomy and capabilities.

There are several definitions of feminist philosophy. Some describe it as “a philosophy that is informed by and seeks to address women's experiences, perspectives, relationships, and oppression” (Hall & Ásta, 2021, p.2). Others stress the importance of the philosophical critiques of power, that concern the hierarchies of the categories that shape what gender is and how it is lived. Examples of these categories are race, class, ability, sexuality, age, and nationality (Hall & Ásta, 2021).

As previously mentioned, feminist philosophy has engaged with different disciplines and has developed several subfields. One example is the feminist philosophy of science, a branch interested especially in the effects of power relations on scientific knowledge, merging subjects of ideology and science. Accordingly, it combines feminism, a political position, and philosophy of science, an epistemological and metaphysical inquiry. Thus, it addresses issues of gender inequality and its effects on scientific knowledge along with the consequences of gender bias in research, on our perceptions and treatment of people of different genders (Bueter, 2024).

From the beginning, the goal of feminist philosophy was not only to use the philosophical tools to understand issues of women, but more importantly, to critique and transform the discipline of philosophy itself. The arising of feminist philosophy as an academic discipline cannot be separated from feminist movements and other types of actions seeking social and economic justice. It was, and still is, shaped by the context of ongoing gender-based oppression and its involvement with racism, ableism, classism, cisnormativity, heteronormativity, Eurocentrism, and Anglocentrism (Hall & Ásta, 2021).

Moreover, feminist philosophy is related to ethics. Broadly, as it emerged outside academic institutions, it looks to respond to those who are marginalized. Rooted in the political, understood as the relations of power that have been normalized and that structure society, institutions, lives and relationships, the practice of feminist philosophy seeks to shed light and deal with exclusionary practices. In this manner, the ethical dimension also contemplates the use of an intersectional analysis. In other words, feminist analyses tend to care for the relationships of gender with other systems of oppression and make visible the experiences of the excluded. As authors Hall & Ásta (2021) explain:

Thinking intersectionally, there is no single, unified voice or experience shared by all members of a social group. Assuming otherwise universalizes the experiences and perspectives of privileged members of the group (e.g. white/Anglo women) while ignoring and rendering invisible those of marginalized members of the groups (e.g. women of color) (p. 7).

Aspiring to understand the oppression of women, feminist ethics uses a feminist method for this effort. It relies on and incorporates women's experiences of a particular moral phenomenon. For example, feminist analytic approaches to ethics use the tools of analytic philosophy to understand and improve the problems deemed by feminist interpretations as

injustices. It is particularly interested in knowing how an ethical analysis works in real life for the people whom the theory is about. In other words, capturing the lived reality of a particular ethical analysis on the field (Brennan, 2021).

Similarly, another subfield of philosophy that advocates for social justice and equality is feminist bioethics. Typically, it studies the ethical implications and outcomes of research and practice, covering multiple topics as it works with the expertise of diverse disciplines such as psychology, law, social sciences, political theory, literature, and technology studies, among others. Feminist bioethics critiques mainstream bioethics through activism and literature. First, accentuating issues in clinical practice that fundamentally affect women or where women's perspectives are not considered. Second, in academia, through the critique of how life sciences research and implementation is structurally gendered (Scully, 2021).

Further, feminist bioethics distinguishes from mainstream bioethics because of the topics it addresses, the emphasis and analysis of certain moral situations retained problematic, and the methodological approaches employed. It has also produced ethical analyses that highlight elements previously unnoticed or neglected in mainstream analyses. These include attention to power dynamics and social context, the use of empirical data to inform ethical theory, focusing on relationality and care, attentiveness to embodiment and materiality, and openness to minority perspectives that are frequently excluded. Moreover, it has also made important contributions to moral philosophy, for example, in the ethics of care and relational autonomy (Scully, 2021).

Regarding the power dynamics and social contexts, feminists retain that the relationships between genders are shaped by power differences, produced by social and political structures that favor the masculine and enable the oppression of women in all societies. Consequently, feminist analyses pay attention to the different levels and areas in which the distribution of power influences how science and technology is used in societies and cultures, creating ethical issues. Furthermore, supporting the claim of methodological bias of normative bioethical judgment, feminists proclaim that these judgments should be made using empirical evidence, based on what is occurring, rather than on assumptions of how things ought to be (Scully, 2021).

Vulnerability is a salient concept in bioethics. From its foundation, bioethics has been concerned about research with humans. The Nuremberg Code, reputed as a foundational

document in research ethics, aimed to protect subjects from potential harm by prohibiting research on those who could not express consent. Thus, informed consent became crucial for protecting participants. Consequently, multiple authors have attempted to describe and identify vulnerable subjects and groups, along with the circumstances that would signal vulnerability, to warn researchers about the situations of potential exploitation or compromised consent. Despite these efforts, there have been several criticisms on the lack of clarity of the concept, which leads to confusion about which criteria to use to identify those who are vulnerable. Furthermore, critiques regarding the dangers of a labeling approach, that falls short in considering the specifics of each case and leads to discrimination and stereotyping (Rogers, 2014).

Being forged by research ethics, bioethics has focused on certain concepts like respect for autonomy and informed consent. Wendy Rogers (2014) advocates for a deeper understanding of vulnerability to respond to specific vulnerabilities of patients, participants or populations. Doing so would allow us to go beyond the procedural issues of consent to matters such as vulnerability arising from the structure of the research enterprise. In her view, an ethics of vulnerability should account for recent uses of the concept in the field. The labeling approach may help identify some people in need of special attention, but it fails to offer a direction to what that attention should be. She proposes an ethics of vulnerability linked to autonomy and capabilities as one possibility to address these issues.

The topics of autonomy and capabilities are regarded as relational from a feminist point of view. As previously stressed, relationality is a central argument of feminist approaches as humans are embedded in relationships and their development is encouraged through interactions with others (Scully, 2021). Conceptualized as biological and social beings we all share vulnerability (Anderson, 2014; Rogers, 2014). Exploring this relational dimension, we will now go through some important topics theorized in feminism that relate to vulnerability.

Vulnerability and feminism: relevant topics.

According to Mackenzie et al. (2014) Feminist theorists have addressed the topic of vulnerability primarily by focusing on dependency and developing the ethics of care, and by the works of Judith Butler and her notion of corporeal vulnerability.

The emphasis on vulnerability and dependency in feminist theorists' work is inspired by Robert Goodin's (1985) influential welfare theory of vulnerability, which places duties to

protect the vulnerable at the center of moral responsibility (Mackenzie et al., 2014). For Goodin, vulnerability is a main aspect of the human condition, and the physical, emotional and social characteristics of individuals render them susceptible to various types of harm. Moreover, he distinguishes between inherent and situational vulnerabilities, the latter comprising specific circumstances such as poverty and political oppression. Further, he introduces the principle of protecting the vulnerable, which calls for prioritizing the needs of the most vulnerable. This includes not just individual actions but institutional and societal obligations. Like many feminist authors, he critiques the liberal individualist notion that highlights self-sufficiency and autonomy and calls for a more relational and collective approach to ethics where the focus is on caring for others and acknowledging our interdependence.

For the feminist ethics of care, the term care refers to attending to the needs of others with whom we have a relationship (Held, 2006; Miele et al., 2024). This approach underlines the value of interpersonal relationships and care as a fundamental aspect of human life. Important features include the focus on caring relationships and the responsibilities that arise from them as a central aspect of development, the relevance of framing ethical issues within the context of personal relationships - considering individuals as relational and interdependent selves, acknowledging the emotional dimension in the moral and decision-making processes, and the importance of concentrating on vulnerability and dependence. It also analyzes gendered power relations with an intersectional lens and explores the difficulties of women's lives in the context of care and its different layers (Dodds, 2014; Gilligan, 1982, 2014; Kittay, 2011; Mackenzie et al., 2014; McKenna & Hamington, 2021; Miele et al., 2024; Scully, 2021; Tronto, 1993, 2010, 2020).

Significant contributions include the works of social psychologist Carol Gilligan, credited as the founder of the ethics of care with her work in the 1980s. In her publication *In a Different Voice*, she argues about the differences between men and women in terms of their psychological and moral development. She theorizes that, generally speaking, women think through an ethic of care, focusing more on care and relationships, while men think through an ethic of rights (Gilligan, 1982). She has continued to make contributions, for example, discussing the concepts of moral injury and its intersection with the ethics of care, and recognizing the importance of relationships and human capacities for empathy and caring to

understand human development and ethical behavior. The different voice, she argues, is not inherently feminine but a human voice that integrates thought and emotion, self and relationships. She also highlights the impact of culture on development, and how societal norms and expectations can cause moral injury, as well as the resistance and resilience capacity, important for maintaining psychological health and promoting connections with others (Gilligan, 1982, 2014; McKenna & Hamington, 2021; Scully, 2021).

On the political implications, the works of Joan Tronto have made a significant impact on the recognition of care as part of a democratic life. She introduced the phases of care and highlighted the importance of a democratic ethic of care that addresses power dynamics and social justice. In her work *Creating Caring Institutions* she argues that good care in an institutional setting has three central components: the purpose of care, a recognition of power relations, and the need for pluralistic, particular tailoring of care to meet the individuals' needs (Tronto, 2010). Further, the objectives of institutional care must be resolved through a political process that regards the needs, contributions and prospects of different actors for a better social provision of care (Tronto, 1993, 2010, 2020).

Focusing on disability and dependency, Eva Feder Kittay has also made important contributions. Her works underline the moral significance of care for dependent individuals and the ethical implications that arise from caring labor. In her view, humans are naturally dependent at times, and those without disabilities are merely temporarily abled. Assistance is not seen as a restriction, but rather as a resource at the core of a society that can accommodate the unavoidable dependency ties between unequal individuals and guarantee a harmonious existence for both the caregiver and the person being cared for (Kittay, 2011).

Also engaging with the works of Eva Feder Kittay and Margaret Walker, Susan Dodds (2014) examines the complexities associated with the social attribution of responsibility for vulnerability, as well as the relationship between dependency, care and vulnerability. Employing Mackenzie's taxonomy of vulnerability, Dodds argues that dependence is a particular form of vulnerability requiring personal attention, care, and support by a specific person or group of persons. She stresses that all humans experience different kinds of dependency at various phases of their lives, including infancy, old age, illness, and disability; but they are not all dependent throughout their lives. Vulnerability stems from our physical and social character, exposing us to potential harm and requiring interpersonal support to

develop our capacities and autonomy. It can be exacerbated or reduced by a range of elements, including qualities of our natural or constructed physical environment, social and legal institutions, our individual knowledge, capabilities and skills, and the actions of others (Dodds, 2014; Mackenzie et al., 2014).

Furthermore, dependency, conceived as a form of vulnerability, involves care from specific individuals to meet our needs and promote our autonomy. Care, in her view, is a response to this vulnerability. She conceived six domains of dependency, the first five related to capacities or status (physical, cognitive, emotional, social and legal), the lack of which may cause dependence on another; and the sixth domain arising from the complex relationship between dependence of others and the development of autonomy. Although we all experience vulnerability to some degree, dependency requires immediate, intimate care, which varies with age, health, gender, abilities, and accessible assistance. The line between dependence and non-dependent vulnerabilities is blurred, as some needs can be met with less personal or institutional care. Dodds presents vulnerabilities and dependencies as interrelated and shaped by the person's capacities and status, as well as the context in which they occur. Thus, the moral demands of vulnerability and dependency are relational and context-dependent (Dodds, 2014; Mackenzie et al., 2014; ten Have, 2016).

Applying care theory to children, Amy Mullin (2014) focuses on the vulnerability of children regarding their emotional needs, arguing that emotional neglect can cause more long-term damage than physical or sexual abuse. In her view, many forms of maltreatment are not intended to harm children but are due to parents' inability to recognize their children's needs or to provide for them as a result of a lack of social, economic, or emotional resources. She identifies four domains where failures of care can occur, and which serve to identify specific vulnerabilities and their potential remedies: protection and security, control and developing autonomy, identification with and belonging to a social group, and reciprocation of behavior. Mullin supports her claim with child psychology research and critiques traditional approaches to child protection like best interests or children's rights, advocating instead for a care theory perspective. This approach considers the needs of both children and their caregivers, is context-sensitive, and focuses on the importance of care for survival and well-being. Moreover, Mullin critiques other philosophical responses, such as parent licensing, as inadequate for protecting children from emotional neglect. She asserts that a

vulnerability-inflected care theory, which considers the emotional needs of children and caregivers within their social context, offers the best protection against emotional maltreatment (Mackenzie et al., 2014).

Altogether, feminist ethics of care is an evolving field that continues to expand its theoretical foundations and applications, addressing contemporary issues and integrating diverse cultural and social perspectives. For instance, in the context of research, current trends advocate for feminist research ethics of care, centered on care, community and relations. It promotes conceptualizing participants as part of a community rather than individuals and integrating self-care and comradeship in the research process (Miele et al., 2024). In the context of migration, Cristina Clark-Kazak (2023) proposes a shift in how research in forced migration is made, advocating for ethical practices that prioritize human relationships and address the power inequalities, oppression and politicization in the field. She supports practices rooted in caring and reciprocal relationships, or in other words, a shift from procedural ethics to a more holistic approach based on radical care ethics.

Aligning with the emphasis on relationships and interdependence, the notion of corporeal vulnerability developed by Judith Butler is another contribution from feminism to the theorization of vulnerability. Butler conceives humans as fundamentally embodied creatures, exposed to external forces which make us vulnerable to injury, violence, and other forms of harm. Vulnerability is not just an individual condition but a relational one, as the body is also exposed to the actions of others. She used the term ‘precarity’ to describe a condition where certain individuals and populations are disproportionately exposed to social and political violence and deprivation. She proclaimed that the inherent vulnerability of the body leads to ethical implications to diminish the suffering and rectify the inequalities that further exacerbate the condition of precariousness (Butler, 2004; Mackenzie, 2014; Mackenzie et al., 2014).

Other authors have expanded the ideas of Butler and applied them in further contexts, concerning human rights and distributive justice. For example, Martha A. Fineman (2008) expands the notion of corporeal vulnerability by integrating it into a broader legal and social framework. She proposes the term ‘vulnerable subject’ to explain inequality and disadvantage, critiquing the liberal emphasis on individualism and autonomy, arguing that it fails to account for the inherent vulnerability of all human beings and how it affects people

in various ways and at different times. She also distinguishes between vulnerability and dependency describing them as both universal, but only vulnerability is constant whereas inevitable dependency is episodic, sporadic, and primarily developmental in nature. Moreover, she highlights the need for a responsive state that actively works to support the vulnerable, through laws and policies that mitigate vulnerability (Fineman, 2008, 2010; Mackenzie et al., 2014).

Many others have elaborated on these ideas and contributed to the ethics of care, and the links between vulnerability and dependency. We have attempted to represent its key points with an ethical focus to highlight the importance of recognizing and responding to vulnerability. As we have seen, feminist theorists have played a part in developing a theory of vulnerability emphasizing its ontological and/or its fundamentally social and relational characteristics. Moreover, feminist approaches look to respond to and mitigate special vulnerabilities of the marginalized, entwining vulnerability and dependency. Unlike traditional philosophical perspectives, feminists argue that particular attention is needed to specific relationships that are morally significant and consequently raise responsibilities from an individual and institutional level. Drawing on these ideas, Catriona Mackenzie incorporates both notions of vulnerability, as inherent in the human body and its socio-relational characteristics, proposing a taxonomy of three different sources and two contrasting states of vulnerability (Mackenzie, 2014; Mackenzie et al., 2014). Now I will present her taxonomy of vulnerability.

Taxonomy of vulnerabilities.

Simply put, the three different sources are inherent, situational, and pathogenic; and the two states, are dispositional and occurrent. Analyzing vulnerability this way allows for recognizing the ontological dimension and the context-dependent factors that influence vulnerability. As a result, the author argues, it aids in identifying responsibilities and viable actions to reduce the effects of its various types (Mackenzie, 2014; Mackenzie et al., 2014).

Inherent vulnerability symbolizes the sources of vulnerability that are inherent to human nature; the ones that stem from our body, our needs, our reliance on others, and our emotional and social tendencies. These can be constant, like in the case of hunger that we experience when we go without food, or variable, according to factors such as age, gender, health status, disability, resilience and capacity to cope. Situational vulnerability refers to the context-

specific sources that can be caused or aggravated by personal, social, political, economic or environmental circumstances of individuals or groups. These can be temporary, intermittent or enduring. Mackenzie (2014) cites as an example a person who loses his job. This might be temporary if he or she has the educational qualifications and skills demanded in the job market. On the contrary, vulnerability can be enduring if the loss of the job leads to long-term unemployment, causing more serious consequences like loss of secure housing, marital breakdown, and ill health (Mackenzie, 2014; Mackenzie et al., 2014; Mendola & Pera, 2022).

These two sources of vulnerability, inherent and situational, are not categorically different but interconnected. Inherent sources of vulnerability reflect, to a certain degree, characteristics of the environment in which individuals are born or where they live. For example, health status is very much dependent on socioeconomic factors, and access to health care can significantly impact how a person's inherent vulnerability to illness is managed. Also, some types of inherent vulnerabilities will render people more prone to situational vulnerability. For instance, physical vulnerabilities can be exacerbated by the social environment, like in the case of a person with a disability who may face social barriers leading to additional vulnerabilities, such as limited access to education or employment. Moreover, situational vulnerabilities can give rise to inherent ones, e.g. the stress of unemployment can cause illness. Additionally, situational causes of vulnerability will have a greater or lesser impact depending on individuals' resilience, which is a product of genetic, social and environmental influences (Mackenzie, 2014; Mackenzie et al., 2014; Mendola & Pera, 2022).

Moreover, these sources of vulnerability might be dispositional or occurrent. This dispositional-occurrent distinction relates to states of potential versus actual vulnerability. For instance, migrant women are dispositionally vulnerable to sexual exploitation, but whether they are exploited (occurrently vulnerable) or not is determined by a variety of factors for example their socioeconomic level, and geographical location, among others. This distinction of states is beneficial when attempting to identify the causes of vulnerability since the risks that individuals face, and the consequences of these risks might be different. Additionally, it helps to distinguish vulnerabilities that have not yet or are unlikely to become sources of harm from those that demand immediate action to mitigate harm (Mackenzie, 2014; Mackenzie et al., 2014; Mendola & Pera, 2022).

A subset of situational vulnerabilities is categorized as pathogenic. This final category addresses power, dependency, capacity or need disparities that may expose a person to abuse or exploitation by others. These include vulnerabilities stemming from prejudice or abuse in interpersonal relations, as well as social dominance, oppression, or political violence. Mackenzie et al. (2014, p. 9) cite as an example “people with cognitive disabilities, who are occurrently vulnerable due to their care needs, and are thereby susceptible to pathogenic forms of vulnerability, such as to sexual abuse by their caregivers”. The concept of pathogenic vulnerability also aids in identifying how certain actions intended to reduce innate or situational vulnerability might have the opposite effect of increasing it. Lastly, an important feature of pathogenic vulnerability is the way it impairs autonomy or intensifies the sense of powerlessness caused by vulnerability in general (Mackenzie, 2014; Mackenzie et al., 2014; Mendola & Pera, 2022).

Applying this taxonomy to migration, we can use as an example refugees or asylum seekers who are often displaced from their countries due to conditions of violence, persecution or human rights violations. In this situation, the sources of vulnerability are primarily situational rather than inherent, even though resilience and physical and mental health factors will have inherent elements. It is considered situational because their vulnerability arises not from their inherent human condition but is contingent on the circumstances they face that can change over time. The sources may be multiple, for instance, being subject to ethnic or political persecution, legal difficulties, economic problems, grief caused by loss or separation from family, post-traumatic stress, incarceration or disrespectful treatment by authorities, being in an unknown environment, anxiety caused by uncertainty, among others. Some of these situational sources can be categorized as pathogenic vulnerability, precisely the political persecution or violence experienced from which the person fled and the government policies in the country of asylum that can give rise to new vulnerabilities such as those associated with mental health. If the person is indeed experiencing a mental illness, then this vulnerability is occurrent, if not (e.g., if the person has a predisposition or has come out of the acute phase), then the vulnerability to mental illness is dispositional. As we can see, these distinctions admit the identification of vulnerabilities arising from social injustices, and how particular conditions like detention can give rise to

specific risks whether or not these are occurrent (Mackenzie, 2014; Mackenzie et al., 2014; Mendola & Pera, 2022).

Mackenzie et al. (2014) also emphasize that experiencing vulnerability can cause a distressing sense of powerlessness, loss of control, or loss of agency. In their view, the concept of vulnerability follows an obligation to respond to it, providing protection from harm, meeting needs, giving care and avoiding exploitation. However, they assert that vulnerability sometimes is equated to victimhood or incapacity, leading to the labeling of individuals, groups or populations as vulnerable, and to discrimination, stereotyping and unjustified paternalistic interventions. In light of this, they believe that the overarching goal of interventions developed to respond to vulnerability must be to enable or restore the autonomy of the affected person or groups wherever possible and to the greatest extent feasible, as well as promote their capabilities. In addition, Mackenzie argues that failure to recognize the value of autonomy can result in objectionable paternalistic social policy responses that combine inherent and situational vulnerability and may produce pathogenic vulnerabilities. She contends that the obligation to foster autonomy is a matter of social justice. To support this assertion, she makes conceptual linkages between vulnerability, relational autonomy, and capability-based approaches to justice.

One example of paternalistic response that produces pathogenic vulnerability is the use of immigration detention centers. Nearly every country implements immigration detention policy and practice, detaining asylum seekers and other migrants for the purpose of resolving their immigration status. In the UK, around 24500 people, 100 of which were children, entered immigration detention in 2021 (Silverman et al., 2022). In general, these centers often resemble prisons in character, albeit being an administrative process. Detainees typically have limited access to legal support and no explanation of how to get out of detention (Silverman & Nethery, 2015). Facilities are often in poor living conditions (situational vulnerability), like lack of access to nutritious food and clean water, and absence of sufficient health services, deteriorating migrants' physical health. The situational vulnerability created by these conditions is compounded by the inherent vulnerability of asylum seekers, many of whom have histories of trauma in their country of origin where they had been deprived of liberty and human rights (von Werthern et al., 2018). Detention is associated with mental health illness such as PTSD, depression, anxiety, psychosis and suicidal ideation. Children

and other groups of people categorized as vulnerable are at particular risk of long-term psychological damage from even short periods of immigration detention (Silverman & Nethery, 2015; von Werthern et al., 2018). This example demonstrates how such policies can create pathogenic vulnerabilities. Although the paternalistic justification is the protection of individuals or the security of the country, the resulting conditions often lead to psychological trauma, physical health issues, and severe emotional distress, thereby increasing their vulnerability.

In summary, the taxonomy of vulnerability discussed by Mackenzie and colleagues demonstrates the multifaceted nature of human vulnerability, highlighting the complex interplay between inherent, situational, and pathogenic sources, as well as dispositional and occurrent states. This framework accentuates the need for responsive actions that address specific vulnerabilities while fostering autonomy and capabilities. Moving forward, I will present the topics of relational autonomy and capabilities.

Relational Autonomy.

Mackenzie claims that it is a mistake to view vulnerability and autonomy as oppositional, and advocates for a reconceptualization of both terms. She builds on Fineman's ideas about the vulnerable vs the liberal subject model to develop her arguments. First, while she agrees with Fineman about the important role of institutions in responding to unavoidable vulnerabilities, she criticizes her emphasis on ontological vulnerabilities, as there are many types of vulnerabilities stemming from interpersonal and social relations or economic, legal, and political structures. In her view, an appropriate ethics of vulnerability should highlight the obligation to respect and foster autonomy; or else, discourses of vulnerability and protection might be used to justify objectionably paternalistic and coercive interventions transmuted in social relations, policies, and institutions. Second, she contends that the need to respond to vulnerability by promoting autonomy is one of social justice and that the capabilities approach offers the most viable theoretical framework for fostering democratic equality (Mackenzie, 2014).

Joel Anderson (2014) expands on Mackenzie's ideas, noting that while vulnerability can undermine autonomy by exposing individuals to exploitation, autonomy itself relies on vulnerability. He affirms that autonomy is a relational, social, or intersubjective phenomenon entwined with vulnerability. From his perspective, vulnerability includes the element of

control, where a person is vulnerable to the extent to which is not able to prevent events that would undermine what they consider significant. Is an issue of effective control of the relative balance of power between the individual and the forces that influence them. Hence, vulnerability can increase as those forces become more powerful, and when the person becomes less capable of countering these forces and effects. Furthermore, he argues that autonomy involves skills and competencies, such as self-trust, self-respect, and self-esteem, which are developed and maintained through mutual recognition. Autonomy, thus, is partly reliant on others' acknowledgment, making individuals vulnerable to social exclusion if deemed incompetent. Anderson emphasizes that justice requires addressing autonomy-related vulnerabilities by ensuring the social, cultural, and institutional conditions necessary for developing autonomy skills, though determining these requirements is a politically contested issue.

Renewing the discussion of relational autonomy, Mackenzie (2021) argues that autonomy is both a capacity and status concept. In her view, to be autonomous means to have the ability to govern oneself, namely, to make decisions and act based on one's own reflective preferences, values, or commitments. To have the status marker of autonomy means that you have the right to exercise self-determination over your actions and your life, which others must respect. She describes feminist philosophical reflections on relational autonomy as highlighting the social components of personal autonomy, as well as how social oppression can impede its development and use. According to this, feminist theorists criticize hyperindividualist conceptions of autonomy, which equate it with self-sufficiency and independence, viewing these as antagonistic to social relations of care and dependency. For relational theorists, personal autonomy is crucial, especially for individuals and groups subjected to social oppression and dominance. Consequently, they reject hyperindividualist ideas and reimagine autonomy through a feminist lens, highlighting the importance of recognizing human vulnerability, dependency, and the need for social relations of care.

Furthermore, relational theories of autonomy emphasize that humans are embodied and embedded in social, historical, and cultural contexts, with identities constituted by these factors. Personal autonomy is thus seen as socially constructed and supported by appropriate interpersonal and social environments. These theories also highlight how social oppression, particularly gender oppression, can impair individuals' capacities for self-determination and

self-governance by perpetuating unjust, hierarchically structured social relations. Gender oppression is referred to as “an unjust system or pattern of hierarchically structured social relations, institutions, and practices of gender-based domination and subordination” (Mackenzie, 2021, p.2).

Relational autonomy encompasses a wide range of views on self-governing agency, relational elements of autonomy, and the impact of social oppression, can be divided into internalist theories focusing on psychological conditions for autonomy, and externalist theories requiring specific social structural conditions. A key debate, the 'agency dilemma,' addresses how to acknowledge the impact of oppression on autonomy without diminishing the agency of oppressed individuals or justifying paternalistic intervention (Mackenzie, 2021).

Mackenzie proposes a multidimensional analysis of relational autonomy that distinguishes three interconnected dimensions or axes of autonomy: self-determination, self-governance, and self-authorization. She suggests that internalist and externalist theories should be seen as addressing different mechanisms of social oppression, some acting as external constraints and others shaping agents' psychologies in autonomy-impairing ways. The self-determination axis, which is linked to externalist theories, involves having authority and power over important life domains that are influenced by social freedoms, opportunities, and status. Social hierarchies can hinder self-determination by limiting access to essential freedoms and opportunities. The self-governance dimension is related to internalist theories, it entails making and enacting decisions that are consistent with one's values and identity. This requires skills in self-understanding, decision-making, and self-control, which are developed through social relationships. These competencies can be enabled or limited by social contexts, influencing authentic self-government. Finally, self-authorization is associated with weak substantive theories; it involves seeing oneself as having the normative authority to own and be accountable for one's values, decisions, and life. It includes maintaining attitudes of self-respect, self-trust, and self-esteem, developed through social recognition and intersubjective relations.

To conclude, the relevance of distinguishing between multiple dimensions of autonomy— self-determination, self-governance, and self-authorization— is that it recognizes the complexity of the concept and aids in detecting how social oppression can influence it in

various ways. This perspective addresses the agency dilemma by viewing autonomy as multidimensional and variable. The latter entails acknowledging that social subordination can limit a person's ability to control their life (self-determination) but without demeaning them or implying they cannot make decisions (self-governance) or accept responsibility for their life (self-authorization). The multidimensional approach also incorporates insights from relational autonomy theorists, who emphasize that internalizing social oppression can, but does not always, hinder these capacities. Additionally, it respects the autonomy of subordinated individuals while recognizing the limits they face.

Finally, Mackenzie and Anderson's reconceptualization of vulnerability and autonomy illustrates the complex relationship between these notions, emphasizing that they are not oppositional but inextricably linked. Their work highlights the need to promote autonomy as a matter of social justice, with relational theories underscoring the role of social factors in creating and preserving autonomy. The multidimensional analysis of autonomy—encompassing self-determination, self-governance, and self-authorization—offers a complete framework for understanding how social oppression can impact autonomy in a variety of ways. This perspective respects the agency of individuals while acknowledging the restrictions imposed by social hierarchies, thus providing a balanced approach to addressing autonomy-related vulnerabilities.

Capabilities Approach.

To illustrate how these theoretical frameworks inform practical interventions and policies aimed at fostering autonomy and reducing vulnerability, Mackenzie (2014) endorses capabilities theory and demonstrates its conceptual connections with relational autonomy and its importance for an ethics of vulnerability. She argues that the capabilities approach, as developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, provides a more precise framework for understanding equality by focusing on 'capabilities to achieve functionings' rather than just resources.

The capability approach is a framework for assessing human well-being and social arrangements, design policies, and propose social change in society. Sen (1995, 2009) contends that equality should focus on "capabilities to achieve functionings" rather than resources or what persons achieve, because capabilities better capture what individuals are actually able to do and the real opportunities available. In general, resources are necessary

means to well-being and freedom, but they are insufficient measurements of the extent of an individual's advantage or disadvantage. Capabilities refer to the freedom to achieve functionings. For instance, the capability to be healthy requires access to health care, nutritious food, and clean water, all which contribute to the functioning of being healthy. Sen's approach distinguishes itself by not associating well-being with gratifying individual preferences, or with the unreflective preferences of groups. Instead, his formulation emphasizes the relevance of contested and dynamic processes of communal thinking, particularly in establishing how public policy can contribute to enhanced welfare (Dalziel et al., 2018; Mackenzie, 2014).

Martha Nussbaum adds to Sen's concepts by distinguishing between basic, internal, and combined capabilities. The notion of combined capabilities, which includes both internal capabilities and the contexts under which functionings can be chosen, emphasizes the role of social, political, and economic conditions in enabling individuals to exercise their capabilities. Nussbaum's list of ten central capabilities necessary for a minimally flourishing life highlights the importance of a political order to secure at least a baseline level of each capability for all citizens. The central human capabilities are Life (to live a life of normal length); Bodily Health (being able to have good health); Bodily Integrity (able to move freely, be secure against violent assault, opportunities for sexual satisfaction); Senses, Imagination, and Thought (able to use the senses, to imagine, think, and reason); Emotions (to love, to grieve, to experience gratitude and anger); Practical Reason (being able to engage in critical reflection about planning one's life); Affiliation (to live with and toward others; having the social bases of self-respect and non-humiliation); Other Species (being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature); Play (able to laugh, to play, enjoy recreational activities); Control Over One's Environment (being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one's life; being able to hold property). This complements the vulnerability analysis by identifying capability deficits and their potential harms. A woman who is lesbian, for example, may have the internal capability for sexual expression but lacks the combined capability to exercise it if she is part of a community that prohibits same-sex partnerships (Mackenzie, 2014; Nussbaum, 2000, 2003, 2011).

In the context of international migration, Eichsteller (2021) investigates the application of Amartya Sen's capability model. She claims that this framework is especially useful for understanding migration, as it highlights the intersection of social inequalities and individual agency. Presenting migration as a spatial and social transition, where migrants navigate complex structural inequalities related to class, gender, and race; she examines how these inequalities affect migrants' opportunities and choices. Eichsteller also draws thematic parallels between the main problems encountered in the study of social inequalities and migration studies, such as the internal and external variations in perception of 'quality of life' and 'valued activities', judgments on the lack of voice and representation in the public discourse, and the lack of recognition that limited choices and opportunities are the indicators of social deprivation. In addition, she suggests that traditional migration studies overlook the discourse of social justice which is critical for understanding migrants' experiences. In her view, Sen's analytical and conceptual approach offers innovative insights by exploring the power relations that shape access to opportunities and connecting them to the concept of individual choice. Finally, she advocates for a capabilities-based understanding of migration, as it acknowledges both individual responsibilities and the roles of states and communities in expanding migrants' capabilities.

Lastly, integrating capabilities theory with vulnerability analysis offers a comprehensive framework for understanding and addressing social inequalities and injustices. Distinguishing between different sources and states of vulnerability helps to identify different kinds of capability deficits and the actual or potential harms they create. This combined approach highlights the need of social structures that not only protect individuals from harm but also foster autonomy and allow them to fully realize their capabilities.

Summarizing the subjects discussed above, several conclusions can be drawn. First, the exploration of vulnerability from various philosophical and feminist perspectives underscores its fundamental role in defining the human condition. Philosophical theories consistently emphasize that vulnerability is an inherent part of being human, resulting in moral obligations and duties of justice (Rogers et al., 2012; ten Have, 2016). These theories highlight the complex nature of vulnerability, which includes physical, moral, emotional,

psychological, economic, and social dimensions (Mackenzie et al., 2014; Quepons, 2017; ten Have, 2016).

Feminist theorists have significantly contributed to understanding vulnerability by linking it to dependency and the ethics of care, particularly in addressing women's experiences (Hall & Ásta, 2021; ten Have, 2016). They have developed a complex perspective that integrates both ontological and relational aspects of vulnerability, emphasizing the need for moral and institutional responses to specific vulnerabilities (Mackenzie, 2014; Mackenzie et al., 2014). For example, Catriona Mackenzie and colleagues' taxonomy of vulnerabilities provides a robust framework for vulnerability analysis. It differentiates between inherent, situational, and pathogenic sources, as well as dispositional and occurrent states, and provides a comprehensive approach to identifying responsibilities and actions to mitigate various types of vulnerability (Mackenzie, 2014; Mackenzie et al., 2014).

Recent developments in feminist philosophy have further refined the concept of vulnerability and its significance for social justice, challenging the traditional view of it as merely disempowering. Scholars advocate for a reconceptualization that acknowledges vulnerabilities' enabling and activating aspects (Fareld, 2023), recognizing it as a constitutive structure shared by all persons while highlighting its unjust impacts on marginalized groups (Teixeira, 2022). Feminist debates have focused on whether vulnerability should be seen as an ontological state or a relational concept, emphasizing the importance of avoiding idealization or condescension in analyzing it (Luna, 2022). Moreover, international feminist activists have refrained from using the term 'vulnerable' to classify groups, instead emphasizing resistance to subjugation within gendered social structures, agreeing with bioethicists and feminist theorists who reject vulnerability as a classificatory term (Savaş et al., 2023).

The integration of capabilities theory with vulnerability analysis offers a comprehensive framework for addressing social inequalities and injustices. This dual approach emphasizes the need for social systems that protect individuals from harm while also developing autonomy and enabling them to fully realize their capabilities (Mackenzie, 2014). This framework is particularly relevant in the context of international migration

because it highlights the intersection of social inequalities and individual agency, providing insights into the power relations that frame access to opportunities (Eichsteller, 2021).

Ultimately, distinguishing between the several dimensions of autonomy—self-determination, self-governance, and self-authorization—recognizes the concept's complexities and helps to comprehend how social oppression can influence it. The multidimensional approach respects the agency of subordinated individuals while acknowledging the restrictions imposed by social hierarchies, providing a balanced approach to addressing autonomy-related vulnerabilities.

Feminist scholars' reconceptualization of vulnerability and autonomy illustrates their complex relationship, emphasizing that they are not oppositional but inextricably linked. This perspective underscores the importance of promoting autonomy as a matter of social justice, with relational theories highlighting the role of social factors in creating and preserving autonomy. Thus, a thorough understanding of vulnerability and autonomy is essential for fostering a more inclusive and equitable society.

1.3 Political perspectives: some of us are more vulnerable

As previously described, feminist approaches are rooted in the political, seeking social justice and equality. The philosophical and political perspectives on vulnerability are not opposites but rather interconnected. Vulnerability confronts us with our own powerlessness and defenselessness, as well as the possibility to exploit others' weaknesses (ten Have, 2016). Philosophically, all human life is marked by vulnerability (Rogers et al., 2012), invoking a general sense of moral responsibility. However, universal protection is impractical since exposure to harm is not equally distributed.

While every human being is susceptible to harm, some face greater risks due to unequal conditions for human flourishing, creating a special obligation to assist the most vulnerable. This difference in the allocation of vulnerability highlights the connection between universal and contextual dimensions, demonstrating that satisfying human needs differs according to individual circumstances (Fineman, 2008, 2010; ten Have, 2016). This point of view emphasizes that vulnerability generates both individual and social responsibility, which should be addressed by fostering a more equal society. Just as we all

share much vulnerability, our social practices and institutions can assist to ameliorate it and develop resilience (Rogers et al., 2012).

Arguing that vulnerability is a general feature of the human species does not exclude its unequal distribution, particularly on a global scale. Ten Have (2016) argues that, on the contrary, philosophical perspectives on vulnerability lay the foundation for political perspectives that address specific circumstances requiring remedial action. Rather than perceiving humans as helpless victims, vulnerability emphasizes their interdependence and connectedness, as well as the moral responsibility they bear for one another, forming the basis of human solidarity. In this section I will briefly review the main aspects of the political perspective on vulnerability.

Ten Have (2016) uses the terms ‘anthropological vulnerability’ and ‘special vulnerability’ to distinguish between the philosophical and political perspectives. Anthropological vulnerability is primarily concerned with sensitivity, understanding humans as embodied, dependent, relational and responsible, and hence, necessarily sensitive to potential harms. It depicts a universal human condition, “the predicament of passivity, the phenomenon of ‘givenness’, when human beings experience that they are susceptible to harm and violence” (p. 127). Special vulnerability emphasizes the components of exposure and adaptive capacity; therefore, humans are more vulnerable when confronted with threatening and risky situations and when they lack the adequate capabilities to respond and cope. It recognizes humans as inherently social beings. Special vulnerability arises from the unequal distribution of harm, in which certain populations are more exposed to potential harm and violence than others. Moreover, it reveals inequalities in human relations, such as, in medical settings where patients and the healthcare personnel have an imbalance of power, which can exacerbate vulnerability. Illness compels individuals to seek assistance, and the resulting relationship can either benefit or hurt them due to power dynamics in medicine. Thus, in such asymmetrical relationships, recognizing and treating special vulnerabilities becomes an ethical obligation.

The political approach associated with the emphasis on special vulnerability is concerned with two main issues: how vulnerability is exacerbated and how it might be reduced. The former addresses the circumstances that contribute to exploitation and abuse, while the latter formulates ethical and political responses that link vulnerability to human

rights and justice. Ten Have promotes a radical perspective of vulnerability, contrasting it with individualism and emphasizing commonality and solidarity. He explains that humans are ultimately social, and that poverty, deprivation, and marginalization are systemic issues rather than individual choices. Global inequalities exacerbate vulnerability in developing countries. Moreover, he argues that addressing this requires systemic solutions rather than individual ones, such as enhancing community roles and changing the conditions that contribute to health disparities. Hence, the political perspective on vulnerability must focus on systemic relations and events that produce special vulnerability, going beyond agency and decision-making.

The production of vulnerability.

The notion of political production of vulnerability refers to the mechanisms by which power hierarchies engender circumstances of precariousness and disparity, having a particular impact on disadvantaged groups (Sales Gelabert, 2021). In this sense, special vulnerabilities are the result of power differences and inequalities within the cultural and social environments. They are thus of our own making, while also determining us as we are continuously shaping and reshaping them by remodeling and restructuring these environments. In a political perspective, vulnerability is a sign of social inequality. According to ten Have (2016) the mechanisms that systematically produce vulnerability include structural violence, inequality, and power differences. I will briefly describe these terms.

Structural violence. Johan Galtung (1969) introduced the term ‘structural violence’ to describe the type of violence that lacks an identifiable perpetrator and is embedded within societal structures. This sort of violence occurs indirectly, as it is built into the social structure, and not as the result of individual actions. It frequently goes unrecognized or remains unnoticed because it is not obviously personal or intentional, yet it is the manifestation of a harmful social context. In other words, it refers to the indirect, prolonged harm embedded in repressive social orders, distinct from direct physical violence (Carruth et al., 2021). The notion broadens the definition of violence to encompass factors such as poverty, famine, subordination, and social exclusion. For instance, starvation exemplifies structural violence because it is caused by global economic disparities and unequal distribution of power and resources, making such suffering preventable on a global scale (Dilts et al., 2012; ten Have, 2016).

Another pertinent example is the concept of ‘Institutional Trauma’. In her work, Lucy Thompson (2021) criticizes mainstream standard psychological treatments for their individualistic and medicalized perspectives on trauma. She proposes a theory of institutional trauma that addresses the socio-political dimensions, highlighting how institutions perpetuate inequalities and violent power dynamics. Kaulino & Matus (2023) employ this theory, alongside epistemological violence and recognition theory, to analyze public policies for institutionalized children in Chile. Their discussion is closely related to structural violence, revealing how institutional procedures invalidate individual experiences, perpetuate inequality, and systematically re-traumatize and marginalize children, thereby limiting their agency and future opportunities.

Inequality. According to Paul Farmer (1999), structural violence manifests through unequal social structures and conditions. He uses the example of Haiti, where patients must travel to the capital with money for surgery, to illustrate the deep-rooted inequalities that he considers the pressing ethical issue of our era. Within countries, morbidity and mortality rates vary significantly among socioeconomic groups, with extreme poverty resulting in preventable deaths and diseases. This inequity is exacerbated by factors such as race, gender, and social class, resulting in unequal access to education, housing, and healthcare. As a result, not everyone benefits equally from scientific and technological advancements. As per Have (2016), while the concept of anthropological vulnerability can be used to explain why all humans are inherently vulnerable to threats like infectious illness, disadvantaged populations suffer special vulnerability due to social, economic, and political inequalities.

Inequality increases vulnerability in numerous ways. For example, Kadetz & Mock (2018) show that pre-existing social exclusions and disparities in access to resources intensify post-disaster vulnerability for marginalized groups. These inequalities create barriers that limit access to critical resources, perpetuate dominance, and obstruct successful disaster recovery efforts. Therefore, marginalized communities face increased risks and challenges, both before and after catastrophic events, due to established social and economic disparities.

Power. Galtung (1969) asserts that while inequality is the root cause of structural violence, achieving equality alone will not eliminate it. He contends that without addressing the decision-making processes that drive resource distribution, equal distribution will not effectively ameliorate structural violence. The core issue lies in power dynamics, namely the

power to decide resource allocation. Power, like violence, is complex and multifaceted. It includes both the capacity to act in one's own interest, which is frequently hindered by impaired decision-making abilities, and situational inequalities in which access to resources varies significantly, such as between affluent and poor individuals or between strong and weak countries (ten Have, 2016).

The sources of unofficial power, ingrained in social, economic, and political contexts, contribute to structural violence. These power dynamics, which are not formally assigned but are culturally ingrained, dictate relationships of domination and actions, such as men over women or wealthy over poor. They provide leverage in influencing others to act or refrain from acting in a certain way (ten Have, 2016). Iris Young (2008) work aligns with the view that power imbalances create special vulnerabilities. Her theory identifies five forms or 'faces' of oppression: violence, exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, and cultural imperialism, indicating that structural phenomena, rather than individual acts, lead to unfair and unequal treatment of groups. These power relations, which are ingrained in everyday practices, sustain disparities, distinctions, privileges, hierarchies, and statuses, causing systemic disadvantages.

Power differentials play a significant role in contributing to vulnerability among migrants. For instance, Khanom et al. (2022) studied the gendered power relations of climate-induced migrants in Bangladesh. In this study, they highlight how gendered power relations shape adaptive capacities influencing vulnerability and affecting their security and ability to adapt in urban areas. Anoosh Soltani (2013)'s study on Muslim migrant women in Rosengård Malmö revealed that power differentials, such as cultural limitations and lack of social ties, contributed to social vulnerability, exacerbating social exclusion and hindering integration efforts. Moreover, Paolo De Stefani (2022a)'s research on the legal and political discourse in Europe reveals that the assignment of migrants to 'vulnerable groups' can increase protection but also accentuate risks of paternalism and exclusion, demonstrating how power dynamics can influence vulnerability.

Identifying individuals, groups, or populations as vulnerable implies a risk of harm through neglect, abuse, discrimination, exclusion, and oppression. Exploitation is a significant concern associated with vulnerability, and it is exploited in a variety of bioethical controversies, including organ selling, non-therapeutic medical experiments, and clinical

research in developing countries. The commodification of healthcare, which limits access to only those who can afford it, as well as exploitative international trade agreements regulating pharmaceutical prices, are other significant issues. These practices have led to the increased awareness of the potential for exploitation, especially among vulnerable populations (ten Have, 2016).

The notion of exploitation, which was historically analyzed through Marxist and neo-Marxist economic interactions, is now applied to non-economic contexts such as research, healthcare, and interpersonal relationships. According to Karl Marx's theory, exploitation is inherent to capitalism, implying the appropriation of surplus value produced by excess labor (Giammarinaro, 2022). Despite widespread agreement on the moral implications of exploiting vulnerable people, no single theoretical framework can explain all forms of exploitation. Injustice, lack of freedom, disrespect, and vulnerability, are common justifications for its wrongfulness, reflecting the concept's complex nature and its implications (ten Have, 2016).

Exploitation entails a power imbalance in which one part takes advantage of another's need, weakness, or dependence. This unequal dynamic, best understood in terms of power, exemplifies how exploitation stems from social exclusion and unequal societal status. According to ten Have (2016), exploitation "refers to situations in which people often have little choice; they are elements in a system where they have no control over the process and outcome of interactions" (p. 138). To reduce vulnerability, dominant behavior must be eradicated.

Furthermore, he claims that understanding vulnerability from a political standpoint requires a review of the relationship between exploitation and social, economic and political conditions. Emphasizing power reveals "structural exploitation", in which vulnerability is caused by the conditions in which people live, rather than their inherent features. This structural exploitation results from global injustices, requiring collective action to address systemic inequalities. Addressing special vulnerabilities generated by these conditions demands collaborative responses to institutional injustices.

Maria Grazia Giammarinaro (2022) examines severe exploitation in relation to production and social reproduction, stressing that "edge populations" subjected to exploitation, particularly migrants, are a structural component of global economies. This type

of exploitation violates fundamental human rights and arises from intersectional vulnerabilities. Through a gender-focused analysis, she highlights the severity of exploitation experienced by women in domestic work, agriculture, and the sex industry, where weak regulations and rights deprivations lead to coercion and negotiation. Giammarinaro advocates for the establishment of safe migration channels and inclusive policies as viable responses. Severe exploitation frequently affects women and marginalized groups, comprising multiple forms of abuse and transitioning between sexual and labor exploitation. She promotes the notion of "gender intersectional exploitation" to address the combined impact of gender, race, and migration status.

Taken together, for the philosophical perspectives, vulnerability reflects our shared susceptibility to harm underscoring a sense of moral duty. Political perspectives call for remedial actions to address specific circumstances of heightened risk, especially for marginalized groups. Unequal social structures, including power differences and systemic inequalities, create special vulnerabilities that perpetuate harm and exploitation. Addressing vulnerabilities necessitates a shift from individualized solutions to systemic reforms. This includes fostering community resilience, promoting equitable access to resources, and enhancing the roles of social institutions (Rogers et al., 2012). As ten Have (2016) argues, efforts to mitigate vulnerabilities should focus on addressing the social conditions that sustain it, contributing to the prevention of its production. Finally, a holistic approach to vulnerability must integrate philosophical insights with political measures, encouraging solidarity and systemic change in order to create a more equitable and resilient society.

In this chapter I have examined the concept of vulnerability from several angles, emphasizing its complexity and multifaceted nature. After reviewing several definitions and applications of vulnerability, we may conclude that the notion is inextricably linked to the susceptibility to suffering, exposure to harm, and the capacity to cope or overcome threats. Moreover, it applies to all living beings, and because of the heterogeneous nature of threats, vulnerability manifests in various forms, including physical, emotional, psychological, social, moral, economic, legal, and political. This broad understanding has enabled the examination of theoretical frameworks that outline the causes of vulnerability and propose actions to mitigate its effects.

Philosophical perspectives on vulnerability highlight human fragility beyond physical characteristics, incorporating moral, emotional, psychological, economic, and social dimensions. This framework emphasizes vulnerability as an inherent part of the human condition, creating moral obligations and duties of justice. Political perspectives on vulnerability underscore the need for remedial actions to address increased risks, especially for marginalized groups. This perspective contends that addressing vulnerabilities requires a shift from individualized solutions to systemic reforms that promote community resilience, equal access to resources, and strengthen the roles of social institutions. The feminist approach integrates philosophical and political insights. It recognizes the fundamental role of vulnerability in defining human experience, and it highlights the necessity of moral and institutional responses to vulnerability, as well as promoting social justice and recognizing the intersection of social inequalities and individual agency.

By examining vulnerability through these lenses, we can obtain a better understanding of its nature and implications. The philosophical, feminist, and political perspectives collectively underscore the importance of addressing vulnerability as a systemic issue that is deeply rooted in societal structures, rather than only as an individual condition. Recognizing the interconnectedness of vulnerability and autonomy, as well as the need for both moral and political responses, is critical for fostering a more inclusive and equitable society. Furthermore, this holistic understanding is helpful for developing effective strategies to reduce vulnerabilities, promote social justice, and contribute to the resilience of individuals and communities. In the following chapter I will discuss the topic of migration and explore how it relates to vulnerability.

Chapter 2: The Mental Health Impact of the Migration Experience

This chapter introduces the topic of migration. I will start by defining the term and different types of migration. Then, I will briefly discuss the root causes or migration drivers. Subsequently, I will shortly describe migration forms, infrastructures, and trajectories - stages of the process. Additionally, I will analyze the relation between mental health and migration, particularly the mental health challenges that migrants face, as well as their resiliency. Finally, I will examine the relationship between vulnerability and migration by reviewing the concept of vulnerability in migration literature, the consequences of labeling migrants, and ending with a proposed conceptual framework to understand vulnerability in the context of migration. Of course, the many sections of this chapter cannot adequately depict the full scope of the field. As a result, the following sections seek to provide an overview of current migration trends that are also relevant to the subject of vulnerability.

2.1 What is migration?

Migration is a complex multifaceted global phenomenon, intertwined with socio-economic, political, and cultural factors. It refers to a physical move involving an intended permanent change of residence (Thomas, 2024). The International Organization for Migration defines the term as “the movement of persons away from their usual place of residence, either across an international border or within a State” (IOM, 2019, p. 137). Migration is an extensively studied topic across multiple disciplines. Scholten et al. (2022) describe migration studies as a diverse field characterized by its plurality, encompassing all types of international and internal migration, migrants, and diversities. They argue the field originated in the 1880s with efforts to theorize about internal migration and the dynamics of mobility, then expanded to include international migration in the 1920s. Moreover, in response to postwar economic developments, migration research began to formalize and extend in the 1950s and 1960s, and later included ethnic and race relations studies through the 1970s. Initially reliant on census and demographic data, the focus shifted in the 1990s to migrants' experiences. Migration studies have become more interdisciplinary in the twenty-first century, with a variety of approaches and intertwined themes, moving away from quantifying and tracing geographies of migration flows and toward research on migrants' subjective experiences, migrants' identity and belonging, and with attention to the cultural (super)diversity of societies.

Migration can be difficult to measure because of its dynamic features. Statistics play an important role in understanding phenomena and are vital in migration studies, both for academic and policy purposes. According to Kraler & Reichel (2022), migration and migrants can be viewed in two ways: stocks and flows. The first refers to the number of migrants in a specific location at a given time point, while flow indicates the events (migration movements) that occur over a given period. Migrant stocks fluctuate over time as a result of inflows and outflows of migrants. In general, they argue that stocks can be easier to quantify than flows, because migration dynamics are more difficult to capture.

Due to the plurality of the migration field, efforts have been made to provide a topical structure, such as the International Migration Research Network's (IMISCOE) taxonomy. The taxonomy of migration seeks to systematize and make more accessible knowledge on migration (e.g. journal articles, chapters and books) by grouping topics into several categories such as migration processes, migration consequences, migration governance and cross-cutting themes (Scholten et al., 2022). For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on migration processes, which includes migration drivers, forms and infrastructures, while acknowledging the cross-cutting topic of gender. Starting with migration forms, the migration research hub's taxonomy includes 24 themes in this cluster demonstrating its variety. In this section, I will concentrate on the distinctions between voluntary and involuntary migration, internal and international migration, and regular versus irregular migration.

Voluntary vs involuntary migration.

In general, the difference between voluntary and involuntary migration lies in the choice and circumstances that surround the migration process. Voluntary migration is made for personal reasons, while forced migration is a response to coercive factors beyond the individual context (Thomas, 2024). Ottonelli & Torresi (2013) critically examined the concept of voluntariness in migration within normative theories. They argue the notion of voluntariness is often under-defined and ambiguous, which undermines the recognition of migrants' claims and projects. In short, they identified two problematic extremes of a spectrum in definitions of voluntariness: overly inclusive and overly exclusive definitions. The first is that certain political theorists consider any non-coerced choice to migrate as voluntary, as long as the migrants' basic rights are protected. They contend this definition is too simplistic, making

the category of non-voluntary choices underinclusive. On the opposite side of the spectrum, other political theorists believe that almost all migration is involuntary due to global injustices. They argue this perspective is too demanding and portrays nearly all migration appear non-voluntary, which tends to make the category of non-voluntary choices over-inclusive.

Furthermore, they propose four conditions that define migration as voluntary, with the purpose of clarifying the ambiguities of the existing use of the term. The first condition is non-coercion, which indicates that migration must not be motivated by physical or psychological coercion. The second factor is sufficiency, which refers to the structure and quality of the opportunities and options available to migrants at the time of decision making: “a migration project is voluntarily undertaken only if the available alternatives at home are good enough for the migrant” (Otonelli & Torresi, 2013, p. 798). For instance, those whose only alternatives to migration are starvation, destitution, injury, or poverty cannot be said to migrate voluntarily. The third requirement is the availability of exit options, or actual options to change one’s immigrant status, that go beyond the possibility to return to one’s original country. The last condition is information. For people to choose voluntarily, they must have adequate knowledge of what they are choosing. In the context of migration, this condition is violated when migrants are purposefully deceived by someone who is interested in exploiting their lack of knowledge, as in the case of trafficking.

Distinguishing between the categories of forced and voluntary migration is relevant because it influences migrants' access to basic rights and resources. Forced migration is defined by the International Organization of Migration as “a migratory movement which, although the drivers can be diverse, involves force, compulsion or coercion” (IOM, 2019, p.77). The concept is associated with displacement, which occurs when individuals or groups are compelled to leave their homes due to external pressures. When someone is forced to abandon their home or habitual place of residence, either across international borders or within a State, is normally considered a displaced person. Those who have not passed over an internationally recognized State border are known as internally displaced persons (IDPs). Displacement can occur as a result of natural or human-made disasters, or in the context of escaping from armed conflict, violence, and violations of human rights (IOM, 2019; UNICEF, 2021).

Moreover, individuals who have been constrained to emigrate due to threats to their safety and well-being often seek security in another country. Asylum seekers are people who have fled their country and applied for protection in another nation, but their claim to refugee status has not yet been processed or finally decided by the country in which they have submitted it. Not every asylum seeker will be eventually recognized as a refugee, but every refugee was once an asylum seeker. In this manner, the main difference between the two lies in their legal status. The 1951 United Nations Convention on the Status of Refugees and its 1967 New York Protocol, serve as the legal foundation for the asylum process. Under the Convention and Protocol, an individual who believes they are at risk of persecution for a specific set of reasons (due to race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion) and who presents themselves to the authorities of a host country seeking their protection from such persecution is considered an asylum seeker during the period during which their claim for protection is being considered. If the claim is successful, they are formally and legally recognized as a refugee and entitled to the forms of support and assistance described in the Convention (IOM, 2019; Southerden, 2023; UNICEF, 2021).

Global crises create serious social and economic repercussions that put pressure on people to migrate. Millions have been displaced due to combat, or by cause of severe economic and political instability, such as that faced by Venezuelans. About 3.9 million Venezuelans were reported displaced globally in 2020. Additionally, large-scale displacements have been triggered by climate and weather-related disasters in many parts of the world, including the United States of America (McAuliffe & Triandafyllidou, 2021). Often reported as the ones who suffer the harsh consequences are particular groups defined as vulnerable like women, children, older adults, and young people. In the migration context, vulnerability is understood as the limited capacity to avoid, resist, confront, or recover from harm, frequently viewed as an outcome of the unique interaction of individual, social, situational, and structural characteristics or conditions, like the ones described in the first chapter (IOM, 2019, p. 229). At the end of this chapter, I will come back to the topic of vulnerability and migration.

Internal vs international migration.

The distinction between internal and international migration highlights the political geography of migration journeys (Talleraas, 2022). Internal migration refers to the movement

of people within a country's borders, whether by nationals or international migrants. When this movement is from rural areas to urban locations it is termed urbanization (IOM, 2019; Thomas, 2024). International migration indicates the permanent movement of people from one country to another. The term 'immigrant' applies to people who move to a new state, whereas 'emigrants' are those who are moving out of a country. An international migrant, then, is a person who has left his or her State of birth, or habitual residence, to live in a new one. This definition encompasses those who move in a regular manner - in compliance with the law of the countries of origin, transit and destination -, often called documented migrants; as well as those in irregular situations, the ones who move across international borders and are not authorized to enter or stay in that State (IOM, 2019; Thomas, 2024).

Because of its political, economic, and social implications, international migration has gained a lot of interest in the last decades, and its increasing tendency is well documented. In the last 30 years, the number of international migrants, or international migrant stock, has risen. Recently, as specified by the 2022 World Migration Report of the International Organization for Migration, there were 281 million people who migrated internationally in 2020. The United States of America remained the primary destination, with over 51 million international migrants. Despite COVID-19 complicating human mobility around the world, the number of persons living outside their country of origin increased from 2019; even so, international migrants represented only 3.6 percent of the world's population indicating that most people remain within their own country of birth (McAuliffe & Triandafyllidou, 2021).

Regular vs irregular migration.

The difference between regular and irregular migration may appear straightforward but the topic raises several issues. Typically, the distinction is based on legal criteria, specifically legal versus illegal migration. In this case, legal immigration refers to individuals who enter a country with the government's formal permission or in compliance with their legal requirements, whereas illegal immigrants are those who enter a country without the necessary proper legal authorization (Thomas, 2024).

According to Maurizio Ambrosini & Minke Hajer (2023a), the term 'irregular immigrant' is preferable. They argue irregular immigration is a broad and diversified category; resulting from the contact and tension between selective policies of admitting foreigners into a different national territory and the aspirations for mobility of persons who

are not, in principle, authorized to enter that area or settle there. Additionally, defining precisely what irregular immigration is, and which immigrants can be labeled as irregular, can be challenging. They claim common sense typically associates irregular immigration with illegal entry into a country, such as the use of fake identification papers, counterfeit visas, or authorized permits sold illegally by corrupt officials. On the contrary, research shows that the majority of irregular immigrants enter the country legally, firstly as tourists and secondly as students, and become irregular by exceeding the time of stay for which they were permitted. Authors maintain that overstayers outweigh those who have crossed the border without valid documentation. Moreover, while illegal entry is normally regarded as a crime, overstaying is often treated as a minor misdemeanor, though there is a growing political trend towards criminalizing all forms of unauthorized settlement.

Ambrosini & Hajer (2023b) also explain the contemporary trends in border securitization as the result of a tension between human mobility and measures to limit or regulate it. The relationship between unauthorized immigration and terrorism is frequently invoked as justification for the securitization of immigration rules. In this view, states implement a targeted border management system that allows some forms of international mobility (for example, citizens of developed countries and elites of developing countries) while prohibiting or preventing other forms of border crossing, particularly from the Global South.

In examining the issue of terminology, they note that the term ‘unauthorized immigrants might pose complications because an immigrant can be allowed to undertake certain activities but not others. For instance, a person who is permitted to enter or stay in a country to receive medical treatment but cannot access the labor market (Ambrosini & Hajer, 2023b). The issue can be further compounded by the different legal statuses that immigrants may hold, leading to instances of what Ruhs & Anderson (2010) termed ‘semi-compliance’. An example could be students, who are typically allowed to work for a certain number of hours. However, “when a student accumulates two part-time jobs, each of which is regular, their aggregation breaks the law” (Ambrosini & Hajer, 2023a, p.17). As a result, and unsurprisingly, immigrants’ legal status is not always obvious. Individuals may fall into conditions of ‘liminal legality’ (Menjívar, 2006), where they are neither undocumented nor fully authorized, or ‘semi-legality’ (Kubal, 2013), where they are residing legally but

working without proper authorization. Additionally, terminology like ‘precarious legal status’ describe temporary and revocable permits, which might lead to further instability (Goldring & Landolt, 2011). Finally, irregular status can emerge from legal norms, as immigrants may lose their legal status due to changes in their circumstances, such as losing their job (Triandafyllidou & Bartolini, 2020).

Ultimately, the authors propose for viewing legality as a spectrum rather than a binary concept, reflecting the complex interplay between migrants’ realities and their responses to legal frameworks (Ambrosini & Hajer, 2023a; Spencer & Triandafyllidou, 2022; Triandafyllidou & Bartolini, 2020). In the words of Triandafyllidou & Bartolini (2020, p.13), “irregular migration needs to be conceptualized not as a black-and-white distinction between legal and illegal status, but rather as a continuum of different statuses between regularity and irregularity”. Finally, Ambrosini & Hajer (2023b) conclude that there is no clear and unambiguous definition of irregular migration. They advocate for the term ‘irregular (im)migrant’ or ‘people in irregular condition’ as it is viewed as less infused with a degrading connotation and respectful of human dignity, rather than employing terms like ‘illegal immigrant’ or ‘clandestine’ because a person cannot be reduced to their legal status or actions, and therefore it is always necessary to distinguish between the legal status or behaviors that break the rule of a State from the human being concerned.

In this section I described the most relevant terminology linked to migration, in an attempt to conceptualize the term, specifically distinguishing between different migration forms such as voluntary and involuntary migration, internal and international migration, and regular versus irregular migration. As shown, some of these categories are not clearly distinguishable from one another, demonstrating the complex and dynamic nature of migration. In the following part, I will discuss why people migrate.

2.2 Why do people migrate?

In this segment I will overview the conceptual understanding of migration drivers. First, by briefly reviewing the most common terms used in literature to refer to the causes of migration, then, by presenting classical theories of migration that explain why people migrate, and finally, by discussing decision-making processes and the migration driver taxonomy proposed by Czaika & Reinprecht (2022).

According to Czaika & Reinprecht (2022), over the last few decades, researchers have identified and described numerous factors and contexts that shape individual migration trajectories and broader migration processes. Migration intentions (and aspirations) and actual moves are driven by a variety of factors. At certain points in people's lives, a number of circumstances combine to generate migration intentions, which, given some feasible livelihood opportunities, may result in temporary or permanent relocation to another country or destination.

In migration literature, the term 'migration determinants' is often used, implying a structural and deterministic (causal) relationship between certain external conditions and migration. Czaika & Reinprecht (2022) believe that this conceptualization is inaccurate because it ignores the critical role of human agency in migratory processes. Another frequent term is 'root causes', which refers to the socioeconomic and political situations that lead to departures, mainly poverty, repression, and violent conflict. They claim that this definition of a migration-inducing factor is somewhat narrow because there is rarely a single or unique underlying causal element that causes people to move. Rather, a multitude of factors interact to mediate and shape individual migration decisions, as well as broader migration dynamics and patterns. Consequently, Czaika and Reinprecht prefer the term 'migration drivers', rather than causes or determinants, as structural components permit and constrain the exercise of agency by social actors and increase the likelihood of specific decisions.

Regarding the decision-making process, they explain that at a higher level of aggregation, structural disparities between places (locations of origin and destination), create the context that encourages migration decisions. These differences may reflect long-standing social and economic inequalities in living conditions within and between countries (e.g., the global North and South), as well as cyclical economic fluctuations. Migration drivers enable or constrain migration at lower levels of aggregation (e.g., the micro-level) by altering people's perceptions of migration possibilities and their capacity to realize these opportunities. As a result, people's view of spatial opportunity gaps serves as pre-conditions for their migratory decisions. Aside from these structural disparities, specific events and developments, such as sudden policy changes, may predispose and eventually trigger migration. Also, the intricate interplay of multiple (economic, political, social and others) gradual and abrupt events might dynamically alter migration opportunities for heterogeneous

groups of individuals. People's willingness and ability to change their life circumstances through migration is determined by what authors refer to as 'complex driver environments', which are time-space-dependent configurations of multidimensional drivers.

Theories of migration.

With respect to theories that explain why people migrate, Czaika & Reinprecht (2022) organize these into two broad categories. First, the ones that focus mostly on individuals or households as the decision-making units, and second, more structural theories that conceptualize migration as an intrinsic part of historical processes and societal developments.

The first category includes neoclassical migration theory, which is based on Larry Sjaastad's (1962) cost-benefit model and Everett Lee's (1966) push-pull model, which suggests that individuals migrate due to economic discrepancies between their current location and potential destinations, where people move if the expected returns are beneficial. Critics of this theory argue that it fails to explain why most people do not migrate despite income disparities, and that it assumes individuals as the sole decision-makers. This led to approaches that consider the role of households in migration decisions, as Sarah F. Harbison (1981, as cited in Czaika & Reinprecht, 2022) argues about the direct and indirect role of family structure and functions in influencing perceptions of migration costs and benefits. Further, the new economics of labor migration (Stark & Bloom, 1985) emphasize households, noting that family ties create social externalities affecting migration decisions. For instance, negative externalities (strong ties to the place and people at origin) decrease the likelihood of migration, whereas positive externalities are established by family and friends living elsewhere who convey information that reduces migration-related uncertainty. Network theory further asserts that migration decisions involve individual actors, families, migrant organizations, and various economic and political factors, with social networks influencing migration patterns. Additionally, the 'culture of migration' approach suggests that cultural norms and widespread information about migration options can motivate and sustain migration within communities (Czaika & Reinprecht, 2022).

The second set of theories explains migration in terms of class-based deprivations in global capitalist systems. Historical-structural models, which are based upon neo-Marxist interpretations of capitalism, stress the importance of structures and forces operating at the

macro-structural level, suggesting that migration is driven by global demand for cheap, flexible labor in segmented markets to sustain economic growth in capitalist countries. This is supported by world systems theory, which claims that capitalist systems disrupt traditional economies, influencing migration patterns both domestically and internationally (Wallerstein, 1974, as cited in Czaika & Reinprecht, 2022). This capitalist impact, linked to colonialism, drove significant migration in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the postcolonial era, world systems theory asserts that neoliberalism and corporate capitalism perpetuate colonial-like structures, maintaining transnational ties and shared histories between former colonial powers and their colonies (Fawcett, 1989). Critics of historical-structural theories highlight that they disregard migrants' agency, depicting them as passive actors in the larger capitalist system (Arango, 2004), and that they fail to account for South-South migration and the influential role of states. To address this, political economy models emphasize that political systems and geopolitical shifts in global economic, political and military power drive migration processes (Czaika & Reinprecht, 2022).

Migration drivers.

Czaika and Reinprecht conclude that almost all migration theories agree that migration, as both an individual behavior and a broader collective action, is highly context dependent. They highlight two context-specific functionalities of migration drivers: predisposing factors, which reflect societal structures and structural disparities defining the broadest layer of opportunity structures, and proximate drivers, which localize predisposing macro-structural factors by disaggregating them into situational triggering factors that establish the actual reasons for migrating, such as unemployment, job offer, marriage, persecution, etc., and thus, bringing them closer to the immediate 'decision context' of a potential migrant.

A set of driving factors may influence migration (decision-making) processes depending on the functionality of migration drivers, which is an important aspect in understanding the specific role (single or combinations of) migration drivers may play in migration. Beyond the degree of immediacy, migration driver functions can further be characterized by their temporality, selectivity and geography. Temporality relates to the permanent or transitory qualities of the driver; for instance, adaptations of cultural norms are slow-changing and thus relatively resilient structural drivers, while natural disasters are phenomena that result in rapidly changing driver environments. Selectivity refers to the fact

that broader social, economic, or political transformations do not homogeneously affect all societal groups equally; for example, business cycles might affect groups differently depending on the age, gender, ethnicity, social status or profession of potential migrant. Finally, geography refers to the driver's locus and scope. The geographical scope can range from local to global, whilst the locus of a migration driver denotes the geographical location of a migration journey where a driver may be operating (origin, transit, or destination) (Czaika & Reinprecht, 2022).

Migration decisions are both situational and contextual, which means that the configuration of complex driver environments is very specific to the time and place in which migration aspirations are formed and decisions are made. It is usually not a single driver, but rather a complex combination of economic, political, social, and other developments and events that can dynamically influence both migration opportunities as well as the willingness and ability to migrate. That is, migration drivers do not operate in isolation, but in conjunction with other migration drivers establishing migration driver configurations. Interaction effects, which according to Czaika & Reinprecht (2022) are regularly overlooked in research analyzing migration drivers, occur when the effect of one driver is dependent on the presence and intensity of one or more other factors.

Finally, they synthesize evidence about migration drivers' dimensions and factors into a taxonomy consisting of nine driver dimensions and 24 driving factors that may play a direct (independent) or indirect (conjoined) role in enabling or restraining migration processes at different levels. The driver dimensions are demographic, economic, environmental, human development, individual, politico-institutional, security, socio-cultural, and supranational. Further, they grouped migration-driving factors into three categories: individual-specific, group-specific, and macro-structural drivers. Briefly, the first category refers to the material and non-material personal and household resources, or lack thereof, that influence migration, such as financial assets and intangible factors like migration experience, aspirations, attitudes and personality traits (e.g. open-mindedness and adventurousness) that are associated with migration intentions. The second category relates to the new economics of labor migration theory and the effect of household size and family structure on migration patterns, as well as the influential role of family in migration decision-making. For example, the presence of children or elderly dependents, which typically

increases male migration and decreases female migration, reflecting the gendered division of labor (De Jong, 2000). The last category, the macro-structural and external migration drivers, which are usually the dominant focus in literature, include the economy (e.g. economic conditions and opportunities), public policies (e.g. the effect of public infrastructure), migration policies and human rights (e.g. globalization, transnationalism and political transitions), conflict and security (e.g. civil, ethnic and religious conflict, war, human rights violations), environmental change (e.g. natural disasters), and international connections and relations.

To summarize, I have presented the common terminology related to the causes of migration, the decision-making process, the classical theories of migration, and a taxonomy of migration drivers developed by Czaika & Reinprecht (2022). Overall, I agree with the author's perspectives that different migration drivers affect distinct societal groups in different ways, as well as their suggestions for studying these drivers in specific contexts, that should also take into account the intersections of age, gender, geography, and how migration drivers change dynamically during migration.

2.3 Migration Forms, Infrastructures and Trajectories

In this section I will quickly outline migration forms, including the International Migration Research Network's taxonomy of migration forms, migration infrastructures, and trajectories, which in this case refers to the stages of the migration process.

Migration forms.

The factors used to distinguish one type of migration from another can include a variety of parameters such as the geography of the migration, the reasons or drivers of migration, migrants' characteristics, the migrant's goals, and the infrastructures and mechanisms that shape the journeys. Moreover, the migrant's legal status at the start of, during, and after their journeys also places them into specific categories, implying that the group (migration form) to which migrants belong to can change over time and *en route* (Talleraas, 2022).

A major understanding in migration studies distinguishes between internal and international forms of migration, further differentiating between those who are forced to move and those who migrate voluntarily. Additionally, different actors, such as border control agencies, human rights activists and political parties, can categorize specific migration forms for varied reasons and purposes. Such categorization into distinct forms

sometimes includes identifying migrant groups on the basis of a specific variable. Examples encompass ‘unaccompanied minors’, which allude to migrant’s characteristics; ‘labor migrants’, which emphasize the drivers or motivations; or ‘boat migrant’, which refers to the mode of transportation. Consequently, categorizing migrants might be a sensitive task; and, while it may be useful for analytical purposes and the provision of rights, it is important not to generalize but to keep in mind the broad range of experiences inherent in any migration journey, as well as to constantly consider the social, political, and analytical repercussions of the labels used to distinguish some people from others (Talleraas, 2022).

Scholars have extensively investigated the different forms of migration and its sub-categories. According to Talleraas (2022), the scope of research reveals the multiplicity of elements that influence the spectrum of migration processes and demonstrates that each act of migration can be referred to by a variety of names, depending on the grounds for categorization. Furthermore, with the purpose of providing a tool to guide research and policies, the Migration Research Hub’s developed a taxonomy that contains the following migration forms: environmental migration, family and marriage migration, health-related migration, high-skilled migration, internal displacement migration, internal migration, irregular migration, LGBTQ migration, labor migration, lifestyle and retirement migration, low-skilled migration, multiple migration, refugee migration, asylum seeker migration, return migration, roots migration, short-term and circular migration, transnational migration, unaccompanied minor migration, student mobility and trafficking. Talleraas (2022) clarifies that it is not an exhaustive list and has its limits in terms of capturing the plurality of, and flexibility in, migration experiences. Nevertheless, it can serve as an instrument and starting point for future knowledge.

Migration infrastructures.

Individuals who aspire to migrate frequently confront both natural obstacles, such as rivers, mountains, deserts, and the sea, as well as political impediments, such as borders, bureaucratic procedures, and organizations. During this process, migrants are often assisted by more-or-less professional service providers, ranging from recruitment and travel agencies, digital platforms and airlines, to human smugglers (Düvell & Preiss, 2022).

Most international migrants acquire some information about the migration process from one source or another. Migration infrastructures refer to those intermediary sources that

facilitate or hinder the movement of people. In other words, the intermediary actors, structures, and geographies that exist between the country of departure (country of origin, of transit or country of current residence) and the country of destination, as well as between the drivers of migration and the individual migrants. They arise due to physical barriers, in response to supply and demand structures, as well as in response to state mobility and migration regulations and restrictions. Thus, they are an important aspect of the opportunities/constraints structure that condition people's ability to emigrate, contributing to explain why people migrate and who migrate, thereby linking migration drivers to actual migration flows (Düvell & Preiss, 2022; Preiss, 2022).

Xiang & Lindquist (2014) coined the term 'migration infrastructures' to characterize the mediation process, as well the interlinked actors, institutions and technologies that enable and constrain mobility. They propose five dimensions of migration infrastructures: commercial (recruitment intermediaries), regulatory (state apparatus and procedures for documentation, licensing, training, and other purposes), technological (communication and transport), humanitarian (NGOs and international organizations) and social (migrant networks). Drawing on this definition, Düvell & Preiss (2022) suggest that migration infrastructures should be conceptualized as those infrastructures that facilitate migration, that include physical, organized and institutional features. Additionally, they maintain the concept should encompass regular and irregular actors and structures; state, quasi-state, and non-state actors; commercial and non-commercial actors and structures; material, architectural, technical and digital infrastructures; and practices of and experiences with these infrastructures, including issues of exploitation and crime. Thus, migration infrastructures are multidimensional, consisting of nature and technology, structure and agency, and knowledge. To summarize, migration infrastructures are defined as the physical, digital, commercial, governmental, and humanitarian infrastructures that support and mediate migration on a meso-level, sometimes provided by macro-level actors and influence migratory trajectories on individuals on the micro-level (Düvell & Preiss, 2022; Preiss, 2022; Xiang & Lindquist, 2014).

According to Düvell & Preiss (2022), research into migration infrastructures is still lacking. The existing literature is somewhat inconsistent, and the phenomenon has not yet been thoroughly conceptualized. Nonetheless, they divide current knowledge into three

categories: actors in migration infrastructures (private, governmental, and civil society actors), material migration infrastructures (such as transit migration hubs and means of transportation), and digital migration infrastructures.

Since migration processes today are strongly influenced by digitalization, an increasing number of scholars are interested in the use of digital technology by migrants and refugees during their journey, as well as the impact of technologies on migration. Digital Migration Infrastructures are the collection of digital technologies including the underlying support structures which facilitate migration processes. This digital ensemble consists of actors (e.g. telecommunication companies, shops that sell SIM cards along migration routes, governments), hardware (e.g. smart and basic mobile phones, cyber cafes, computers/tablets), and software (social media, online information campaigns, WIFI hotspots). In essence, Digital Migration Infrastructures play a crucial role in mediating regular and irregular forms of migration and facilitating forced displacement (Düvell & Preiss, 2022; Preiss, 2022).

Migration trajectories.

As we have seen, migration experiences are multidimensional, dynamic and diverse. The journey that people go through is referred to as the migration process or cycle (IOM, 2019). Scholars often organize migration processes into three stages: pre-migration or pre-departure, transit or during-migration, and a post-migration (Cleary et al., 2018; Watson et al., 2022). When analyzing the movement of people, it is important to note that these stages are not always distinct and sometimes tend to overlap with each other (Watson et al., 2022). For the purposes of this paper, I will use Zimmerman et al. (2011) migratory process model that includes five phases: pre-departure, travel, interception, and return.

The pre-departure stage is the period before the outset of the journey, when people start making plans, arrangements or begin considering the idea of moving abroad (Zimmerman et al., 2011). It involves the decision-making processes, including the motivations that steer individuals to migrate, as well as the organization for the departure. The stage or process of pre-migration may range from years to a few hours, contingent upon the circumstances and reasons for migration. Moreover, the duration of this phase may assist the individual in preparing for migration by learning the language, diet, culture, and so on, of the new country (Watson et al., 2022).

The second stage is ‘travel’, also called the transit or during-migration phase, which varies according to the context of the journey. It encompasses the period when individuals are between their place of origin and a destination or interception location (Zimmerman et al., 2011). Some migrants travel directly to their destination while others may need to take several steps along the way. These are ‘transit’ locations where individuals stop for short or long periods. For instance, in the context of international migration, for some it is a deliberate decision to pass quickly through transit countries; while others are unable to continue because they finish the money, or encounter conflicts, disasters or strict border controls that constrain them to remain. Consequently, this step can take some time, as the physical transition may be followed or accompanied by obtaining employment, housing, basic necessities, and so on (Watson et al., 2022; Zimmerman et al., 2011).

Particularly for those migrating irregularly, the journey to the intended destination can take months or even years. From a health perspective, health influences on irregular migrants during this period are intimately tied to the mode of transportation and circumstances; for instance, Mexican migrants who die of heat exposure on treks across the desert towards the United States (Zimmerman et al., 2011). Additionally, migration can also expose individuals to traffickers, smugglers and violence (Paris et al., 2018). In the cases of human trafficking, this phase is often when criminal acts begin, such as illegal border crossing, kidnapping, and notably for women and children, sexual violence (Zimmerman et al., 2011). Furthermore, recent research has indicated that the securitization of borders, which includes harsher visa regimes and enhanced border controls, increases the insecurity of individuals attempting to cross them, making journeys longer, more dangerous and more expensive (Freedman et al., 2022).

Some authors group the ‘destination’, ‘interception’, and ‘return’ phases into a single category termed ‘post-migration’. In this case, post-migration refers to any processes that occur after the physical journey to the destination. It could include stressors associated with the asylum procedures (e.g. immigration detention, temporary visas), repatriation to their home country, or resettlement in the case of refugees (Chen et al., 2017). This stage can last a long period of time and is especially important in understanding acculturation, access to health care, and the increased likelihood of psychiatric disorders as a result of numerous stressors (Watson et al., 2022).

Using Zimmerman et al. (2011)'s framework, the destination phase occurs when people settle in their intended location, whether temporarily or permanently. According to the authors, the majority of migration health research and policy is centered on this stage, stressing, for instance, that mental health outcomes for refugees and migrants are frequently poorer than for native-born individuals. Moreover, the interception phase, which relates to a specific at-risk population, is distinguished by circumstances of temporary detention or interim residence and is pertinent for forced migrants. Interception methods are linked to immigration control measures, which frequently have negative or punitive implications, especially on children (Mares & Ziersch, 2024). Immigration detention facilities or refugee camps often have negative consequences on mental and physical health and are common sites of human rights violations. Furthermore, the length of detention correlates with the severity of mental health disorders. Finally, the return phase is when individuals go back to their place of origin, either temporarily or permanently. People who return after suffering serious abuse, such as trafficked persons or affected refugees, may experience significant levels of distress or psychiatric illness.

To summarize, in this part on migration forms, infrastructures and trajectories, I have attempted to present a comprehensive analysis of the various aspects and stages of migration. Overall, migration is multidimensional and is frequently classified according to geography, drivers, legal status or other features for policymaking and research purposes. It is crucial to note that these categories can change throughout the migration journey, influenced by many elements, including the infrastructures that facilitate migration. Furthermore, the process is typically divided into three stages, pre-migration, transit, and post-migration, each of which involves different challenges and experiences. Finally, migration movements are multifaceted, dynamic and diversified, influenced by a wide range of contextual and individual characteristics. As a result, scholars have been interested in learning more about migration and its impact on mental health. In the following section, I will examine the mental health challenges that migrants experience during their trajectories, as well as their resiliency.

2.4 Migration and mental health

Migration has a substantial impact on mental health at all stages, including pre-migration, migration and post-migration, with stressors affecting individuals and families (Bronstein &

Montgomery, 2011; Chen et al., 2017; Cleary et al., 2018; James et al., 2019; Mesa-Vieira et al., 2022). Understanding the circumstances surrounding migration is critical to comprehend and address the mental health difficulties that immigrants face, as well as to foster their resilience.

Because the relationship between mental health and migration is dynamic, research covers a wide range of topics (e.g. stressors, outcomes, acculturation, etc.) and populations (e.g. unaccompanied minors, refugees, etc.). Literature attests that some psychiatric disorders such as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and psychosis, have a higher incidence among migrant populations (Galatolo et al., 2022), especially amid refugees (Morina et al., 2018; Theisen-Womersley, 2021). Somatization or somatic conditions are also frequent amid immigrants belonging to various ethnic groups (Lanzara et al., 2019; Theisen-Womersley, 2021). Moreover, migrants, particularly forced migrants or refugees, experience psychological distress on their journey. The term ‘refugee mental health’ encompasses the mental health issues related to various aspects of becoming, being, or having been a refugee, such as traumatic exposure in one’s own home country that led to the person’s flight, adverse experiences during the journey, and the myriad challenges refugees are typically exposed to when trying to integrate into the host country (Zipfel et al., 2019).

To organize this section of the chapter, I will use the American Psychological Association’s (2013) guiding frameworks for immigration, which include three principles. First, to acknowledge immigrants’ resilience; second, to adopt an ecological perspective in framing their experiences; and third, to apply a cultural lens. Consequently, I will start by describing Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) bioecological theory, which considers the social contexts that influence individuals thus offering an ecological perspective, before moving on to research on trauma and resilience in the migration process. Additionally, although not exclusively, I will focus on refugee mental health and their experiences.

Regarding the cultural lens, the American Psychological Association (APA) has developed multicultural guidelines for providing effective and respectful services to people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Research suggests that culture, defined as a set of cognitive schemas, value systems, and social practices, has a strong influence on human experience, including cognition, emotion and identities (American Psychological Association, 2013). Briefly, the multicultural standards intend to give a framework for

psychologists to contemplate when working with diverse populations. Among its key elements, the guidelines emphasize the importance of considering the intersection of multiple identities and the complex ways these intersections affect individuals' experiences and well-being, as well as how overlapping identities (e.g. race, gender) can create unique dynamics of privilege and oppression, thus, advocating for an intersectionality perspective (American Psychological Association, 2017). Because it is beyond the scope of this paper, I will not go into greater depth about the guidelines.

Ecological framework.

Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory provides a structure for understanding human development in the context of the relationships that form their environment. The theory describes multiple layers that influence an individual's development, structured from the most immediate settings to broader contexts. Development is viewed as a continuous process of bidirectional interaction between the developing individual and the context. The conceptualization of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory of human development was largely concerned with the characteristics and influences of different contexts: micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems. He later added to the theory the chronosystem, including the dimension of time (Antony, 2022; Chu & Thelamour, 2021).

The microsystem refers to the innermost layer and includes immediate environments in which a person is directly involved, such as family or school/teacher. The mesosystem represents the interconnectedness or relations between microsystems, in which activities and interpersonal relations occur across settings, such as the relationship between family and school experiences. The exosystem is an extension of the mesosystem, including broader social systems and structures that do not directly involve the individual, but still affect their development, such as social services. The macrosystem encompasses the overarching cultural and societal influences; it involves the institutional systems of a culture, such as economic, social, educational, and political systems, including cultural norms, media, social values, overarching belief systems and ideology. The chronosystem reflects the impact of changes and transitions over a lifespan, such as historical and environmental events. It considers changes that occur throughout an individual's life caused by events or experiences that can be from the environment and external to the individual (e.g., a sibling's birth) and/or internal to the individual (e.g., puberty). They can also be normative, expected transitional

changes (e.g., starting school) or non-normative, unexpected (e.g., war). This is especially pertinent when examining the lives of immigrants, because the chronosystem includes the non-normative external event of moving from one country to another. Furthermore, immigration experience (including acculturation) is an active and dynamic process that occurs both within and outside of the individual (Antony, 2022; Chu & Thelamour, 2021).

As stated previously, most mental health-related research focuses on the post-migration phase; thus, Bronfenbrenner's theory has often been used to understand migration outcomes. According to Chu and Thelamour (2020), immigration policies, cultural attitudes towards newcomers, and interpersonal interactions are among the factors that influence immigrant functioning. The convergence of personal, interpersonal, and contextual influences on immigrant adjustment makes bioecological theory an effective theoretical framework for studying immigrant groups. Similarly, the American Psychological Association (2013) in the psychological analysis of immigrants in the United States, employed an adapted social-ecological framework that assumes that the human experience is the result of reciprocal interactions between individuals and their environments, which vary depending on the individual, his or her contexts and culture, and over time. When describing the immigrant experience, they emphasized the influence of context, in particular, contextual risk and protective factors that reduce or enhance healthy adaptation. In sum, this theory provides a framework for understanding migration experiences, taking into account the relationships and broader contexts that influence an individual's development and mental health.

Trauma and Resilience.

Trauma and resilience play crucial roles in the context of migration. Some researchers have documented multiple stressors and mental health problems, including trauma, that migrants experience throughout the journey (Galatolo et al., 2022; Idemudia & Boehnke, 2020; Theisen-Womersley, 2021), while others have provided evidence regarding the positive mental health results that relate to the migration process (Cardoso & Thompson, 2010; Carroll et al., 2020; Theisen-Womersley, 2021). As aforementioned, multiple psychiatric disorders and mental health difficulties have been associated with migration, mainly high levels of post-traumatic stress, anxiety and depression, but also common mental disorders (like substance abuse, psychosis, suicidality, and other forms of mood and anxiety disorders)

and other issues like psychosomatic disorders, grief related disorders and existential crises (Morina et al., 2018; Theisen-Womersley, 2021). In this segment I will focus on trauma and resilience, conceptualizing the terms in migration research literature, to understand their relationship with the mental health of migrants.

Trauma.

Trauma in migration encompasses a variety of psychological and sociocultural consequences experienced by individuals and families as they manage the intricacies of relocation. In the case of refugees or asylum seekers, it refers to the psychological distress experienced by those forced to leave their homes due to factors like political oppression, violence, or disasters, often leading to additional traumatic events (Elmore Borbon & Marotta-Walters, 2024). Traumatic experiences of displacement include the loss of loved ones or caregivers and/or means of support, the destruction of property, insecure living conditions, war, torture, imprisonment, terrorist attacks, abuse, and sexual violence; and in the post-migration context, stress and trauma relate to harsh living conditions, the erosion of social support mechanisms, limited access to basic needs and services, and lack of opportunities for maintaining livelihood and education (Theisen-Womersley, 2021).

International migration entails a realignment of daily life, as well as substantial economic, social, and psychological challenges for individuals and communities. It is also a factor influencing physical and mental health because the relocation process involves the accumulation of risks from the country of origin, transit, and destination. Additionally, upon arrival there are a variety of challenges to overcome, including concerns about adaptive mechanisms for appropriate integration, and issues inherent in the reciprocal contacts between migrants and citizens of recipient countries (Idemudia & Boehnke, 2020).

There are different frameworks to conceptualize trauma in migration. According to Idemudia and Boehnke (2020), although there is no comprehensive theory of international migration, theoretical frameworks grounded in psychosocial rather than medical or economic models emphasize the significance of life changes and their assessment during migration. Given the vulnerability of refugees and migrants to various adverse experiences associated with the migration process, social science researchers have proposed different theoretical perspectives to comprehend and explain the potential links between the migration phenomenon, mental health, and coping. Some of the existing theoretical postulations used

to explain PTSD, migrants' well-being, and mental health include: The Trauma-based Medical Model, Chronic Traumatic Stress Model, Hofboll's Conservation of Resources, Stress-coping Framework, Lazarus and Folkman's Stress Model, Boski's Theory of Disharmony, Acculturative Theory, Cultural Syndromes, and Attachment Theory.

In response to the American Psychological Association's call for a socio-ecological framework, I will outline the Chronic Traumatic Stress (CTS) Model developed by Fondacaro & Mazulla (2018). This biopsychosocial framework is based on Bronfenbrenner's theory and serves as a model for understanding and treating refugees and survivors of torture. The CTS framework is both conceptual and intervention-based, proposing an approach that goes beyond PTSD to encompass the physical, psychological, and social impacts of trauma. This model advocates for a shift in focus from pathology, such as PTSD, to a broader understanding of trauma and resilience, aiming to improve treatment outcomes. Fondacaro and Mazzulla (2018) argue that PTSD does not fully capture the complex and ongoing experiences of trauma, particularly the stress related to post-migration living difficulties and daily stressors. Furthermore, the model emphasizes the importance of considering the cultural origins of refugees in the assessment, interpretation, and treatment of mental health problems caused by pre-migration stressors such as war and violent conflicts. The CTS framework identifies stressors and other traumatic life events as precipitating factors, while psychological and physical challenges and strengths are considered outcomes. Moderating risks and protective factors are exhibited at the individual, family, community, and cultural levels (Fondacaro & Mazulla, 2018; Idemudia & Boehnke, 2020).

Precipitants (including events and stressors) comprise Chronic Traumatic Stress (CTS) derived from war and political conflict, post-migration living challenges, and daily stressors. Sources of chronic traumatic stress involve sexual assault, rape, physical injury, torture, loss of family members, and witnessing violence. Moreover, refugees may confront stressors connected to safety, inadequate food and shelter, and deficient medical care during their escape from persecution. In this model, these experiences are classified as traumatic stress stemming from past and present traumas. It is acknowledged that refugees might continue to face chronic traumatic events due to ongoing war and an unstable political climate in their country of origin. Additionally, post-migration stressors encompass language barriers, insufficient social support, concerns for family members residing in other countries,

unemployment, poverty, lack of housing, discrimination, acculturation challenges, and family problems. Finally, authors differentiate daily stressors from post-migration living difficulties; while post-migration stressors are obstacles experienced after resettlement, daily stressors are considered to be common difficulties that refugees, immigrants, and citizens generally encounter, such as childcare issues, financial management, or unexpected vehicle troubles (Fondacaro & Mazulla, 2018; Idemudia & Boehnke, 2020).

Fondacaro and Mazzulla (2018) reference Bronfenbrenner's model to explain the interaction between individuals and their surroundings, as well as the role of family and community networks in enhancing individual functioning. They identify protective and risk factors, which can either mitigate or exacerbate the impact of stressors on physical and psychological outcomes. According to the authors, resilience is defined as positive adaptation in severe adverse circumstances (Fondacaro & Mazzulla, 2018, p. 64). Protective factors, such as adaptive coping styles, social support, and community engagement, can enhance resilience by reducing the negative impact of trauma and psychological impairment. Individual factors, such as age, sex, coping style, and emotion regulation skills, may also contribute to resilience. Additionally, resilience can be increased by factors within the family (e.g., family cohesiveness), culture (e.g., cultural identity), and community (e.g., community support). Risk factors can exist on various levels, including the individual (e.g., substance abuse), familial factors (e.g., domestic violence), and cultural factors (e.g., acculturation difficulties, discrimination, and historical loss) (Fondacaro & Mazulla, 2018; Idemudia & Boehnke, 2020).

The model examines the psychological and physical consequences of traumatic experiences and stressors. These psychological outcomes include symptoms such as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress, while physical outcomes encompass somatic complaints like gastrointestinal issues, headaches, and chronic pain, sleep disturbances like insomnia and nightmares, and chronic diseases like hypertension and obesity. Lastly, CTS suggests existing evidence-based therapies to manage symptoms of PTSD, such as Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT), Prolonged Exposure (PE), Cultural Adaptive-Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CA-CBT) and the Narrative Exposure Therapy (NET). According to Idemudia & Boehnke (2020), while the model's strength lies in its ability to account for pre- and post-migration factors in refugee mental health and demonstrate how protective and risk

factors moderate the impact of stress and traumatic events on physical and psychological outcomes, its limited scope has been noted. It has been criticized for focusing solely on refugees and survivors of torture, failing to explain the elements that influence the mental wellbeing of other types of migrants (Fondacaro & Mazulla, 2018; Idemudia & Boehnke, 2020).

Also drawing on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory for understanding trauma, Theisen-Womersley (2021), in his book 'Trauma and Resilience', highlights the limitations of using PTSD as a diagnostic construct for refugee populations, citing substantial variability in prevalence rates and the influence of post-migration factors on mental health. He contends that the medicalization of trauma on an individual level ignores the larger socio-political context and ongoing forms of violence experienced by refugees. He also underlines the importance of considering the cross-cultural validity of PTSD, as reactions to trauma and appraisals of what is traumatic might vary depending on cultural norms and socio-cultural context. Moreover, according to the author, using psychiatric diagnoses like PTSD can pathologize individuals and homogeneously identify all members of minority groups as passive victims, oversimplifying their experiences. The individual's response to trauma is influenced by various socio-historical factors, which are often overlooked when trauma is solely medicalized. He argues that instead of viewing refugees as passive victims of mental health problems, it is essential to recognize their resilience. This involves challenging external forces and allowing refugees to express their experiences in their own terms, including discourses of resilience and post-traumatic growth.

Theisen-Womersley (2021) further explains that potentially traumatic events from the past are not the only or even the main source of psychological distress, but that the bulk of emotional suffering is directly related to current stress factors. Consequently, and in line with APA's principles described above, understanding trauma and other mental health difficulties requires a multifaceted approach that considers individual experiences alongside broader sociocultural factors (Elmore Borbon & Marotta-Walters, 2024).

I will now briefly explore the literature on migration-related trauma and mental health reviewing factors that influence trauma pre-, peri-, and post-migration. According to Theisen-Womersley (2021) in the case of refugees, the '*the triple trauma paradigm*' explains the trauma experienced during these three stages of migration, in which the refugee or asylum

seeker experiences or re-experiences traumatic events that vary during each stage and depend on particular adverse circumstances they encounter (Ringler-Jayanthan et al., 2020, as cited in Theisen-Womersley, 2021). The author warns that factors that characterize each phase interrelate; thus, it is important to keep in mind that there is a dynamic, complex and ongoing exchange between all of them.

Pre-migration phase.

Given the nature of the journey, many refugees have been exposed to a wide range of traumatic experiences prior to leaving their home country, including trauma from war and conflict, persecution, violence and torture suffered by themselves and loved ones (Theisen-Womersley, 2021). In a systematic review and meta-analysis Mesa-Vieira et al. (2022) found that migrants with prior exposure to violence had a higher prevalence of mental disorders, particularly post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and major depressive disorder, followed by current generalized anxiety disorder. Although not consistently across all studied disorders, they discovered that pre-migration factors such as the intensity of the conflict in the country of origin, along with post-migration factors such as the host country's low-income level and characteristics of the migrant population, particularly a younger mean age of the study population, were associated with an increased prevalence of mental health disorders. They also noted that post-migration factors have a significant role in the adaptation and recovery from pre-migration trauma.

Furthermore, Keller et al. (2017) explored pre-migration trauma exposure and mental health functioning among central American migrants arriving to the United States border. Out of the 234 adults interviewed, 83% indicated violence as the cause for fleeing their country, and 90% expressed fear of returning to their place of origin. Traumatic events included sexual violence, physical assault, death threats, murder of family members, extortion, domestic violence, and kidnapping. In terms of psychopathology, a self-report symptom checklist revealed that 32% fulfilled the diagnostic criteria for PTSD, 24% for depression, and 17% for both disorders. According to the authors, these findings indicate that migrants arriving to the U.S. border from Central America have significant mental health symptoms in response to violence and persecution. Along the same lines, psychologists Paris et al. (2018) described pre-migration trauma exposure in the case of children and adolescents from Latin America. Life-threatening circumstances such as gang violence, physical,

emotional, and sexual abuse, threat of human smuggling and trafficking, where among the primary drivers of unaccompanied child migration. These traumatic events represented critical psychosocial stressors that placed children at an increased risk for experiencing emotional distress and developing mental health disorders.

Another referenced pre-migration trauma is experience of torture. According to Theisen-Womersley (2021), exposure to torture has emerged as a particular triggering factor of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptomatology and is associated with emotional distress even years after the event. The dual trauma of being both a victim of torture and a refugee is associated with a variety of losses, human rights abuses and other aspects of suffering that are linked not only to torture experienced prior to migration, but also to different forms of violence experienced during and following migration. From a sociocultural perspective, the author describes torture's distinct nature as a pathogenic act that disrupts human connection and has far-reaching consequences for survivors. Moreover, he discusses Kirmayer et al. (2018)'s model of adaptive systems affected by torture, to reflect on the consequences of torture from an ecological, social and cultural perspective. Kirmayer and colleagues (2018) emphasize that moral emotions such as shame, guilt and humiliation are deliberately used to cause the most damage in torture, which reflects the cultural systems of meaning. The impact of torture extends beyond individual psychological disorders, with social, legal, and political consequences for those who survive; affecting the survivor's body, personality, aspirations for life, identity, belief systems, the sense of being grounded and attached to a family and society, autonomy, community relationships, a sense of safety, among others. These effects are complex, interacting and manifesting in diverse ways, influenced by culture, gender and other aspects of the context.

During-migration phase.

The majority of research on migration and mental health focuses on stresses that occur before and/or after migration, as well as its link and psychological consequences. Although quantitative research and scientific data on migrant journeys are lacking, there is a rising interest in understanding in-transit experiences, particularly those of women and children.

The migration experience itself may have negative effects on mental health, with factors such as prolonged detention increasing the risk of developing mental health disorders, the longer detention persists, and the mental health impact lasting long after release. Other

elements include stays in frequently insecure refugee camps, exposure to trafficking rings, difficulty in transit countries, and perilous travels, which compound with lack of information, uncertainty, potential hostility, and changing policies, which add up further stress (Silverman & Nethery, 2015; Theisen-Womersley, 2021).

UNICEF (2021)'s report *Uncertain Pathways: How gender shapes the experiences of children on the move*, addresses the dangers of the migration journey for children. As with adults, the journey may also involve detention by government officials or local militias, as well as prolonged stays in refugee camps. In these instances, they may be separated from their parents, disrupting family and cultural systems (Paris et al., 2018; Theisen-Womersley, 2021). Children in detention centers are more likely to experience violence, abuse, and unsafe living conditions. Torture, extortion, forced labor, and sexual violence are also common, with serious consequences for both short-and long-term physical and mental health. Similarly, research indicates that LGBTIQ+ migrant adults are especially vulnerable to targeted acts of violence, sexual assault, and other forms of identity-based harassment by detainees and facility staff (Tabak & Levitan, 2014; UNICEF, 2021).

Furthermore, gendered social norms and gender-specific vulnerabilities are likely to influence child migration experiences. For example, boys are more prone to travel unaccompanied than girls, travel longer distances, and cross borders, whereas girls typically move within their own regions and face significant risks of being exposed to gender-based violence. Moreover, women and girls account for a disproportionate number of victims of trafficking, and many are unable to obtain information about their rights, such as where and how to access services, as well as information about potential gendered risks they may face along the journey, such as trafficking, labor exploitation, unethical recruitment practices and sexual and gender-based violence (UNICEF, 2021). In the same line, other authors have described the migration-related trauma exposure for children in Latin America, like traumatic stress in peri-migration related to transportation which may result in trauma (Cohodes et al., 2021; King, 2022). For instance, Paris et al. (2018) reported that nowadays many of the transnational gangs and drug cartels operating in Central America and Mexico have become engaged in the migration process, patrolling the routes north, threatening and extorting child and adult migrants.

Migration presents unique challenges and risks, particularly for women. Women are retained more vulnerable during migration due to a combination of health risks, mental health challenges, and social and economic disadvantages. Migrant women, especially refugees, asylum-seekers, and undocumented migrants, are more likely to experience poor perinatal health outcomes, including gestational diabetes, preterm birth, stillbirth, and low birthweight infants (Gagnon et al., 2009; Heslehurst et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2019). They also frequently face barriers to accessing proper healthcare; structural, organizational, social and cultural barriers obstruct the use of perinatal care resulting in negative experiences (Heslehurst et al., 2018). Additionally, female migrants are more susceptible to sexual abuse, rape, and violence, particularly in refugee camps, affecting their reproductive health (Adanu & Johnson, 2009). Their psychological health is also often jeopardized by experiences of sexual and gender-based violence during migration (Gagnon et al., 2009; La Cascia et al., 2020). Lastly, women are more prone to psychiatric disorders due to risk factors such as unfavorable socio-economic status, stigma and adversities faced during migration (Shanbhag et al., 2021).

Finally, uncertainty about the legal status of asylum seekers has been linked to negative mental health outcomes. According to Theisen-Womersley (2021) one of the factors contributing to trauma in this phase is the experience of requesting asylum. The author cites research on the impact of legal status on mental health, namely the high incidence rates of PTSD. Stressors related to this period include delays in the asylum application process, fear of repatriation, exclusion from the labor market, discrimination, loneliness, and inadequate housing conditions. Furthermore, he argues that living in constant fear of authorities might similarly trigger old fears associated with traumatic events experienced in the countries of origin and throughout the migration period. He also mentions the process of losing identity as a factor, characterizing it as “a sense of de-individuation and diminishing feelings of self-worth and self-esteem (that) may be exacerbated by the ‘en mass’ treatment of migrants as they enter the host country” (Theisen-Womersley, 2021, p.35) which has a psychological impact on migrants.

Post-migration phase.

According to Theisen-Womersley (2021), post migration factors, such as unemployment, family separation, an unstable residency status and fear of deportation, ongoing conflict in the country of origin, insufficient language proficiency, constant mobility, social

discrimination, and integration difficulties have all been linked to mental health issues among displaced populations, particularly the maintenance of PTSD symptoms. The author contends that the psychological impact of these elements, as well as other everyday stresses, must be considered in light of the additional significant life events that displaced populations encounter. Similarly, Chen et al. (2017) found that post-migration potentially traumatic experiences and stressors, such as poor social integration, financial difficulties, and loneliness, were substantially related with PTSD and severe mental illness in humanitarian migrants. They concluded that post-migration resettlement-related stressors were the most relevant predictors of mental health, accounting for both direct and indirect associations.

Other authors have come to similar results. Hajak et al. (2021) conducted a systematic review of factors that influence the mental health and well-being of asylum seekers and refugees in Germany. Their findings show that asylum seekers and refugees have high rates of psychological distress, which is influenced by contextual factors. Uncertainty about asylum status, living in shared asylum accommodations, separation from the nuclear family, a lack of German language skills, integration challenges and discrimination were all post-migration risk factors for poor mental health, while employment was a protective factor. The authors also discuss the importance of traumatic events experienced prior and during a migrant's flight for the development of mental disorders. These events entailed unmet basic needs for survival (like regular access to water and food, medicine, fearing for one's life, the death of a loved one, and forced separation from family), witnessing acts of violence (like bombing and shooting, living in a war zone), and being imprisoned and living in a refugee camp. Trauma exposure was identified as a risk factor for PTSD, depression and anxiety disorders. They suggest that increased exposure to traumatic events causes more severe symptoms of mental disorders, particularly depression and anxiety.

Moreover, in addition to traumatic events prior to and during migration, adaptation to a new environment; including potential financial, social and interpersonal stressors, as well as migration-related restrictions to legal residence, were linked to impaired psychological functioning. Studying this correlation in long-settled war refugees, Bogic et al. (2012, as cited in Hajak et al., 2021) found that post-migration stressors (such as temporary residence status) were directly related to mental disorders, namely significantly greater rates of mood and anxiety disorders, as well as PTSD. Unemployment was also associated with mood disorders,

as was feeling a lack of acceptance by the host society, which was linked with higher rates of both mood and anxiety disorders.

Another systematic review of factors related with the occurrence of psychological distress and common mental disorders highlights the role of socio-demographic and psychological characteristics. The study by Jurado et al. (2017) classifies the various factors associated with common mental health disorders among migrants into three clusters: (1) socio-demographic (e.g., age, sex, country of origin, civil status, education level, socio-economic status) and psychological characteristics; (2) migration-related factors (e.g., prior traumatic events, reasons for migration, residence permit, living arrangements, acculturation, language proficiency, and length of migrant's stay in the host country); and (3) factors related to the social and occupational environment in the host country (e.g., social support, social discrimination, employment). Low self-esteem and external locus of control were both psychological characteristics connected with psychological distress. In general, the authors concluded that traumatic events prior to migration (war and political conflict), forced, unplanned, poorly planned or illegal migration, low level of acculturation, living alone or separated from family in the host country, lack of social support, perceived discrimination (on account of race/ethnicity, indigenous culture, economic difficulties, low social class, among others), and the length of migrants' residence in the host country, all increase the likelihood of common mental health disorders. Language proficiency, family reunification, and perceived social support, on the other hand, lowered such probability.

Finally, not all migrants respond to traumatic or potentially traumatic events in the same way. Brunnet et al. (2020) conducted a literature analysis on the psychological assessment of post-traumatic reactions in migrants and refugees. The reviewed publications examined different post-traumatic reactions including psychopathologies, post-traumatic development, and resilience. According to the authors, depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder were the most extensively researched psychopathological responses. Among the most frequently cited risk factors identified were being a victim of or witnessing violence in one's country of origin and after migration, encountering post-migration difficulties such as asylum denial, being in a precarious situation in terms of housing and employment, and difficulties with adaptation to a new cultural environment. Furthermore, social support, psychological support, and a good quality of life in the host country, were

described as protective factors for mental health. The evaluated articles also discussed how cultural factors, such as the perception of an event as traumatic, have a significant impact on mental health. Although the authors of the reviewed studies acknowledge the impact of culture on post-traumatic responses, the majority of tools used to assess the mental health of migrants and refugees were developed in a Western context, and therefore may not grasp the complexity of the patient's mental health. Brunnet et al. (2020) concluded that practices such as the use of interpreters, the supervision of cultural mediators, or the use of culturally sensitive tools, may assist clinicians in maintaining good practices with patients from diverse cultural backgrounds during the diagnostic and psychotherapeutic processes.

Resilience.

Resilience factors in migrants encompass a wide range of psychological, social, and economic elements that enable them to adapt and even thrive despite the challenges (Gambaro et al., 2020; Hawkes et al., 2020; Lindert et al., 2023; Olcese et al., 2024; Roberts & Browne, 2011; Siriwardhana et al., 2014; Southwick et al., 2016).

The role of social support has been well documented in several studies (Hawkes et al., 2020; Roberts & Browne, 2011; Siriwardhana et al., 2014; Southwick et al., 2016)), although some are cautious about the correlation due to insufficient evidence (Giles et al., 2024; Southwick et al., 2016). According to Southwick et al. (2016) resilience is broadly described as an individuals' ability to adapt or to 'bend but not break' in the face of adversity, trauma or stress. They argue that the problem with this definition is that it focuses on the individual, ignoring the fact that individuals are embedded in social systems, which are more or less resilient on their own, and more or less capable of supporting the individual's adaptive psychological capacities. As a result, they contend, responses to trauma are determined by numerous dynamic, interconnected individual systems (e.g. genetic, epigenetic, developmental, neurobiological), which are embedded in broader social systems (e.g. family, cultural, economic, and political systems). Moreover, social support, defined as having or perceiving to have people who can provide care or help during times of stress (Eisenberger, 2013), has multiple dimensions that, while overlapping in some ways, reflect distinct parts of the construct. These facets include: structural social support (i.e., the size and extent of the individual's social network, frequency of social interactions); functional social support (i.e., the perception that social interactions have been beneficial in terms of meeting emotional or

instrumental needs); emotional social support (i.e., behavior that fosters feelings of comfort and leads the person to believe that he/she is loved, respected, and/or cared for by others); instrumental/material social support (i.e., goods and services that help solve practical problems); and informational/cognitive social support (i.e., provision of advice or guidance intended to help individuals cope with current difficulties). These aspects of social support can be supported and maintained by a variety of systems, including familial, community, state, national, and international ones. Authors note however, that while social support is an important predictor of psychological resilience, its effectiveness varies according to how well it meets individual requirements, which might alter over time.

Furthermore, Southwick et al. (2016) found that social support seems to be associated with resilience to psychopathology through psychological and behavioral mechanisms, such as motivation to adopt healthy and reduce risky behaviors; feelings of being understood; appraisal of potentially stressful events as being less threatening; enhanced sense of control or mastery; increased self-esteem; use of active coping mechanisms; among others. Social support can also act as a buffer against psychological stress via a variety of neurobiological pathways. For example, studies have shown that positive social support can inhibit the activation of fear-related neurobiological systems by activating the parasympathetic nervous system and brain regions involved in the processing of safety cues (Eisenberger, 2013); as well as stimulate the release of oxytocin, which is critical for social behaviors, and has been linked to anxiolytic effects (Heinrichs et al., 2009). Finally, the authors discuss the importance of family and community social systems in fostering resilience, which has been proven to increase in children and communities in the aftermath of disasters.

Personal attributes and psychological characteristics have also been linked with resilience. Lindert et al. (2023) did a systematic literature analysis and discovered that variables such as future orientation, hope, caring for others and spirituality greatly contribute to resilience, even outweighing institutional support structures. Other promotive factors included educational and employment opportunities, as well as opportunities for prosocial behavior (advocacy or activism, which can contribute to feelings of belonging to the host society). Based on their findings, the authors concluded that focusing on resilience and post-traumatic growth (PTG) rather than trauma is critical in changing the perception of victimized migrants and instead encourages policies and psychosocial services geared towards providing

migrants, particularly forced migrants, with opportunities and greater autonomy. Additionally, they argue that emphasis on a solely psychological explanation of migration's impact may be a barrier to adopting a more culturally relevant public health approach, which incorporates resilience and responding to adversity with hope and prosocial behavior. Research, policies and practices frequently focus on documenting vulnerabilities rather than strengths, consequently, by changing the focus on the strengths and capacities, this type of research can generate a perception of migrants as capable, resourceful, motivated individuals, who persevere in the face of adversity.

The role of spirituality and religion was also documented by Hawkes et al. (2020). In their analysis of factors endorsed by women of refugee background as contributing to their resilience, religion, faith or belief in a higher power / God was the most frequently cited factor. Other factors included cultural protection and connection; raising children and hope for their future; social support from their own culture of origin; family (providing a sense of purpose); personal characteristics (e.g., strength and patience); and formalized support (e.g., education and healthcare). These findings emphasize the mediating role of culture in shaping how resilience is conceptualized and developed (Hawkes et al., 2020; Theisen-Womersley, 2021). Overall, this review supports the emerging argument that research on resilience in refugee populations should take a more culturally grounded approach, focusing on understanding how refugee populations understand resilience, what factors they see as contributing to their resilience, why, and how they interact (Yotebieng et al., 2019, as cited in Hawkes et al., 2020). This is also congruent with the feminist approach and theoretical underpinnings outlined in the first chapter. The study shows that vulnerability and autonomy are interconnected. Through the acknowledgement of their experiences and the social factors they highlighted as contributing to their resilience, women became active participants in fostering their well-being, and thus, autonomous. It aligns with feminist principles and relational autonomy theory, showing that vulnerability can enable resilience, particularly within the social and cultural contexts that shape their identities.

Other resilience aspects in migrants include the ability to manage challenges, recover from adversity, and adapt to the migration process, which influences mental health outcomes and acculturation experiences in host countries (Gambaro et al., 2020). Gambaro et al. (2020) investigated the links between resilience, trauma, and hopelessness in the development of

psychopathology among migrants. The study included 119 migrants who applied for assessment at the Mental Health Operational Unit of the National Institute for Health, Migration and Poverty (NIHMP) in Rome, Italy. The Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC) questionnaire was used to assess resilience. Lower resilience was associated with higher levels of hopelessness in migrants. Furthermore, resilience was inversely related to anxiety and suicide intent as measured with the Zung Self-Rating Anxiety Scale (SAS) and Beck's Suicide Intent Scale (SIS), respectively. However, the authors warn that the function of resilience in mediating mental health outcomes is unclear. Their research found that more resilient migrants had better levels of psychological well-being, although resilience was highest among migrants without social support. One explanation for this result is that resilience, defined as the ability to manage and recover from life's challenges, could be a key differentiator in situational management coping. In other words, resilient migrants may seek help when they are in need and may use existing resources, hence limiting an exaggerated use or excessive usage of social support services. Taking a variety of other elements into account in psychological resilience, authors argue, it is likely that social support is not universally beneficial; also, the effectiveness and extent of social support are dependent on individual needs, which may change over time.

Contemporary trends on resilience have been interested in understanding how migrant populations cope with migration trauma, therefore researching resilience from a community perspective (Hawkes et al., 2020; Olcese et al., 2024; Theisen-Womersley, 2021). Olcese et al. (2024) did a scoping review to assess psychological and social science literature on community resilience in migrant communities. Community resilience is broadly defined as the ability of communities to mobilize resources and devise activities to cope with adversities and stressful events. The authors propose that community psychology, in contrast to individual psychology, may provide a broader view by emphasizing on the significance of ecological resources, such as community resilience, rather than individual deficit in explaining migrant adjustment. The findings of their scoping review were organized into five themes: economic aspects, community competence, information and communication, social capital, and beliefs and attitudes. Access to economic resources was identified as a critical factor in improving community resilience. In terms of community competence, migrants deemed it vital to acquire and develop skills, such as emergency response or flexibility in

integrating into a new cultural setting while maintaining their ethnic identity. Positive narratives and cultural practices that support migrant integration were within the themes of communication and information which may help to build community resilience. Social capital was referred to as social support, and the findings were consistent with current literature on the value of support systems in developing resilience. The theme of beliefs and attitudes included factors such as pride, respect for one's ethnicity, faith, and spirituality, all of which were found to promote community resilience.

To summarize, the literature on migration-related trauma underscores the profound psychological and sociocultural impacts that migrants, particularly refugees and asylum seekers, endure throughout the migration process. These impacts are evident across three distinct phases—pre-migration, during migration, and post-migration—each characterized by unique stressors and traumatic experiences. Pre-migration trauma often includes exposure to violence, persecution, and torture, which significantly heightens the risk of mental health disorders such as PTSD, depression, and anxiety. During migration, individuals face further hardships, including detention, unsafe living conditions, and gender-based violence, which exacerbate their psychological distress. Post-migration challenges, including social integration difficulties, discrimination, unemployment, and unstable legal status, continue to strain migrants' mental health, often prolonging or intensifying the symptoms of earlier traumas.

Overall, the literature on trauma and resilience, particularly findings that emphasize social support and community resilience, are consistent with a socioecological framework for explaining the complexities of migration experiences. Resilience in migrants is not solely an individual trait but is deeply influenced by various interconnected systems, including social, cultural, familial, and economic factors. Furthermore, resilience is a dynamic, context-dependent construct that encompasses individual traits, social support systems, cultural influences, and community resources. Understanding and fostering resilience in migrant populations requires a holistic approach that considers these multiple dimensions. The findings presented suggest a need to shift the focus from viewing migrants as victims to recognizing their strengths and capacities. Emphasizing resilience and post-traumatic growth rather than trauma alone can lead to more empowering policies and psychosocial services that support migrant autonomy and well-being. In the following section, I will explore the

links between vulnerability and migration by describing how the concept is articulated in the literature.

2.5 Vulnerability and migration

Vulnerability in the context of migration is complex, frequently used without clear definition. Nevertheless, it is often associated with the relative lack of protection and resources that migrants face when confronted with health risks, threats to basic needs, and human rights violations (de Snyder et al., 2022; Gilodi et al., 2022). According to De Stefani (2022a) migrants are ‘particularly vulnerable’ when additional subjective characteristics or situations interfere with their condition; that is, when special needs arise due to factors such as age, gender, disability, among others. In fact, whether migrants’ health improves or deteriorates is determined by the interaction of the various factors influencing their health before, during, and after migration, known as the ‘social determinants of health’, which include the possibility of safe transit, adequate accommodation, and access to health care. Vulnerability and resilience factors are dynamic. Migrants are not inherently vulnerable to physical and mental health issues; however, the conditions within the different migration stages may significantly impact their health and well-being (Galatolo et al., 2022).

In this section I will review the notion of vulnerability in the context of migration, including how the term is commonly employed and the repercussions of generalizing the term for migrants. To conclude, I will discuss a conceptual framework for the analysis of vulnerability in migration.

2.5.1 Conceptual analysis and implications

The term ‘vulnerability’ is regularly used to categorize migrants into specific groups based on their characteristics, with diverse definitions and understandings across academic fields. However, according to Amalia Gilodi, Isabelle Albert and Birte Nienaber (2002), who critically examined the notion in the migration context, it is often associated with other key concepts such as risk, capacity, autonomy and dependency. As previously discussed in the first chapter, I will not reiterate these definitions but will instead focus on how vulnerability is portrayed in migration norms and literature in general.

Conceptualizing vulnerability.

The Glossary on Migration of the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2019, p. 229) defines vulnerability as “the limited capacity to avoid, resist, cope with, or recover from harm”, resulting from a combination of individual, household, community, and structural factors. As indicated by Gilodi et al. (2022) this definition highlights the focus on limited capacity, which implies a deficiency or deviation from a normative state, aligning with a neoliberal view of political subjects, that can lead to stigmatization and marginalization.

Moreover, the IOM defines vulnerable groups as “any sector of society - such as children, the elderly, persons with disabilities, ethnic or religious minorities, migrants, persons of diverse sex, sexual orientation and gender identity - that is at higher risk of being subjected to discriminatory practices, violence, social disadvantage, or economic hardship than other groups...” (IOM, 2019, p. 230). The same document specifies that during periods of conflict, crisis, or disaster, these vulnerabilities intensify, though the specific risks are not clearly defined. Additionally, migrants in vulnerable situations are characterized as being unable to effectively enjoy their human rights and therefore at increased risk of violations and abuse. These definitions emphasize that vulnerability is linked to structural conditions rather than individual attributes, indicating that those forced to flee and seek protection are particularly exposed to human rights violations (Gilodi et al., 2022).

Lauren Carruth et al. (2021) observed that the term "vulnerability" in public health often describes individuals at heightened risk of negative health outcomes, which can imply powerlessness, victimhood, and the need for external interventions that can be stigmatizing. Social structures, such as immigration laws, shape collective forms of vulnerability and can perpetuate structural violence. They use the term ‘structural vulnerability’ to explain how social hierarchies and institutions contribute to poor health outcomes for migrants and asylum seekers. This concept integrates structural violence and vulnerability, highlighting the impact of global migration on both the health of these populations and the capacity of healthcare providers to offer adequate care. Moreover, this notion reveals that the risks faced by undocumented and/or irregular migrants and asylum seekers are due to inequitable migration and asylum systems, and not individual failings. These systems create shared vulnerabilities that variably impact health and other outcomes. Healthcare providers working within these constraints often face limited resources and ethical challenges. Therefore, the focus of

structural vulnerability is on holding accountable and reforming the powerful social, political, and economic structures that shape individuals' lives and health outcomes.

In the European context, Paolo De Stefani (2022) examines the role of vulnerability in the legal and political discourse, highlighting that the normative and legal use of the term balances between the 'ontological' and the 'situational' facets of the concept, both of which present practical challenges. De Stefani argues that international human rights instruments often conceptualize some collectives as 'vulnerable', but the vague and adaptive nature of the term makes it difficult for legal systems to consistently apply effective measures. He claims that the vulnerability discourse requires a taxonomy, such as the one described by Mackenzie et al. (2014), that is qualitative and quantitative, to effectively address individual and group needs without falling into either essentialism (ontological) or subjective criteria (situational). Additionally, he claims that attention should be paid to the vulnerability within the legal systems themselves, and thus, a focus on 'institutional vulnerability'.

Regarding the use of the term in migration literature, Gilodi et al. (2022) claim that there are three key lenses for understanding vulnerability: innate, situational, and structural vulnerability. Innate vulnerability stems from innate or natural characteristics such as gender, age, disability, or chronic medical conditions, which are frequently employed in migration and refugee contexts to identify the most vulnerable groups, such as women, children, the elderly, and people with disabilities. For instance, Flegar (2018) demonstrates how the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in its policy documents has used the notion of 'innate vulnerability' to define women, children, elderly and persons with disabilities, albeit implicitly.

Gilodi and colleagues (2022) suggest that this conceptualization may have political implications, because measures and policies to address vulnerability must be protective in nature, as the condition is by definition unavoidable. However, they warn that assuming vulnerability as an unchangeable condition can lead to stigmatization and marginalization. Similarly, De Stefani (2022) criticizes this perspective of a 'vulnerable person', claiming that the use of vulnerability language in this context is misleading and might unnecessarily add a patronizing and paternalistic flavor to the status assessment procedures.

On the opposite side, a large body of literature has stressed the situational character of vulnerability, which considers it as arising from specific conditions or experiences that

people have undergone, are currently experiencing, or may be exposed to (Gilodi et al., 2022; Mendola & Pera, 2022). This perspective emphasizes the potential for change and agency, and thus advocates for proactive policies to assist individuals in overcoming vulnerable situations. Situational vulnerability is frequently seen in the challenges faced during migration, such as exposure to violence, unsafe conditions, and lack of social security (Gilodi et al., 2022). Flegar (2018) points out that in IOM and UNHCR policy documents the displacement context itself is referred to as contributing to vulnerability, because of factors such as unsafe migration conditions, discrimination, difficulty accessing justice, irregular status, among others.

Finally, structural vulnerability considers vulnerability to be the product of larger social, political, and economic structures, emphasizing that systemic inequalities and institutional dynamics shape vulnerability rather than individual characteristics or situational experiences. In social sciences and legal studies, the emphasis on structural vulnerability contrasts with the notion of vulnerability as an inherent or situational attribute of individuals or groups, and is often theoretical, critical and political (Gilodi et al., 2022). Further, it is contextual and social, acknowledging our inevitable interdependence as social beings as well as the framework of relationships and structures within which we might negotiate our autonomy. In this sense, it is social, political, geographical, and culturally situated (Cassadei, 2018; Monno & Serreli, 2020). This perspective calls for addressing the core causes of vulnerability, such as structural violence and inequality, and advocates for policies that target the systems creating these conditions (Gilodi et al., 2022).

Flegar (2018) highlights three ways migration relates to vulnerability in IOM policy documents, particularly in disaster contexts: migration can induce vulnerability, result from vulnerability, or be hindered by it. Gilodi et al. (2022) use the example of refugees escaping persecution to demonstrate how migration can be caused by structural vulnerability. The structural social, political, and cultural characteristics in their home countries increase their vulnerability as members of a persecuted group, forcing them to leave; however, it can also be the cause of non-migration, when marginalized groups may be unable to migrate following natural disasters, due to resource deficiencies that are structurally determined. Moreover, the authors note that structural vulnerability may affect migrants in their host countries, exposing them to racialized structural violence. The position of an individual migrant or group within

the social hierarchy of power dynamics, and its legal and political effects, determines their exposure to structural violence and thus their structural vulnerability, which at the individual level may be expressed in psychological symptoms, such as emotional suffering (Quesada et al., 2011).

Criticisms and Implications.

Because of the diverse definitions and understandings, several scholars have criticized the notion of vulnerability and its implementation in social and migration policy. The narrative of vulnerability has often led to generalization, creating labels for groups of migrants. As defined by Leighton (2022) labeling is about power; it is the process of imposing one's will and perceptions on another. Labels shape who and how a person is defined and treated. Consequently, categorizing migrants as vulnerable can have multiple consequences. On one end, the concept of vulnerability is important for expanding protection of human rights; on the other, it can also lead to detrimental outcomes such as reinforcing stereotypes, disempowerment, stigmatization, and exclusion (De Stefani, 2022b; Flegar & Iedema, 2019; Gilodi et al., 2022; Purkey, 2022).

Gilodi et al. (2022) discuss the implications or (un)intended consequences that the concept of vulnerability may have when used in migration politics, policy, and legal frameworks, as well as when used as a conceptual tool in migration research. They argue that the main effects include discrimination and stigmatization; patronizing, paternalistic and disempowering attitudes; social control and oppression; exclusion and reifying. Concerning the discriminating and stigmatizing effects, they contend that these are the product of a normative understanding of vulnerability; in other words, resulting from reducing complex social, structural and temporal dynamics to single characteristics, particularly with the innate conceptualizations of vulnerability. Labeling groups or individuals as vulnerable implies a moral judgment that perceives them as less capable, less autonomous, less rational, less competent; aligning with liberal and masculinist ideals that stigmatize those who do not conform to these standards.

Flegar & Iedema (2019) discussed the stigmatizing and potentially paternalizing effects of labeling forced migrant women and girls as vulnerable, and its impact on human rights protection under the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). They advise that, while references to vulnerability might contribute to preserving

human rights by establishing protection priorities and clarifying state obligations, this positive effect can be amplified if more attention is paid to avoid stigmatization. They also call for a focus on structural weaknesses and dysfunctions, as well as the role of laws, policies, and institutions in developing resilience and protecting their human rights.

On the same line, neo-liberal perspectives on vulnerability can result in patronizing and paternalistic attitudes towards vulnerable individuals, portraying them as permanently incapable. Consequently, society and the government have the responsibility to protect them as they are not capable of doing so. This paternalistic and patronizing tone characterizes legal frameworks of protection and care, which have been criticized as disempowering. This type of dynamic can be seen in asylum procedures and humanitarian aid, where refugees must present themselves as helpless to receive protection (De Stefani, 2022b; Gilodi et al., 2022).

Vulnerability in social policies can also lead to social control and oppression, either directly through policy interventions or indirectly by ignoring the structural causes producing inequalities and conditions of vulnerability (Cassadei, 2018; Heidbrink, 2021). Moreover, its exclusionary effects have been reported in the context of refugees' reception and humanitarian aid. According to Gilodi et al. (2022) the current commitment to identify 'the most vulnerable' has resulted in narrowing protection of asylum seekers and restricting access to services for those deemed 'less vulnerable'. Normative categories employed to identify the most vulnerable can exclude people who do not fit these fixed criteria, failing to capture the complex factors that contribute to vulnerability (Gilodi et al., 2022; Heidbrink, 2021). Finally, on a conceptual level, some authors have criticized the reifying effect, that is, the labeling of groups as vulnerable, which does not account for the complexity of the experiences of those who may be in a condition of vulnerability. Additionally, ignoring differences in vulnerability within a group also implies ignoring intersectionality, or the fact that one individual may experience several dimensions of vulnerability (Cassadei, 2018; Gilodi et al., 2022; Heidbrink, 2021).

As we have seen, defining and applying the concept of vulnerability in migration highlights its multifaceted and complex nature, which includes innate, situational, and structural dimensions. While innate and situational vulnerabilities focus on individual characteristics and specific experiences, structural vulnerability emphasizes the systemic inequalities and institutional dynamics that shape migrants' experiences. Definitions from

organizations like the International Organization for Migration, as well as insights from scholars, underscore the complex interplay of social, political, and economic factors that contribute to and perpetuate vulnerability. This structural perspective calls for addressing the root causes of vulnerability through systemic reforms rather than individual interventions.

Furthermore, the critique of using vulnerability as a conceptual tool in migration policies and research reveals significant consequences. Labeling migrants or groups as vulnerable often leads to discrimination and stigmatization, reducing complex social and structural factors to simplistic characteristics. This practice fosters patronizing and paternalistic attitudes, portraying vulnerable groups as permanently incapable and dependent on external aid. Additionally, it can facilitate social control and oppression, as policies designed to protect may inadvertently reinforce power imbalances. Moreover, focusing on specific vulnerabilities can exclude many who do not fit predetermined categories, limiting their access to necessary protections and assistance.

2.5.2 Conceptual framework for vulnerability analysis in migration

Gilodi et al. (2022) argue that the term vulnerability is typically viewed as self-explanatory, and that the numerous ways to understand and use it might have major implications. Thereupon, they propose a new conceptual model for understanding vulnerability in migration. The model aims to systematize various understandings of vulnerability at different levels of analysis, as well as contain cross-level processes that show how different layers interact and affect one another. They also advocate for a temporal perspective, which includes historical geopolitical contexts and personal development over time, because adverse events can affect an individual differently depending on what moment of its lifespan he or she is. In this view, vulnerability might be seen as a future risk, a current condition caused by limited resources, or a universal experience spanning a lifetime.

The main three levels are macro, meso, and individual. At the macro level, it examines international and national legislation, governance and humanitarian aid structures that create systemic vulnerabilities. Structural inequalities have an impact on local services and interpersonal relationships (meso level) through discrimination and social control. Broadly this level corresponds to structural vulnerability.

Following, the meso level encompasses the complex systems of institutions and services that interact with migrant communities, as well as the network of human interactions that exist between migrants and non-migrants' residents, within a certain location and time. The combination of contextual circumstances and personal attributes results in forms of situational vulnerability. However, systematizing individuals' experiences and conditions of vulnerability into preset categories can result in processes that have a detrimental influence on individuals, such as stigmatization, disempowerment, and exclusion. Also, it is where organizations and individuals utilize vulnerability strategically to get access to resources and support, which corresponds to patronizing and paternalistic attitudes.

Finally, the micro level focuses on individual experiences and how people emotionally and psychologically process vulnerabilities. Although they acknowledge that some people face more challenges because of their innate characteristics, they propose the term 'experiential vulnerability' to describe the objective and subjective factors that make vulnerability a personal and unique experience influenced by individual interpretations.

I agree with Gilodi et al. (2022, p. 15) that "vulnerability in the context of migration should be understood as a multi-layered, dynamic, and embedded concept". In addition, they argue that experiences of vulnerability cannot be captured by a fixed, measurable state or list of circumstances that persist throughout time and location. Individuals are embedded in larger systems of sociopolitical hierarchies of power dynamics, which are then replicated in local systems and interpersonal connections in everyday life, as well as reinterpreted and negotiated by individuals. As a result, at various stages of life, a person may be vulnerable due to an innate characteristic, unique experiences, and/or structural constraints. Therefore, this model offers an alternative way to analyze vulnerability, taking into account the above discussed characteristics of individuals and their circumstances, along with the analysis of the cultural, geographical, political, and temporal system in which they operate and develop.

Summarizing, defining and applying the concept of vulnerability in migration highlights its multifaceted and complex nature, which includes innate, situational, and structural dimensions. While innate and situational vulnerabilities focus on individual characteristics and specific experiences, structural vulnerability emphasizes the systemic inequalities and institutional dynamics that shape migrants' experiences. Definitions from organizations like the International Organization for Migration, as well as insights from

scholars, underscore the complex interplay of social, political, and economic factors that contribute to and perpetuate vulnerability. This structural perspective calls for addressing the root causes of vulnerability through systemic reforms rather than individual interventions.

Furthermore, the critique of using vulnerability as a conceptual tool in migration policies and research reveals significant consequences. Labeling migrants or groups as vulnerable often leads to discrimination and stigmatization, reducing complex social and structural factors to simplistic characteristics. This practice fosters patronizing and paternalistic attitudes, portraying vulnerable groups as permanently incapable and dependent on external aid. Additionally, it can facilitate social control and oppression, as policies designed to protect may inadvertently reinforce power imbalances. Focusing on specific vulnerabilities can exclude many who do not fit predetermined categories, limiting their access to necessary protections and assistance.

The analysis emphasizes the importance of taking a complete, multidimensional approach to understanding vulnerability in migration, such as using Gilodi et al.'s (2022) conceptual framework and the principles of intersectionality. Gilodi and colleague's conceptual model highlights the need for understanding vulnerability across three levels: macro (systemic structures and policies), meso (institutional interactions, relationships and social networks), and micro (individual experiences). This approach emphasizes how structural inequalities at the macro level affect the meso and micro levels, resulting in systemic, situational, and experiential vulnerabilities. The framework also includes a temporal perspective, which acknowledges that vulnerability is dynamic and context-dependent, influenced by historical, geopolitical contexts, and individual lifespans.

To conclude, in this chapter, I provided a comprehensive overview of migration, exploring its multifaceted nature through various lenses, including definitions, drivers, forms, infrastructures, and trajectories, as well as its intricate relationship with mental health and vulnerability. The chapter began by defining migration and distinguishing between voluntary vs. involuntary, internal vs. international, and regular vs. irregular migration forms. This categorization illustrated the complexity and fluidity inherent in migration processes, challenging the notion of clear-cut distinctions.

The discussion then shifted to the drivers of migration, presenting both classical theories and contemporary perspectives, particularly the taxonomy proposed by Czaika & Reinprecht (2022). This analysis underscored the dynamic and context-dependent nature of migration drivers, which intersect with factors such as age, gender, and geography, influencing the decision-making processes of migrants.

Next, the chapter explored migration forms, infrastructures, and trajectories, emphasizing the multidimensionality of migration. It highlighted how migration is often segmented into stages—pre-migration, transit, and post-migration—each presenting unique challenges and experiences. This section also underscored the importance of understanding migration as a process influenced by various infrastructures that facilitate movement.

The impact of migration on mental health was then examined, particularly the stressors and psychological challenges that migrants face at different stages of their journey. The literature reviewed demonstrated the profound impact of trauma but also the potential resilience factors on migrant populations, with a specific focus on refugee mental health. The analysis pointed out the necessity of a socioecological perspective to fully grasp the complexities of migration-related mental health issues and the role of resilience in mitigating these challenges.

Finally, the chapter reviewed the concept of vulnerability in migration, highlighting its multifaceted nature and the dangers of oversimplification in policy and research. The discussion emphasized the importance of considering structural, situational, and innate vulnerabilities while being mindful of the risks associated with labeling migrants as inherently vulnerable. The proposed conceptual framework offered a more nuanced understanding of vulnerability, advocating for systemic reforms and justice-focused interventions that empower rather than stigmatize migrant populations.

Overall, Chapter 2 has provided a broad yet detailed examination of migration, laying the ground for understanding the complex interplay between migration, mental health, and vulnerability. While this chapter offered an essential overview, it is clear that each aspect of migration warrants further exploration to capture the full scope of this intricate field. The following chapters will build on these insights, inquiring into contemporary migration trends and their implications.

Chapter 3: Gender Differences in the Migration Process

The third chapter features the intricate relationship between gender and migration. Gender is a pivotal factor that intersects with other social identities to influence the migration process. This chapter begins with an introduction to the foundational concepts and an overview of the scholarship on gender and migration, followed by an exploration of intersectionality and its relevance to the study of migrant women's experiences. The discussion then moves to the specific contexts of asylum, gender-based violence, vulnerability and resilience, contemplating the multifaceted processes that impact the mental health and overall well-being of migrant women. By examining these intersecting paths, this chapter aims to highlight the critical importance of gender in understanding the complexities of migration.

As a premise, this chapter has considerable limitations as it mainly focuses on the experiences of women, leaving aside the realities of people with diverse gender identities, sexual orientations, and other characteristics. Additionally, considering the aims of this research, I will center on forced migration as the main form of transnational mobility. This chapter is therefore necessarily selective and unable to provide a comprehensive review of the extensive literature on the delicate topic of gender in the migration context. Nevertheless, it provides valuable insights into how gender shapes the migration experience. By focusing on intersectionality, the chapter highlights the importance of addressing the overlapping systems of oppression that contribute to women's heightened vulnerability in migration, while also recognizing their resilience. This chapter seeks to encourage the development of more and more informed and gender-sensitive policies that can better support women's mental health.

3.1 Gender and Migration: An introduction

Gender significantly impacts every stage of the migration journey, shaping individuals' experiences, decision-making processes, and integration trajectories (Hennebry et al., 2021; Sharma et al., 2024; Singh & Mahadevan, 2024; Teodorescu, 2024). This section will appraise some of the ways in which gender is represented in migration literature, define key terms relevant to gender and migration studies, and explore recent developments in gender-based dynamics of human mobility. To gain a better understanding of migrant's social positions and identities, it is essential to remember that the terms reviewed in this, and further

sections are contended as fluid, temporary, overlapping and dynamic categories of their experience.

Gender as a concept.

Gender refers to “the socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for individuals based on the sex they were assigned at birth” (Hennebry et al., 2021, p. 32). It is also one of the most important types of differentiation within societies, interacting with other social divisions such as age, class, ethnicity, nationality, race, disability and sexual orientation (Christou & Kofman, 2022). Gender is not synonymous with women; it refers to the often-unequal relationships between women, men and other non-conforming expressions of identities and sexualities; and in general, to the beliefs and attributes about the social differences, power and privileges of differing genders including trans and intersex. Furthermore, gender is a non-universal notion that indicates the social representations of biological differences and identities. Gender concepts are context-dependent and there is fluidity in interpretations of how gender relationships find meaning in societies. Gender has various nuances that vary according to culture, period, and place, with disputed interpretations based, for example, on the impact of migration. In practice, discourses around gender often focus on women since, as a group, they have been most affected by gender inequality. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that all gender groups have a vital role in working towards equality, and thus retain that a gender perspective does not imply a woman's perspective (Bonifacio, 2019; Hennebry et al., 2021).

Gender in migration studies.

The scholarly understanding of gender within the context of migration emerged gradually in the 1970s and 1980s. During this period, women migrants were often portrayed as followers, accompanying men rather than initiating migration or migrating as independent beings. Early studies on women and migration primarily focused on labor migration, emphasizing it as the main form of both internal and international migration. This was followed by a period in which family mobility received more attention, but women's presence received less emphasis. Finally, by the 1990s, a significant paradigm shift occurred, recognizing migration as a gendered phenomenon. This movement highlighted the interplay of practices and representations of femininity and masculinity and the relationships between women and men

as central to the migration experience (Anastasiadou et al., 2023; Boyd, 2021; Christou & Kofman, 2022; Kofman & Raghuram, 2022).

In the beginning, the emphasis on labor migration led researchers to an empirical focus around distinguishing between the autonomous migration of women and family migrants, sparking debates over women's economic contributions. Research from Latin America, alongside African studies, was pioneering in documenting the significant roles women played in domestic labor, sex work, and entrepreneurship. This contribution underscored the complexities of women's responsibilities towards children and parents while managing work. In addition, these studies raised critical questions about the nature of autonomy in migration, challenging researchers to consider how women's decision-making processes in migration were influenced by economic or familial factors. Furthermore, gender differences also emerged in the use of migration networks, with women often relying on established networks, while men tended to create new ones to facilitate their migration. Also, women generally did not appear to gain the same economic benefits from migration as men, prompting a detailed analysis of the different causes, consequences, and modalities of migration among genders (Kofman & Raghuram, 2022).

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, there was a growing attempt to better understand women's migration and its distinctive characteristics. By the turn of the twenty-first century, statistical systems from leading supra-international organizations such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the International Labour Organization (ILO) were increasingly collecting data on migrant women, confirming their presence in the contemporary migration flows. Researchers, associations and policy makers examined the critical relationship between gender, migration and inequality (Boyd, 2021). The publication of gender-focused migration research grew rapidly in the 2000s, particularly in Asia, Europe and North America. This growth reflected an increasing preoccupation with receiving countries in the Global North and their demand for labor in feminized sectors. The literature on gender and migration thus engaged with theoretical frameworks analyzing global inequalities and the counter geographies of globalization, that created new circuits linking the Global South and the Global North, where women played a crucial role in sustaining households in economies destabilized by economic restructuring. One major conceptual framework that emerged was the notion of global chains of care, broadly defined

as the transnational connections formed through paid or unpaid work. While this framework effectively captured the rising global demand for reproductive labor—such as domestic work, caregiving and sex work—it however faced criticism for its narrow and limited focus on transnational motherhood and childcare. Critics argued that it overlooked the roles of men, reinforced heteronormativity, and failed to acknowledge the broader range of institutional and other sites where care is provided (Anastasiadou et al., 2023; Christou & Kofman, 2022; Kofman & Raghuram, 2022).

Recently, Pearson & Kusakabe (2021) conducted a case study on Burmese garment factory workers in Thailand to explore the strategies employed by migrant women to manage their direct gendered care duties. These responsibilities involved both the direct care of children present in the destination country and transnational care of family members, such as parents and other kin, at home. Their research expands the scope of transnational care analysis by emphasizing the unpaid reproductive labor performed by women migrants in non-care sectors of the economy. Their study highlights that the situation of Burmese migrant workers in the garment factories of Thailand's Tak province exemplifies a broader trend in which workers from lower-income neighboring countries are 'imported' to meet the demand for cheap labor, necessary for sustaining a competitive position in global export markets. Likewise, the preference for female workers, often described as having 'nimble fingers', underscores a gender issue, as it reflects the unequal gender relations and structural inequalities that render women vulnerable, underpaid and expendable. While working in the Thai factories, these women are compensated at rates far lower than those of their male counterparts working alongside them. Moreover, the survey showed that 40% of the workers were parents of young children, needing a variety of strategies to balance their childcare duties with their work. These strategies included leaving children in the care of relatives in Myanmar (typically mothers or sisters), often illegally bringing a dependent to Thailand, hiring local caregivers, coordinating childcare with partners or friends, or, in some cases, bringing babies and infants to work. The latter was feasible only in the smaller unrecognized and unregulated factories (Mora & Piper, 2021; Pearson & Kusakabe, 2021).

Furthermore, the discourse on the 'feminization' of migration has become prevalent. The phrase 'feminization of migration' means that the female share among migrants is increasing; the specific meaning depends on temporal trends in the number of females and/or

the proportion of females as a share of total migrants (Boyd, 2021). This concept has recently faced considerable challenges (Boyd, 2021; Christou & Kofman, 2022). For instance, some scholars critique the notion of feminization by pointing to the increasing levels of education among migrant women, suggesting that what we have been observing in recent years is not merely the feminization of migration but rather the feminization of skilled migration. This trend is characterized by a higher proportion of highly educated women migrating compared to men with similar educational backgrounds (Dumitru, 2017, as cited in Christou & Kofman, 2022). As a result, women have increasingly constituted a significant percentage of skilled migrants, a categorization based on educational attainment rather than the specific occupations they engage after they have migrated (Christou & Kofman, 2022; Kofman & Raghuram, 2022).

Moreover, Monica Boyd (2021) discusses recent data from the United Nations Population Division on the feminization of migration. She argues that the traditional feminization of migration index, which calculates the percentage of females within the total migration population, is inadequate for fully understanding female international migration. She contends this measure fails to explain the underlying causes of high or low feminization levels. Besides, by combining women and girls, as well as men and boys, into singular categories, the index oversimplifies differences across developmental stages. While women and girls may share some experiences, they diverge in migration opportunities, treatment under migration policies, and the rights they are afforded in both sending and receiving countries. For instance, migrant children may prioritize access to school, whereas labor standards may be more relevant to adult women. Additionally, the index overlooks the significant variation across different countries and regions, each with unique histories, labor market demands, and approaches to women's rights and migrant treatment. As a result, the feminization of migration index varies considerably by destination, region, and development status. The author points out that in 2019, for example, feminization was most prominent among older migrants, particularly in Europe and North America, while it was lowest among working-age (15-64 years) migrants in Asia and Africa compared to other regions where working age women represented half of all migrants. These differences might reflect cultural and gender norms that, depending on where they are in the world, allow some women to migrate while preventing others from doing so.

Additionally, while discussions about feminization often center on labor migration, Christou & Kofman (2022) highlight that it is important to recognize that women not only move to continue their reproductive roles as paid workers but also within family contexts. Family migration remains the largest source of permanent migration, with many migrants entering through this route, mainly as spouses, followed by children and parents. Immigration policies significantly shape how one is able to perform family, especially as countries have made stricter conditions of entry for family members. These policies often define ‘family’ more narrowly than in non-migrant contexts and fail to be cognizant of the diverse ways families live in many countries of large-scale family migration. While cohabiting and LGBTIQ couples have acquired family rights or rights akin to those traditionally reserved for heterosexual married couples, these rights are not always extended to migrants (Christou & Kofman, 2022; Kofman & Raghuram, 2022). LGBTIQ or LGBTIQ+ is an acronym that stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer. The + sign represents people with various sexual orientations, gender identities, gender expressions and sex characteristics, who identify using other terms. Because the language used to indicate these aspects varies around the world, the letter order changes in many places, such as LGBTIQ+ or GBLTQI. Additional characters can be added, e.g., A for asexual, agender, or ally; 2s for two-spirit; or P for pansexual. The acronyms are not static and continue to evolve over time, thus Hennebry et al. (2021, p.33) advise that it is crucial to use them with caution to guarantee inclusivity.

Contemporary research has focused on gender differences in migration drivers. One significant driver of migration is the proliferation of prolonged conflicts and political instability, which has caused an increase in refugee flows and internal displacement. According to Kofman & Raghuram (2022) women constitute the majority of those fleeing generalized conflict, though only a minority manage to seek asylum in the Global North, because moving long distances requires substantial resources and frequently the use of smugglers. For example, Syrian refugees have faced socio-economic pressures that impede their migration efforts, as reported by Damir-Geilsdorf & Sabra (2018). Additionally, recent research also suggests that women may be more likely than men to migrate to escape socially discriminatory institutions and social control. Measures of discrimination against women such as the Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) from the OECD Development Centre

indicate that gender inequalities can act both as a motivating factor and as a barrier to women's migration. For instance, Ruysen & Salomone (2018) found that women facing discrimination in their country of origin are more inclined to migrate to destinations with lower levels of gender discrimination in social institutions; however, traditional determinants, such as family responsibilities and limited access to resources and networks, can also hinder their ability to migrate (Christou & Kofman, 2022; Freedman, 2016; Kofman & Raghuram, 2022).

At this stage, it is noteworthy that not all asylum seekers are escaping from generalized conflict; some may be seeking to escape gender-related forms of persecution. Gender-based persecution refers to individuals harmed because of their gender, for instance, women who experience sexual violence, domestic slavery, female genital mutilation (FGM), or honor killings (Shuman & Bohmer, 2023). Other forms include domestic violence, forced and early marriage, and restrictions on openly expressing their sexual orientation and gender identity (Bowstead, 2015; Freedman et al., 2022; Kofman & Raghuram, 2022; Lurgain & Eyber, 2022; Sharma et al., 2024; Yarwood et al., 2022). Sexual orientation indicates a "person's enduring capacity for profound romantic, emotional, and/or physical feelings for, or attraction to, other people. This encompasses hetero-, homo-, bi-, pan-, and asexuality, as well as a wide range of other expressions" (Hennebry et al., 2021, p.35). Gender identity, on the other hand, refers to "each person's deeply felt internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond to their sex assigned at birth or the gender attributed to them by society" (p. 32).

Adolescence is an important period for the development of gender identity. According to Nielson et al. (2024), gender identity is a multidimensional developmental construct with two components: gender similarity, how one's self-concept relates to the major gender collectives (male and female), which is related to self-esteem; and felt pressure, the pressure one feels to conform to gender norms. The findings of their study revealed that early adolescence was a period of particularly strong gender norms, during which participants faced significant levels of pressure from parents, peers and self (Nielson et al., 2024). Similarly, Rawee et al. (2024) studied non-contentedness during adolescence (meaning, unhappiness with being the gender aligned with one's sex) and its relationship with self-concept, behavioral and emotional difficulties. They concluded that gender non-

contentedness, which was found relatively common during early adolescence, especially in females, declines with age and appears to be connected with poor self-concept and mental health throughout development. This information is pertinent to comprehend the combined impact of the migration experiences on mental health and overall wellbeing of migrants, especially given the increasing numbers of LGBTQI+ refugees and asylum seekers or migrants of diverse sexual orientation, gender identity or expression (SOGIE) who are exposed to discrimination and violence due to their diverse gender identity and sexual orientation (Elliott et al., 2022; Yarwood et al., 2022).

Finally, migrants are also subject to violence during their journey and/or on arrival in a destination country which have significant impacts on their health and mental health, such as the ones discussed in the second chapter of this paper. Consequently, contemporary trends on gender and migration are addressing the challenges they face during migration and in refugee camps, as well as how sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) influences particularly women's decisions to leave their home countries (Bowstead, 2015; Freedman, 2016; Freedman et al., 2022; Kofman & Raghuram, 2022; Lurgain & Eyber, 2022; Sharma et al., 2024). In the following sections I will examine this topic.

Overall, gender has a significant impact on all aspects of the migration experience, including migration motivations and decision-making processes. Men, women and other gender identities migrate for different reasons, which are influenced by gender norms and social expectations. Initially disregarded, the importance of gender in migration rose to prominence in the late twentieth century, with early research on labor migration highlighting how women balanced employment and caregiving responsibilities. The contentious concept of "feminization of migration" noted an increase in female migration but has also received criticisms about data collection and how this notion tends to oversimplify complex realities, such as the varying effects of migration policies across geographies and life stages. Moreover, recent trends on gender and migration have been interested in migrant's experiences, focusing on the dynamics and ongoing challenges that migrants confront before, during and after migration, such as gender-based persecution, violence and discrimination. In the following section, I will explore the intersectionality approach to the study of gendered migration.

3.2 Intersectionality and conceptual approaches

The transition from women to gender in migration studies has allowed for a more innovative and intersectional approach to researching gendered mobilities. According to Christou & Kofman (2022), the incorporation of multiple categories relevant to the understanding of intersectional hierarchies can reveal inequalities, relationships and meanings in migration thereby enlightening how gendered identities and roles rise as shaped by social reproduction, class division, generation/age and other institutional and structural practices.

The notion of intersectionality stems from the works of law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991) who coined the term in 1989, as well as feminist and gender studies, which emerged in response to inequities. The intersectional approach to social inequalities is regarded as one of the most significant contributions of feminist theory to the social sciences in the last decades (Kofman & Raghuram, 2022; Mora & Piper, 2021). Intersectionality alludes to the existence of a ‘cumulative’ effect of disadvantages caused by certain inherent characteristics (e.g., ethnicity) that outweighs the sum of the negative effects caused by each single characteristic. It relates to the interconnectedness, interdependencies and mutual co-construction of key categories of social positioning or also called axes of differences/inequalities (Lutz & Amelina, 2021), such as race, class, and gender, and other personal qualities or identities; as well as the fact that persons who fall into numerous categories confront unique challenges. It also refers to how these identities relate to oppressive and discriminatory systems. Indeed, it implies that different forms of discrimination intersect or overlap to produce distinct experiences, dynamics, and effects (Bastia et al., 2023; Christou & Kofman, 2022; Degani & De Stefani, 2020; Fernández-Sánchez, 2023; Kofman & Raghuram, 2022; Lutz & Amelina, 2021; Mendola & Pera, 2022; Mora & Piper, 2021; Stypińska & Gordo, 2018).

According to Fernández-Sánchez (2023) intersectionality is a dynamic and growing theoretical and analytic tool that delivers useful insights across a variety of research domains. It has been defined and conceptualized in several ways, including as a method, theory, paradigm, concept, perspective, and theoretical framework. He cites as an example, qualitative research, in which it is widely regarded as a useful paradigm for comprehending the intricacies of social identities and power dynamics. Moreover, he argues that researchers have used intersectional approaches to investigate how numerous intersecting social

categories influence people's experiences and access to resources. This approach avoids homogenizing narratives by emphasizing agency and resilience, empowering communities and advocating for social justice. Thus, the author highlights that intersectionality aims to produce positive social transformation and social fairness. Freedman et al. (2022) also emphasized its political elements. For them, intersectionality can be presumed as a theoretical approach with an activist orientation or social movement dimension, which means a 'work in progress', an invitation for researchers to always broaden the scope of work that it can be applied to, in order to give voice to silent and excluded categories of subjects struggling for social justice.

Relatedly, Christou & Kofman (2022) define intersectionality as an analytic framework that seeks to understand and transcend how interlocking systems of power, oppression, and privilege interact, with a special focus on the combined impact on those who are marginalized and disempowered in a given society. At its core, intersectionality theory posits that multiple forms of oppression, such as those relating to gender, class, ethnicity, race, nation, sexual orientation, disability, age, generation, religion, and so on, are not experienced independently but interact with and reinforce one another (see Chapter 4 for details). Furthermore, Kofman & Raghuram (2022) explain that these features, both individually and collectively, establish and reproduce inequality by assigning attributes to individuals and allocating them to particular social roles, which can be witnessed for example in households and labor processes. The interplay of axes of inequalities varies historically and spatially, requiring an empirical investigation to capture the structural or institutional contexts and subjective identities in relation to discrimination and action, as one may be subordinate along one axis while privileged along another (Christou & Kofman, 2022; Kofman & Raghuram, 2022).

Authors Christou & Kofman (2022) discuss the criticisms of the intersectional perspective. They point out that the concept of intersectionality has been condemned as ambiguous and has triggered intense disputes in academic and public discourse, as well as being frequently misused in its application to research and theorizing, resulting in the politicization of the topic (see also Chapter 4). In addition, Lutz & Amelina (2021) maintain that current debates focus on various points of conflict, such as whether intersectionality can be considered a theory or a hermeneutic tool, or if race or gender must always function as a

master-category, or whether new categories can be added without harming the concept as a whole. As per Freedman et al. (2022), intersectionality has been characterized as a ‘traveling theory’ and reduced to a methodological approach to diversity research because of its flexible nature, which allows it to move across national boundaries, within and across disciplines, and work with diverse methodologies (qualitative and quantitative) and topical inquiries. As a result, it has been criticized for losing its original ‘situated and embodied’ character.

Despite criticisms, the use of an intersectional lens and methodology has become essential in gender and migration research. In this vein, recent advancements in the intersecting inequalities approach have shifted focus from rigid (reifying) social categories to people’s lived experiences (Mora & Piper, 2021). According to Christou & Kofman (2022), as both a theoretical and methodological approach to migration research, intersectionality emphasizes the relational dynamic within migration social contexts, power structures, and inequalities, thus accentuating the complexity of interjective forms of oppression. They further argue that intersectionality’s value as an analytical framework in migration studies lies in its ability to provide an inclusive understanding of migrants as part of multiple (under/privileged) groups and reveal the barriers they might encounter. These intersections highlight the interconnectedness of personal and systemic inequalities on a global scale. For instance, Kofman & Raghuram (2022) contend that class, a frequently overlooked social category in intersectional analysis, addresses important gaps by incorporating social stratification for a more nuanced understanding of migrant experiences and positionalities. Class, often discussed in migration literature through the proxy of skills, interacts with other social categories (such as race), allowing some women to (at least partially) overcome other forms of discrimination. Skills, measured by qualifications and wages, are key to identifying class, but when situated in gendered labor markets that disadvantage women, class operates alongside gender to produce intersectional outcomes (Christou & Kofman, 2022; Kofman & Raghuram, 2022).

Some scholars argue that intersectionality perspective should be integrated with other paradigms. For example, (Lutz & Amelina, 2021) explore the integration of intersectionality and transnational approaches to migration, emphasizing the interplay of multiple forms of domination among migrants. They believe that for an appropriate gender analysis in migration research, insights from gender studies and from migration studies should be taken

into account, since both disciplines provide critical perspectives on deconstructing gender images in the context of migrant othering. Intersectionality offers a framework for understanding post-migration dynamics within systems of power and inequality, whereas transnational approaches, which gained prominence in the 1990s, criticize traditional assimilation-focused perspectives on migration.

Furthermore, the authors through the presentation of key transnational conceptualizations state that all these transnational approaches call into question the classical assimilation paradigm in migration studies, which assumes migration as a one-way, one-time process from a sending to a receiving country. They stress the importance of multidirectional, ongoing mobility and cross-border relationships, as evidenced by research on care chains, transnational motherhood, and multi-local family dynamics. Moreover, in terms of intersectionality in transnational settings, scholars argue that migrants assess their social positions across multiple localities, including the sending, the receiving, and, in some cases, a third state or locality, and face hierarchical inequalities across gender, class, and ethnicity. They cite as an example the phenomenon of contradictory social mobility. Transnational migrants often experience contradictory social mobility, such as downward mobility due to discrimination in the receiving country, but upward mobility in their country of origin. Finally, they conclude that intersectionality-sensitive migration research will continue to face theoretical and methodological challenges in the future, and one possible solution is to follow anti-categorical ways of thinking to understand gender, ethnicity/race, class and other axes of difference, as well as their intersections, as socially constructed and historically specific and mutable (Lutz & Amelina, 2021).

Intersectionality and Vulnerability.

Mendola & Pera (2022) applied the concept of intersectionality to examine the disadvantages of refugees. They claim that this approach is beneficial for understanding their vulnerabilities. Based on Mackenzie et al. (2014)'s taxonomy, they argue that integrating inherent, situational, and pathogenic vulnerabilities can help explain refugee's sense of loss of power, control and agency. Furthermore, they contend that this approach can aid in understanding discrimination resulting from societal practices that treat certain groups unfairly based on traits such as age, sex, religion, or nationality. On this issue, 'intersectional discrimination' relates to when a person is discriminated against because of several factors

at the same time, and in such a way, that these factors are inextricably linked (Crenshaw, 1991; Mendola & Pera, 2022).

Besides, they argue that in the scholarly migration debate, the analysis of migration has been broadened by the application of gender theories about inequality, the inclusion of additional axes (e.g. age, religion, ethnicity), and the emphasis on the different facets of the vulnerability condition of migrants. They also describe how the intersectionality approach enables one to focus on context-dependent aspects of personal experiences. Refugees' experiences of intersectionality vary across different contexts (e.g. detention centers, workplaces) and might lead to resilience as a coping mechanism for the overall condition of being underprivileged, despite pervasive inequalities and experiences of discrimination. Moreover, when discussing intersectional vulnerability, they claim that we should consider the (cross)relevance of the various concurring vulnerabilities and how they influence migration. Considering these combined factors of vulnerability helps in assessing and improving interventions for refugees.

According to Mendola & Pera (2022), one methodological challenge is that quantitative social sciences struggle to capture the complex, multi-dimensional nature of intersectional vulnerability. They also point out that identifying and assessing intersectional vulnerabilities requires understanding both present effects and potential future risks, which currently used methods may not effectively distinguish. Finally, while intersectionality is frequently mentioned in international frameworks, it is rarely incorporated into legislation, case law, or vulnerability assessments, especially in quantitative methods and practices.

Similarly, Bastia et al. (2023) stress that intersectionality's radical aspects, from which it stems, are sometimes reduced or diluted in policy contexts, obscured by terms like 'leave no one behind' (related to 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals). According to the authors, such programs may address vulnerability and poverty but lack feminist political insight or historical structural analysis. Furthermore, they contend that the radicalism of intersectionality is not consistently supported in academic research. Feminist-inspired studies tend to keep this radicalism, but other research may dilute the concept by presenting intersectionality as a set of variables rather than focusing on justice, gender, or marginalized groups.

As has been briefly discussed, Crenshaw's work introduced the concept of intersectionality, which is essential for understanding how various social categorizations such as race, gender, and ethnicity intersect to generate compounding effects. Despite criticisms of its conceptual ambiguity and politicization, the intersectionality perspective remains a vital tool for studying gender in migration and feminist research, addressing systems of power and social dynamics, and emphasizing the relational nature of migration contexts. This perspective highlights the particular challenges that migrants encounter and underlines the importance of holistic and justice-focused interventions. Moreover, intersectionality can enhance migration vulnerability assessments by offering a more nuanced understanding of the complex and intersecting factors that contribute to migrants' vulnerabilities. As I will show in the next chapter with some examples, the intersectional approach may improve the quality of migration vulnerability assessments by recognizing diverse agency and identities, understanding power dynamics and empowering communities, promoting social justice, and challenging homogenizing narratives in migration research (Fernández-Sánchez, 2023).

3.3 Gender and Migration Processes

This section is divided into two parts. The first segment aims to address gender-based differences throughout the migration journey, and the literature will be presented by stage of the migration process (pre-, during, and post-migration). In the second segment, the gendered aspects of forced migration will be discussed, including the asylum process, experiences of gender-based violence, and the concepts of vulnerability and resilience as key links for understanding gender and intersectional violence in the context of migration.

3.3.1 Gender-based differences in migration stages

Gender influences every stage of migration. Gender affects migration motivations, who migrates and where, how they migrate, the networks they utilize, opportunities and available resources in the destination, and interactions with the country of origin. Also, gender has a substantial impact on risks, vulnerabilities, and demands which frequently differ between groups. The roles, perceptions, connections, and power dynamics connected with being a man, woman, boy, or girl have a significant impact on the migration process (Ferdous, 2024).

Pre-migration phase.

International migration is linked to economic conditions, employment, education, marriage, poverty, violence, and the environment; as well as larger aspects such as living standards and personal motives. Many factors influence the pre-migration phase, particularly an individual's decision to migrate. Women's motivations for migrating may be similar or different from those of males. As discussed in the second chapter, migration decisions are situational and contextual, and they are typically influenced by a complex combination of economic, political, social and other developments that dynamically impact migration opportunities as well as the willingness and ability to move. To achieve the objectives of this document, I will focus on socio-cultural factors, particularly employment, education, and culture, including gender and cultural norms, as well as violence (Anastasiadou et al., 2023; Bonifacio, 2019; Elfadl et al., 2021; Ena, 2022).

Economic conditions and employment.

Poverty has long been recognized as a powerful motivator for migration. Women often migrate to escape poverty, motivated by a combination of economic need and the desire for better opportunities (Bellampalli & Yadava, 2024; Ferdous, 2024; Kumah et al., 2020; Schouler-Ocak et al., 2019). Their capacity and inclination to migrate are influenced by factors such as their financial status, availability of suitable employment, and an assessment of potential benefits of migrating. Additionally, a decent job is important for both men and women since it allows them to create a better future for themselves, their families and their communities (Ferdous, 2024). Some authors have argued that disparities in employment migration patterns are impacted by a complex interplay of socioeconomic, cultural, and political factors in both developed and developing nations. For example, Nazari (2016) examined the distribution of international female migrant workers. Her findings show a substantial relationship between the gender gap at work and the destination of female migrant workers. Women frequently migrate from underdeveloped countries to developed ones in quest of better job prospects, prompted by wages discrepancies and lack of local employment opportunities.

Moreover, traditional gender roles and expectations can limit women's opportunities in their home countries, spurring migration as a means of empowerment and economic independence (Duarte, 2018). Many women migrate not just to escape poverty, but also to

obtain autonomy and help their families back home (Akileswaran & Lurie, 2010). Working in a foreign country can give women a sense of autonomy, the ability to learn valuable skills to improve their prospects in the labor market, and the potential for social mobility through the financial support they can provide to their families via remittances (Ferdous, 2024).

Finally, in their examination of employment gendered migration patterns, Anastasiadou et al. (2023) discovered that women respond differently to adverse labor market conditions in their home community. Despite having similar intentions to migrate, independently migrating women are hindered by barriers such as rigid gender norms and limited access to resources, resulting in a lower likelihood of actually attempting or completing the migration process compared to men. Another difference they found between genders was the use of networks to facilitate migration. Migrant women rely on longer-established family networks, whereas migrant men rely on relationships with acquaintances in the destination country. The authors contend that this highlights the diverse security considerations and precautions taken by women and men.

Education.

Education has been identified in sociological studies as a likely causal factor of migration for both men and women (Williams, 2009). Particularly in youth migration it seems to be a key factor. According to Bonifacio (2019), 'youth' refers to that phase in life when education is completed, and employment begins. The skills and knowledge gained over the years may influence youth's decisions to leave their home countries when better education or employment opportunities exist. Similarly, Anastasiadou et al. (2023) found that the opportunity to get education is a primary motivator for women to migrate. They argue that studies show that women are more likely than men to cite education as a reason for migrating, and this pattern was particularly evident in low-income countries, such as Ethiopia, Cuba and Nepal, as well as in rural-to-urban migration (Williams, 2009). Lastly, while education is a powerful motivator for female migration, women often confront barriers to education, limiting their migration opportunities and agency (Ena, 2022).

Gender roles, cultural norms, and violence.

Cultural contexts have a substantial influence on gender differences in the pre-migration stage. Macro-level gender inequalities, as well as the subsequent disparities in access to financial and natural resources, can either drive or deter women from migrating, and thereby

influencing the gender and sex-compositions of migration flows. Neumayer & Plümper (2021) explored international migration to Germany and discovered that stronger economic rights in the migrant's place of origin correlate with a higher proportion of women in the sex-composition of migration to Germany (Anastasiadou et al., 2023; Neumayer & Plümper, 2021). According to Anastasiadou et al. (2023) these findings imply that lower gender inequality in the migrants' home country translates into greater agency over women's migration actions and control over resources that can be used to facilitate the move.

Domestic and societal gender norms compel certain groups to act in specific ways while restricting others. Persistent gender relations and family hierarchies can influence migration decisions, such as who migrates, for how long, and to which countries; with women frequently having less control over these decisions (Ferdous, 2024). Other gender roles and cultural norms drive individuals to migrate. Marriage, for example, is a well-known factor, especially in terms of youth mobility. According to Bonifacio (2019), in this context, the bride normally moves to the groom's residence. Marriage migration has been researched extensively, particularly in Asia, where it has emerged as a distinct feature of young women's international migration from developing countries to developed ones. Moreover, cultural contexts marked by gender-based violence, such as early marriages, forced marriages and discrimination also put pressure on women to migrate (Ena, 2022; Ferdous, 2024; Schouler-Ocak et al., 2019). Anastasiadou et al. (2023) found that women cited personal and physical security concerns as reasons for their move. Similarly, La Cascia et al. (2020) detected that Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) is a common risk factor shared by all international migrant women. Domestic violence, female genital mutilation (Ferdous, 2024), persecution, and violence (Schouler-Ocak et al., 2019), are consistently reported as factors encouraging female migration. Women fleeing gender-based violence or restrictive cultural contexts are more prone to migrate, especially from developing countries (Ena, 2022).

Furthermore, escape from violence caused by war, conflict, persecution, and other harm has been associated with youth and family migration, and many of those fleeing conflict are unaccompanied children (Bonifacio, 2019). In a report made by UNICEF (2021) gender-based violence and/or conflict-related sexual violence, were stated as prevalent strategies of war, that drive many girls and women to migrate. According to the source, one in every two girls and women arriving in Europe reported threats or personal violence as their primary

reason for leaving, including domestic violence, inheritance issues, religious discrimination, sexual orientation or gender identity, opposition to marriages, or threats of persecution.

Finally, in some circumstances, gender-based discrimination and rights violations may drive people to move. In their review, Alessi et al. (2021) found that sexual and gender minority (SGM) migrants face severe and persistent violence and abuse because of their sexual orientation or gender identity in the pre-departure phase. Similarly, UNICEF (2021) observed that LGBTIQ+ people who experience high levels of familial or communal scrutiny may leave their home to seek anonymity and greater rights. Furthermore, research has revealed that people with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity or expression (SOGIE), LGBTIQ+ migrants, refugees and asylum seekers appear to experience persecution in their home countries, which poses health and safety risks. Their experiences include severe and prolonged trauma prior to migration, including psychological abuse, physical and sexual assault, property damage, wrongful imprisonment, forced psychiatric hospitalization, and daily institutional discrimination (Moleiro et al., 2021; Yarwood et al., 2022).

While these socio-cultural factors highlight the difficulties that women and people of other genders confront, it is important to remember that migration can also function as a catalyst for change, allowing them to reframe their roles and assert their agency in new contexts (Ferdous, 2024).

Peri-migration phase.

Although the sex-composition of migrant flows shows that men and women migrate in roughly equal proportions (Anastasiadou et al., 2023), the transition stage of migration is differently and heavily impacted by gender. According to Ferdous (2024), focusing solely on variations in male and female migratory flows is insufficient in the broader context of gender dynamics, and it is critical to consider and analyze the inequalities disguised by these patterns. For instance, while nearly half of migrants are women, this statistic does not provide enough information about the underlying social constraints or the qualitative differences that characterize women's migration. Gender inequalities and biases can cause women and men to take drastically different migratory patterns. The political and economic environment of the nation of origin, which commonly discriminates against women by, for example, limiting their access to resources, also has an impact on women's migratory potential and determines their ability to travel independently. Gender stereotypes that emphasize women's inability to

migrate unaccompanied, the constraining effects of their conventional family responsibilities, and their lack of social and economic freedom all contribute to their low participation in international migration.

Women are often considered more vulnerable to violence during the migration journey. Some of the violence is cross-cutting across all parts of the journey (for example, gender-based violence can occur at all times), while others are unique to and experienced during the different parts of the journey (La Cascia et al., 2020). Women on the migration path are at risk of experiencing sexual or physical abuse by transporters, other male migrants, or border officials. Women are also more vulnerable to sexual assault in refugee camps and by aggressive local communities (Ferdous, 2024).

Furthermore, women and girls make up a large proportion of those trafficked, both regionally and to Western countries (Bonifacio, 2019; UNICEF, 2021) and are especially more vulnerable to trafficking due to their marginalized social position and economic insecurity (Ferdous, 2024). According to Ferdous (2024), these women typically come from locations with limited economic opportunities for them, where they rely on others and lack access to resources to improve their lives. They may be attracted with the promise of respectable employment, only to be pushed into sex work, marriage, domestic labor or other forms of exploitations. Likewise, girls and boys that travel alone frequently use irregular channels and rely on smugglers, despite the risks of potentially being exploited and trafficked; and because both smuggling and trafficking industries are illegal, the exact number of children doing so is unknown (UNICEF, 2021).

The term ‘trafficking’ refers to “the procurement, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of a person with the intent to exploit him or her using force or other forms of coercion, victimization, fraud, deception, abuse of power, or weakness, exchange of monetary value, or other forms of advantage” (Ferdous, 2024, p.17). In addition, Ferdous (2024) believes that practices such as prostitution and other types of sexual exploitation, forced labor or servitude, slavery or slavery-like activities, enslavement, or organ removal are all examples of exploitation that should be included in a complete definition of the term.

Gender influences the type of trafficking an individual will experience. UNICEF (2021) indicated that three out of four trafficked girls are trafficked for sexual exploitation, whereas boys are more likely to be trafficked for forced labor. Although sexual and physical

abuse is common in both sexes, sexual violence is so prevalent in women and girls that in some cases they prepare for it in advance, such as Eritrean women planning to travel to Libya who reported seeking contraception ahead of time to avoid unwanted pregnancy in the event of rape. Unfortunately, because of stigma, shame, and misconceptions regarding what constitutes sexual violence against boys, little is known about their experiences of sexual violence.

LGBTQI+ migrants are also at a significant risk of sexual violence during migration (Alessi et al., 2021; Yarwood et al., 2022). In their review, Yarwood et al. (2022) reported that many forced migrants with diverse SOGIE recounted engaging in sex work at various points during their migration route and having no option since they believed sex work was the only way to survive financially. Sex work was also connected to dangerous sexual activity, including exposure to sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), as well as exposure to sexual assault. Finally, compared to general migrant populations, migrants with diverse SOGIE were reported to be at additional risk of abuse, discrimination, or reduced access to services during transit because of their identity, making them more likely to experience double marginalization, of their migrant or minority status and their gender identity.

Post-migration phase.

Research on gendered differences at the post-migration phase is limited and with mixed results; most studies conceptualize gender as male and female, whereas other gender identities are understudied or not considered. Moreover, scholars have mostly focused on the physical and mental health outcomes of migrants, particularly in terms of integration and adjustment. Consequently, I will first briefly present general findings on gender differences in the post-migration phase, and then, I will focus on mental health aspects.

In terms of health, Elfadl et al. (2021) argue that women have been described as having more health conditions and poorer physical health, including a higher prevalence of chronic health problems, obesity, and functional capacity limitations than their male counterparts or that of women in general. Male migrants, on the other hand, have been related to higher rates of substance abuse, and experiences of torture than female migrants. Moreover, in the post-migration phase the integration process can be impacted by factors such as the migrant's legal status, career prospects, education level, economic status, culture

and gender norms (Anastasiadou et al., 2023; Fokkema & de Haas, 2015). Schouler-Ocak et al. (2019) highlighted that individual psychological resources, social support, successful acculturation process, cultural variances and time since relocation were all statistically significant protective factors. Furthermore, Fokkema & de Haas (2015) found that pre-migration factors like education affect gender differences in post-migration socio-cultural integration. In the context of immigration to Italy and Spain, for example, well-educated African female migrants demonstrated higher levels of integration compared to their male counterparts. Finally, difficult economic and social positions (occupational status), financial capacities, living conditions, and legal ambiguity have been identified as social risk factors for migrants (Wandschneider et al., 2020).

Mental health in post-migration contexts

Migrants' risk of developing mental disorders may be linked to a lack of access to power, material resources and policymaking as a result of larger social, political, and economic forces that perpetuate inequality (Hynie, 2018). Moreover, other elements that have been identified as influencing adjustment include cultural bereavement, culture shock, social defeat, a gap between expectations and achievement, and acceptance by the hosting country. These experiences, combined with acculturation stress, limited or loss of social networks and social isolation, language and cultural barriers, unemployment, low socioeconomic status, and a lack of or barriers to access to mental health-care services, all have a negative impact on immigrants' mental health (Schouler-Ocak et al., 2019). In terms of the role of gender, Sword et al. (2006) reported that immigrant women are considerably more likely to have poor levels of social support, unmet health literacy needs and low family incomes, and the need for financial assistance than Canadian-born women. The lack of social support and networks has also been linked to an increased risk for distress and mental illness, particularly depression among immigrant women (Schouler-Ocak et al., 2019).

In addition, women have been described as particularly at risk of developing stress-related disorders. According to La Cascia et al. (2020), after experiencing a traumatic event, women are about twice as likely as males to develop PTSD. These differences have been linked to limited social support resources and gender-specific acute psychobiological reactions to trauma or violence. According to the authors, women often do not access treatment after experiencing the violence. Furthermore, many migrant women are often

deprived of social network support, have no understanding or awareness of how psychological services work in the host country, and face significant barriers to access care such as language barriers, cultural background and societal pressure.

Recent research suggests that the impact of post-migration stressors on refugee's mental health differ by gender (Alexander et al., 2021; Wu et al., 2021). For example, Wu et al. (2021) investigated refugee's mental health during resettlement in Australia. They found that for both male and female refugees, there were positive associations between loneliness, economic stressors, and mental illness, as well as an increasing association between male refugee's mental illness and the stress of adjusting to life in Australia and English language barriers during the resettlement years. Similarly, Alexander et al. (2021) examined gender-specific correlations between post-migration stressors and positive mental health in a sample of adult Syrian refugees resettled in Sweden. Their results indicate that post-settlement stressors such as social strain (i.e. frustration due to loss of status & loss of personal competency) and financial strain had gender-specific effects on participant's subjective well-being, with men experiencing a greater negative effect. They attributed this finding to traditional gender roles and the importance of patriarchy in Middle Eastern societies, where men's identity is linked to labor and the ability to provide for their families. Another finding was that social support appeared to mitigate the negative effects of financial stress on the subjective well-being of both men and women.

Finally, Moleiro et al. (2021) examined LGBTQI+ migrants' experiences. They highlight how, upon arrival at their destination, individuals experience feelings of isolation and alienation because of their migration and sexual and/or gender minority status. Furthermore, they argue that LGBTQ+ migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees are especially vulnerable to acculturative stress because they may lack appropriate coping strategies (due to the experiences of complex trauma) and social support (e.g. being excluded from their families, religious groups, the local LGBTQ+ community, among others, which can additionally become sources of rejection and discrimination due to sexual prejudices). These situations of acculturative stress can be exacerbated by experiences of verbal abuse, physical assault, and discrimination, resulting in social isolation, alienation and powerlessness, exposing them to a variety of mental health risk factors (Haghiri-Vijeh & Clark, 2022).

It is important to note that studies on gender differences have several limitations, including a lack of information, variations in the length of resettlement, biases, the occasional failure to include post-migration potentially traumatic events that may affect migrants' mental health, and a lack of specific data about migrant women's psychological status. Naturally, the results cannot be generalized. Nevertheless, these findings emphasize the importance of gender differences and call for tailored interventions throughout the migration process. Additionally, further research should consider a multilevel and non-binary conceptualization of gender. Data availability for gender-sensitive research is restricted, and it remains challenging to account for gender diversity, particularly in quantitative research (Wandschneider et al., 2020).

Overall, in this section on gender and migration, I have described how gender influences each stage of the migration process. Men and women have different pre-migration motivations, opportunities, and risks due to social, economic and cultural factors such as education, employment opportunities, and gender roles, among others. Women are more likely to migrate to escape poverty, gender-based violence, and oppressive environments, and they frequently face more challenges. The gendered experience of migration is also shaped by inequalities, with women, girls, and LGBTQI+ migrants facing increased risks of trafficking, sexual violence, and discrimination along the journey. In the post-migration phase, women are more likely to experience health and mental health issues related to trauma, whereas men may struggle with stressors related to gender roles and cultural expectations, such as having to provide for their families. These findings highlight the importance of gender-sensitive data and interventions, as well as the need for research that considers non-binary gender identities and experiences throughout the migration process.

3.3.2 Gender, forced migration, and the impact on mental health

In this second part, I will briefly examine other gendered dimensions of irregular forced migration, such as the role of gender in the asylum process, as well as gender-based violence and its links with vulnerability and resilience.

Gender and Asylum.

According to Shuman & Bohmer (2023), the United Nations definition of refugees in the 1951 Refugee Convention does not clearly mention gender as a criterion for asylum

applications. Instead, refugees and asylum seekers must file a claim for gender persecution under the category of membership in a social group. They argue that research demonstrates that men and women are treated differently during the asylum procedure, with women's requests often being denied.

Asylum proceedings are typically complicated, lengthy and adversarial. Asylum applicants claiming gender-based persecution must demonstrate not only that the events (e.g. sexual violence) occurred, but also that their home country failed to protect them from persecution. Demonstrating that a state has failed to protect someone from gender persecution is complicated by a number of factors, including the fact that occasionally the persecution (particularly rape) was carried out by a military or government employee, and the fact that some states not only do not protect individuals but actively condone forms of persecution, especially restrictions on women's education or public participation. Additionally, Shuman & Bohmer (2023) claim that domestic violence has only recently become a crime in some nations and is not punished in others. Similarly, some countries may have laws prohibiting sexual violence or sexual trafficking but do not provide protection or prosecute the person(s) who commit(s) the illegal act (Berthold, 2023; Shuman & Bohmer, 2023).

Typically, the petitioner must provide evidence of their persecution, as some asylum claims submitted by applicants are false or embellished. This evidence frequently includes psychological evidence of trauma and, if present, medical proof. Concerning the latter, chronic pain is one of the most common physical repercussions of torture and other forms of physical persecution, as reported by physicians. Evidence of physical abuse can be acute and/or temporary, appearing shortly after the trauma in the form of lacerations, burns, bruises, hematomas and tooth or bone fractures. A physician may not be able to claim with certainty that a certain symptom is caused by the persecution, but rather that it is consistent with the history of persecution that the individual reports (Berthold, 2023; Dehghan & Osella, 2022; Quiroga & Jaranson, 2005).

In terms of psychological evidence, severe and persistent mental health consequences of torture or other traumatic persecution include: PTSD and depression (often comorbid), anxiety disorders (generalized anxiety disorder or panic disorder), substance abuse, changes in worldview and personality, cognitive symptoms such as impaired memory, concentration problems, disorientation/confusion, neurovegetative symptoms such as insomnia,

nightmares, lack of energy, sexual dysfunction, and other psychological symptoms like withdrawal, irritability, emotional liability, dissociation (Berthold, 2023; Dehghan & Osella, 2022; Quiroga & Jaranson, 2005). Furthermore, medical and psychological experts can assist adjudicators in understanding that traumatized applicants may present with a variety of demeanors consistent with their experience of persecution and mental state, such as a blunt or flat affect, emotional numbness, or a highly emotional or labile affect. These demeanors are probable posttraumatic reactions, which also may be influenced by the impact of testifying in a stressful asylum hearing (Berthold, 2023).

As traumatic events are usually triggered, the specific trigger during the procedure (including variances in how they are asked about their experiences) may cause applicants to emphasize or recall different aspects of their experiences, which may result in discrepancies in their testimony. A survivor's testimony may be hampered further by a strong desire to avoid their traumas and difficulties recalling parts of their experiences (both possible symptoms of PTSD). Because trauma can be associated with memory blocks or dissociation, as well as memories stored as fragments of sensory perceptions and emotional states, when asked to testify about their persecution, their accounts may appear incoherent, and they may be unable to describe aspects of their trauma that the adjudicator believes are most relevant to their case. Additionally, inconsistencies are also more prevalent when individuals are more anxious, under a lot of stress (such as during asylum proceedings), and/or when a person has experienced multiple traumas that share some similarities. Unfortunately, in the absence of psychological explanation, an adjudicator may make a negative credibility finding, erroneously concluding that the applicant was insufficiently emotive or presented an overly emotional account based on their own assumptions of how a person who is recounting traumatic experiences should present (Berthold, 2023; Berthold & Gray, 2011).

Gender differences can also influence immigration officials' evaluation of applications. The officials' trustworthiness assessments frequently rely on assumptions about expected gendered behavior in their home country or expectations of manners during the political asylum hearing. Officials have been particularly suspicious of women for their decisions about leaving their children behind or opting to engage in particular events rather than conform to gendered cultural norms. In certain circumstances, officials have voiced concerns when applicants' emotional reactions did not match their perception of gender

standards (Shuman & Bohmer, 2023). It is important to remember that negative credibility decisions frequently end in an order of deportation for the applicant.

Differences in gender expectations also influence how women disclose or withhold reports of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). Although the prevalence of GBV is well documented, women have not always been successful in their political asylum claims. According to Freedman et al. (2022) women have more challenges in making their claims, such as the difficulty of discussing GBV during asylum interviews. They contend that the most challenging issue is the burden of proof and the difficulties in providing evidence to support their claims of violence. Some female applicants have been unwilling to reveal experience of sexual violence, whether to avoid further humiliation, out of fear of retaliation against family members, or based on prior experience of reporting, or because of stigma and shame (Freedman, 2016; Freedman et al., 2022; Shuman & Bohmer, 2023).

Moreover, culture might influence the information disclosed in an asylum application or testimony. All political asylum petitioners turn to their own cultural resources, prohibitions, and customs to discuss intimate and tragic events. An applicant may not initially reveal their rape in their asylum application, for example, due to the cultural consequences and connotation of rape (i.e. being ostracized or disowned by family). If the rape is disclosed later in the asylum procedure, credibility issues often arise. Further, some applicants are concerned about the allegiances of court-appointed male interpreters, who may further harm a family or individual's reputation (Freedman et al., 2022; Shuman & Bohmer, 2023). Additionally, asylum officials may be willing to consider traditional cultural practices, such as female genital mutilation (FGM) or honor killings, as violations of human rights that warrant asylum; however, these categories of violence carry an implicit critique of the applicant's culture and cultural values, deepening an east/ west divide in the political asylum process (Shuman & Bohmer, 2023).

Finally, Lewis (2023) argues that, notwithstanding recent developments in political asylum policy, LGBTQI+ refugees continue to struggle in translating their experiences of persecution into the kinds of narratives that the state can recognize. LGBTQI+ refugees, like all other applicants, must demonstrate they have a 'well-founded fear of persecution' as well as membership in a specific social group. Immigration officials frequently rely on stereotypical assumptions and expectations when evaluating an applicant's claim (e.g. that

they all belong to a common social group with shared cultural tastes and social spaces, or that they all ‘come out’ as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender immediately upon arrival in the receiving country). As a result, LGBTQI+ asylum applicants are frequently expected to conform to Western ideals of sexual citizenship based on visibility, consumption, and an identity in the public sphere in order to be recognized as eligible candidates for asylum. Lastly, asylum adjudicators often misinterpret bisexual and transgender identities; whereas transgender and intersex people are commonly labeled as “medical problems” by immigration officials, bisexuals are deemed unworthy of protection because of the notion that it is possible for them to return to their country of origin and assume a heterosexual identity. Ultimately, all of these stereotypes support the assumption that sexual orientation and gender identity can be precisely organized according to a set of categories, with heterosexuality remaining the norm (Jansen & Spijkerboer, 2011; Lewis, 2023).

Overall, medical and psychological evidence, as well as the experts interpreting these findings, can help in providing alternative explanations for an applicant’s demeanor, memory deficits, inconsistencies, and other aspects of their functioning that may inform the adjudicator's determination of credibility (Berthold, 2023). In the following part I will describe gender-based violence in migration contexts and its links to vulnerability and resilience.

Gender-based violence in migration contexts.

Gender-Based Violence (GBV), sometimes known as Sexual and Gender-based Violence (SGBV), refers to any harmful act perpetrated against a person on the basis of that person’s sex, gender, sexual orientation or gender identity. It encompasses five dimensions of violence: physical, psychological, sexual, socio-economic, and cultural harmful practices, such as threats, coercion, or denial of freedom (Freedman et al., 2022; La Cascia et al., 2020; UNICEF, 2021). Although this definition indicates that both women/girls and men/boys can be victims of gender-based violence, in accordance with Freedman et al. (2022), I will focus on gender-based violence against women and girls because statistics show that women/girls are by far the most common victims of such forms of violence worldwide.

According to Freedman et al. (2022), the relationship between GBV and migration is complex, intersectional and multi-levelled, with migration serving as both an outcome and an aggravation or triggering factor of GBV. As previously discussed, these forms of violence

in migration contexts can cause a wide range of psychopathological and psychosocial consequences, including social stigma, isolation, and psychological distress, as well as psychiatric conditions like Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Depression, Adjustment Disorders, Trauma and Stressor-related Disorders, among others. Furthermore, GBV happens at all stages of migration. First, it is present as a cause of migration, both through violence during conflicts, forcing women to escape, and through gender-related forms of persecution, such as forced and early marriage, FGM, sexual and domestic violence, for which women migrate to claim asylum (Freedman et al., 2022; La Cascia et al., 2020).

GBV during migration is associated with how the securitization of borders and tougher visa regimes enhance the insecurities of people attempting to cross them, making journeys longer, more dangerous and more expensive (Freedman, 2016; Freedman et al., 2022). Freedman et al. (2022) mention as examples: (1) studies demonstrating that women are proportionally more likely than men to die crossing borders; and (2) gendered and racialized representations of migrants, which increase violence and impacts the experiences of women and men differently, with men linked to threats of terrorism while women are considered more ‘vulnerable’, particularly if traveling alone or are pregnant. According to the authors, these representations are kinds of symbolic violence in and of themselves, as well as the creation of specific situations of repression and control.

With regards to GBV at the destination or host countries, the authors mention transactional sexual relations as a prototypical example. Transactional sex, which is frequent in refugee camps, routes, and upon arrival in host countries, has become a means of survival for migrant women and girls who receive little or no assistance from the state or other sources. The authors emphasize the need of recognizing that migrant sex workers are not simply ‘victims’ but also have agency, and for many, this may be a strategic choice within the constraints of options available to women due to their sex and immigration status. Furthermore, they contend that trafficking and migrant women’s sex work are linked to broader concerns of exploitation and violence in the labor market and employment, in which women are recruited into unskilled, low-paying and insecure jobs. Consequently, it can be seen as a consequence of state violence in that stringent enforcement of immigration law makes women increasingly vulnerable and at risk (Freedman et al., 2022).

Finally, several studies have looked at migrant's reception conditions and how they relate to women's vulnerability to GBV. Inadequate receiving conditions create insecurity for women due to lack of safe and sanitary accommodations, access to health services, and psychological support. According to authors, lack of access might be regarded as a sort of structural violence, which is not only neglect, but intentional 'slow' violence and a form of social and political control aimed at racialized and gendered persons on the move. Moreover, poor reception conditions have been associated with domestic violence. Poor reception conditions and ineffective integration policies lead to downward mobility and, as a result, loss of status with migration in destination countries, which can strain family relationships and increase the prevalence of domestic violence among migrant and refugee families. Women in these situations have limited legal or social assistance, which is partly due to how they are culturally 'othered'. Further, immigration rules and procedures are often founded on traditional family structures, thus women may continue to be dependent on husbands / partners for legal status, exposing them to risks of GBV and making it harder for them to leave their abusive spouse (Freedman, 2016; Freedman et al., 2022).

All in all, migration can both exacerbate and result from gender-based violence. GBV includes physical, psychological, sexual, cultural and socio-economic abuse, which predominantly affects women and girls. Intersections of GBV and migration occur at all stages of the process: as a driver or motivator (i.e. fleeing forced marriages or sexual violence), in transit (i.e. heightened risks of trafficking due to border securitization), and in destination countries (i.e. exploitation in the labor market). Next, I will review the topics of vulnerability and resilience related to GBV.

3.3.2.1 Vulnerability and Resiliency

To conclude this chapter, I will briefly address Cathy Holtmann (2022)'s study on immigrant women in Canada, which explains the links between GBV, vulnerability and resiliency. The author conducted qualitative research with immigrant women in the Atlantic region of Canada, describing refugee women's experiences of domestic violence and resistance, as well as how they cope with inequalities and build resiliency collectively. Holtmann argues that meaningful engagement with migrant communities is required to render public services more accessible, as opposed to the individualistic approach to gendered violence, currently

used by social actors in Canada, which increases migrant women's vulnerability through greater isolation (Freedman et al., 2022).

As previously established, migration can alter power and gender dynamics within families, and in some cases increase the incidences of domestic violence (Freedman, 2016). Many women migrate in search of better opportunities, but they also confront challenges such as poverty, discrimination, and limited access to public services as a result of intersecting structural inequalities such as gender, ethnicity, class, and immigration status. According to Holtmann (2022), immigrant women are more likely to experience family violence and are less likely to seek formal support than non-migrant women in Canada (Freedman et al., 2022), which is exacerbated by cultural influences (e.g. religion) that shape their recognition of abuse and willingness to seek help.

Vulnerability

Cathy Holtmann (2022)'s research is informed by intersectional feminist theories of gender-based violence, and vulnerability theory as conceptualized by Martha Freeman. Because of the reality of embodiment, this vulnerability theory believes that all human beings are vulnerable at different points throughout their lives. Furthermore, vulnerability and dependency are essential social realities and public duties rather than individualistic problems. Consequently, institutions (such as the family, religion, civil societies, government) are social relations that provide care for those experiencing vulnerability. Moreover, an intersectional feminist theory of family violence postulates that the underlying structural root of family violence is the use of power for coercive control. Men have better access to power due to ideological privilege and material resources (for example, they tend to be the major applicants in the Canadian immigration system). Altogether, these theories highlight how structural inequalities, shaped by policy and law, intersect with gender-based violence (GBV) making immigrant women more vulnerable.

In her research, Holtmann (2022) describes that immigrant women's vulnerability arises from the intersecting structural barriers they face, which include economic marginalization, racism, religious discrimination, and language barriers. As an example of racism and religious prejudice, the author discusses the situation of a Muslim woman from Chad, who had difficulty finding work and whose husband urged her to not wear her headscarf to the next interview. She followed his advice and got the job in a position that

marched her qualifications. Holtmann argues that these intersecting structural barriers of immigrant status, socio-economic decline (due to unemployment or work in low-skilled, low-paying jobs), racism, religious discrimination and communication difficulties limit women's access to public services and increase their vulnerabilities.

Furthermore, Holtmann adds that Canada's immigration system prioritizes skilled candidates and fosters dependency, as men frequently hold primary immigration status, reinforcing gender inequalities within families. Additionally, cultural socialization prior to immigration influences immigrant women's experiences with family violence, often resulting in silence or tolerance of abuse. Finally, their vulnerability is compounded by Canada's neoliberal individualist approach, which expects women to leave abusive relationships on their own without considering the cultural and familial contexts that shape their lives. This expectation can increase their vulnerability by cutting them off from critical social support networks, reinforcing their isolation, and diminishing their ability to access help.

Resiliency

Despite their vulnerabilities, immigrant women displayed resilience by utilizing both formal and informal social networks of care to support one another and their families. According to Holtmann (2022), collectivist values, ingrained in their ethno-religious backgrounds enable individuals to navigate structural inequalities and rebuild their lives after experiencing family violence. Their collectivist perspective, as well as their religious values and practices of care, prioritize the common good and the group's obligations to care for vulnerable individuals (particularly women and children), while also acknowledging individual dependency on the group. Thus, she argues that these networks provide care, social support, and emotional sustenance, which are frequently disregarded by public service providers in Canada who are trained in individualist interventions.

Moreover, through their cultural and religious communities, immigrant women engage in collective care practices that promote well-being and resilience. These activities aid them in coping with the challenges of immigration, isolation, and family violence. The author uses friendship networks as an example. Immigrant women who had already settled would often reach out to newcomers since they were aware of the difficulties associated with migration. They welcomed them by preparing meals, assisting with childcare, providing

information on affordable housing, and navigating the educational system. Additionally, immigrant women frequently learned about formal social support networks through friends, such as those affiliated with cultural associations or immigrant settlement agencies. Furthermore, they received critical support from friendships, cultural associations, and religious groups, and these networks helped them build resilience by providing emotional, material, and practical assistance. Examples include using social media to help fellow migrants whose work permits were about to expire in finding new jobs, as well as sharing housing or transportation across networks to help workers maximize their remittances and become more financially independent.

Finally, social networks are important in the lives of many immigrants. The author uses the example of a South American Muslim immigrant woman whose husband, a leader in the local Muslim community, physically abused her. The woman initially told another Muslim woman, who advised her to obey her husband so that the violence would stop. She eventually befriended a Canadian-born woman in her area and disclosed the assault to her. She obtained information and advice about local family violence services, before fleeing with her sons to a transition house. The author contends that ethno-religious and cultural social support networks have the potential to assist an abused immigrant women in coping with her family situation; however, if the people in them are not informed about the risks of a violent husband, the damaging effects of witnessing violence on her children, and the social supports available, they are not providing effective support. Consequently, Holtmann underlines the need for culturally competent interventions that incorporate these collectivist practices into the broader response to GBV, allowing public service providers to collaborate with immigrant leaders to address family violence in a culturally sensitive manner.

Taken together, gender-based violence (GBV), vulnerability, and resilience are all interconnected and influenced by structural inequalities and cultural contexts. GBV stems from unequal power dynamics between genders and is compounded by intersecting vulnerabilities related to immigrant status, ethnicity, class, and religion. Immigrant women are also susceptible to violence. This increased vulnerability is caused not only by gender inequality, but also by structural barriers, such as socio-economic challenges, language barriers, and discriminatory practices that impact their daily experiences in their host country. Despite these vulnerabilities, they also exhibit resilience, which in this case was fostered by

collective practices of care embedded in Canadian immigrant's cultural and religious values. Social support networks, both informal (e.g., friendships, family connections) and formal (e.g., religious or cultural organizations), were crucial in enabling immigrant women to survive and rebuild in the face of gender-based violence. These networks helped women in navigating the complexities of family violence while reinforcing their cultural and collective identities. Holtmann argued that by leveraging these networks, immigrant women can cope with violence. Consequently, a culturally competent strategy to GBV must recognize both women's vulnerabilities and resilience, ensuring that interventions are collaborative, culturally sensitive, and inclusive of the collective practices that strengthen their ability to overcome structural inequalities.

This chapter has examined the role of gender in the migration process. Gender significantly impacts all stages of the migration experience, from motivations and decision-making processes to long-term outcomes. The foundational concepts and contemporary scholarship were reviewed, revealing the complexities of gender as a dynamic and intersecting category within migration studies. Despite criticism, the application of intersectionality remains an important tool for studying migration and gender, because it offers a nuanced understanding of multiple, overlapping factors that shape the lives of migrant women and other gender identities, unveiling the unique challenges they face in terms of vulnerability, violence, and resilience.

The chapter also highlighted the importance of adopting a gender-sensitive approach when studying migration, acknowledging that societal norms, cultural expectations, and structural inequalities affect men, women, and non-binary individuals in different ways at every stage of their migration journeys. Moreover, migration plays a role in changing gender norms and the status of women, thereby promoting gender equality. Women who find a decent job abroad may gain access to financial resources, allowing them to have a greater influence in household decisions (Ferdous, 2024). The discussions on asylum, gender-based violence, and the resilience of migrant women further underscored the need for a comprehensive framework that addresses both vulnerability and resilience in migration contexts.

The intersection of gender and forced migration was also explored, demonstrating how gender significantly impacts mental health. The trauma inflicted through GBV, prior to, during, and after migration, exacerbates the psychological toll, resulting in a range of mental health issues such as PTSD, anxiety, depression, and dissociation. These effects are compounded by the difficulties in providing evidence of gender-based persecution during asylum interviews, since cultural, emotional, and psychological barriers impede women from disclosing their experiences of violence, particularly sexual abuse. Women and girls face greater risks of violence, exploitation, and structural marginalization at each stage of the migration process, from the decision to migrate, through dangerous border crossings, to life in the host country. Despite these challenges, women may demonstrate resilience by using both formal and informal social networks of care to support one another and their families.

Overall, this chapter has argued that understanding gender in migration requires an intersectionality approach that considers the interaction of social identities, power dynamics, and institutional practices. As such, gender-sensitive policies and interventions must be prioritized in order to address the specific needs of migrant women and other gender minorities, promoting not only their safety but also their agency and well-being. In conclusion, gender is not a singular factor, but rather a critical lens through which the broader processes of migration can be understood.

Chapter 4: Exploring the Intersections of Migration, Gender, and Vulnerability in Latin America

In this chapter I present a critical analysis of the intersecting vulnerabilities faced by women in Latin America. The discussion is divided into two parts. The first part provides a brief overview of contemporary regional factors that influence migrants' experiences, including socio-political and economic challenges, alongside cultural factors, such as gender norms and the increasing violence that disproportionately affect women. The second part focuses on a segment of the migratory journey from the South to the North of America, specifically examining the mental health-related vulnerabilities of migrant women through an intersectional lens. The analysis draws on the taxonomy of vulnerabilities proposed by Catriona Mackenzie and colleagues, introduced in the first chapter, and centers on the situation of women and girls, particularly Venezuelan citizens, as they cross the Panama-Colombia border through the dangerous Darién Gap.

4.1 Regional contextual factors: Socio-political, economic challenges, and gender norms in Latin America

Latin America is a wide and diverse territory that spans from Mexico in the north to Argentina in the south, including Central America and the Caribbean. It is one of the world's most heterogeneous regions, varying in terms of ethnicity, culture, socio-economic level, political, health, and social factors (Retis, 2019). Its variety of ethnic groups include indigenous, afro-descendant, mestizo, European, and Asian communities, each with their own migration history, making it difficult to establish a single term to adequately represent all Latin Americans and research the population's complex dynamics. According to Retis (2019) international migrations and displacements have traditionally had a significant effect in the composition of Latin American groups and diasporic formations. Moreover, as Latin Americans relocate around the world, they form heterogeneous groups that reproduce the diversity of their countries of origin. They establish transnational connections within their home countries and the new destinations, as well as with other Latin American diasporic groups around the world.

As a result of this diversity, there has been some debate in social research over the appropriate language for referring to people from Latin America. The terms Latino/Latina

have been used mostly in the U.S. context and have been criticized for their binary framing and gender-exclusion. Latinx, its gender-neutral equivalent, has grown in popularity as a challenge to binary gender assignment, while being critiqued as a too broad term that might mean anything and nothing, as well as being linguistically awkward and anglicized. Because of the variation within the Latino classification, it is unclear what is being measured when it is utilized in scientific research. Nonetheless, this classification has been defended for its value in helping address the consequences of racism against Latinos, as well as for sparking discussions about gender, inclusivity and the power of labels (Licea, 2020; Torres, 2018). Therefore, as there is no universally accepted way of addressing the population, for the purposes of this research, I will attempt to use an inclusive and context-specific language, such as ‘Latin American’, when referring to the overall population. Since this discussion focuses primarily on migrant women, I shall use the terms “Latina women”, “Latinas”, or refer to her country of origin whenever possible.

Furthermore, the heterogeneity of socio-economic status has motivated many people to migrate. According to Retis (2019), international migration in Latin America has been driven by economic reasons as well as violence, with groups leaving the region in search of refuge from civil wars or political violence. Also, women in Latin America face significant socio-political challenges caused by historical inequalities and contemporary crises. These issues manifest in many forms, including gender-based violence and socio-economic disparities. In this section I will briefly explore how structural inequalities and patriarchal norms exacerbate the vulnerabilities of Latin American women.

4.1.1 Socio-political and economic challenges

Latin America is a region marked by socio-political instability, which includes government corruption and political violence. Nations, regimes, corporations, and political elites have been corrupted for decades, with Venezuela serving as an extreme example. Corruption is closely tied to the smuggling of drugs, arms, migrants, and people in general, feeding upon money laundering, the financial support of trafficking cartels and criminal gangs, facilitating transnational crime (Rotberg, 2019). Moreover, political violence, defined as “the deliberate use of power and force to achieve political goals” (i.e. power, control, or policy change), includes both physical and psychological acts aimed at injuring or intimidating populations,

such as detentions, torture, and shootings (Sousa, 2013, p.1). According to Solimano (2004) Latin America has a long history of political violence, with domestic confrontations varying in intensity, ideological origins, and dynamics. He contends that throughout the second half of the twentieth century, political violence has included civil wars, guerrilla movements, military interventions, coups, terrorism, and other types of violent conflicts. Political violence is also linked to structural violence, which occurs when social institutions systematically prevent the full realization of human potential. Structural violence causes, coexists alongside, or serves as a tool in political violence, which frequently overlaps in marginalized communities where political violence exacerbates structural disparities. For example, systemic inequality or oppression causes social dissatisfaction, which might turn into political violence. Overall, individual's social and political contexts are significant because they can influence their mental health, either by protecting or affecting mental health outcomes, such as PTSD, depression and anxiety (Sousa, 2013).

Economic conditions, which deepen inequalities, are another significant contextual influence. Cruz (2022) argues that inequality and exclusion in Latin America stem from three centuries of colonial authority. During this time, foreign control of natural resources and sociopolitical dominance prevented the redistribution of economic growth through public and social programs. Since Latin America gained political independence in the nineteenth century, income, opportunities, and property have remained substantially concentrated in the hands of interest groups. Furthermore, Maria Amparo Cruz contends that neoliberal policies have facilitated the institutional modernization of Latin American societies during the last three decades, although regional economic and social growth has been uneven. While nominal poverty, as defined by the proportion of persons living below the per capita poverty line, decreased, inequality rose, and the middle class contracted. Since the early 1990s, market-oriented policies have not resulted in decent and productive jobs or eliminated gender disparities. Instead, they have limited social investments essential to improve well-being, social cohesion, and ultimately productivity.

Moreover, according to the author, social exclusion takes many forms in the region, including discrimination against girls and women, farmers who survive without support, marginalization of indigenous communities, criminalized migrants, forgotten older persons, people with disabilities whose fate is unconcerned to many, and the precarious livelihood of

unregistered workers (Cruz, 2022). The UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) recently published a report on the region's social conditions, which is experiencing structural challenges in a context of great uncertainty due to economic, environmental, technological and geopolitical shocks. The report states that the region is dealing with the results of a succession of cascading crises that have resulted in a prolonged social catastrophe, particularly in health and education, food and energy insecurity, and increasing living costs (CEPAL, 2023). This sociopolitical context has gender-specific implications; for instance, Fries (2019), in her research about migrant women in Latin America, notes how political and economic crises, as well as environmental disasters, motivate many women and girls to migrate.

Inequalities are determined by more than just income. According to ECLAC (CEPAL, 2023), the Latin American social inequality matrix consists of several structuring axes that indicate long-standing socioeconomic, gender, age, ethnic and racial inequalities, among other factors. These axes intersect and influence the exercise of fundamental rights, including the right to work under fair and fulfilling conditions. As a result, some groups or individuals face greater barriers and structural obstacles to accessing employment. Young people, Afro-descendants, indigenous peoples, migrants and people with disabilities are overrepresented in informal jobs, and there are still significant gender gaps, with women facing more marginalization. Hence, for example, Afro-descendant women in particular confront greater challenges when it comes to finding a job, and migrant women are in a more disadvantaged situation than native-born persons, working on average longer hours, more often in informal settings, and earning less (CEPAL, 2023).

Gender disparities in economic security and social vulnerability emerge early. According to UNICEF (2023)'s report on teenage girls in Latin America, more than one in every four adolescents aged 10-17 live in moderate or severe multidimensional poverty, and one in every five aged 15-19 do not have a job, education or training. Studies have found that adolescents who are not in education, employment or training are at risk for mental health problems because they are unable to meet social expectations, which leads to feelings of dissatisfaction with life. Additionally, when economic difficulties force young people to work, they endure stress from the need to provide for their families (Sánchez-Castro et al., 2024).

Furthermore, adolescents are highly sensitive to their social, economic, and cultural contexts. In a scoping review of adolescents' mental health in Latin America and the Caribbean, Sánchez-Castro et al. (2024) reported that social inequality, where intersecting inequalities produce discrimination and determine conditions for social vulnerability (e.g. poverty), is associated with impaired well-being and mental ill health, as well as lack of access to mental health care. Social inequality was characterized as the result of the interaction of social categories that shape the social environment, including ethnicity/race, migration, gender, and class. In general, social inequality has a negative impact on adolescents' mental health. The authors found a link between social inequality and the prevalence of mental illness, based on the understanding that socioeconomic adversity and discrimination raise concerns and stressors that negatively impact well-being, acting as significant risk factors for the onset of mental disorders, primarily depression and anxiety. Likewise, a relation between social inequality and discrimination and antisocial behavior (e.g. physical fighting, vandalism, stealing, disobedience, etc.); as well as PTSD and social inequality, the latter particularly among street adolescents who have been exposed to highly distressing and traumatic events such as violence or natural disasters.

Moreover, adolescents who were exposed to social inequality, which included critically unfavorable conditions such as armed conflicts, extreme poverty, or gender-based violence, were at a greater risk of developing adverse mental health outcomes and PTSD. Finally, social inequality and discrimination were associated with suicidal behavior, which included deliberate self-harm, suicidal ideation, attempted suicide, and completed suicide. Sánchez-Castro et al. (2024) argue that this can be explained in that during adolescence, the influence of socioeconomic contexts can potentially contribute to inadequate emotional regulation and ineffective coping with stressful situations, such as those resulting from social inequality and discrimination, and that these factors may be associated with suicide (Herrera et al., 2006; Sánchez-Castro et al., 2024).

4.1.2 Gendered social norms and violence

Latin America is among the most unequal regions in the world. Social inequality is a multifaceted issue. The previously described socioeconomic issues (poverty, unemployment, and education levels) and political factors (instability, corruption and political violence) are

inextricably related to cultural aspects, such as social norms and violence. Economic and political transitions are frequently accompanied by violence and criminality, which shape people's socioeconomic situations and, in many cases, drive migration (Sánchez-Castro et al., 2024). According to Feldmann et al. (2019), violence across the region is changing typical migration patterns. The public crisis in Mesoamerica is alarming, and the already large flow of economic migrants attempting to reach safe destinations, particularly the United States, has been widened by thousands of forcibly displaced people fleeing their communities due to increased insecurity. Moreover, socioeconomic and political factors influence social norms and the incidence of violence within communities. Social norms are collective expectations of appropriate behaviors that are formed from context and society. Harmful social norms perpetuate and tolerate sexual violence and other forms of GBV against women and girls, particularly in low-resource and complex humanitarian settings (Perrin et al., 2019).

Traditional gender roles in Latin America are based on patriarchal norms and values that privilege men and limit women's power. As an example, Irma Arriagada (2014) studied differences and inequalities in Latin American families. In her analysis of the asymmetries that exist among family members in terms of power, resources, and negotiating capacity, she argues that the utmost power is generally associated with the person who generates the family's monetary income, or the person who cultural norms expect to do so - usually the male head of household. Furthermore, the twentieth-century patriarchal family distinguishes between the public and private realms, with men and women performing distinctly different roles. The man is responsible for establishing a family, based on evident structural relationships of authority and affection toward his wife and children, which are legitimized in the outside world and allow him to provide for, protect, and guide his family. The woman, on the other hand, is expected to serve as a complement and collaborate with her husband/father.

Moreover, the author contends that family formations were profoundly influenced by the patriarchal Spanish colonial legacy, as well as a population model of informal couple formation that implied extramarital births and a socially acceptable practice of male sexual predation (Therborn, 2007, as cited in Arriagada, 2014). The gender system in urban mestizo societies valued the division of public and domestic domains, control over female sexuality, the concept of family honor, recognition by other males, and fatherhood as a means of

asserting masculinity. Historically, class and ethnic differences enhanced control over women's sexuality, allowing men to have relationships with women from different social groups using different rationales and moral codes (Arriagada, 2014).

Gendered societal norms significantly impact women in the region, limiting their ability to achieve economic independence. Economic crises disproportionately affect Latin American women, who face wage disparities, increased domestic labor, unemployment, and informal employment. According to CEPAL (2023), while women's labor force participation has increased by 4.3 percentage points since 2020, the gender gap remains wide. In 2022, one in two women did not participate in the labor force, compared to one in every four men. Moreover, Campaña et al. (2018)'s study on the gendered distribution of total work found that women in Mexico, Peru and Ecuador spend more time on unpaid domestic work than men, which correlates with lower levels of well-being. They also found that countries with more egalitarian gender norms had less variations in total work.

Similarly, Cruz (2022) discusses how gendered social norms in Peru discriminate against girls and women. According to the author, Peru, like many other Latin American countries, has patriarchal structures that prevent women from fully participating in the labor market and achieving gender equity. The study of Vaccaro et al. (2022), analyzed the evolution of the Peruvian gender wage gap over 2007-2018. They discovered that an unexplained gender gap in favor of men has remained stable over the period of analysis. They determined that structural barriers, namely social norms, gender stereotyping, and discrimination, prevent equal pay for equal work. In addition, the unexplained gender gap was more prevalent among the poorest women, who are typically less educated and employed as unregistered workers, demonstrating the intersection of gender and class. Likewise, Cruz et al. (2021) investigated the labor income gap in Peru through engagement of older workers in the labor market. They concluded that institutional patterns and value systems sustain female discrimination in the workforce and during old age. The income gender disparity was also greater among low-income and rural women. These findings extend the results of Vaccaro and colleagues, and demonstrate how age, gender, race and class inequalities interact to marginalize women in this context (Cruz, 2022; Cruz et al., 2021; Vaccaro et al., 2022).

Furthermore, social inequality in Latin America is strongly linked to gender-based violence. Cultural norms that value male dominance and authority over women contribute to

high rates of violence against women and girls. This can be witnessed for example, in patrimonial (property) violence (Ludemir, 2023), as well as the region's growing rates of femicide (Cruz, 2022; Mercado & Veeniza, 2022; Montiel & Martin, 2023). Moreover, violence is linked to migration in a variety of ways; for instance, it contributes to LGBTQI+'s and women's decisions to migrate, and it poses and added risk to migrant women and transsexual people during their journeys and in the host or transit countries (Cabieses et al., 2023; Calderón-Jaramillo et al., 2020; Fries, 2019; Mercado & Veeniza, 2022; Ramage et al., 2023). In the next section, I will go into greater detail about the relationship between gender and violence in migration.

Gender norms and mental health

Patriarchal norms and values also shape people's attitudes about mental health. Mascayano et al. (2016) investigated stigma toward mental illness in Latin America and the Caribbean. They argue that, despite the heterogeneity of the Latin American population, Latinos share cultural characteristics and values such as '*familismo*', '*compadrazgo*', '*machismo*', and '*dignidad y respeto*'. The notion of '*familismo*' involves (1) family obligations—providing material and emotional support to the family; (2) support from family—the expectation that family members should support and help one another; and (3) family as reference—the expectation that important decisions are made in the best interests of the entire family unit. The term '*machismo*' refers to a patriarchal social structure in which the man is the primary protector and provider for his family, while the woman is expected to become a “holy and pure” mother dedicated to caring for her husband, children and family (p.74). The authors believe that this value is related with the reproduction of authoritarian interactions between genders in many Latin American communities. Further, '*compadrazgo*' is a “formal friendliness” that emphasizes warm, close, and caring relationships, even in professional settings, which are strengthened only when people can offer and reciprocate favors. Finally, '*dignidad y respeto*' is a value that emphasizes the intrinsic worth of all people while also encouraging equality, empathy and connection in one's relationships. This value was related with a hierarchy of obedience in which elders and parents are granted the highest value, merit, and respect than youngsters. According to the authors, '*dignidad y respeto*' is also moderated by '*machismo*', which allows men to command more dignity and respect than women.

Regarding their interpretation of stigma, some values were deemed protective factors while others exacerbated the problem. For instance, attitudes of compassion and benevolence, related to the cultural orientations of '*compadrazgo*' and '*dignidad y respeto*', have been connected to social capital within Hispanic communities, which may serve as a protective factor. On the other side, several of the reviewed studies related to gender issues, specifically '*machismo*' and '*dignidad y respeto*', which favored men. According to the authors, many Latin American societies are traditional and influenced by the legacy of colonialism and Christianity, which established an active and authoritarian role for men (i.e., provider and protector) and passive and secondary roles for women (i.e., devoted to household chores and duties). As a result, women are more likely to be stigmatized if they lose their capacity to fulfill family roles and tasks, whereas men may conceal their psychiatric diagnosis and refuse to receive mental health care in order to maintain their status (Mascayano et al., 2016).

Some academics have studied the significance of patriarchal norms, gender and their associations with mental health, particularly among adolescents and girls. Sánchez-Castro et al. (2024) reported that patriarchal standards affected female adolescents' communication and expression of feelings, particularly in terms of sexuality, leading to feelings of inferiority among young women. In this regard, the intersection of gender and socioeconomic status was reflected, with women at schools with poorer social conditions having lower self-esteem and stronger feelings of anxiety and sadness. Socially vulnerable families in the region were more likely to have experienced family conflicts and tensions, intrafamilial violence, illnesses, single-parent families, large families, and unemployment, all of which were viewed as stressful situations that harmed adolescents' mental health and quality of life. Furthermore, Herrera et al. (2006)'s research on the socioeconomic and political determinants of suicide in adolescent females in Nicaragua, showed that, in addition to poverty and family dysfunction, suicidal behavior was linked to turbulent political situations, traditional patriarchal norms, and the weakening of religious institutions (Herrera et al., 2006; Sánchez-Castro et al., 2024). Finally, Koenig et al. (2021) conducted a cross-sectional, cross-cultural study on unequal gender norms and depression among adolescents aged 10 to 14 in disadvantaged areas across several countries, including Ecuador. They found that unequal

gender norm perceptions were associated with poor mental health in both sexes, with girls reporting more depressive symptoms than boys.

Taken together, social, economic, political, and cultural elements are part of the macrosystem that influence an individual's development and overall well-being. This section has provided an overview of the regional contextual factors that impact Latin American migration particularly for women. The intersection of socio-political instability, inequality, and ingrained patriarchal norms across the region exacerbates the risks they face, by limiting women's power, access to resources, and promoting violence, often forcing migration as a survival strategy. Corruption, political violence, and exclusion, entrenched in colonial legacies, have resulted in deeply unequal societies in which women, particularly those from marginalized communities, bear the weight of social and economic crises. The persistence of gender-based violence and unequal gender norms further heighten women's and girls' insecurity and mental health challenges, ranging from diminishing their sense of self to experiencing anxiety, depression or suicidal behavior, as they negotiate in their environments marked by systemic inequalities. As CEPAL (2023) points out, structural inequalities are one of the most pressing concerns for the region's sustainable development, which requires tackling gender inequalities and achieving women's autonomy in order to overcome them and progress towards social justice.

In the next section, I will explore how these contextual factors relate to the migratory journeys of Venezuelan migrant women, with a focus on their mental health. By examining their experiences, we will gain insight into the unique risks faced by Latin American migrant women, furthering our understanding of gendered migration in Latin America.

4.2 The journey from the South to the North: Venezuelan migrant women and mental health-related vulnerabilities

In this section, I introduce part of the journey from South to North America by examining the experiences of Venezuelan migrant women, particularly the mental health challenges they confront. To understand the context that drives women to forced migration, I will first provide a brief overview of the Venezuelan humanitarian crisis. Then I will explore how the stress of displacement, exposure to violence, sexual abuse, and exploitation, among other factors, impact women's mental health. Finally, I will conclude by analyzing the situation of

crossing the dangerous Darién Gap via an intersectional lens, focusing on how it shapes the experiences of women and girls by exposing them to risks that make them more vulnerable and have an impact on their mental health.

4.2.1 Context of Venezuelan migration

According to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, 2023), more than 7 million people have left Venezuela since 2015, with nearly 6 million moving to Latin American and Caribbean countries, making it the world's largest migratory flow alongside that of Syria. The mass movement of Venezuelan citizens may be considered a case of survival migration, a pattern that is characterized by people escaping from violations of fundamental rights safeguarding their life and well-being (Feldmann et al., 2019; Retis, 2019).

According to Freier & Jara (2020), in spite of its complexities, the Venezuelan State's crisis can be portrayed as the inability to meet its citizens' basic needs in the areas that are critical for the functioning of a State, such as the preservation of life, freedom, and personal security. By preservation of life, the authors refer to the shortage of food, medicines, supplies, and an overall poor state of the health-care system. Malnutrition has reached the level of a humanitarian disaster in several parts of the country, with some children suffering major physical and mental deficiencies, increasing their risk of illness in adulthood. The situation of hunger and socioeconomic disparity in early childhood is particularly relevant and concerning since it is a sensitive period during which much of the brain development occurs, and the developing brain may be particularly vulnerable to experience. As reported by Noble & Giebler (2020), socioeconomic disadvantages impact brain structure and function, notably in circuits that support language, memory, executive functioning, and emotion processing. Furthermore, the lack of medicines and medical equipment makes it difficult to diagnose and treat patients. This situation is exacerbated by problems with water and electricity supplies, which have resulted in the deaths of many individuals.

In addition to serious deficiencies, personal freedom is affected as a result of intimidation and political persecution. The Organization of American States (Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, 2017, 2023) has documented arbitrary detentions and disproportionate use of violence by law enforcement, including cases of physical and

psychological abuse. Finally, there is a lack of security, as evidenced by the increase in homicides, thefts, and overall crime. The situation of insecurity particularly affects children, adolescents, and women. According to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, 2017), Venezuela is one of the three Latin American countries with the highest number of child and adolescent homicides, and the number of femicides has increased in recent years (Freier & Jara, 2020).

In this context of political instability, economic crisis, and serious human rights violations, millions of Venezuelans have been compelled to migrate, shaping one of the most significant migratory crises in the recent history of Latin America. Venezuelan women, often with their children, are particularly at high risk, facing continuous human right violations, especially gender-based violence, during their migratory journey. Since 2015, over 7 million people have left Venezuela, making this one of the largest global migratory movements. The root causes of this exodus lie in the Venezuelan state's inability to meet the basic needs, such as food, medicine, and healthcare, leading to widespread malnutrition and preventable deaths. Additionally, political repression, including arbitrary detentions and excessive use of force by law enforcement, severely undermines personal freedoms. High insecurity, in the form of increasing crime rates, homicides, and femicides, further contribute to the precarious situation, disproportionately affecting women, children, and adolescents.

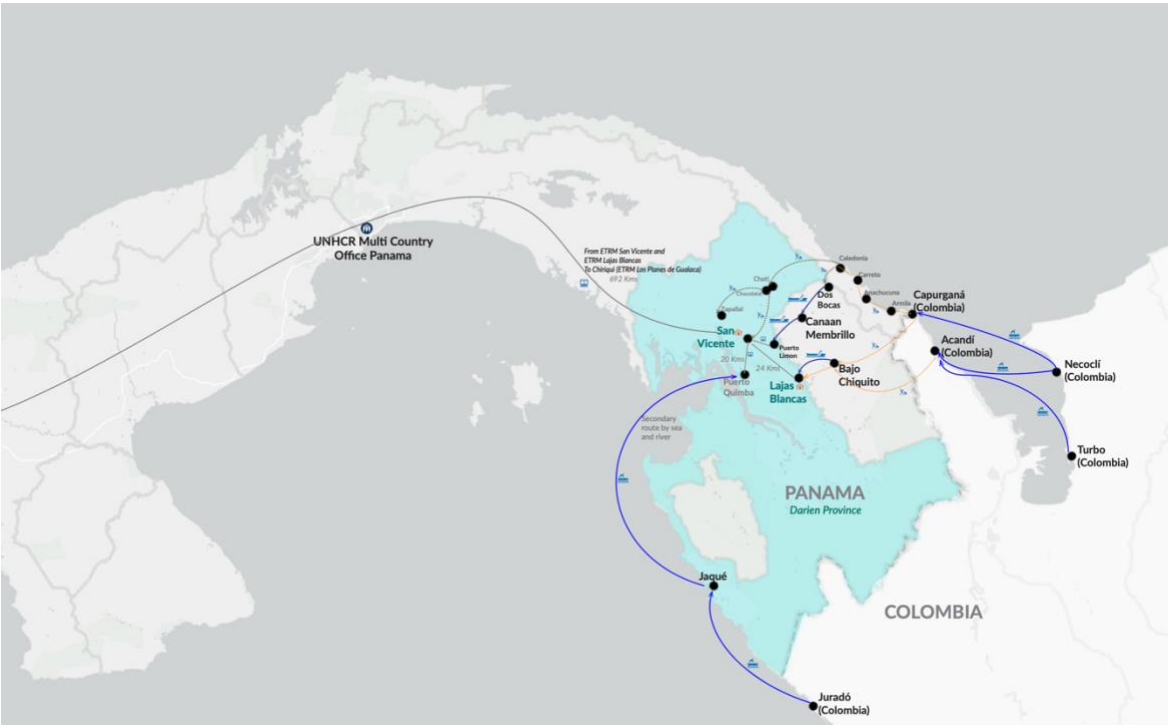
The following section will explore the specific challenges faced by Venezuelan women on their migratory journey, particularly as they cross the Panama-Colombia border. It is crucial to highlight that many are forced to migrate irregularly, often undocumented, since it might be their only option. Irregular migration is due to a lack of resources and documentation, exacerbated by the severe economic crisis and restrictive migration policies in neighboring countries, such as visa requirements. This context highlights the additional risks faced by Venezuelan women as they navigate a migration system that makes them vulnerable to violence, exploitation, and further marginalization.

4.2.2 The dangerous journey: the Darién Gap

The Darién Gap, which separates Colombia and Panama, is one of the world's most perilous migratory routes. It is the only terrestrial route between South and Central America, spanning more than 60 miles of dense rainforest, steep mountains and swamplands. There are no roads,

only a remote trek in which migrants walk for up to 12 hours each day in oppressive humidity, temperatures ranging from 20 to 35 degrees Celsius, and heavy rainfall and flooding from May to December. During their journey, migrants encounter steep and slippery terrain, overflowing rivers, insects, and dangerous wildlife. Despite its dangers, it has become one of the most important migration pathways for immigrants heading to North America, particularly the U.S.-Mexico border. According to data from Panama’s National Migration Service, more than 500,000 people crossed the border irregularly in 2023, with 134,646 women, 52,820 girls, 60,360 boys, and 272,259 men. This represented a considerable increase in the number of migrants from 2022, when approximately 250,000 crossed the border, with more than 150,000 coming from Venezuela (Humans Rights Watch, 2024; Obinna, 2024).

Figure 1. Map of the Darién Gap.



Source: Compiled from UNHCR map routes. Mixed movements through Darien, Panama – May 2023. <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/100506>

Most immigrants begin their journeys across the Darién Gap by boat from Necoclí or Turbo to the Colombian coastal towns of Capurganá or Acandí, located closest to the Panamanian border. Migrants from Venezuela typically travel through Colombia to the

Darién Gap, which frequently includes an 8-hour bus ride from Medellín. After spending a few hours or overnight in shelters in Acandí or Capurganá, migrants begin their days-long journey through the jungle. According to Obinna (2024), the northern trek is determined by the immigrants' socioeconomic position. Those who can afford it can pay up to 450 dollars to take a boat from Capurganá to Carreto (Panama) and then walk through the jungle for roughly two and a half days before exiting the Darién at Canáan Membrillo or Bajo Chiquito, two small indigenous villages in Panama. In addition to tolls for passage, costs include extortion payments charged by gangs and communities to migrants passing through their territories (Humans Rights Watch, 2024; Obinna, 2024).

Moreover, migrants are regularly subjected to robbery and other forms of abuse, including sexual violence. They also confront health and climate challenges, such as humidity which exacerbates thirst, hunger and dehydration, as well as rainfall, which can create landslides and flooding in the steep terrain during the rainy season, resulting in accidents and sometimes death. The rainy season also increases the amount of snakes and mosquitoes that spread diseases like malaria and dengue fever (Obinna, 2024). Furthermore, children are especially vulnerable to poor health and human rights violations, particularly those traveling unaccompanied, who frequently lack documentation to authenticate their identity, exposing them to abuse and ill health. In addition, the temporary accommodation facilities where migrant families often stay are overcrowded and inadequate for children (Naranjo et al., 2023).

Most migrants have been on the road for months before arriving at Bajo Chiquito, part of Panama's indigenous area. They arrive exhausted after several days of walking in the jungle, with significant foot wounds, insect bites and stings, trauma from falls, and diarrhea and vomiting from drinking river water. Furthermore, there is little infrastructure in place. The Panamanian authorities have set up a garrison to process immigrants as they arrive, separating them based on their nationality or country of origin. After processing, most migrants spend one night in Bajo Chiquito before continuing their journey to the north, with the exception of the rainy season, when the only way to transfer migrants is via boat with limited capacity, in which case they stay longer (Obinna, 2024).

Finally, because of the agreement with Costa Rica, migrants can only take approved buses with government-set contracts and prices when passing through Panama. Those who

cannot afford the bus fee begin walking up the highway. In order to prevent human trafficking, Panama has made it illegal for private citizens to transport migrants. Upon reaching the Costa Rican border, those with money board the bus to continue their journey, while those without are stranded until they can acquire funds. The trek continues across Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala and Mexico, exposing migrants to additional risks and dangers in hostile countries (Obinna, 2024).

All in all, the Darién gap, a treacherous stretch of jungle between Colombia and Panama, represents one of the most perilous migration routes in the world. Despite its extreme dangers—including harsh weather, difficult terrain, and the threat of robbery and violence, particularly sexual assault—hundreds of thousands of migrants continue to cross it in hopes of reaching North America. In 2023 alone, over 500,000 people traversed the border, a significant increase from previous years, with Venezuelans making up a large portion of this flow. Moreover, economic resources determine the difference between enduring days or even weeks of walking through dangerous jungle conditions or shorter treks. However, the journey remains dangerous for all, exacerbated by the extortion payments to gangs and local communities, and the physical toll, particularly on women, children, and unaccompanied minors, who more frequently face exploitation and other human rights abuses. Overcrowded shelters and a lack of proper medical care further intensify these risks.

Upon reaching Panama, migrants are processed by authorities in the indigenous region of Bajo Chiquito, but infrastructure and services remain limited, and many remain stranded for extended periods, particularly during the rainy season when travel is restricted. As migrants continue toward the U.S.-Mexico border, they face increasing risks, including exploitation, violence, and extortion in the countries they pass through. The combination of physical, economic, and legal barriers exposes them to continuous threats to their safety, health, and basic human rights, creating a dangerous journey with long-lasting impacts on their mental health and overall well-being. In the following section these links will be further discussed.

4.2.3 Analyzing mental health-related vulnerabilities from an intersectionality perspective

There are a few considerations to keep in mind as a premise. As was already established, Latin America and its countries are heterogeneous with complex dynamics that influence individuals' development and mental health. It is acknowledged that consolidating citizens into a single category - in this case Venezuelan migrant women - may oversimplify matters considering individual and cultural processes. In an effort to fulfill the goals of this study, the analysis that follows is limited in that it is unable to convey this diversity because it does not attend single testimonies and, consequently, does not take into account individual characteristics that influence women's identities and mental health. Additionally, it is important to recognize the complexity of mental health, the fact that it is a dynamic continuum, and that outcomes are typically determined by a confluence of variables across time and space. Nevertheless, gaining a general overview of the issue remains valuable as it helps in understanding the potential factors that may impact women's mental health and provides the fundamental information required to enhance public policies and interventions. Moreover, it offers an opportunity to advance the field's research by examining particular traits in future studies.

4.2.3.1 Migration and Mental Health: Mackenzie et al.'s Taxonomy of vulnerabilities

Through a conceptual analysis, I have examined in this research the broad and multifaceted concept of vulnerability, emphasizing its significance in shaping the experiences of migrants. Vulnerability is often employed without precise definitions, leading to narratives that can inadvertently reinforce paternalistic, disempowering, and stigmatizing perspectives. This notion holds particular relevance in the context of Latin American and Caribbean countries, where contemporary migration trends, especially considering the situation of Venezuela, reveal how converging environmental, social, political, economic, and cultural factors have compelled millions to migrate irregularly. This irregular migration, as exemplified by the perilous crossing of the Darién Gap, exposes migrants to a range of serious risks, underscoring the urgent need to critically examine and address the vulnerabilities they face.

To grasp the complexities of vulnerability in migration contexts, this section presents an intersectional analysis of the multiple overlapping forms of disadvantage that shape the experiences of Venezuelan migrant women as they traverse the Darién Gap, contributing to their mental health-related vulnerabilities. Intersectionality, as a theoretical framework, has been applied in previous research to examine the situation of migrant women in Latin America (Bonilla Valencia, 2023; Cabieses et al., 2023; Obinna, 2023). Its value lies in acknowledging the diversity of human experiences by contemplating the intersecting dimensions of migration, gender, ethnicity, and social class (Sánchez-Castro et al., 2024). In conducting this analysis, I will draw on Mackenzie and colleagues' taxonomy of vulnerability, which distinguishes between inherent, situational, and pathogenic vulnerabilities. Although inherent and situational vulnerabilities are not entirely distinct and often intersect (e.g., inherent traits may be influenced by environmental factors and increase susceptibility to situational vulnerabilities), for gaining a clear overview of the subject, I will separate the sources into different categories.

Inherent vulnerability.

Inherent vulnerabilities are rooted in the fundamental aspects of the human condition—our physiological needs, our reliance on others, and our emotional and social tendencies. These vulnerabilities are linked to characteristics such as age, race, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and mental health status, which determine how individuals navigate the phases of migration (Flamand et al., 2023; Mackenzie, 2014; Mackenzie et al., 2014). For Venezuelan migrant women crossing the Darién Gap, these inherent factors contribute to specific vulnerabilities that heighten their risk of adverse psychological outcomes.

For instance, pregnant women face significant challenges during migration due to their need for adequate prenatal care, which is often unavailable during their journey. Research shows that undocumented migrant pregnant women typically experience lower rates of antenatal care, compounded by elevated levels of stress and anxiety related to the precarious conditions and uncertainty. These factors contribute to increased risk of maternal and neonatal complications, alongside mental health disorders such as trauma and prenatal depression (Atak et al., 2023; Bains et al., 2021; Eick et al., 2023; Fair et al., 2020; Garnica-Rosas et al., 2021; Iliadou et al., 2019). Long-term consequences may also emerge, with some studies suggesting links between prenatal stress and the development of psychiatric

disease in offspring (Zhang et al., 2023). Furthermore, Venezuelan migrant women encounter significant barriers to healthcare access, both during transit and in hosting countries, exacerbated by discrimination, limited knowledge of available services, and hostile treatment from healthcare providers, leaving them more vulnerable to pregnancy-related complications. The intersecting factors—gender, ethnicity, and migration status—intensify their exposure to harm.

Another inherent source of vulnerability arises from family ruptures, which is a common experience among Venezuelan women due to the widespread migration over recent years. Many women have been forced to leave behind children or other family members in Venezuela in search of economic opportunities abroad, while others travel with their children under extremely challenging conditions. Rivera et al. (2023) highlight how these separations disrupt familial bonds, leading to feelings of grief and loss that can have profound psychological effects. Migratory grief, as a result of significant material and interpersonal losses, has been linked to psychological distress, manifesting in mental health conditions such as persistent grief disorder, depression, anxiety, or post-traumatic stress disorder (Renner et al., 2024). For women, particularly within Latin American patriarchal societies that place familial caregiving roles upon them, the inability to care for their children due to migration adds another layer of psychological strain. The emotional burden of these losses, combined with the demands of the migratory journey, deepens their inherent vulnerability.

In summary, inherent vulnerabilities stem from basic human conditions and characteristics, such as pregnancy, disability, or psychological factors like the stress of displacement and family separation. For Venezuelan migrant women, these factors intersect with social determinants like gender, class, and ethnicity creating compounded risks to their mental health. These dynamics illustrate the relational dynamic within migration, and how the human condition, combined with systemic inequalities, contributes to heightened mental health vulnerabilities, which may manifest in acute stress, anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder, due to the traumatic nature of their experiences.

Situational vulnerability.

Situational vulnerability arises from context-specific personal, social, political, economic, or environmental circumstances that individuals or groups encounter, which can be temporary, intermittent or enduring (Mackenzie, 2014; Mackenzie et al., 2014). In the context of

Venezuelan migrant women crossing the Darién Gap, situational vulnerability is shaped by complex social, political and economic factors surrounding their migration. These factors are not static, they relate to present or past experiences, and fluctuate based on context, highlighting the relevance of both dimensions of time and space in understanding vulnerability (Flamand et al., 2023).

One significant aspect of situational enduring vulnerability is the exposure of Venezuelan migrant women to gender-based violence (GBV), a form of violence that persists throughout their journey. Employing the concept of the “continuum of violence” developed by Liz Kelly (1988) and Cynthia Cockburn (2004), helps to see how violence extends across both private and public spheres, manifesting as a persistent reality that is normalized by social structures, manifesting in everyday practices of domination and control (e.g., harassment). In the context of displacement, this continuum reflects the interconnectedness of violence at various stages of the migration process, exacerbating the vulnerabilities of women (Obinna, 2023; Rubini et al., 2024).

Many Venezuelan women are forced to migrate due to the economic collapse, political instability, and violence in the country, often without legal documentation, which exposes them to greater risks of abuse and exploitation. As they traverse the Darien Gap, they encounter multiple forms of violence from multiple actors such as smugglers, armed groups, and other migrants. Obinna (2023) identifies three interrelated forms of GBV in Venezuelan migration: interpersonal violence, perpetrated by individuals or small groups (e.g., smugglers, armed groups, other migrants); structural violence, resulting from socio-political systems that create the conditions where interpersonal violence occur (e.g., in the absence of state protection to punish GBV); and symbolic violence, reinforced by societal stereotypes that stigmatize migrant women as ‘sexualized’ beings.

The isolated nature of the Panama-Colombia border region exacerbates these risks, providing a fertile ground for unchecked violence against women. For instance, smugglers may exploit women by demanding sexual favors in exchange for passage, while armed groups like ‘*El Clan del Golfo*’ (Gulf Clan) assert control over the territory, using sexual violence as a method of dominance. Additionally, many women are coerced into survival sex, forced to trade their bodies for basic necessities such as food or safe passage. Refusal to comply often leads to physical punishment or abandonment in dangerous areas. These forms

of violence are deeply related to patriarchal norms that reduce women to objects of male control, especially in lawless spaces where their rights are unprotected. Furthermore, the violence does not end at the border; it continues upon reaching their destination, where migrant Venezuelan women experience exclusion from legal protections, healthcare, and employment opportunities, further compounding their vulnerability.

The situational vulnerabilities of Venezuelan women in this context are rooted in the specific conditions of their migratory journey, where violence is normalized and perpetuated by broader social and structural inequalities. The continuum of violence helps to illustrate how patriarchal structures and power imbalances create opportunities for exploitation. Gender, combined with migration status, places these women at the bottom of the social hierarchy, making them more vulnerable to gender-specific forms of violence that leaves profound psychological wounds. Research links repeated exposure to GBV at borders to mental health issues such as PTSD, anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation, as well as feelings of isolation, fear, shame, and despair (Cabieses et al., 2023; Obinna, 2023; Ramage et al., 2023).

In conclusion, Venezuelan migrant women crossing the Darien Gap are vulnerable to situational, gender-based violence, which is part of an ongoing and multi-layered process of the continuum of violence. This enduring vulnerability transcends the immediate moments of crisis embedded in their migration experiences and reflects the larger structural inequalities related to the intersections of gender, migration, and socio-economic status. Their irregular status and lack of access to resources further exacerbate their inability to challenge acts of GBV, resulting in deepened mental health vulnerabilities and limited access to justice and support services.

Pathogenic vulnerability.

Pathogenic vulnerability, a subset of situational vulnerability, arises when social structures or policies that are intended to mitigate vulnerability instead exacerbate it, impairing autonomy and increasing feelings of powerlessness. In migration contexts, this type of vulnerability is often associated with political persecution, violence, and human rights violations, which contribute to the worsening of migrants' conditions. This form of vulnerability reflects a failure in systems that are meant to protect individuals but instead intensify their suffering (Mackenzie, 2014; Mackenzie et al., 2014).

In the case of Venezuelan migrant women crossing the Darien Gap, pathogenic vulnerability is closely tied to restrictive migration policies and government inaction. As Palumbo (2023) notes, it is impossible to fully grasp intersectional vulnerabilities faced by migrant women without acknowledging the impacts of restrictive and selective migration policies, inadequate reception centers, and the gendered and racialized models incorporated into the assistance measures. Although a detailed exploration of these intersections is beyond the scope of this research, it is critical to recognize how such structural mechanisms amplify migrant women's vulnerabilities.

For Venezuelan women traversing the Darien Gap, pathogenic vulnerability manifests in various ways. The absence of governmental oversight and the presence of armed groups in this remote area result in pervasive human rights abuses, including gender-based violence (GBV). Studies show that the phenomena of trafficking and smuggling, closely linked to structural factors, such as poverty and lack of education (Cabieses et al., 2023), are widespread in this area. The marginalization and neglect of local communities along the migration route, who lack access to basic public services (i.e. water, sanitation and healthcare), has contributed to the exploitation of migrants by these same communities, creating a cycle of structural violence that compounds migrant women's vulnerabilities. The lack of safe migration routes and inadequate state protection further exposes them to life-threatening dangers, reinforcing the continuum of violence they experience.

International organizations, including Humans Rights Watch (2024), have documented the failures of Panamanian and Colombian authorities in protecting migrants and addressing the abuses they suffer, particularly in relation to sexual violence. The lack of effective reporting mechanisms, combined with cultural, linguistic, and systemic barriers, allow perpetrators to evade accountability. For instance, male persecutors and strong cultural norms of '*machismo*' discourage women from reporting sexual violence (i.e., not talking to women, normalizing GBV, or women feeling uncomfortable disclosing abuse information with men). Furthermore, linguistic challenges arise when Indigenous translators are unavailable, and fear of retaliation prevents many women from speaking out, as they encounter their abusers in the same communities after crossing the border. Consequently, crimes against migrants, particularly sexual violence targeting women, often remain uninvestigated and unpunished.

As has been illustrated, a strategy to protect migrants, namely reception centers to process them, is ineffective. The inadequacies of migrant reception centers, intended to provide support, can exacerbate pathogenic vulnerability. Women are retraumatized when they encounter the same perpetrators responsible for their abuse, reinforcing their sense of helplessness. Additionally, the intersection of gender, migration status, and nationality contributes to their marginalization, as Venezuelan women are often stereotyped as hypersexualized and disregarded due to cultural machismo. Upon surviving the distressing journey through the Darien Gap, many women continue to face exclusion from legal protection and mental health services, further entrenching their vulnerability to GBV and leading to long-lasting psychological consequences, such as complex PTSD.

In summary, restrictive migration policies and governmental inaction in the region function as forms of structural violence, contributing to the pathogenic vulnerabilities faced by Venezuelan migrant women. Policies like Panama's 'controlled flow' strategy (also called 'humanitarian flow'), which prioritizes moving migrants as quickly as possible to Costa Rica over considering migrants needs and rights for asylum, fail to protect them and actively perpetuate their vulnerability. The resulting uncertainty for their future, in combination with the legal limbo, contributes to chronic stress and further deepen the psychological impact on these women. When states neglect their responsibility to provide adequate protections and humanitarian aid, they reinforce a cycle of structural violence that exacerbates migrant women's mental health vulnerabilities.

4.2.3.2 Summary: Vulnerability and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Taken together, inherent, situational, and pathogenic vulnerabilities intersect and compound the mental health challenges faced by Venezuelan migrant women crossing the Darien Gap. Inherent vulnerabilities, such as gender, age, and physical conditions, expose women to heightened risks during migration, as seen in cases of pregnant women or those experiencing family separation. These inherent factors, deeply tied to human conditions, interact with the hostile environment of irregular migration, where harsh terrain, physical exhaustion, and psychological stress amplify their mental health vulnerability.

Situational vulnerabilities are context-dependent and shaped by the specific socio-political, economic, and environmental circumstances of the migration journey. Venezuelan migrant women are particularly vulnerable to gender-based violence (GBV) during their journey through the Darien Gap, as the continuum of violence spans throughout the different phases of the migration process. The power imbalances inherent in this context, combined with their irregular migration status, further exacerbate their exposure to exploitation and abuse, leading to profound psychological consequences such as depression, anxiety, and complex post-traumatic stress disorder (CPTSD).

Pathogenic vulnerabilities emerge when the very structures designed to mitigate harm, such as migration policies and protective systems, instead intensify the vulnerability of migrant women. Restrictive migration policies, governmental inaction, and inadequate reception centers not only fail to protect women but also perpetuate cycles of violence and exploitation. In addition, the legal limbo these women face contributes to chronic stress, while structural violence engrains their marginalization, leaving them excluded from essential legal protections and mental health services.

Mackenzie et al.'s taxonomy effectively shows the interplay between various forms of vulnerability, highlighting the complex ways in which gender, migration status, economic precarity, ethnicity, and socio-political structures intersect to shape the mental health outcomes of Venezuelan migrant women. This research has underscored that trauma, while a significant contributor to mental health disorders, also fosters resilience in many cases. Therefore, any comprehensive and intersectional approach to addressing these women's experiences must go beyond addressing immediate mental health needs; it must also confront the broader structural inequalities that exacerbate their distress. By examining how inherent characteristics, situational factors, and pathogenic vulnerabilities create a continuum of mental health challenges, we can better understand a pathway to promoting autonomy and long-term well-being for migrant women. Ultimately, such an approach seeks to not only reduce harm but also empower migrant women to rebuild their lives with dignity and resilience.

Applying Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory.

In this chapter, I have critically examined the complex and multifaceted vulnerabilities experienced by migrant women in Latin America, focusing particularly on Venezuelan women crossing the Darién Gap. By employing an intersectional framework and drawing on Mackenzie et al.'s taxonomy of vulnerabilities, I have attempted to demonstrate how gender, nationality, socio-economic status, and various contextual factors intersect to shape the physical and mental health risks these women endure. To conclude this analysis, Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) serves as a valuable lens for understanding how multiple layers of social context contribute to the mental health outcomes of migrant women. In essence, this theory postulates that human development is influenced by interrelated environmental systems, ranging from their immediate settings, such as family and community, to larger systems, such as societal norms. Thus, the experiences of migrant women are not only shaped by personal factors but also by the dynamic interplay of influences at different levels of their environment, simultaneously impacting both their vulnerability and resilience.

At the *microsystem*, which encompasses the immediate environment surroundings in which individuals operate, Venezuelan women are subject to intimate, daily encounters with instability and violence, including exploitation. These encounters occur in close interactions with family members or fellow migrants as they endure together the dangerous journey across the Darién Gap. Women, particularly those traveling with children, face significant psychological stress as they need to balance their caregiving responsibilities with survival strategies in extremely hostile environments. These immediate relations and traumatic experiences often manifest in significant mental health consequences, including symptoms of anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder.

The *mesosystem*, referring to the interactions between different microsystems or the relationship between individual and settings, further make it more difficult by linking various domains of their lives, such as family life, community relations, and broader migrant networks. For example, the lack of adequate support systems such as access to healthcare, basic supplies, legal protection, intensifies the challenges they face. Migrant shelters, which serve as temporary refuges for women and their children, are often overcrowded and unsafe, fostering environments where violence persists. This disconnection between critical support

systems exacerbates their psychological vulnerability, further harming their sense of security and well-being.

The *exosystem*, which includes structures not directly experienced by individuals, but which still affect their lives, such as migration policies, border controls, and governmental actions, plays a significant role in shaping their vulnerability. Restrictive migration policies and visa requirements imposed by neighboring countries limit legal migration channels, forcing many Venezuelan women to undertake irregular migration routes that expose them to heightened risks. The structural violence embedded in these policies and actions, such as inadequate reception centers, further marginalize women, denying them their basic human rights subjecting them to chronic stress, which has lasting implications for their mental health.

At the *macrosystem*, which encompasses the broader cultural, political, and economic context, the vulnerabilities faced by Venezuelan migrant women are deeply influenced by Latin America's persistent socio-political crises, economic inequality, and patriarchal norms. These factors create a context in which women are more likely to experience gender-based violence and social exclusion. As discussed throughout the chapter, the Venezuelan humanitarian crisis, characterized by government repression, economic collapse, and widespread insecurity, has forced millions of people to flee their country, with women disproportionately affected. These overarching social structures not only shape the lived experiences of migrant women but also contribute to their mental health outcomes. Gender norms deeply established in the social fabric of the region restrict women's access to resources, limit their autonomy, and reinforce cycles of inequality and violence that persist throughout their migration journey (the continuum of violence).

Finally, the *chronosystem*, which encompasses the dimension of time, adds to this analysis by recognizing that individual development and vulnerability are influenced by historical and temporal contexts. For Venezuelan migrant women, the timing of their migration is crucial, as their experiences are framed by the specific socio-political moment in Venezuela, where the crisis continues to escalate. This contributes to a cumulative trauma of forced migration, aggravated by the uncertainty of their legal status and long-lasting effects of violence and exploitation, that shapes their mental health trajectories over time. Furthermore, their migration crisis can be characterized as a collective trauma, a situation

when an entire community experiences chronic and ongoing injustice and suffering, often without the resources to navigate it. The prolonged nature of their displacement and the persistent stress of systemic injustices further compound their mental health challenges.

This chapter has highlighted the importance of understanding mental health challenges faced by migrant women not merely as the result of trauma but as deeply intertwined in the structural inequalities they encounter at every level of their experience. The intersectional nature of these women's experiences underscores the need for comprehensive policies that address their immediate and long-term mental health needs. Moreover, it is essential to confront the broader structural inequalities embedded within the macrosystem, which perpetuate their vulnerability. By addressing these systemic challenges, migrant women would be empowered to rebuild their lives with dignity and resilience. Ultimately, the analysis presented in this chapter contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics of gendered migration in Latin America, offering insights for future research and initiatives aimed at addressing the unique vulnerabilities of migrant women in this context.

Conclusion

By examining the complex interplay between vulnerability, gender, and migration, the current research aimed to identify the intersecting vulnerabilities of migrant women in Latin America, with a particular focus on the mental health implications. The research highlights the structural inequalities that shape the experiences of migrant women. Rather than labeling migrant women as inherently ‘vulnerable’, this thesis argues that the intersectionality framework offers an appropriate approach for studying mental health-related vulnerabilities. This paradigm challenges homogeneity narratives and seeks to better understand how personal characteristics, social positions, contextual and structural factors interact to impact their mental health.

The first chapter introduced the concept of vulnerability through philosophical, feminist, and political perspectives. The theoretical review revealed that addressing vulnerability requires a holistic understanding that transcends individual-focused solutions, viewing it as a systemic issue deeply rooted in societal structures rather than merely an individual condition. Philosophical perspectives view vulnerability as an inherent aspect of the human condition, encompassing emotional, psychological, moral, and socio-economic features, which creates moral obligations and duties of justice. Political perspectives emphasize the unequal distribution of exposure to harm, demanding systemic reforms that foster community resilience and equal access to resources. The feminist approach integrates philosophical and political insights, focusing on social justice and acknowledging the intersections of social inequalities with individual agency. Catriona Mackenzie et al.’s taxonomy of vulnerability, along with the capabilities approach, provided valuable frameworks for addressing vulnerabilities in a migration context, emphasizing the need to foster autonomy and expand the capabilities of marginalized individuals, rather than just resources.

The second chapter examined migration as a multifaceted phenomenon that can significantly impact mental health. It began by illustrating the complexity and fluidity of migration processes, challenging rigid distinctions between voluntary and involuntary, regular and irregular migration. The analysis highlighted the dynamic and context-dependent nature of migration drivers, which intersect with factors such as age, gender, and geography, influencing the decision-making processes of migrants. Likewise, it followed the migration

process through its pre-migration, transit, and post-migration phases, identifying key factors that contribute to psychological distress. In the pre-migration phase, these included exposure to violence, persecution, and torture. During transit, conditions like unsafe living and gender-based violence further exacerbated the risk of mental health disorders including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), while post-migration challenges encompassed discrimination, unemployment, and uncertainty in legal status. Furthermore, the concept of resilience was explored as a dynamic, context-dependent construct, influenced by interconnected social, cultural, familial and economic factors. The chapter concluded with a review of the notion of vulnerability in the context of migration, highlighting the need for a multidimensional approach that includes the principles of intersectionality, warning against the oversimplification of migrant experiences, which can lead to discrimination, stigmatization, and paternalistic attitudes that perpetuate power imbalances.

The third chapter analyzed the gendered dimensions of migration, revealing how gender intersects with other social identities to influence every stage of the migration process, from motivation and decision-making processes to opportunities and available resources in the destination. The roles and power dynamics associated with gender influence each stage, with women being more likely to migrate to escape poverty and gender-based violence, facing more challenges during migration, and more likely to experience mental health issues related to trauma. The chapter emphasized the necessity of gender-sensitive interventions and the adoption of an intersectional approach to address the distinct vulnerabilities experienced by women and LGBTQI+ migrants, who are more likely to face discrimination, trafficking, and sexual violence. These findings call for acknowledging that societal norms and structural inequalities affect men, women, and non-binary individuals in different ways at every stage of their migration journeys.

The final chapter focused on the Latin American context, with special attention given to Venezuelan migrant women. The intersection of social categories and contextual factors, such as socio-political instability, inequality, and ingrained patriarchal norms in the region, compounded their vulnerabilities. Women's mental health challenges ranged from a diminishing sense of self to anxiety, depression, and suicidal behavior. The chapter illustrated how inherent, situational, pathogenic sources of vulnerability intersect and compound the mental health challenges of Venezuelan migrant women. Inherent factors, such as gender,

age, or being pregnant, interact with the hostile environment of irregular migration, in which exposure to wildlife, high temperatures, harsh terrain, along with physical exhaustion and psychological stress, amplify their vulnerability to mental illness. Situational vulnerability is context-dependent and shaped by socio-political, economic and environmental circumstances of the migration journey. For these women, their migration through dangerous routes, such as the Darién Gap, exposes them to gender-based violence (GBV), which leaves profound psychological wounds, and is part of an ongoing and multi-layered process of the continuum of violence. This enduring vulnerability reflects larger structural inequalities related to the intersections of gender, migration status, and socio-economic conditions, that limit their access to resources, justice, and support services causing deepened mental health vulnerabilities. Finally, pathogenic sources are related to the policies and protective systems that instead intensify their vulnerabilities, impairing their autonomy and increasing feelings of powerlessness. Restrictive migration policies that leave them without legal options, governmental inaction, and the inadequacy of the reception centers characterized by cultural, linguistic and systemic barriers that discourage women from reporting sexual violence, not only fail to protect them but perpetuate cycles of violence and exploitation, contributing to chronic stress and psychological consequences.

Mental health, as this research has shown, is a dynamic continuum shaped by the intersection of multiple factors, including individual, social, familial, political, and economic elements. Addressing mental health challenges requires moving beyond individual-focused solutions to recognize that they are deeply intertwined with structural inequalities encountered at every stage of the migration experience. The intersectionality framework offers an ethical lens for understanding and addressing these inequalities, showing how different systems of power intersect to shape vulnerability.

Considering these research findings, it is recommended that mental health interventions adopt an intersectional approach to address the specific needs of migrant women, considering not only individual factors but also broader contexts that shape their experiences. Key recommendations include integrating relational autonomy and the capabilities approach into Trauma-Informed Care (TIC) (Pebole et al., 2021; Sandhya, 2024), providing multidisciplinary, culturally, and gender-sensitive services, and advocating for safe and legal migration pathways.

Relational autonomy and capabilities-focused TIC should prioritize creating supportive environments that empower women, providing safe spaces and promoting their ability to make informed decisions regarding their mental health care. Practitioners must recognize trauma symptoms, avoid re-traumatizing practices, and support healing through empowerment, by focusing on acknowledging their needs and on overcoming challenges, while fostering practices that build on their strengths and resilience. They should also be mindful of the institutional and structural barriers that hinder their access to services. Overcoming practical barriers, for example by providing childcare, is essential for enhancing women's opportunities to access mental health support.

Moreover, *culturally and gender-sensitive multidisciplinary services* are essential, as integrated care requires collaboration among mental health professionals, legal advisors, social workers, and human rights advocates. These services should account for the diverse backgrounds of migrant women (i.e. offering services in native language), with attention to their cultural and gendered experiences (i.e. being aware of unique stressors related to GBV and discrimination), and should aim to foster a sense of community to build resilience. Moreover, women should be encouraged to form support networks where they share information and emotional support, helping them reinforce a sense of autonomy and to regain control over their journeys. These networks can offer not only mental health support but also assistance on legal, social, and employment challenges that impact their well-being.

Finally, systemic change is required to provide *safer and legal migration* options for women that reduce the need for dangerous, irregular journeys. Advocacy efforts must focus on pressuring governments to provide legal protections, safe transit options, and access to asylum, to prevent further psychological harm and exploitation of women in transit. Addressing the transportation barriers that would allow them to continue their journey towards the north, as well as reducing the risk of trafficking and gender-based violence, should be prioritized.

While this thesis presents a broad theoretical analysis of the intersectional vulnerabilities faced by migrant women in Latin America, it is important to recognize its limitations. As a conceptual study, this research lacks empirical evidence and may not fully capture the complex, lived experiences of migrant women in various contexts. Additionally, the scope of this study is limited by the available literature. Future research should include

empirical studies to test the practical applicability of the theoretical insights presented here, incorporating diverse participants to deepen the understanding of intersecting vulnerabilities across different socio-economic and cultural contexts. Ultimately, this research underscores that there is no mental health without social justice.

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