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The Real Impostor: Coloniality and Patriarchy in the Academic
Journeys of Mexican Women in Europe

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*Erasmus Mundus Master in the Psychology of Global Mobility,
Inclusion, and Diversity in Society*

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Department of Social and Organizational Psychology

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Abstract

The academic migration of Mexican women to Europe is a persistent and increasingly prominent phenomenon, reflecting broader trends in gendered mobility and international education.

Although research indicates that Mexican women have agency in global social mobility, and while this trend is skyrocketing as more women pursue studies abroad, little is known about their lived experiences as student migrants in European settings.

To address this gap, this qualitative study employed a Decolonial Feminist and Intersectional approach to examine the experience of Mexican women in European postgraduate programs. Fifteen Mexican master's and PhD students participated in semi-structured interviews that explored how they navigate their academic journeys. Thematic Analysis was used to analyze the data and yielded in three themes, including: 1- Academic Journey, 2- Mental Health, and 3- Changes in Identity and Meaning Making. Subthemes were also identified within each category

The findings indicate that Mexican students in Europe face academic and social challenges stemming from their intersectionality. Due to their vulnerability, they encounter academic institutional violence and struggle with mental health issues. At the same time, they find international education to be a means of empowerment, and they reflect on how their migration experiences have shaped their hybrid identities in a positive way.

Keywords: Academic Migration, Mexican Women, Decolonial Feminism, Intersectionality, Identity Transformation, Empowerment.

Resumo

A migração acadêmica de mulheres mexicanas para a Europa é um fenômeno persistente e cada vez mais proeminente, refletindo tendências mais amplas de mobilidade com recorte de gênero e educação internacional. Embora pesquisas indiquem que as mulheres mexicanas possuem agência em termos de mobilidade social global, e que esse fenômeno cresça à medida que mais mulheres buscam estudar no exterior, pouco se sabe sobre suas experiências vividas como estudantes migrantes em contextos europeus.

Para preencher essa lacuna, este estudo qualitativo adotou uma abordagem Feminista Decolonial e Interseccional para examinar a experiência de mulheres mexicanas em programas de pós-graduação na Europa. Quinze estudantes mexicanas de mestrado e doutorado participaram de entrevistas semiestruturadas que exploraram como elas navegam por suas trajetórias acadêmicas. A Análise Temática foi utilizada para interpretar os dados, resultando em três temas principais: 1- Jornada Acadêmica, 2- Saúde Mental e 3-Transformações de Identidade e Produção de Sentido. Subtemas também foram identificados em cada categoria.

Os resultados indicam que estudantes mexicanas na Europa enfrentam desafios acadêmicos e sociais relacionados às suas interseccionalidades. Em razão de sua vulnerabilidade, vivenciam violências institucionais acadêmicas e enfrentam dificuldades em saúde mental. Ao mesmo tempo, veem na educação internacional uma via de empoderamento e refletem sobre como suas experiências migratórias moldaram positivamente suas identidades híbridas.

Palavras-chave: Migração Acadêmica, Mulheres Mexicanas, Feminismo Decolonial, Interseccionalidade, Transformação da Identidade, Empoderamento.

Introduction

The women who collaborate in this research are Mexican student migrants who are currently studying or have completed a postgraduate program in Europe. This study emerged from the need to explore their lived experiences in their academic journey, a phenomenon that remains unrepresented within academic literature and institutional agendas. They cross not only borders, but epistemic frontiers; their academic journeys are both empowering and challenging, situated at the intersection of gendered, racialized, and colonial structures.

My approach is rooted in Intersectionality, Feminist and Latin American Decolonial epistemologies. These frameworks help me to explore the lived experiences of women whose identities are shaped in colonial legacies. By examining their academic and personal journeys through these perspectives, I aim to highlight the structural violence they encounter, what it means for them to be student migrants, and the emotional experiences and embodied outcomes that conform their gendered migration. Additionally, I explore the strategies of resistance and meaning-making that they employ in response to these challenges. This research centers their experiences as powerful forms of knowledge; it recognizes the struggles and the strength that define their academic migration experiences.

Context of the Research and Problem Statement

There is an increase in the number of female Mexican postgraduate students in Europe. Although recent data indicates that Mexican women have agency in global social mobility (INM, 2021), and while this trend is growing rapidly as more women pursue studies abroad, little is known about their lived experiences as student migrants in European institutions.

Pursuing international postgraduate degrees has become an important motivation for Mexican women to migrate to Europe. According to the Secretary of Foreign Affairs (2021), the global mobility of Mexican individuals for educational purposes represents 26% of the total, positioning it as the second most prevalent reason for Mexicans living abroad. In 2020, it was reported that of the 11.2 million Mexicans residing abroad, 46.8% were women. This noteworthy figure highlights Mexico's position among the top five countries with the largest populations of women living internationally (INM, 2021). The National Women's Institute of Mexico (2021)

indicates that only one-quarter of Mexican women abroad engage in domestic and unpaid care work, while approximately seven out of ten are studying and/or working. These figures illuminate the evolution of migration trends among Mexican women.

European countries also represent significant destinations for Mexican women (CONAPO, 2023). Data from the Institute of Mexicans Abroad (IME) indicated that in 2015, the number of female Mexican migrants in Europe surpassed their male counterparts. This emerging trend suggests that European countries are becoming increasingly significant destinations for female migration. Therefore, further research should be done to expand our understanding of this phenomenon, particularly in the context of women's pursuit of professional studies, which is an understudied topic within European academic settings.

The phenomenon of feminization of migration highlights the empowering aspects of academic migration, serving as a pathway for women to become agents of change (Morokvasic, 1984). On the other hand, it also exposes the vulnerabilities this population may encounter as women from the Global South and migrants in Europe. These may include systemic discrimination, obstacles to academic and development in reason of gender, heightened risks of gender-based violence, both within the community and from institutions, and limited access to comprehensive health service (Rojas, 2007; Contreras, 2007; Rodríguez Domínguez 2024). Thus, the feminization of migration reflects a dual narrative, highlighting both the potential for empowerment and the intersecting challenges encountered by women from Mexico who engage in the migration process.

While women migrating for educational purposes can experience empowerment and benefits, they still face challenges and discrimination as they navigate traditional norms and expectations while striving to redefine their private and public roles (Bhatar, 2023). And considering that there is a gap in addressing this particular phenomenon in European settings, it is essential to analyze it from perspectives that acknowledge their coloniality background and the intersectionality as women from the Global South, in order to understand and make meaning of the experiences of those who engage in White, Eurocentric and colonial epistemologies for postgraduate purposes.

This research poses the following questions:

1. How do Mexican postgraduate female students experience their academic journey in Europe?
2. Do female Mexican postgraduate student migrants encounter systemic violence in their lived experiences in academia abroad?
3. What are the potential mental health impacts experienced by Mexican postgraduate students in European settings?
4. In what ways do they demonstrate resilience and find meaning in their European environments?

In line with those questions, the study objectives are:

- To explore how Mexican postgraduate female students navigate and experience their academic journey in European institutions.
- To investigate the presence and manifestations of systemic violence in the lived academic experiences of Mexican female postgraduate student migrants in Europe.
- To examine the potential mental health impacts experienced by Mexican postgraduate students in European settings.
- To analyze the strategies of resilience and the ways in which these students construct meaning within their European environments.

Theoretical and Epistemological Framework

The theoretical foundations of this research include Intersectionality, Feminist and Latin American Decolonial epistemologies. In this section, I will present a brief overview of the literature on each theory.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality is a robust framework for understanding the realities of student migrants from Mexico to Europe. This groundwork allows to capture their embodied experiences and the varied challenges and accomplishments in their international academic journey. Acknowledging the multiple categories, they have as Latin American migrants and female students, as well as the intersecting barriers they encounter, through the lenses of Intersectionality, this research aims to have a more comprehensive approach that echoes their voices and resistance across European academic settings.

Kimberlee Crenshaw introduced the concept of intersectionality, a theoretical and methodological perspective that examines how various identities a person holds, including gender, class, race, ethnicity and religion, contribute to their lived experiences, which are socio-historically situated (Crenshaw, 1991).

Rooted in Black feminist activism, Intersectionality recognizes how racism and sexism intersect in the lived experiences of women and highlights how different categories should be viewed as linked rather than separated (Crenshaw, 1991). Later, Chicana feminist scholars questioned static identities and highlighted hybrid identities (Anzaldua & Moraga, 1981). Subsequently, Latin American feminists incorporated neoclassicism and neoliberalism into intersectionality critiques. Maria Lugones (2008) and Mara Viveros (2009) further explored how sexuality and race are expressions of coloniality power. For Ochy Curiel (2017), the categories of gender, race, sexuality and class contextualized in a specific place and time extend beyond analyzing identity politics and recognition; they are essential to evaluate relations and social structures.

As an analytical tool, intersectionality gives the opportunity to examine the hierarchies that permeate in social and institutional contexts, as well as the way power relations perpetuate inequalities. It allows us to uncover insights that may not be apparent when considering categories in isolation (Scuzzarello & Moroşanu, 2023). Additionally, it provides a powerful lens to understand how gender intersects with other identities and how that intersection can prompt oppression or privilege mechanisms within contexts of relation powers that reproduce social inequalities (Makuc Urbina, 2020).

Considering gendered migration through the lens of intersecting categories is essential for a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of female migrants. From a Latin American perspective, identities overlap not only in the experiences of women, but in the historicity of our territories and neocolonialism (Curiel, 2017). Without this approach, there remains a gap in fully appreciating their diverse realities as well as the vulnerabilities and systemic violences they may encounter abroad.

Borderlands Theory

Gloria Anzaldúa, a Chicana feminist, laid the groundwork for Borderlands Theory. Her insights and perspectives were shaped by her experiences growing up along the U.S.-Mexican border, immersed in both Mexican and Anglo cultures (Anzaldúa, 1987). *Borderlands/La Frontera* challenges the colonial definitions of territories and make room for more profound views where exchange of cultures is possible, so the affections and ideologies that divide identities and territories (Anzaldúa, 1987). It stretches beyond geography to any “in-between” zone, between languages, races, genders, and sexualities, where dominant binaries break down and contradictory membership cultures and racial identities co-exist.

For Anzaldúa, the border represents a place of contradictions and uncertainty, she framed it as *una herida abierta* [an open wound], a dividing line that separates us and them, the safe and unsafe, a place where two worlds can make a third country, a border culture (Anzaldúa, 1987). Borderlands Theory examines the experience of living in a territory that exists in two worlds (Vargas Monroy, 2012). More than geographical spaces and divisions, borders are where the state of being and consciousness is constantly redefined, it is where new identities emerge.

The Border is a psychological and spiritual space where two cultures clash and merge, giving rise to mestiza consciousness (Fellner, 2023). This consciousness emerges from the collision and fusion of different cultures and identities, no matter how contradictory they may be, altering multiple cultural perspectives. Mestiza consciousness involves internal crises and conflicts that ultimately lead to the formation of a fused self (Hernandez 2020, cited by Fellner, 2023). Not just a blend of different identities, the mestiza consciousness holds the potential to embrace all cultures without borders.

The term *Nepantla*, derived from Nahuatl, translates to “in-between space.” and in the Borderlands Theory it refers to the territory between two worlds, or a perpetual state of (Scott & Tuana, 2017). Anzaldúa adopted this concept to describe the stage between worlds. *Nepantla* represents a condition of transition that encompasses confusion, loss, and the potential for transformation as one moves between different paradigms (Al-Hayali & Atallah, 2022).

Nepantleras [those in *Nepantla*], experience the vulnerability of not fully belonging to one side or the other. However, this position allows them to become boundary-crossers who can see beyond false dichotomies. Anzaldúa's later work, she further explains *Nepantla* as a stage in the journey of *conocimiento* (the process of coming to consciousness), where old identities dissolve and new insights emerge (Eufracio, 2022).

La Facultad is a concept that describes a unique insight or awareness developed by those who are marginalized or pushed out of the mainstream [los atravesados]. Specifically, it refers to “the capacity to view from two or more perspectives simultaneously,” it is a form of active, embodied, epistemic agency (Ortiz, 2023). Individuals living in borderlands must constantly navigate various social cues and survive in hostile environments, which allows them to refine “*la facultad*”, this enables them to detect danger, nuance, and possibilities that others may overlook (Camp, 2023).

Language itself is a borderland because it inhabits the space where cultures, identities, and power dynamics intersect and recombine (Anzaldúa, 1987). Stepping into this “in-betweenness”, living in multiple languages is not just a matter of navigating grammatical, lexical, and cultural norms, but also internal and external struggles of belonging. (Ramos, 2015; Rudolph, 2012, cited by Yazan & Selvi, 2019). In this exchange between language and culture, speakers don't just adapt; they evolve, generating a new, fluid identity, a border identity.

Coloniality of Power, Gender and Knowledge

Developed by Anibal Quijano, the concept of Coloniality of Power refers to a pattern of global power associated to racial classification and has enabled control and exploitation of resources, labor and territories for the growth and consolidation of capitalism (Restrepo, 2017). From this point of view, racialization legitimizes a Eurocentric pattern of power and still

permeates the modern world; America then is a subordinate region in a colonial/modern and Eurocentered capitalist world economy.

Maria Lugones (2008, 2014) argues the lack of gender/race separability in Quijano's model and she introduces the Coloniality of Gender, highlighting the interconnectedness of gender, race, class and sexuality in the context of colonialism, central construct of the power system. Thinking about the coloniality of gender helps us understand colonized people far beyond the way Eurocentric constructions of gender portray them as oppressed or passive individuals. The concept of coloniality of gender connects closely with resistance, so we should not only look at these individuals in contrast to the Eurocentric view of gender in indigenous societies. (Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies Program, Ohio State University, n.d.). From this point of view, Lugones invites us to explore the ongoing relationship between oppression and resistance.

The logic of colonialism continues to influence institutions, migration systems, and epistemologies. Walter Mignolo elaborated on Quijano's views with the colonial matrix of power (2007), an interconnected structure organizing the world through race, gender, authority, and epistemology. Within this matrix, knowledge itself is colonized and therefore, subject to decolonization. Mignolo emphasized that (2020) "decolonization of the mind cannot be detached from decolonization of the body" (p. 613), that is to say, there should be an epistemological reconfiguration to detach from the knowledge that was imposed as universal and superior.

The category of coloniality of knowledge highlights the relationship between knowledge and power within a global context. "Coloniality of knowledge contributes to an understanding and exposure of epistemic silences, conspiracies, and epistemic violence that are hidden within Eurocentric epistemologies" (Seroto, 2018 p.5). It illustrates how certain types of knowledge are often regarded as legitimate, while other forms may be overlooked (Restrepo, 2017).

Decoloniality of Knowledge (Mignolo, 2020) emphasizes the need to critically examine and move beyond Western epistemic dominance while recognizing the value of knowledge systems that have been historically overlooked. As noted by Seroto (2018), contemporary educational institutions play a significant role in perpetuating colonial knowledge hierarchies. Therefore, the decoloniality of knowledge represents epistemic disobedience by actively

engaging with and questioning established colonial frameworks of thought while recognizing and valuing the marginalized frameworks.

Mental Health: a decolonial and feminist approach

Mental health has traditionally been approached through Western, patriarchal, and colonial perspectives. This section departs from Feminist, Abya Yala (Indigenous Americas), Latin American Decolonial frameworks to provide definitions of mental health, acknowledging how structural oppressions have repercussions on mental well-being and the healing and caregiving practices that define them.

The development of decolonial psychologies began in the 1960s and 1970s, influenced by numerous global and local movements aimed at addressing significant social inequities (Ciófaló & Ortiz-Torres, 2024). Authors such as Ignacio Martín-Baró (1984) called for a de-ideologization of psychology through his work, "La Psicología de la Liberación" [Liberation Psychology]. His contributions emphasized the essential connections between mental health, human rights, and the struggle against injustice. Martín-Baró's contributions illuminated the limitations of Western psychology in addressing inequities, proposing a way to approach mental health that serves the social needs and considers the reality of oppression and collective resilience in Latin America.

Recognizing the history of exclusion, discrimination, and violence against Indigenous peoples resulting from colonial and patriarchal dominance systems, decolonial community psychology in Abya Yala (America) visibilizes the capacity for community mobilization and organization that arises from people's autonomy and sovereignty (Velázquez et al., 2024). Abya Yala name *El Buen Vivir* [well-being] to the condition to live harmoniously with human beings and nature, taking into account interdependence and eco-dependence (Ferreiro Lago, 2018).

Abya Yala's psychology embraces a holistic understanding of well-being, recognizing the interconnectedness of the mind, body, community, and environment. This perspective offers a valuable contrast to the Western mental health model, which tends to emphasize individualism and is centered on the concept of psychological distress and mental health struggles. The idea of "El Buen Vivir" advocates for social inclusion and cohesion, which are crucial for achieving

harmonious coexistence (Ciófalo & Ortiz-Torres, 2024), it emphasizes the interdependence of individuals within a community.

In this sense, mental health is understood as a dynamic and collective process, shaped by the intersection of diverse identities, historical experiences of colonization, and social injustices. may affect the well-being of communities. This understanding highlights the challenges posed by patriarchal and colonial systems and honors the agency and resilience demonstrated by individuals within communities.

Feminist theory has long highlighted the persistence of structural gender violence and sexism within mental health discourses. Feminism brought to light how structural patriarchal violence has serious psychological consequences and has distorted the definition and treatment of mental health issues in women as well as over-pathologization and devaluation of women's behavior (Gupta, Madabushi, & Gupta, 2023).

Approaching women's mental health through feminist lenses makes visible deep-seated inequalities of power in society and within various systems. It also highlights that these inequalities have often been overlooked, ignored, or inadequately represented in mental health services (Williams & Watson, 2016). The Feminist approach acknowledges the impact of gender inequality in mental health, and women in especial are exposed to risk factors such as gendered expectations, domestic and sexual abuse, multiple responsibilities and limited opportunities (Scott, Watson & Williams, 2020).

Feminist critiques look at the social factors that affect mental health. They don't only examine how diagnoses are constructed, including historicity, biases and limitations but they challenge generalized medicalization and pathologization, echoing the resistance and empowering counter-narratives (Rodriguez, 2024).

Self-Care, Collective Care and Well-Being

In Latin American, Chicana and Black Feminist thought, self-care is framed as an act of political resistance and survival. Caring practices have become a radical practice within feminist movements and a form to have accountability in handling mental health struggles. A feature that highlights from Latin American Feminist views on self-care is the emphasis on community.

From this perspective, the terms “*autocuidado*” and “*cuidado colectivo*” [self-care and collective care] are paired. This idea advocates that women caring for themselves should go hand-in-hand with supporting each other.

Self-care practices, within or outside academia, are revolutionary and transformative. Women of color need to engage in self-care and self-love to overcome the struggles caused by racism, sexism, homophobia and class oppression (Nicol & Yee, 2017). This section delves into self and community care, and their important role in well-being.

Self-care represents a significant act of resistance and resilience. For Audre Lorde (1992), it is an intentional and revolutionary practice that recognizes the connection between social change and individual well-being, from her view self-care is political. From this perspective, self-care is viewed as a political act and an important part of feminist activism. (COFEM, 2024).

bell hooks advocates that women who pursue personal fulfillment, in ways such physical health and wellness, creative tasks, or nurturing meaningful relationships, are better armed to keep connected to broader collective efforts for equality and social justice. (hooks, 1984; Nicol & Yee, 2017). Her contributions point out to reflect self-care beyond individual acts and to view it as a political and collective effort, and when self-care is practiced collectively, it becomes a radical act that helps build resilience in marginalized communities.

Transitioning to a community feminist perspective from Abya Yala, the concept of *cuerpo-territorio* [body-territory] was introduced by the indigenous maya-xinka feminist Lorena Cabnal (2010). She emphasizes the importance of healing from the *herida colonial* [colonial wound] through practices of self-care and community care (Hernández Jiménez, 2021). As she eloquently expressed, *merecemos recuperar la alegría sin perder la indignación*, which can be interpreted as we deserve to reclaim joy while maintaining our sense of indignation. Julieta Paredes, a founder of community feminism, highlights how individual and collective care are intertwined, and she frames self-care as a political stance (Gómez Urdiales, 2016).

Self-care is a way to inhabit our body/territory in a more compassionate and revolutionary manner. Self-care and collective care are powerful forms of resistance against patriarchal and colonial systems. By taking ownership of our bodies and nurturing our

communities, we not only empower ourselves but also foster a culture of well-being that benefits everyone. Embracing these practices paves the way toward achieving El Buen Vivir.

Latin American and Black Feminist Critiques of Impostor Phenomenon

Building on the positionality of this research, this section explores from a critical point of view what is known in Western psychology as the impostor phenomenon. In 1978, Paulina Rose Clance and Suzzane Imes, psychologists from the United States, made contributions to understand feelings of self-doubt of intellect, skills or accomplishments among high achieving women (Huecker, Shreffler, McKeny, & Davis, 2023). Their pioneering work brought light to a phenomenon in mental health that had been overlooked. However, their standpoint framed women's self-doubt as an individual psychological issue, and they didn't consider how race, class, or structural oppression might contribute to those experiences.

While their contributions pointed out to frame it as a phenomenon, rather than a pathology, it gained popularity by getting known as impostor syndrome, prompting women, and men as well, to identify with it without taking into account the broader power systems at play.

Patricia Hill Collins introduced the term “outsider within” to interpret Black women's position in academia and other dominant institutions. The concept describes how a social group's placement in a specific context and its disparities might influence its point of view on the world (Collins, 1999), leading individuals to see themselves as outsiders, often due to their belonging to a marginalized group. Her work reframes impostor feelings as a consciousness induced by structural factors, rather than viewing it as an individual problem that can be solved by working on oneself.

Recent Latina scholars apply Anzaldua's framework to the impostor phenomenon. Using Nepantla, Ramirez, Puente and Contreras (2023) showed that Latina/Chicana students feelings of impostor syndrome arise from navigating a racist/sexist educational system and while also engaging with their home culture, added to academic and cultural shock, lack of belonging at the university and gendered isolation.

In *Presumed Incompetent, the intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia*, Gutiérrez y Muhs et al. (2012) provide a framework for understanding the contradictory culture

of academia, where, supposedly, race and gender identities are irrelevant for succeeding in academic careers, but at the same time women of color tend to find themselves “presumed incompetents” as a response of social hierarchies including race, gender, class and sexuality. Despite the privilege of taking part in a Eurocentric academic setting, Latinas are actively engaged in inequalities and struggles that might prompt feelings of the impostor in a context of knowledge production with an imperialist history.

Female Student Migration

In research done with female Indian student migrants (Bhattar, 2023), it was found that their motives for migration were to accomplish dreams and aspirations through education. They choose destinations where opportunities are available and despite the benefits of empowerment, they navigate discrimination while reconfiguring their lives. The author highlighted the emotional impact of this experience resulting in feelings of loneliness, cultural shocks and stress.

Based on research with Chicana and Native American women pursuing PhDs in the USA, Cueva (2014) discusses the psychological and physical consequences students face as a result of racialized and gendered microaggressions in higher education. Additionally, the study highlights the resilience of marginalized women within academic institutions and explores strategies for combating microaggressions, as well as ways to navigate racism, complex power dynamics, and white privilege.

The study conducted by Wright-Mair et. al. (2023) examines the prevalence of feelings of impostor syndrome across Latinx college students in the USA. According to their piece of work, this phenomenon stems from internalizing social inequality and, Latinx students are prompt to experience feelings of the impostor due to their intersected identities. This study reveals three strategies to navigate imposter syndrome: code-switching, seeking guidance from support networks, and developing strategic consciousness. Participants highlighted the tension between Eurocentric values and their own cultural frameworks, which often leads to a sense of exclusion. The support from family and peers was a vital resource in alleviating feelings of isolation and underscores the importance of collectivism as a cultural asset.

In their scoping literature, Kelly et.al. (2018) found that female international university students experienced self-discovery and positive transformation as outcomes of studying abroad. This transformation included an increase in self-confidence, a strengthened identity and culture and a broader worldview. The researchers noted that female students were liberated from societal expectations, gained a mature sense of who they are and self-awareness, all this within a context where they successfully overcome various challenges in their host countries. These experiences contributed to building resilience, courage and validation through their academic journeys. Conversely, the study also revealed that struggles with language proficiency were significant factors for negative experiences. Female students reported feelings of guilt related to their families, as well as acculturative stress, discrimination and cultural differences.

In a study focused on Latina college students in a US academic setting (Granillo, 2011) found that Latina students encounter significant feelings of stress and psychological struggles during their academic journey. These mental health issues can impact their academic performance, and institutional discrimination and dissatisfaction may be prone to these challenges. While factors such as social support and religiosity showed themselves to be protective of their well-being.

In her article, Kaminski (2022) discusses the challenges faced by first-generation Latina students in U.S. academic settings. These students often experience low self-esteem and poor academic performance due to feelings of impostor syndrome. The stigmas within their communities, along with societal expectations and pressure placed on first-generation Latina students, contribute to these challenges, as well as the lack of representation and socio-economic disparities that led them to be first-person attending university. Latinas also encounter gender discrimination, which affects the opportunities available to them. Beyond academic disparities, these students face cultural and language barriers.

Unzueta (2023) identified that Latina students in the US often experience feelings of otherness due to their Latina identity. However, instead of giving up or silencing their identities, they harness their cultural background to persist and thrive. This resilience helps them overcome challenges and motivates them to resist adversity. As a result, they came to see themselves and other Latinas as strong and powerful individuals.

In a longitudinal study of female PhD holders from Mexico (Munguia & Flores, 2023), both in the country and abroad, participants reported experiencing institutional violence, which was intertwined with feelings of uncertainty, sacrifice, harassment, and experiences of internal migration. Many expressed the belief that these sacrifices would later pay off. However, participants also shared a sense of disillusionment and noted the negative aspects of being overqualified in a country lacking opportunities, with some suggesting that it may have been better not to pursue further education. In contrast, those who completed their postgraduate studies abroad reported improved living conditions, job stability, greater well-being, and no experiences of academic institutional violence.

In their autoethnographic study, Rodríguez & Kokka (2023) focus on how they resisted institutional violence in academia during their doctorates. They found that connecting with their support networks and collective healing are key to this resistance. Their bodies bear the impact of the violence and imbalance in academia, and it is through their physical experience that they push back against institutional violence, and conclude that existence is a form of resistance, as they confront oppressive structures.

This research builds upon previous studies and the theories discussed earlier, which serve as a foundation for its questions and methodologies. By employing a feminist intersectional framework alongside decolonial critiques, I aim to analyze the experiences of Mexican postgraduate students in Europe, shedding light on the structural barriers they encounter but also the strategies through which they resist, embrace their journeys, and make meaning of their experience.

Methods

I undertake this research from my positionality as a Mexican woman and migrant student; my journey as a feminist psychologist and researcher anchors my perspective. My work challenges the embedded power structures of patriarchy, colonialism, and normativity. This goes beyond just an academic exercise; it is a deliberate act of resistance that aims to acknowledge, respect, and redefine diverse lives, knowledges, and bodies. Writing a feminist dissertation requires a process of self-reflection and self-critique, allowing me to tap into my own embodied knowledge, which is situated in my personal experiences (Rodriguez, 2024).

Research Design

This study is framed within an exploratory, qualitative, descriptive, cross-sectional, and analytical approach aimed at understanding the experiences of Mexican women who have migrated to Europe to pursue postgraduate studies. The research is constructed around a temporal snapshot- a specific moment in which situated narratives are captured- shaped by migration, gender, and the institutional dynamics of European academia. The aim is not to generate generalizations but rather to interpret and give meaning to the experiences shared by participants at that particular point in their life trajectories.

The analysis is centered on individual experiences and how these are articulated, resisted, or redefined within structures characterized by coloniality, academic racism, and gender inequality. This study is underpinned by the belief that situated and embodied knowledge is crucial for comprehending intricate phenomena such as female academic migration from the Global South.

Materials

Each interview was video recorded using Microsoft Teams and later transcribed verbatim. The semi-structured interview included 56 guiding questions organized into nine subsections (see Appendix A), guided by the A Priori category-based qualitative framework (Rueda Sanchez et al., 2023). Additional materials included an advertisement poster for recruitment, gatekeeper and participant information sheets, consent forms, and a debrief sheet (see Appendices B and C).

Procedure

The interviews were conducted in February 2025. The invitation to participate in the study was shared during the first week of the month. Within approximately a week and a half, all interviews were completed, thanks to a very positive and cooperative response from the women who chose to take part. Before this, I developed a semi-structured interview guide based on the study's objectives. Additionally, prior to formally beginning data collection, I conducted a pilot interview with a participant who had a similar profile to those I intended to engage. This pilot interview helped me refine the instrument and ensured that the questions fostered a meaningful conversation aligned with the research goals.

The call for participation was shared through virtual spaces where Mexican women studying in Europe tend to gather. This included two Facebook groups: one belonging to the SECIHTI (Secretariat of Science, Humanities, Technology and Innovation) scholarship community, and another related to the Erasmus Mundus program, as well as a WhatsApp group made up of recipients of Mexican government scholarships. This strategy not only facilitated participant recruitment, but also reinforced the collaborative spirit of the study, as it emerged from existing support networks among migrant students.

The interviews were conducted virtually, respecting the participants' native language: Spanish. Each conversation lasted approximately 45 minutes and one hour. Since the women were located in different countries across Europe, and some in Mexico, scheduling the interviews required a flexible approach on my part, adapting to their availability, time zones, and personal contexts.

After completing the interviews, I manually transcribed them using tools like Pinpoint and Word. Each transcription took between three to four hours. During this process, I also conducted an initial round of coding. In total, the transcription took approximately 55 hours of work and produced 264 pages of text. It was an immersive experience that allowed me to engage deeply with each narrative, not just through the words, but also through the tone, silences, pauses, and emotions woven in each interview.

Participants

The sample consisted of 15 Mexican women, aged between 26 and 42 years old at the time of the interview. All participants were either currently enrolled in or had completed a master's or doctoral degree in person at a European higher education institution across various fields of study. Participant selection was conducted using purposive sampling (Suri, 2011) and snowball sampling, based on specific inclusion criteria. These criteria included: being a Mexican national woman who studies or has completed a postgraduate program (master's or PhD) at the age of 26 or older, undertaking the program in person in a European country -or countries in the case of joint degrees- and being either in the final stage of the program or having already completed it. Participants were assigned alphanumeric codes (e.g., P1, P2) to maintain anonymity. The following table presents the demographic data of the participants:

Table 1

Participants Demographics

Participant identifier	Age at interview	Age during Postgraduate Studies	Postgraduate Period	Degree	Country of Study
P1	26	23-26	2022- present	Master and PhD	France
P2	33	28-33	2019-2025	Master and PhD	Ireland
P3	28	25-27	2022-2024	Master	Spain / England
P4	26	24-26	2022-2024	Master	Spain / Poland
P5	28	26-28	2023 - present	Master	Netherlands
P6	35	24-27	2015-2017	Master	Italy
P7	26	26-27	2024 - present	Master	England
P9	33	28-33	2020-2025	Master and PhD	France
P10	33	30-33	2023 - present	Medical Specialty	Germany
P11	30	27-29	2022-2024	Master	Austria
P12	29	26-29	2021-2024	Master	Portugal
P12	28	27-28	2024 - present	Master	England
P13	42	40-42	2022-2024	Master	Spain / Portugal /Turkey
P14	27	24-25	2022-2023	Master	Spain
P15	31	27-31	2021 - present	Medical Specialty	Germany

Approach to analysis

This research employed an analytical approach that combined a design based on pre-existing categories with an openness to emerging elements. Thematic analysis was conducted following the guidelines established by Braun & Clarke (2006). While the analysis was not entirely a priori, I began with certain predefined concepts and theoretical frameworks that helped shape both the interview guide and the initial coding stages based on the suggestions of Rueda Sanchez et.al. (2023). The categories were developed manually using Word and Excel, and the analysis was conducted from the moment the extracts were selected. Interview segments were coded, and themes and subthemes emerged.

From the beginning, I organized ideas around broad categories such as academic trajectory, mental health, and protective factors, which guided the formulation of questions focused on these areas. These thematically organized categories were influenced by the theoretical framework and the methodological suggestions from authors who work with a priori approaches in qualitative analysis. Once the information was organized, I utilized Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis to refine these categories, identify subthemes within them, and construct an interpretative narrative based on the participants' accounts.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was given by ISCTE Instituto Universitario de Lisboa ethics committee, ethic project number PSI_43/2024. The advertisement poster and information sheets stated participant criteria and interview topics, so participants knew what to expect and could self-exclude if they were not willing to continue. Information sheets also highlighted that interviews would be video recorded. Participants were informed of their right to skip questions, take a break, or stop the interview without judgment and were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study. It was also made clear that interviewees should only share information they were comfortable with and that they would be kept anonymous.

Each interview was pseudonymised and identifiers removed, with recordings immediately transferred from ISCTE OneDrive. All data, including consent forms, were stored on a secure ISCTE OneDrive. The researcher was aware of the potentially sensitive nature of the

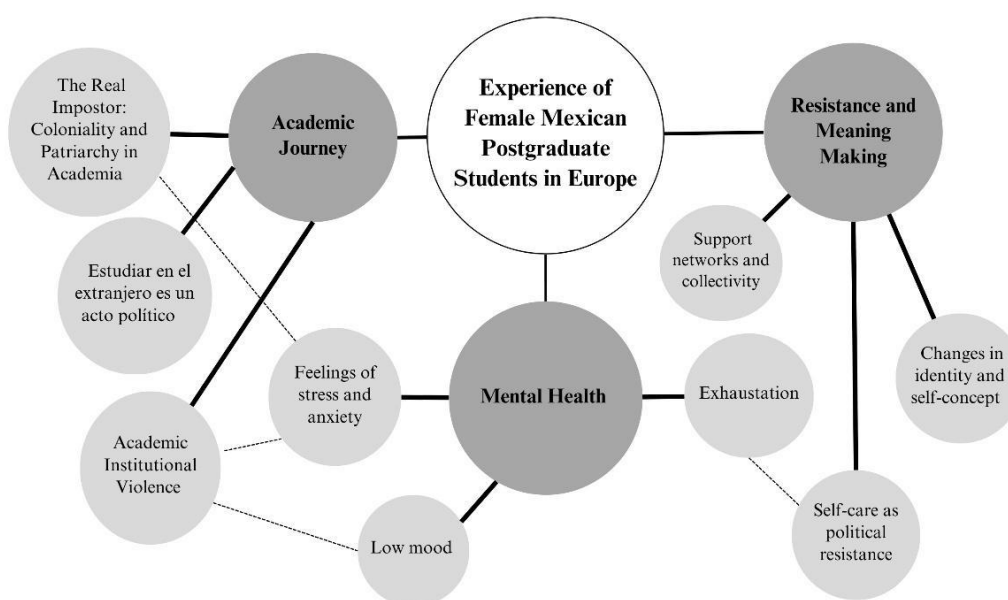
study, so they sign-posted participants to support organisations relevant to the study topics if they needed support following participation.

Results

Three themes, and nine subthemes emerged representing the experiences of Mexican postgraduate students in Europe. The three main themes are: Academic Journey, Mental Health in Postgraduate Students, and Resistance and Meaning Making. The following thematic map shows the themes and subthemes that emerged during the analysis.

Figure 1

Thematic Map of the Experience of Female Mexican Postgraduate Students in Euro



Theme 1: Academic Journey

To analyze, describe, and understand the academic experiences of student migrants, one must account for the diverse nuances that shape their journeys. Employing an intersectional lens offers a more integrated and comprehensive interpretation that echoes their strength and assets they carry into European academic settings, as well as to the vulnerabilities that, by virtue of being women, migrants, Mexicans, and scholarship recipients, can heighten the contingencies of injustice they may encounter.

Subtheme 1: Academic Institutional Violence

This theme reflects the different nuances in the experience of studying abroad, which are woven with processes of social and academic integration, migratory grief, bureaucratic procedures inherent in social mobility, gains and losses, and a constant weaving together of knowledge and emotions.

Institutional violence in the academic sphere refers to those aggressions related to the effects of racism and race-based trauma that caused cognitive, emotional and physical negative outcomes, affecting in a particular way to women's minds, bodies and academic well-being (Cueva, 2014). It is essential to adopt a specific perspective, as proposed by Chicana Feminist scholarship, when analyzing the institutional violences that Mexican women face in European academia, since these experiences cannot be understood outside the historical framework of coloniality nor the structural differences derived from coming from Global South contexts. This perspective makes visible how academic dynamics, seemingly neutral or inclusive, reproduce historical inequalities and hierarchies of knowledge, placing Mexican students in a position of systematic vulnerability within institutions deeply marked by Eurocentric logics.

Of the fifteen participants, seven recounted experiences of academic violence. Four participants were studying their postgrads in Spanish academic settings, while the remaining were enrolled at institutions in France, Germany, and Italy.

Below, we read Participant 3's experience, a master's student in Spain. She shared how, after proposing a project alongside her classmates, they were accused by a professor of having plagiarized one of her ideas without any prior justification offered to support that claim:

It was such an ominous threat, 'I'm going to accuse you of plagiarism because that is plagiarism and you cannot plagiarize in academia.', I mean, honestly, now it makes me laugh, but at the time it was terrible and super destructive. She was attacking us again and again (...) With all those attacks we ended up destroyed, demoralized. (P3)

P3 reported that, abusing her authority, the professor bypassed the established protocols for a formal plagiarism review; instead, she summoned P3 and her classmates privately. In that meeting, she not only discredited them but also verbally assaulted them and threatened to file

charges with both the master's program direction and the scholarship coordination, thereby jeopardizing them the financial support on which they depended.

A common pattern in the results was how institutional violence within academia can span economic, emotional, and subjective dimensions in students' experiences. In the case of P3, set in the Spanish academic context, it highlights how faculty members, by omitting established conflict-resolution procedures, perpetuate symbolic and structural violence within the university.

For P3, and the participants who recounted experiences of violence in academia, these incidents had repercussions for their mental health, because the feelings of anxiety generated by the threats and the level of demoralization went beyond a mere academic misunderstanding; they were acts of systemic violence. Most of the participants (14 out of 15) reported relying on a grant to afford their academic journey, moreover, the possibility of losing their scholarship as result of institutional academic violence, also meant threatening their means of subsistence in a foreign country. Consequently, power ambivalence and moral harassment amplified the harm, undermining students' well-being.

Participant 4, who studied a joint master's program in Spain and Poland, shared the emotional impact she suffered during her first year of postgraduate studies in Spain because of academic violence:

I don't consider it a microaggression; it was a somewhat direct and frontal aggression. And honestly, it did a lot of damage to our mental health at a very crucial moment because we were finishing the school year in Granada. There were many deadlines; we were already exhausted. And it was very, very difficult(...) and I wondered: to what extent is this professor doing this because we are Mexican or Latin American, or is she just a cruel person and would treat anyone the same, regardless of nationality? I couldn't resolve that. (P4)

In the closing lines, P4 expressed doubt about whether the professor's behavior was related to her origin. It is noteworthy how, despite the presence of that feeling and the constant violence exerted by the professor, she found it difficult to assume that, at least in her case, her race and nationality could have influenced the professor's actions. A consistent thread across narratives was that students found difficult to acknowledge aggressions, given the existence of

cultural differences and hierarchies, it was hard to assume, in the first encounters, they were cases of academic violence, and they were constantly framed as cultural differences and customs they, eventually, would get used to.

Speaking of condescension, "as if they know nothing", reveals how teaching practices can actively undermine or dismiss the expertise migrant students bring with them, reinforcing a sense of superiority in which the instructor, by virtue of her hierarchical position, always prevails.

From an intersectional perspective, one can understand that the professor, knowledgeable of a migrant Mexican student's vulnerabilities in the Spanish context, and considering the colonial background, wielded violence and abuse of power, affecting not only the student's academic experience but also her emotional well-being. This analysis reveals how, in the academic context, the intersections of oppression, such as migration, race, and gender, configure power dynamics resulting in violent practices.

Additional forms of academic violence emerged in interviews and were found in the experience of participants. For example, one participant recounted how a professor at an Italian institution, upon learning she was from Mexico, repeatedly addressed her whenever topics related to indigenous peoples were discussed in class. Another shared how a professor at a Spanish university responded rudely and even mocked her in front of the entire class, claiming he didn't understand her way of speaking Spanish. These examples reflect how racism manifests in classrooms and pedagogical dynamics.

From an intersectional perspective, it is crucial to consider how race and gender intersect in their experiences: as Latina women, belonging to a minority group, and thus vulnerable position in the classroom, intensifying their exposure to racialized violence and symbolic exclusion.

Another form of academic violence observed among participants was the lack of knowledge transfer. Participant 9, a PhD student in France, shared how she has never felt academically supported by her advisor, who is responsible for her progress. When P9 arrived at the institution, she noticed her supervisor had assigned another woman in her lab to handle

teaching duties. The few interactions P9 had, were marked by hostility and poor pedagogical methods, as it is shown below:

My PhD supervisor taught me to do two or three things stubbornly. She's the type who says, 'I explained it to you yesterday; don't ask me again tomorrow'. So, I even recorded her in secret. I'd listen to the recording the next day calmly and do it my way. I think they don't take the time to see how you learn. (P9)

During her PhD, she endured verbal assaults from her supervisor. These forms of symbolic violence have directly impacted on her physical and emotional well-being, and a hostile environment has hindered her academic development. As a result, her feelings of loneliness and lack transfer of knowledge have deeply affected her motivation and diminished her satisfaction in participating in the postgraduate program.

It is crucial to consider how the experiences of violence are exacerbated by the migrant student status. This population depends on the institution for essential bureaucratic procedures, such as renewing residence permits and maintaining scholarships. Dealing with asymmetric power relations not only heightens the institutional vulnerability a migrant student could face but also reproduces power dynamics where raising students' voice involves the risk of losing financial support and jeopardizing the migration bureaucracy.

The experiences of those who suffered academic violence highlight forms of institutional violence in which academic abandonment, false accusations, microaggressions, delegation of responsibilities without proper guidance, verbal assaults, appropriation of knowledge, and hostility in training spaces occur in postgraduate programs, profoundly affecting the lives of those who migrate to continue their academic journey.

Subtheme 2: The Real Impostor: Coloniality and Patriarchy in Academia

Building on the work of Latina and Black feminist scholars who have powerfully contributed to exposing who the real 'impostor' is, the context of Eurocentric academic settings represents an open space for Latina students to question themselves: the legitimacy of their knowledge, the accuracy of their ideas, and even their right to occupy the positions they've

earned within universities. Constant epistemic violence and impostor feelings are rooted in white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and settler colonialism that infiltrate the academic experience (Tran, 2023).

This subtheme illustrates how Mexican students experience multiple forms of epistemic oppression and social exclusion, where race, gender, language and migratory status play fundamental roles in prompting women to question the legitimacy of their achievements and the validity of their knowledge and abilities. Moreover, it shows how knowledge hierarchies reinforce the feeling of not belonging, and how these feelings emerge in racist and sexist systems. The shared elements in the participants' discussions around this subtheme were lack of self-confidence, feelings of inadequacy in European academic settings and language barriers that prompt experiences of not being up to the postgraduate expectations.

In the following excerpt, Participant 7, the first in her family to attend university and the first female academic migrant, shares her reflection on how she experiences the feeling of not deserving to be in that space, as well as the constant doubt about whether she truly belongs.

Sometimes you ask yourself a lot: 'What am I doing here? I don't know how I made it. I don't know what I'm doing here (...)I think you deal a lot with impostor syndrome: if you didn't have what you needed to be here, you wouldn't be here. They wouldn't have accepted you in the first place. But the level of pressure and comparison you impose on yourself is very significant. And if there's an issue there, or if you have a different socioeconomic context, that can also create some noise. (P7)

P7 describes her feelings as "Impostor Syndrome." This stems from her experiencing an unfamiliar space and very different from what she has known throughout her life. As a result, receiving a scholarship and enrolling in a prestigious, Eurocentric university, along with her integration into a higher socioeconomic context, has created a sense of dissonance. This has made it challenging for her to feel deserving of being in that environment.

Many students experience pressure to excel and often compare themselves to others, using their peers' knowledge and abilities as benchmarks. This can lead to self-demanding behaviors that become a trap. While trying to be like others may temporarily relieve feelings of unworthiness or inadequacy, it ultimately does not address the underlying issues. In her case, she

is enrolled at an institution in the United Kingdom, although she did not experience violence, it doesn't mean that she hasn't experienced feelings of being an outsider in that context.

These feelings of inadequacy were a recurring theme across participants, and such feelings are structurally induced: coming from Mexico, a country marked by pronounced academic elitism, students from lower-middle-class backgrounds repeatedly experience that such spaces are not meant for them and that they do not belong.

Throughout the interviews, several recurrent patterns lead to the manifestation of what is colloquially called "Impostor Syndrome," which causes students to struggle with feeling entitled to produce knowledge, worthy of receiving grants, and capable of meeting expectations and metrics of a European postgraduate degree.

These experiences of not feeling good enough stemmed in a diversity of academic contexts, intersected with migration processes, where cultural shocks and adaptations occur symmetrically in both the community and academic spheres. Participant 1, a current PhD student in France who completed her master's in the same country, has had an academic trajectory marked by various challenges, especially the academic cultural shock at the beginning of her master's. Affected by the struggles of adaptation, administrative stress and economic problems, P1 failed her first year of master's. This period, beyond failing exams, the sole mode of evaluation, she had significant challenges adapting to the French educational system and the organization of her postgraduate program:

Always, let's say without realizing it, I had built much of my identity around being smart or being academically good... I began to question my entire future: coming here, completely rethinking my future, accepting that I would never be able to erase the fact that I failed the year (...) Also, I feel... I felt very incompetent. It really was a very, very, very, very strong blow to how I saw myself. And it gave me a certain shyness that I still carry from time to time. That's when I began to experience a kind of impostor syndrome.
(P1)

With an identity constructed around academic performance and success, failing represents a threat to the self-concept, besides the emotional impact of not knowing how to identify oneself, the extract shows how assessment and teaching methods may not be adapted for

international students, by not considering the intersectionality of their academic journey, creating a risk gap in which migrant students fail to meet academic requirements. Furthermore, this failure escalates into an experience of “defeat” that could cause students to question if they truly belong to the institutions, even to reconsider their decision to migrate to pursue postgraduate programs. Then, participants labeled their experiences as “impostor syndrome”, a common finding from their voices was that they put the blame on them, the impostors were themselves with their feelings of inadequacy, and not the structural conditions.

The collective experiences point to the fact that linguistic differences can also undermine confidence and represent a barrier, which can impact knowledge production and socializing ideas in an academic setting. Most participants of this research chose programs in non-Spanish-speaking countries, that is the case of Participant 12, a master’s student in England, she describes what it means for her to live in the linguistic borderlands:

Speaking another language every day is physically and mentally tiring, and sometimes it has affected my confidence to participate because I sometimes feel I won’t speak fluently or express my ideas as they are in my head when translating from Spanish, so it’s been complicated to feel confident that I have the knowledge and can share it because, at times, it (the language) limits me. (P12)

Her experience, which resonates with the rest of the participants who talked about language barriers, illustrates how living in a foreign language represents a drain and a factor where migrant students doubt their abilities. Although they may be fluent and have a certification, which is necessary for admission, the daily use of a foreign language implies fear of communication in European institutions.

This is not an isolated phenomenon, as migrants are exposed to hostile treatment and discrimination, especially around race, nationality, migratory status, class, and linguistic differences. Even pronunciation errors may render them vulnerable to receiving aggressions.

In this sense, doubt and fear are common feelings in Mexican students, resulting from inhabiting Western and colonial educational systems. A common feature of their discourses is their awareness that such systems were not built for them, creating knowledge hierarchies where the native speaker is perceived as the authority. Despite being capable of communicating in the

local language, migrants will never be native speakers, and that is where they are placed at a systemic disadvantage.

Subtheme 3: Estudiar en el extranjero es un acto político

“It’s the most incredible and wonderful thing a woman can do; it’s an incredible political, disruptive, rebellious act. We need more women doing these things and migration is only for the brave.” (P14). The subtheme “Studying abroad as a political act” underlines how women’s educational migration is a political act of self-determination and empowerment that resists patriarchal norms, illustrating that female migrants are not passive dependents but active agents challenging social constraints.

In line with Martínez-Cairo and Buscemi (2021), Latin American Decolonial Feminism seeks the decolonization of knowledge, and participants of this research converged that pursuing studies abroad is not simply academic advancement. Beyond that, they are navigating spaces designed and reserved for colonial elites and men, politicizing their academic journey.

As it was stated by María Lugones’s (2010) discussion on the coloniality of gender, Eurocentric colonial power-imposed gender hierarchies still persist in Latin America. Those who claim their agency in educational settings resist colonialism by breaking invisibility and reclaiming their epistemic agency.

This subtheme encompasses how seeking education abroad challenges not only gender subordination but also the colonial mindset that devalues non-Western knowledge. By crossing borders to earn a postgraduate degree, women fight local patriarchy and global colonial power structures and pave the way for emancipation.

From the 15 participants, 13 of them are the first female academic migrant from their families. That is the case of, Participant 14, a master’s student in Spain and a first-generation scholar migrant, below she explains her experience:

For me, it has been one of the most incredible things that could have happened to me. I mean, for me, it’s breaking with my entire family lineage (...) it’s a political act what I’m

doing, I know historically, women have been oppressed in many ways, and for me, saying ‘I do it myself without anyone’s help’ has been a political act. (P14)

In this excerpt, P14 describes studying abroad as a political act, emphasizing the symbolism of breaking her family lineage and connecting it to the long history of systemic violence and oppression against women. Recognizing that her context did not allow her to imagine herself as a student in Europe, she decided to act, opening paths to cross both physical and gender-imposed borders rooted in coloniality.

A common feature from the participants’ discourses was the acknowledgment of the complexities of choosing academic migration as a way to continue their studies, and constantly being questioned about why not taking more traditional and gendered life paths, such as getting married, finding a steady job, or settling down in their hometowns, an example of this feature is found in the next excerpt of Participant 10, who pursuing a medical specialization in Germany, shares how deciding to study abroad represents a cultural challenge:

I think, although everything is open for all girls or people to go on exchange, I feel it’s not the path everyone takes, right? Because it’s hard. The tendency is to stay at home with family. (P10)

This excerpt is powerful because it illustrates that, in the Mexican context, a woman leaving home to pursue international education is often not regarded as a visible option. Instead, there is a status quo of gender expectations where the path seems predetermined. Therefore, opting for alternatives entails challenging established gender structures.

Following that line, we find that the political act is constant, not only in breaking with family lineages and deciding to “*salir del huacal*”¹ but also in the participants’ daily lives, where they engage in ongoing resistance and the assertion of their right to space. An example of constant resistance is illustrated below

Every morning, you have to give a speech in another language, where they judge you or check that you’re doing things right, all that in front of twenty men, you know? So, more

¹ Salir del huacal: colloquial expression, it refers to breaking the rules, defying norms, and refusing to follow orders. It is used to describe someone who is unruly, disobedient, or who crosses the line. (Excelsior, 2007)

than having broken the stereotype of leaving, I think that every day I really have to face feeling very uncomfortable over here. (P10)

In a culture where females are taught that “*calladita te ves mas bonita*” [you look prettier when you are quiet] crossing a border to pursue an education becomes a radical act of speaking out. The discomfort of not feeling that one belongs, of occupying male-dominated spaces, and of expressing our knowledge in another language constitutes a political act that is constructed day by day.

Across interviews, all research participants reported having worked before beginning their postgraduate applications. These jobs proved to be pivotal points, either for making the leap to a higher academic degree, as their primary livelihood, or to afford the investment that studying in Europe represents. In line with Bhattacharya’s (2005) research, when working-class women migrate for education, empowerment can be especially pronounced. Thus, it is worth highlighting how the efforts and work to build an academic journey abroad begin long before setting foot in a European classroom.

This theme brought to light the many layers that shape a Mexican student’s journey through European graduate studies, far deeper than merely attending lectures in a foreign classroom. It’s a significant personal process, one that resonates culturally and personally.

This section has highlighted a diversity of experiences that converge on the prevalence of academic violence within European postgraduate programs and its particular impact on migrant women. Taking part of Eurocentric spaces proves both a personal and scholarly challenge, shaping students’ academic journeys and personal experiences. Finally, we underscore the resistance and agency of Mexican women as they navigate, and actively choose, academic migration at various levels.

Theme 2: Mental Health

Understanding how moving and transformative the migrant student experience is, and aligned with participants’ journeys, mental health emerged as a recurrent theme. This section considers how migration and postgraduate studies impact students’ mental health. From this perspective, mental health cannot be understood in isolation or treated as an individual issue but

should consider female international students' intersectional contexts. Consistent with feminist critiques, mental health should be addressed by viewing how structural conditions cause distress, bearing in mind that psychological well-being is affected by the sociopolitical context (Scott, Watson & Williams, 2020).

This theme reflects the emotional impacts of the academic and migration processes, showing how structural affects the mind and the body.

Three subthemes emerged:

Subtheme 1: Exhaustion

Enrollment in a postgraduate program is demanding, and meeting master's or PhD expectations can be overwhelming. Academic pressure, intersected with institutional academic differences, language barriers, and migration processes, are factors student migrants must handle. This subtheme shows how academia's structures combined with migration-related factors lead to high levels of physical and emotional exhaustion. This is the case of Participant 11, a master's student in Austria, who was severely affected by burnout during her second year:

I had a very serious health problem due to extreme stress; I had so much cortisol in my body from studying and everything. I ended up hospitalized for about ten days due to burnout. And it was exam season, so that moment was very, very difficult. (P11)

This example shows the relationship between academic stress and its physical effects. For Lolis, hospitalization did not represent the beginning or end of her burnout. As participants noted, intense academic fatigue, especially in the context of the migratory experience, tends to be normalized.

According to the participants' shared insights, experiencing stress, exhaustion, mental fog, reduced concentration and information retention used to be framed as normal. This is associated with attending classes in a foreign language, academic content difficulty, and cultural shocks during learning.

As stated by the participants, such feelings may emerge at the beginning of their academic journey in Europe, as part of their adaptation to the educational setting, also as

temporary feelings without long term outcomes, nevertheless, several interviewees reported experiencing burnout. As Lolis expressed: “It was exam season, and it was very, very difficult,” evidencing that even when her body couldn’t handle it anymore. She remained concerned about meeting her academic requirements, which illustrates how fulfilling postgraduate obligations is intrinsically linked to other factors for migrant students, in her case the importance of keeping her scholarship and with this the ability to continue the academic journey abroad.

A recurrent topic in the interviews was how students experienced the thesis process. Although in some cases the thesis was not a significant source of distress, for others, it became a risk factor for mental health. Specially for the ones who were pursuing a PhD, but there were other cases reported in masters students also struggled emotionally, such is the case of Participant 6, a master’s student in Italy and who was studying under a full scholarship, she experienced severe physical and emotional exhaustion that led her to seek psychiatric help to complete her thesis and graduate:

They did not accept my thesis. Well, it was not well done. I had a horrible burnout. I stopped working on the thesis, and went to a psychiatrist (...) I had a terrible burnout, lost my scholarship because time had passed. (P6)

In her interview, P6 shared that feelings of exhaustion had emerged even before submitting the thesis. During the dissertation process, she experienced lack of supervision and encountered barriers to accessing support for the research development that affected the quality of her work. However, the thesis process itself became a significant source of stress and anxiety, since its successful completion was directly tied to maintaining her scholarship and adhering to its policy-driven degree requirements. This example shows the emotional impacts arising from the participants' experiences: some testimonies shared the initiation of psychiatric medication, engagement in psychotherapy or resumption of psychological support, given the high levels of fatigue during their postgraduates abroad.

Burnout in migrant students also affects them institutionally through the risk of losing scholarships, affectations in their grades and consequences if they fail to meet institutional requirements. To take care of oneself in such difficult times requires to take actions to strengthen the body and the mind, perhaps by attending professional mental health services or by adopting self-care actions focused on helping them thrive and recover from burnout episodes, especially

when accessing mental health services in a foreign country may be a barrier. However, those experiencing burnout need specialized care for recovery, and isolation plus lack of local support networks amplify vulnerability. This self-care or self-sustenance of mental health, derived from structures that put their well-being at risk shows how social conditions become individualized without addressing systemic causes.

Subtheme 2: Feelings of Stress and Anxiety

This subtheme reflects the different nuances that cause feelings of stress and anxiety in students' experiences, as well as factors that may cause emotional discomfort beyond academic demands. To begin with, participants reported that migration procedures are a major source of stress, describing them as tedious, stressful, complicated, and even chaotic; some mentioned that procedures were manageable thanks to university or scholarship institutional support.

It is important to remember that any first-time or renewal residence permit application requires a university enrolment letter; in certain cases, universities liaise directly with immigration authorities. Complications in institutional, academic, and governmental procedures have negative effects on students' emotional states. For example, Participant 2, who did her PhD in Ireland, experienced institutional negligence at her university that had consequences for her migration procedures:

I think they forgot to enroll me for two years, but my residence permit depends on being enrolled, so they left me in a migration limbo that they didn't care about and the stress it caused me. Once I applied for a COVID extension; they lost the payment. They lost my ethics application for two months. They lost my PhD exam report for another two months, so it delayed many things and caused unnecessary stress. (P2)

This extract exemplifies some of the most prominent feelings of stress in academic experience. Alongside multiple student responsibilities, they must manage migration procedures, navigate university bureaucracy, and rely on the institution, placing students in vulnerable positions within migration policies. On the other hand, this dependence can provide protection when universities provide strong support services.

Similarly, academic evaluations proved a significant source of feelings of anxiety. Exams and assignments are essential for academic progress: passing “terms” not only ensures academic continuity and issuance of a new enrollment letter but also enables residence permit renewal. Below, Participant 15, a medical specialization resident in Germany, illustrates how exam pressure can trigger severe physical and emotional consequences, especially intertwined with migration procedure uncertainty:

I needed to pass that exam for my visa to be renewed. So, in some way, it caused me a lot of stress. I was unfocused, very anxious, I had trouble sleeping, gastrointestinal syndrome, I felt like a little balloon all the time. (P15)

This example highlights that, alongside feelings of anxiety, physical symptoms may also manifest in response to the stress of visa renewals and the continuation of their academic journey. For student migrants in specific, failing exams is not only an academic setback, but a direct threat to the life and career some of them are trying to build in Europe.

Overall, this subtheme covered how feelings of stress and anxiety are an embodied response to academic migration, highlighting the interconnectedness between migration procedures and academic life, amplifying the feelings of stress while navigating other difficulties and challenges.

Subtheme 3: Low Mood

Migrant students face additional stress layers: beyond the emotional toll of being far from home, navigating borderlands, both physical and emotional, contributes to low mood and feelings of depression. As Van de Velde et al.(2023) demonstrate in their gender comparison, female students report more depressive symptoms than male counterparts. Academic and migration distress can prompt low mood and feelings of depression; intersected with lack of support and difficulties navigating health systems, migrant students are considered a vulnerable group.

From a feminist-informed, qualitative standpoint (Brown, 2019), low mood and feelings of depression are embodied responses to broader contextual factors such as social injustice, gender disparities, and systemic oppression, impacting mind and body. This approach

understands these embodied experiences as forms of resistance and adaptation to contextual challenges, ways of reconnecting with shared vulnerability and acknowledging feelings. It encourages creating self-care spaces so integrating new realities becomes more manageable.

Across interviews, recurrent themes of feelings of depression and low mood emerged. Participants spoke about homesickness, nostalgia, seasonal lows, ambivalence between positive and negative moods, sometimes to the point of suicidal thoughts, those were recurrent codes from their experiences.

In the following extract, we read a case of emotional impact resulting from migratory grief and how local climatic conditions affect well-being and mood:

Nostalgia is hard; being far from the people you love is really hard. The weather affects me emotionally; I'm someone who struggles to find energy to get up in the morning and be productive on cloudy and grey days, so I tend to get a little depressed. (P12)

As illustrated in the example, migrant students experience physical and emotional adjustment processes during postgraduate studies. In the case of the participants, European climatic conditions, particularly long winters, reduced daylight, and low temperatures, can intensify physical and emotional discomfort. Many other participants echoed P12's experience, because living in the Borderlands led them to reframe the relationships they left behind in Mexico and to find ways to persevere them from afar. Some participants mentioned that family members are dealing with chronic illnesses and not being physically close to offer support and care affects them emotionally.

A common pattern in participants' experiences was how uncertainty in different stages of their academic journeys caused low mood and despair. P10 is one of them. In addition to uncertainty, she struggled with cultural shocks and found it hard to get health insurance for her mental health. These struggles were due to not finding work, crying Infront of her partner which eventually made studying feel like a harder task for her. These issues go hand in hand, which is why after getting treated she felt better overall.

And once I finally got my health insurance, I looked for a psychiatrist and told them, 'You know what? I'm not okay; I'm feeling very bad. I have problems with my husband because I'm always crying; I don't have work right now, I can't. So I can't even study. I

need something, and that's it.' The psychiatrist prescribed something, and eventually I got better. (P10)

This example also illustrates how low mood impacts not only intrapersonal and interpersonal spheres but also academic trajectories, as low mood negatively affects motivation, energy, and concentration. For those who shared feelings of depression, some of them got professional help, some others didn't access it due to insurance and money constraints, while others explained they didn't believe it was that severe to need professional support and decided to manage it in other ways.

Theme 3: Resistance and Meaning Making

In line with Borderlands Theory (Anzaldúa, 1987), Mexican women's academic experience in Eurocentric spaces opens a gap for emerging hybrid identities and resistance, as it involves constant integration with the foreign (the other), where pre-migration knowledge and ways of life articulate with new environments. The coexistence of these identities constitutes a way of making sense: reconstructing and deconstructing oneself, reinforcing what is inherent to being Mexican and valuable to them, letting go of what is no longer useful in new contexts, and little by little rewriting their identities. Resistance and learning happen not only academically but personally.

For participants, going through this process is not in isolation but in community. Support networks play a crucial role in sustaining and empowering them while they navigate the complexities of academic migration. This theme highlights how the weaving of support networks is key for resisting intersectional vulnerabilities in European academic spaces and the intrapersonal experience of meaning making as migrant students. Here, resistance and meaning intersect with self-care, where participants shared practices that keep them strong and help them continue their academic paths. Below are three subthemes where this is analyzed.

Subtheme 1: Support networks and collectivity

Tejer redes de Cuidado [weaving networks of care] and connection implies building support networks that foster resistance and well-being for academic migrants; often, these networks are vital for survival. This subtheme explores how participants establish support networks in Mexico or their study locations, the roles these networks play before and during migration, and the positive impact of collectivity.

Support networks include those in Mexico, family and friends, and those woven at the residence location: classmates, friends, partners, fellow nationals, Latino and migrant groups. All are fundamental protective factors, highlighting community and collectivism's crucial role.

During the interviews, participants were asked if their local support networks were protective factors. To this, Participant 4 shared:

They supported me so much, so, so, so much. I have no doubt. Because there was always someone who cared; I didn't spend a single Christmas alone or feeling like a burden in any place. (P4)

This example makes visible the fundamental role of local support networks in making the student migrant feel accompanied. For P4, who values collectivity, having a circle where she felt included and supported was key to her well-being and experience abroad. In the voice of participants, having a community helped them thrive and overcome challenges, in particular those circles constituted by Mexican and Latino people. They expressed that having a community where they can share their experiences made them feel resilient and understood, with them they can share aspects of their life and get support in a way that those support networks in Mexico cannot give, because they don't fully understand and people in Mexico tend to believe that living in Europe may not represent a struggle, since they are fulfilling their goals in a privilege setting.

In this sense, local support networks were key to overcoming obstacles. These networks offer companionship for shared realities, remain attentive to each other's needs, and provide care when the students are not able to take care of themselves, for example in cases of emotional burden or medical issues. This is how P3 and her network went through struggles in their academic journey:

We got through it, of course, with tears and *apapachos* [affection and comfort] and by being there for each other(...) We were checking if we have eaten, checking if we had a good sleep, our routine changed a lot, and we don't take care of our own basic needs no one will do it(...) *mis amigas fueron quienes me salvaron* [my friends were the ones who saved me]. (P3)

This section also shows how the opportunity to study abroad results from collective efforts and support, not just individual achievements. P7 says:

Reciprocity is everything to me, and that's why it's so important and significant for me to be here. Because I always feel like I'm not alone. I stand on the shoulders of giants who paved the way, sacrifices made by my community, my family, my ancestors. I always feel accompanied. You can't see them here, but here they are, with me (P7)

As expressed by participants, *el tejido social* [social fabric] not only supports during the academic journey but, according to participants, the support they receive from their networks is also a crucial part of being able to study in Europe, and it deepens the shared impact, strengthening a sense of community. By weaving these support networks, students create a shelter for mutual care, reinforcing a sense of community and accompaniment.

Subtheme 2: Self-Care as Political Resistance

“Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare” (Lorde, 1988, p. 131). Following Lorde's thought, this subtheme addresses self-care as a political resistance act, reclaiming the right to well-being. Participants have developed strategies for self-care using available resources, challenging productivity norms. Even with academic demands and feelings of inadequacy, adopting physical and emotional self-care acts becomes a way to support and sustain themselves, which is of high importance in difficult times.

This section shows how migrant students implemented self-care practices during their academic paths, ranging from accessing mental health services, therapy, psychiatric treatment, psychoeducation, to meaningful daily actions like mindfulness, exercise, spirituality, and motivational self-talk.

Among the most notable self-care practices were mindfulness activities. A clear example is Participant 13, diagnosed during her master's in Spain, Portugal, and Turkey with a physical and emotional illness, exacerbated by navigating diverse health systems and her insurer announcing near her program's end that they would no longer cover her condition. Added to academic demands, caring remotely for her elderly parents, and constant mobility P13 shares:

I went for walks a lot when I felt stressed or overwhelmed. Reading helped me a lot, disconnecting. I'd go to bookstores or libraries, rent or buy secondhand books, then read in a park or café for a while to calm down. Also, immersing myself in local culture helped. (P13)

For P13, moments of self-awareness through walking, reading, and cultural immersion were ways to resist high-pressure moments. Similarly, P11, who also faced a burnout-related medical crisis, shared her valued recovery and relapse prevention measures:

I never stopped exercising; even if just a bit, I'd go for walks, trying to clear my mind of everything that happened, maintaining a positive attitude, which neurologists noted that helped a lot in getting better. (P11)

Through her experience, which resonates with the voice of participants, we can see the importance of moments for debriefing and physical activities as forms of self-care, and how maintaining an optimistic attitude can support coping with academic activities and life as a migrant.

Resistance is not a linear process and perseveres through different stages of the academic journey. It manifests in daily self-care actions, in the ways that postgraduate students care for themselves and find meaning. They described the experience of being a student migrant as an emotional roller-coaster, when one day they may experience positive emotions and the day after things might change and go through low mood. Day by day, actions like self-determined internal dialogues and personal reminders support them, as Participant 5, a master student in the Netherlands, shared how her internal dialogue sounds like:

I am where I wanted to be,' and it serves as a mental reminder that I'm doing exactly what I always wanted, and that the conditions I'm in, the context, both academic and my daily life are overall positive for me (...)So, so having such positive atmosphere is

motivating, and it's like ok, I miss my family or I miss the foods, but at the same time I'm gaining all of this (P5)

Subtheme 3: Changes in identity and self-concept

Across the interviews, moments when students described inhabiting multiple cultural codes at once where identified, where Mexican and European academic and cultural norms converged. The participants shared how Mexican networks in Europe form study groups, cultural associations and support networks, in addition on how their identities and self-concept have been reshaped and the emergence of new identities as result of the academic migration.

This subtheme is approached through the lenses of Theory of Borderlands (1987), because it helps to make sense of the mestiza consciousness and Nepantla (the psychological and cultural in “betweenness”). This framework helps to make sense of how these women have lived identity changes, their realizations of changes in self-concept, and have developed deep personal growth while navigating multiple realities.

The interviewees described an emotional ambivalence, they missed and longed for Mexico, while simultaneously appreciating the place where they are or were studying. Participants explained how they can live and develop in a foreign country and still embracing their identities rooted in Mexico. Certain aspects do not change, they are merely integrated and accommodated whiting next contexts, just as P15 recounts in her experience of living in the Borderlands:

It's very complicated, but somehow it makes you feel like you're no longer from there, yet you're not really from here either (...) When you're in Mexico, you feel like something's missing, that you long for certain things from the country you migrated from. And in Germany, you miss things from Mexico and think, 'Hey, please bring back my tacos or send me those warm and nice people' (...) I felt confused and maybe a bit melancholic. The first time I experienced it was very strange, but in the end, I managed to internalize it peacefully and accept that, indeed, I'm neither from here nor from there, and I just move forward. (P15)

As stated in the extract, living in the borderlands means inhabiting nostalgia and longing, that feeling of “something’s missing”, and at the same time connecting with a new territorial space where a life project and hybrid identities can create a sense of belonging. A shared feature in participants’ experience was how confronting that feeling can be, at first, shocking, but having the opportunity to inhabit the borderlands, embracing the emotions and multiple realities that shape the migrant student’s identity, becomes a catalyst and a way to make sense of their experiences and continue with their academic journeys.

The experience of the participants were very diverse, some participants shared how living in Europe has strengthened their sense of belonging to Mexican culture, and how being far from home let them to embrace their Mexican identity and community ties in a different way, and how they have used cultural symbols as a form of resistance and a way to connect with parts of themselves whether through music, food, and collectivist actions. These symbolic actions represented a way for them to reconnect, embrace nostalgia, and feel motivated in times of struggles and in feelings of loneliness.

The participants explained how studying and living abroad have reshaped their identities, highlighting how academic migration serves as a motivation for developing new qualities and strengths. Here is the example of P13:

I learned so much about myself, things I had no idea about. It was like seeing myself from a completely different perspective, learning many new things about me, revaluing and reconsidering many aspects, and I definitely don’t feel the same person I was when I left (...) you realize your resilience, your strength, your problem-solving ability. I think you also reappraise yourself, because sometimes here (in Mexico) you’re not aware of what you were capable and being over there you see yourself from a different position.
(P13)

The participants discovered how the international experience led them to feel greater freedom and resilience, and that determination was key to continuing their postgraduate studies even when facing adversities and emotional struggles. Additionally, they noticed changes in their personalities, they shared how they developed more openness and flexibility, they felt more confident about themselves, and developed interpersonal skills, they described it as personal transformation and strengthening.

Within these experiences of personal growth and accomplishment in the borderlands, participants also express how academic migration tends to be romanticized in Mexico, acknowledging that, despite the benefits and privileges it brings, this phenomenon should not be idealized. The participants showed to be mindful of both perspectives, both the hard and beneficial parts of academic migration, they embrace their growth, recognize the challenges and are able to *apalabrar* [name and claim] their journey and take accountability of it.

Discussion

This study set out to investigate the experience of Mexican postgraduate students in Europe, concerning the challenges they encounter and their resilience in the academic migration process. This chapter discusses the study's main findings in relation to the initial research questions and the theoretical framework. It interprets the results within the broader context of existing literature and considers their implications, limitations, and contributions to the field.

There was a very positive response after the invitation to participate in the study was shared. The participants demonstrated openness and a willingness to collaborate, which is a significant finding. Many expressed how important it is to discuss this topic and appreciated the opportunity to be interviewed. They emphasized that the evidence gathered would benefit women who wish to pursue postgraduate studies overseas. This involves having role models, adopting a broad and realistic perspective on the choice to study abroad, and sharing how they successfully became student migrants and overcame challenges.

The academic journeys of Mexican women cannot be generalized. However, by reflecting on the commonalities and patterns in their experiences, we can acknowledge the prevalence of academic institutional violence, the negative effects of coloniality and patriarchy in the self-perception of students, and how they resist and take ownership of their postgraduate experiences.

The findings indicate that academic violence reflects the colonial dynamics present in certain European institutions. By applying an intersectional lens (Crenshaw, 1991; Anzaldúa & Moraga, 1981; Curiel, 2017; Makuc Urbina, 2020), it becomes evident that the challenges faced by Mexican women in postgraduate programs cannot be fully understood without considering how their personal histories, gender identity, national origin, scholarship status, and migration status intersect, placing them in a particularly vulnerable position.

Academic violence exists in the lived experience of participants, this type of systemic violence is reproduced by some European institutions in semantic ways as Lugones suggests (2008). The cases of academic violence are connected with racialized and gendered factors (Crenshaw, 1991). The findings in this research connect with the findings of Cueva (2014) indicating that in fact there are emotional and physical implications of going through academic

violence. From the perspective of the coloniality of power (Quijano, 2007; Restrepo, 2017), it becomes evident that exclusionary dynamics are perpetuated through specific institutional practices.

Exploring participants' experiences of violence reveals that, even after leaving those cycles behind, recalling and naming such incidents continues to cause deep distress. The time that has passed since these events adds depth to the analysis, some have broken free from those patterns, while others still confront them. Moreover, the challenges of academic migration intensify the impact of institutional violence, prolonging its emotional effects. As Rodríguez and Kokka (2023) observe, these findings confirm that students' bodies carry the burden of violence and inequality in academic settings; by resisting institutional aggression, they come to understand that their very existence is itself an act of defiance against oppressive structures.

For those already aware of academic violence as a phenomenon, naming and processing it came more easily. For those unfamiliar with the concept, integrating it took longer, leaving a gap in which they blamed themselves, normalized the mistreatment, or even assumed it was simply part of adapting to the European system. This echoes what Anzaldúa calls *La Facultad*, exemplified by how these students developed the insight and perspective-taking needed to recognize danger or conditions that render them vulnerable.

Anxiety, demoralization, and insomnia described by the participants confirm Cueva's (2014) findings that academic violence has both emotional and physical repercussions. Anger and helplessness surfaced in response to these injustices and propelled the students to protect themselves and seek more dignified ways to experience their academic migration. But before that mobilization came confusion and fear. These two emotions are tied to their status as scholarship holders, economically and institutionally dependent on their awards to continue studying in Europe. The emotional toll led many participants to turn to mental health services and both personal and collective forms of care to cope with the effects of academic violence.

The coloniality of knowledge, as discussed by Mignolo (2020), manifests in various ways within academia, particularly through language. Participants reported that faculty often expect them to write and speak as flawlessly as native speakers, with corrections of their linguistic differences delivered in a cold and deliberate manner. This dynamic was especially pronounced

in Spain; despite sharing the same language, instructors imposed a hierarchy of “proper” Spanish, labeling the students’ Mexican Spanish as incorrect.

The reproduction of social inequalities and hierarchies of knowledge was evident in unexpected ways, such as lack of supervision and lack of knowledge transfer. After being accepted into postgraduate programs, the participants believed their expertise and identities would be easily integrated into the system. However, they soon discovered that the academic environment itself could also pose significant risks.

Attributing significance to individuals’ physical features and mocking their manner of speaking are not just acts of discrimination; they are also manifestations of the coloniality of power in practice. While these actions are indeed racialized, they reflect a colonial mindset that undermines alternative forms of knowledge and existence, what Anzaldúa (1987) refers to as hybrid identities. This dynamic creates subtle forms of segregation and reinforces a widespread sense of non-belonging.

Cases of aggression within postgraduate programs can be examined through the lens of what Lugones (2010) described as gender myths and Eurocentric categories, that is, how language and naming operate as vectors of colonial and patriarchal violence. Lugones identifies rigid, essentializing gender myths, imposed through discourse and language, as a form of violence against the subjectivities of marginalized women. I approach this discussion drawing from Lugones’ framework, rather than using the term “microaggressions,” as it is commonly employed. Labeling these acts as “micro” often serves to obscure broader forms of violence. According to the participants’ testimonies, the impact is real and profound, both in the short and long term. The pain is not micro. The rage is not micro. Calling it micro distorts the experience and minimizes its emotional weight. Words pierce both body and mind, semantic violence within academia thus becomes a weapon of the coloniality of power, intensified by the intersecting identities that migrant women have.

Building on the findings of Munguía and Flores (2023) considering that only a minority of their participants had studied in Europe, and that, compared to those who remained in Mexico, their trajectories were largely described as free from violence, I add that institutional forms of academic violence appear to be strikingly similar in the Mexican context. In this study, 7 out of 15 participants reported having experienced academic violence, a figure that underscores the

prevalence of this phenomenon. These findings reaffirm that academic violence is both real and persistent within European academia. Leaving the country does not exempt us from experiencing it. Academic spaces are still sites where faculty, supervisors, and staff reproduce violence, precisely because these practices are systematically sustained by the institution itself.

It is worth reconsidering how various forms of violence continue to persist, only their modes of expression change over time, without ever being truly confronted at the root. Every student has the same right to access and thrive within academia as a native student of the host university, yet it often seems that academic trajectories are marked by uneven levels of obstacles. What is most concerning is that these obstacles are normalized and frequently individualized, placing the burden on those who experience them rather than addressing the systemic structures that produce them.

The experiences that built the subtheme *The Real Impostor: Coloniality and Patriarchy in Academia Emerged* across different parts of the interviews, especially in segments where participants were sharing their feelings around being in Eurocentric institutions and the challenges of confronting colonial systems of thinking. Self-doubt, lack of confidence and language barriers were common features that caused them to struggle in feeling worthy, entitled and competent as postgraduate students.

This theme was named in that way because the approach is to dismantle the perception where the impostor is oneself. Contrary to Clance and Imes (1978) proposed, I write it this way cause I want to reframe the way female student migrants posed themselves as the ones who are the problem and the impostor lives inside them, when in reality the impostor is outside and permeates the educational and institutional systems.

As Mexican women pursuing postgraduate study abroad, these students occupy a uniquely privileged yet precarious position, because not only have they surpassed the average educational attainment in Mexico, but they must also navigate intense self-doubt born of longstanding *machista* cultural norms. Renata Kaminski (2022) similarly documents how academic settings grapple with low self-esteem and impaired performance as a result of impostor feelings. This study confirms that community stigmas, societal pressures, and socio-economic disparities converge to undermine confidence, particularly for those who are the first in their

families to attend university abroad. Even among high-achieving Mexican women whose accomplishments in higher education should, in theory, grant them unqualified confidence.

Participants' reflections strongly resonate with Patricia Hill Collins's concept of the "outsider within." (1999) As members of a marginalized minority in European academia, Latino communities are relegated to the periphery by structural forces, while the coloniality of knowledge often dismisses their ways of knowing as inferior to European standards. This closely aligns with the findings of Wright-Mair et al. (2023), which indicate that this phenomenon stems from the internalization of social inequality, where Latinx students are particularly prone to feeling like impostors due to their intersecting identities. Hill Collins (1999) and Wright-Mair et al. (2023) frameworks illustrate how these racial and epistemic hierarchies foster persistent feelings of unworthiness, even for individuals who have secured competitive grants or gained admission to prestigious international programs.

Coloniality is the impostor, not the students themselves. Structural factors shape this mindset as students navigate through racist and sexist educational systems. The women shared experiences of oppressive conditions that have hindered their academic journeys, which extend beyond their identities as students. Oppression is part of our history as women and post-colonial communities. Additionally, language barriers play a crucial role in fostering feelings of isolation and self-doubt. Women whose first languages have been devalued by colonial education systems struggle to assert their authority in classrooms that are structured around Eurocentric norms.

Patriarchy is the other impostor, not the women. Participants recalled inequalities related to sex and gender, and they recognized the contradiction between the inclusion-driven and gender-neutral institutional language. As Gutierrez and Muhs (2012) describe, they find themselves perceived as "presumed incompetents" by white, male-dominated institutions. As women and student migrants, we are expected to measure up in academic, personal, and professional realms. The gendered expectations and socially assigned roles make it difficult for us to excel in all these areas simultaneously, as society expects women to do. Consequently, feelings of being an impostor arise from a demanding and unequal system that disproportionately affects women's perceptions of themselves.

In this context, academic migration among Mexican women is intertwined with many factors that evoke feelings of impostor syndrome. These feelings stem from being raised in a

patriarchal culture and the influence of colonial epistemologies and logics, which activate long standing issues. I wonder: if participants could reframe the notion of impostor syndrome, what changes would they make? How would they feel if they discovered they are not impostors but rather allies for themselves and their community?

It is important to emphasize that for most of the participants academic migration wasn't an option they were given. Thirteen out of the fifteen participants are first-generation academic migrants, which for them meant breaking traditional gender roles related to their professional careers and personal lives. While they received support in their home contexts to pursue professional studies, in Mexico, obtaining a master's degree is already above the national average. Studying abroad presents even more challenges, both culturally and institutionally.

The participants' experiences reflect Bhattar's findings, as their motivations for academic migration were rooted in the pursuit of dreams and aspirations, with higher education serving as a vehicle to achieve them. They chose countries and institutions that could act as bridges toward the kind of life they envisioned for themselves, aligning their decisions with their personal and professional goals. It is important to note that the availability of scholarships played a significant role in shaping these choices. Nonetheless, in this study, all participants expressed satisfaction with their selected postgraduate programs. Their experiences abroad contributed to their empowerment and broadened their expectations, as leaving the country opened up horizons that would not have been accessible to them in Mexico.

In this sense, academic migration becomes a political act. The decision to leave the country in order to study, to take action, and to fight for scholarships and admissions in Europe are disruptive moves that, for Mexican women, represent self-determination and empowerment, acts of resistance against patriarchal norms. As Martínez-Cairo and Buscemi (2021) point out, for the participants, this journey is not merely about obtaining a university degree. It is about confronting a system that has historically been reserved for those with high socioeconomic status, for men, and for predominantly European populations.

The inclusion criterion requiring participants to be in the final stages of their postgraduate studies or to have already completed them allowed for a reflective perspective on their experiences. Having already lived through the realities of being migrant students, they were able to articulate their journeys beyond the initial shocks of migration or the excitement of having

achieved the milestone of enrolling in a European postgraduate program. This positioning enabled them to engage with their experiences from a broader and more grounded perspective, naming and narrating them from a different standpoint.

Another noteworthy aspect within the context of this research is that all participants were employed prior to pursuing their studies in Europe. This contrasts with the more linear academic trajectories commonly observed in European contexts, where students often transition directly from undergraduate to postgraduate studies. In the Mexican context, the reality is different: it is common to begin working with only an undergraduate degree, typically completed in four to five years, and socioeconomic conditions often necessitate employment to ensure financial stability. For many of the participants, the decision to migrate was not immediate but rather a long-term process that involved working, saving money, investing time and effort into searching for scholarships, preparing applications, facing rejections, and persevering through them. This process also involved negotiating with their families, helping them understand the value of this plan and seeking their moral support.

In a context where migration is commonly directed toward the United States and often motivated by family reunification, caregiving responsibilities, or employment, academic migration to Europe represents a break from socially expected pathways. While Anzaldúa's analysis was rooted in the experiences of Chicanas and Latinxs within U.S. academia, this research shows that the experiences of Mexican women in Europe share similar nuances of empowerment and resistance. This connection lies in the shared cultural roots and deeply embedded traditions that, when challenged in pursuit of alternative ways of life, signify an act of agency, a conscious effort to claim space and inhabit the borderlands.

In this way, the political act intersects with cultural, social, and personal layers. When academic migration is not a path traditionally carved out for women from their communities, these women have taken it upon themselves to forge it. They speak of this journey with pride, with nostalgia, and with undeniable strength.

The women's experiences of exhaustion, anxiety, and low mood are not merely individual issues that follow us from Mexico to Europe; they are embodied signals of how colonial, gendered, and class-based power is perpetuated within Eurocentric institutions. Intersectionality reminds us that a single body can simultaneously represent multiple identities: Mexican, Latina,

migrant, brown-skinned, scholarship recipient, and Spanish-speaking. As a result, every policy, deadline, or wait in a migration office is experienced through a combination of these social identities, rather than being viewed as a single factor. Decolonial feminist psychology takes this further by teaching us that mental distress must be understood in relation to the historical and ongoing effects of colonialism; healing cannot be separated from the pursuit of justice.

The mental health of the participants of this research is significantly influenced by the various challenges they encounter, particularly the inequalities and disadvantages they face due to their migrant status. According to Williams & Watson (2016), these inequalities are often overlooked or misrepresented in health services. This can be illuminated in the fact that some participants, even when facing emotional struggles, didn't receive professional mental health support. Reasons for this included the lack of clarity in accessing mental health services, time constraints, economic restrictions to pay for psychotherapy, the normalization of discomfort, or lacking the confidence to seek help, especially within the university environment.

On the other hand, those who attended mental health services had to pay for them out of their own pockets, as insurance did not cover them. Some participants continued remotely with the therapy they had previously begun in Mexico, while others started when living abroad.

Language and cultural differences also hindered student migrants from accessing inclusive mental health care in the places where they live. Extending on the work of Kelly et.al. (2018), I demonstrate that difficulties with language proficiency contributed to negative experiences. As a result, many of them have chosen to seek online therapy with Mexican mental health practitioners. For participants with a prior psychological diagnosis, struggles with academic migration can exacerbate symptoms. Consequently, student migrants diagnosed with psychological conditions are more vulnerable and face greater health risks while abroad.

In the context of exhaustion, burnout emerges as the physical symptom of a neoliberal university model that demands intense cognitive productivity, erasing the labor of linguistic adaptation and cultural translation of student migrants. Employing the coloniality of knowledge and gender (Mignolo 2020; Lugones 2008) in this discussion allow us to uncover how taking part of Eurocentric institutions leads students to internalize the belief that their expertise and knowledge are inadequate or not good enough. An additional layer involves pedagogical

differences and cultural shocks in academia, that require migrant students to "relearn" how to be students and do so in another language.

As a result, these students feel compelled to compensate in various ways. This burden is further intensified by the pressure to achieve high grades, as scholarship retention and immigration permit renewals are closely linked to satisfactory progress in the postgraduates, in addition to performing well on a daily basis. This creates a constant demand for strong academic performance.

When we consider this alongside Lugones's concept of the colonality of gender, it becomes evident that women face additional challenges. Participants noted that, as women, they feel they must continually reaffirm their right to occupy academic and social spaces, an expectation that their male peers do not face. Women's overinvestment in caretaking roles extends into academia, for example sleeplessness and "normalizing" fatigue reflect an internalized expectation that one's body must absorb structural inequalities. Additionally, some participants reported having caring roles for their families in Mexico. Even after migrating, these roles do not vanish; instead, they transform, as they continue to care for relatives from afar.

Striving to meet the expectations of European academic institutions while navigating personal and institutional migration processes often leads Mexican students to experience significant exhaustion that negatively impacts their health, particularly during their thesis work. This situation worsens if they encounter academic violence in the process. This research resonates with Seroto (2018) and Restrepo (2017) points of view, indicating that participants have endured epistemic violence, which reinforces the notion that only certain forms of knowledge are considered legitimate. These colonial dynamics significantly affect their mental health.

Institutional academic violence and systemic violence during migration processes significantly increased stress levels among students. As student migrants, they experienced heightened anxiety. Participants reported that their physical health often deteriorated, leading them to seek healthcare services. In addition to managing existing health issues, navigating unfamiliar medical services, having consultations in a foreign language, and dealing with insurance and bureaucratic procedures added additional layers of stress to their already challenging experiences.

These findings are consistent with those of Granillo (2011), who also found that participants experienced significant stress and psychological difficulties throughout their academic journey. This was largely due to dissatisfaction with their academic experience and being victims of institutional discrimination. These emotional impacts extended beyond their feelings, negatively affecting their academic performance as well.

Studying in Europe is not the culmination of a dream and a goal, but rather a continuation and a bridge toward achieving other aspirations, serving as a means for both professional and personal growth. They emphasize how much they value the opportunity to study abroad and reflected on the discipline they adopt to advance their studies and make the most of the postgraduate. This commitment can easily transition to pressure and high self-demands that cause emotional overload. The pressure to meet the system's expectations (and how they internalize them) is intensified by the emotional challenges associated with social mobility. Consequently, feelings of anxiety not only arise naturally but are also heightened by the conflict between their responsibilities as students and other concerns they must handle as migrants.

The research reveals how romanticized this phenomenon and little is said about the emotional pain inherent in migrating for the sake of one's studies, since academic migration is often romanticized in Mexico. In this context, thinking about migration is associated with great sacrifices, not a choice but a must to survive and find better life opportunities, and the risks of irregular migration routes. In this context women are often seen as accompanying dependents without much agency. The notion of women choosing to migrate to a destination other than the United States, contradicts these narratives. In the collective and colonial mindset, Europe is perceived as the ultimate ideal, a dream. This contributes to the belief that studying in Europe has no emotional costs or mental health impacts.

Bhattar research (2023) places an emphasis on feelings of loneliness, cultural shocks and stress in student migrants. This study found a similar pattern in many participants who reported experiencing low moods while feeling isolated or only connected to a close circle who share similar experiences. Adding on the work of Bhattar, migratory grief emerged as a recurrent experience among participants. They often feel misunderstood in Mexico and fear judgment for being "privileged migrants" who seemingly have no reason to suffer. Some others felt free to opened up about their struggles and find support in their network in Mexico.

Academic migration pulls many sensitive strings. Living between cultures, dealing with a divided heart, and facing constant uncertainty can take a toll on mental health. Despite confronting injustices, disparities, and the relentless demands of a capitalist, colonial system, participants tackle these challenges head-on and strive to persevere.

During the interviews, participants shared the various aspects that shape the migratory experience. As a final segment of the interview, I asked them what sustains them throughout their postgraduate studies, and every single one replied: their support networks. Personally, although I anticipated echoing Rodríguez and Kokka's (2023) findings, that highlight that fostering connecting with support networks and emphasizing the importance of collective healing are vital components of resistance in academia, the fact that all participants opened this discussion by naming "support networks," and then elaborated on what these networks mean to them and on other forms of resistance, was profoundly meaningful and moving.

What impressed me the most was how they shared their experiences: shifting from accounts of violence, pain, effort, and sacrifice to speaking of their support networks with tones of pride, nostalgia, joy, even tears in their eyes. Hearing how these networks have accompanied them throughout their journeys was undeniably enriching and led me to reflect on how this research itself constitutes part of a social fabric, a weaving together of their stories and those of other Mexican women in Europe.

The fact that support networks play such a crucial role in the resistance of migrant women resonates with the Abya Yala psychology emphasis on community interconnectivity for *buen vivir* (Ciófalo & Ortiz-Torres, 2024; Ferreiro Lago, 2018) and with key concepts from Liberation Psychology (Martín-Baró 1984) emphasizing the collective aspect of well-being, where identity is seen not as an isolated self, but as a community process. Building upon the findings of Granillo (2011), this research expands the understanding of social support to be protective for the well-being of female student migrants. From the testimonies gathered, it becomes clear that healing and resistance arise through community networks, woven connections of care, support, and interdependence.

Studying in Europe is not merely an individual accomplishment; it represents a collective journey, a historical rupture of coloniality and gender roles that open new paths for future generations. In agreement with Wright-Mair et.al. (2023) the support of family and peers plays a

crucial role in reducing feelings of isolation, highlighting the significance of collectivism as a valuable cultural asset. Just as the participants feel sustained by their communities, both those who are in Mexico and those in their current places of residence, they also see themselves as contributors to these circles, offering care to others and engaging in social reciprocity.

Build a home far from home. Although the support networks from Mexico have evolved due to distance and continue to be important for those involved, participants have started to develop a new sense of belonging by nurturing their communities. They come together in kitchens to prepare Mexican food, use WhatsApp groups to share both frustrations and celebrations, and gather in living rooms to offer comfort and support during difficult times. These spaces serve as places of resistance. Within these environments, individuals learn to navigate the struggles associated with student migration. These in-between spaces embody what Gloria Anzaldúa refers to as *Nepantla*. In this context, circles of *Neplanteras*, especially female friends sharing similar identities, provide meaningful collective support.

From this perspective, collective care is also care for the body-territory. Sharing experiences and living migration in community become ways to recharge our energies, weave alliances, and build networks of accompaniment. The body, as our first territory, travels with us wherever we go: we continue inhabiting the same body, and therefore the same territory, even in migratory contexts. This body-territory carries a colonial wound, and it is precisely through encountering one another, weaving networks, and practicing collective care that we reclaim the right to *buen vivir*. Engaging with the body-territory with compassion and attentive care becomes a revolutionary act. The participants resist injustices and overcome challenges by holding themselves accountable and nurturing their well-being.

For the women in this study, self-care practices proved essential to sustaining their academic journeys. As emphasized by bell hooks and Audre Lorde (COFEM, 2024). Engaging in physical exercise, pursuing creative activities, and nurturing personal relationships not only help them recharge their energy but also play a critical role in resisting systemic injustices. In a system that romanticizes exhaustion and valorizes relentless academic overexertion, and under conditions that compel migrant students to labor harder than their peers, pausing to cultivate moments of rest, leisure, and inward connection is, in Lorde's words, "a political warfare."

Since the migratory journey is an emotional roller coaster, marked by uncertainty and constant change, adopting loving practices and a stance of self-compassion leads to better mood regulation and greater resilience among migrant students. Equally compelling is how participants draw strength from embracing and leveraging their cultural heritage, a finding that mirrors Unzueta's (2023) work, where this resilience not only allows them to navigate challenges but also inspires them to confront adversity. Consequently, they come to recognize themselves and other Latinas as strong and powerful individuals.

Recognizing that migration brings both solitude and introspection, participants find in these spaces an opportunity for self-discovery and resilience. In solitude, they adopt an optimistic outlook on challenges, mentally reminding themselves of the value of pursuing a postgraduate degree in Europe, of the sacrifices it took to get here, the fierce competition required to win a scholarship. They also reflect on their past, their current situation, and the future they aspire to create. This reflective practice has a reinforcing motivating effect that proves highly beneficial for coping with emotional lows. These findings deepen current understandings of the enhancement of self-discovery and positive transformation in female international university students (Kelly et.al. 2018), especially in the role of self-awareness and its contribution to building resilience, courage and validation through their academic journeys.

In both collective settings and individually, the participants undergo identity transformations and shifts in how they perceive themselves. As Anzaldúa (1987) describes, inhabiting the borders is a space in which they have discovered new ways of being and of living, challenging colonial definitions and forging perspectives that allow for cultural exchange, blending ideologies and emotions, and redefining themselves through their own freedom and agency.

This study reveals how, in that "in-between" zone, migrant students confront the uncertainty of self-reinvention and navigate deep identity and experiential contradictions. That open wound functions both as a reminder of the divide between themselves and "the other" and as an invitation to inhabit border culture. Consistent with Vargas Monroy (2012), these findings confirm that living in a space defined by two worlds catalyzes a reconfiguration of the mestiza consciousness, from which new identities inevitably emerge.

The mestiza consciousness experienced by the participants leads to internal crises arising from the blending of different cultures and identities. As Hernández (2020) explains, the clash between their former selves -before they became migrant students- and their evolving identities compels them to face the reality that the individual who leaves is not the same as the one who returns. However, within this tension lies the richness of migration, as this mestiza awareness holds the potential to embrace all cultures without borders.

Migrant students gradually bid farewell to parts of themselves that will no longer exist. Along the way, they discover new qualities, values, and ways of being, both for themselves and in their relationships with the world. These evolving identities would not have had the opportunity to develop had they stayed in Mexico.

In this personal transformation, I observed that the participants cultivate genuine self-fulfillment, affirming Anzaldúa's insight that living without borders is an act of rejecting imposed limitations, and, in turn, a means of reinventing oneself to experience greater freedom, independence, and self-confidence. In a context where Mexican women face multiple, intersecting oppressions and lack the structural supports necessary for true empowerment, the borderlands emerge as a unique space in which new possibilities for self-discovery can unfold.

Extending the work of Kelly et.al. (2018) this study confirms the positive identity transformation outcomes of studying abroad and how living in the borderlands was a mean of liberation from societal expectations and this new ways of being are also a means to combat violence, navigate complex power dynamics, as it was proposed by Cueva (2014).

Many participants share that, although they initially experienced a sense of rupture, they gradually cultivated a renewed sense of belonging and identity. They established new homes that emphasize community rather than assimilation. While many participants continue to hold the idea of Mexico as home, they approach it with a spirit of reconfiguration. For some, this notion of home is idealized and cherished, whereas for others, it is critiqued and redefined. However, in every instance, it serves as a significant source of strength.

This journey reflects a thoughtful reinvention of home, grounded in care, interdependence, and reciprocity, which resonates with María Lugones's concept "*Viajar Mundos*" (world-traveling) (2021), a term that illuminates how the participants have not only

crossed the Atlantic to study but have also undergone the exercise of shifting perspectives, becoming different individuals in varied environments, and embracing new forms of resistance and knowledge.

The participants demonstrate that they belong both "here" and "there," challenging the binary notion that requires us to define ourselves as originating from a single place, which often leads to feelings of being outsiders elsewhere. Academic migration is a complex and intriguing phenomenon through which women grow and empower themselves. Whether they plan to return to Mexico after completing their postgraduate studies or prepare to transition from migrant students to professionals, participants describe their personal growth as encompassing freedom, agency, resilience, strength, openness, interpersonal skills, and intercultural competence.

Limitations and Future Research

It is important to recognize that research is an ongoing process. No single work can encompass all perspectives or conclusions. I aim to support both the knowledge we have contributed and the potential for future studies to further explore and expand upon these themes.

From a methodological standpoint, time zone differences did not represent an obstacle during the sampling phase, but they did influence the scheduling of interviews. Coordinating with women located across Mexico and Europe required the researcher to remain highly flexible, always prioritizing the availability and timing that worked best for participants. Considering the time and resources available to me, this was the best I could achieve.

Language also played a significant role. The interviews were conducted in Spanish, which proved to be a strength because it allowed participants to express themselves in their native language, it also allowed the researcher to conduct interviews in a more natural and personalized way, considering all the cultural and emotional nuances it entails; therefore, the native language is essential for a deeper understanding. When translating the testimonies into English for results presentation, a significant challenge emerged, because translations can distort the subjective meaning of certain words and phrases, especially those that are connected to cultural identity and meaning making. This task required careful revision and a strong ethical commitment to preserving the complexity and integrity of the participants' voices.

Working with non-captive populations demands full openness to participants' schedules and conditions and this resulted to be a limitation. The research was adapted to their rhythms and availability, which is fundamental when the goal is to build situated, ethical, and respectful knowledge. However, this also posed significant logistical demands.

When interviews explore sensitive topics, which was the case of this study, emotionally charged moments can emerge. Some participants experienced distress while recalling difficult experiences. Research of this kind should be conducted, or at least supervised, by individuals with training in psychology, since emotional containment is both an ethical and technical component of fieldwork. This does not contradict making a critique of the conditions in which they live that have led them to emotional difficulties.

Technology has become an invaluable resource for facilitating remote meetings through video calls. However, it has its limitations. The researcher cannot control the physical environments of the participants, and interactions via a screen cannot replicate the closeness of being in a shared physical space. This could open the discussion on communication research.

The topic explored in this study is both extensive and complex that is why I had to narrow the scope based on the research objectives. As a result, some valuable information was left out of the final analysis. One example is the range of gender-based violence manifestations present in the journeys of migrant and student women. While these experiences were mentioned in interviews, time and focus constraints prevented a deeper exploration. This exclusion does not imply they are irrelevant; rather, it underscores important areas for future research that warrant more specific and targeted approaches.

Among the recommendations, I emphasize the need to continue examining the many forms that gender-based violence takes across different contexts: academic, community, institutional, and migratory. Academic migration is a complex terrain that must be explored in greater depth using methodologies that allow for a deeper understanding, such as case studies or phenomenological approaches. I also propose conducting research with broader and more specific populations. It would be highly valuable to work with Latin American women while avoiding generalizations, recognizing instead the intersections with other factors such as class, race, migration status, and other axes of identity.

Conclusion

Mexican women, in their condition as migrants and students, resist, actively contribute, and challenge the structures of European institutions. This research shows that their experience goes beyond being recipients of knowledge and academic training, they also share knowledge, positionalities, and identities that enrich both the academic and community spheres. Academia becomes *un lugar de lucha* [a site of resistance], transformation, and agency. Far from being defined solely by vulnerability, these women resignify their experiences; the intersections that place them in unequal situations also become sources of strength to face challenges, embrace their academic journeys, and leave a mark in the contexts they inhabit.

The academic trajectory of Mexican migrant women is marked by nuances of empowerment, where studying abroad becomes a political act. However, this path is also traversed by forms of social injustice that manifest as institutional academic violence. In their migratory and educational experience, they become allies of themselves and their communities. Nevertheless, the internalization of structural violence, along with a Western psychological model focused on the individualization of distress, leads them to believe that they are the ones sabotaging their path, reproducing discourses such as the so-called impostor syndrome. This research, however, shows that the real impostor is coloniality and patriarchy, which systematically devalue the knowledge and wisdom of women. A system that, through multiple mechanisms, makes us feel that we will never be enough.

The mental health of migrant students is affected by social mobility, academic challenges, and the multiple forms of social injustice that shape their experience. This manifests as excessive exhaustion, the emergence of feelings of anxiety, and low mood. When considering the intersectionality that traverses their lives, marked by gender, race, social class, and migratory status, it becomes evident how these women are placed in structurally vulnerable positions that compromise their well-being.

In the face of all these challenges, women not only resist but also make meaning and transform their experience. This study echoes how academic migration promotes personal growth, and not just academic or professional development. Mexican women undergo identity changes and processes of self-concept restructuring, where they reclaim their freedom, exercise

their agency, and discover new versions of themselves. In this sense, migration becomes a space where they can reinvent themselves and break with gender stereotypes.

Pursuing postgraduate studies in contexts marked by adversity and injustice is made possible through collective care, where support networks play a fundamental role. Likewise, radical self-care allows women to look after themselves, employing creative survival strategies where holding and containing themselves emotionally becomes a revolutionary act, overcoming the loneliness that migration often implies and finding joy in their experiences. All of this shows that they are by no means impostors; this shouts that they are allies. We are allies.

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Appendices

Appendix A- Semi-structured interview

General questions

1. What is the name of the programme?
2. If you are still studying, when are you going to finish your postgraduate?
3. If you have completed your studies, when did you complete them?
4. In which country did you study?
5. At what institution?
6. What was the language in which the programme was taught?

Migration

7. How was the migration process, regarding visa and university procedures, before starting your degree?
8. What was your experience like before migrating?
9. What aspects of your life did you have to leave behind in order to study abroad?
10. How did you experience the visa procedures?
11. Did you find any difficulties in getting your student permit?
12. What was your experience when arriving in a new country and new school?
13. Which challenges did you face as a migrant student that as a student in your country you wouldn't encounter?
14. Intersectionality of gender and migration
15. Are there any migrant women in your family?
16. How is it to be a woman who pursues an academic career?
17. How would you describe your experience as a Mexican woman migrating for academic purposes?
18. What challenges have you faced as a female migrant that you believe male migrants may not encounter?

19. How was your experience in terms of gender roles and your will to study abroad?

Academic journey

20. How was your experience in the programme?

21. What were the challenges that you, as a Mexican student, have to go through?

22. How did you find the academic part of the program?

23. Did it fulfill your expectations?

24. How was the administrative part of the postgraduate?

25. Did you feel supported by the administration staff and professors?

26. How was your experience during your thesis?

27. Was it a time where you felt molested by a member of the university or peer?

28. Did you experience any kind of aggression? How did you experience it?

29. Did you ever feel threatened? In the sense of fear of losing a grade, not being able to tackle your research or losing economic support?

30. Do you feel like you have gone through institutional violence?

31. How was it for you to study in another language?

32. Which challenges did you find in studying in another language?

Physical and mental health

33. Did you have any health issues before starting the postgrad?

34. Was there any health deterioration during the program?

35. How were you feeling physically during the postgraduate?

36. How were you feeling emotionally while studying?

37. If you had to use medical facilities, how was it to navigate a medical system different from yours?

38. Do you have insurance that protects you? Was it useful?

Economic situation

39. How is your economic situation?

40. Has this situation helped or made it more difficult to accomplish your tasks as a student?

41. Were you able to work in case you needed it?

42. Did you find potential job opportunities that help you improve your economic status?

43. Was the grant or scholarship enough to cover your living expenses?

44. Do you find any connection between stress and your economic situation?

Personal and interpersonal sphere

45. How did your relationships change once you arrived and lived for a long term abroad?

46. Did you have any support networks in the place you migrated?

47. Do you feel that your identity changed during the migration?

48. Were you a caregiver before starting mobility? If so, how has this shaped your experience as a migrant?

49. Did you become a caregiver? If so, how has this shaped your experience as a migrant?

50. Are there relatives or persons who depend on you while you study abroad?

Impact of migration: career outcomes

50. How has this international experience opened up any different career outcomes that you didn't have before?

51. If it hasn't, which challenges did you face?

52. Did the student permit provide a job seek permit that helped you remain in the country where you study?

53. Did you want to go back to Mexico after the completion of the postgraduate program?

Protective factors

54. What helped you to cope with those challenges that you faced?

55. Did you receive any kind of support given by your institution to help you cope with the challenges that academic migration had?

56. What were your coping mechanisms that help you make the most of your experience abroad?

Appendix B- Informed Consent

This study is part of a research project being carried out at ISCTE – Instituto Universitário de Lisboa.

The study aims to explore the experience of Mexican Women who migrate/d for Postgraduate Studies Purposes in Europe. Your participation in the study, which will be highly valued, as it will contribute to the advancement of knowledge in this field of science, consists of a semi-structured interview done through a video call that can take approximately 45 minutes.

Iscte is responsible for the processing of your personal data, collected and processed exclusively for the purposes of this study, having as a legal basis your consent (article 6, no. 1, and article 9, no. 2,) of the General Data Protection Regulation, as applicable)

The study is being carried out by Cynthia Aime Flores Lopez, her email address is caflz@iscte.iul.pt, supervised by João Manuel de Oliveira (joao.oliveira@iscte-iul.pt), whom you can contact if you wish to clarify a question, comment or exercise your rights regarding the processing of your personal data. Both researchers will have access to this data for analysis and supervision purposes. You can use the indicated contact to request access, rectification, erasure or limitation of the processing of your personal data.

Participation in this study is confidential. Your personal data will always be processed by authorized personnel, bound by the duty of secrecy and confidentiality. Iscte ensures that appropriate techniques, organizational and security measures are in place to protect personal information. All personnel involved in the study is required to keep personal data confidential. In addition to being confidential, participation in the study is strictly voluntary: You can freely choose whether, or not, to participate.

If you choose to participate, you may stop participation and revoke your consent for the processing of your personal data at any time, without having to provide any justification. The withdrawal of consent will not affect the legality of any processing carried out prior to the withdrawal based on the consent provided.

Your personal data will be kept by a maximum of 6 months post-defense of the master dissertation, and data will be pseudonymized (assigning codes to protect your identity), after

which they will be destroyed or anonymized, ensuring their anonymity in the study results, only disclosed for purposes such as teaching, communication at meetings or scientific publications.

Considering that this type of interview is a reflexive practice that may evoke emotional responses, and some topics may be sensitive, you should know that you can stop the session at any time.

Iscte does not divulge/disclose or share, with third parties, the information relating to your personal data. Iscte has a Data Protection Officer, who can be contacted at dpo@iscte-iul.pt. If you consider it necessary, you also have the right to lodge a complaint with the competent supervisory authority – the National Data Protection Commission.

I declare that I have understood the objections of what has been proposed to me and explained by the researcher, that I have been given the opportunity to ask all the questions about this study and that all of them have received an enlightening/satisfactory answer.

Consent will be given orally at the beginning of the interview and recorded.

Appendix C- Debriefing

Thank you very much for taking part in this study. As stated at the beginning of your participation, the study focuses on exploring the experience of Mexican women who migrate for postgraduate purposes. More specifically, it aims to explore the intersection of gender and migration, considering factors such as migration process, academic journey, health and well-being, personal and interpersonal sphere, institutional violence, socio-economic context, career outcomes and protective factors as migrants.

If you experience any emotional distress or discomfort as a result of participating in this study, we encourage you to seek support. In Mexico, you can contact Línea Mujeres, a free and confidential service that provides psychological support, crisis intervention, and guidance for women. Their trained professionals are available 24/7 to help. For more information or to access their services, please visit <https://www.semujeres.cdmx.gob.mx/> or call Linea Mujeres helpline 55 5658 1111.

We would like to reinforce the contact details you can use should you have any questions, wish to share any comments, or signal your intention to receive information about the main results and conclusions of the study: Cynthia Aime Flores Lopez, (caflz@iscte-iul.pt) and João Manuel de Oliveira (joao.oliveira@iscte-iul.pt)

Thank you again for your participation