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The Language of Emotions: A Study on Metaphors and Semantic Fields in Venezuelan Migrant Women's Discourse

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ABSTRACT

More than 7.3 million Venezuelans have left their country since 2014 (UNHCR, 2023). In some South American countries, more than 50% of Venezuelan migrants are women and girls who are vulnerable to violence in their host communities. This article explores the connections between violence, forced migration and language expressing emotions that derive from that experience. The main corpus is Venezuelan migrant women's testimonials. The scope of the analysis is based on generative metaphors and semantic fields theories. Testimonials were classified in three main types: testimonials that revolve around the semantic field of warfare and survival; testimonials that express otherness; and testimonials about sexualization and dehumanization. All of the types showed metaphors (or the expression) of war. The conclusion is that hardship and trauma have molded these women's view of the world so they now understand it as a battlefield.

Palabras clave: Venezuelan migrant women; generative metaphors; semantic fields; language and violence

RESUMEN

Más de 7.3 millones de ciudadanos venezolanos han abandonado su país desde 2014 (UNHCR, 2023). En algunos países de Suramérica, más del 50% de los venezolanos migrantes son mujeres y niñas, quienes son vulnerables a la violencia en sus comunidades receptoras. Este artículo explora las conexiones entre violencia, migración forzada y el lenguaje para expresar las emociones que derivan de dicha experiencia. El corpus principal son testimonios de mujeres migrantes venezolanas. El análisis se basa en las teorías de la metáfora generativa y los campos semánticos. Los testimonios se clasificaron en tres tipos: los que giran en torno al campo semántico de la guerra y la sobrevivencia; los que expresan otredad y los que expresan sexualización y deshumanización. Los tres tipos de testimonio mostraron metáforas (o expresiones) de guerra. La conclusión es que la adversidad y el trauma han moldeado la visión del mundo de estas mujeres y es así como lo entienden ahora, como un campo de batalla.

Keywords: mujeres migrantes venezolanas; metáforas generativas; campos semánticos; lengua y violencia



INTRODUCTION

Communicating emotions, whether verbally or non-verbally, is an action most humans engage in frequently. Usually, disciplines such as psychology and biology have approached the topic of speech and emotions from different angles and methodologies. However, it has been argued that speech research from the linguistic point of view is also “capable of making a distinctive contribution [...] into the mainstream research on emotion” (Cowie & Cornelius, 2003). This idea is connected to linguists’ function in society: linguists are supposed to be agents for social change; they are in a unique position to tackle questions that intersect with the social aspects of language behavior (Charity, 2008). It seems then, worthwhile, to explore how humans express emotions that emerge when dealing with violent circumstances and violent behavior from others.

In the context of this article “violence” is defined as follows:

Violence [is] an act of physical force that causes or is intended to cause harm. The damage inflicted by violence may be physical, psychological, or both. Violence may be distinguished from aggression, a more general type of hostile behaviour that may be physical, verbal, or passive in nature [...] violence is multicausal [...] violence results from a combination of factors, including those originating in the violent person’s social or cultural environment and those representing immediate situational forces. (Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d.)

Moreover, regardless of its cause, violence has a negative impact on those who experience it or witness it. Many psychological disorders, including post-traumatic stress disorder, are associated with experiencing or witnessing violence. Psychological symptoms such as depression and anxiety are common in victims of violence (Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d.).

Given the consequences violence can have for those who experience it, this paper will explore and

analyze the discourse patterns of testimonials from Venezuelan migrant women. The connections between violence and forced migration are several, and the way these women express the emotions derived from them will be the focus of this paper.

Some of the Venezuelan displaced and refugee women have had terrible lives and hard journeys. The testimonials come from women who were once prosperous but whose businesses went broke, as well as women who had barely enough to eat and feed their children. Mistreated not only by their own government, but also by the governments and peoples of the receiving countries, these women have become “warriors who overcome.” They speak with strong conviction about how one day they will get the better lives in quest of which they left Venezuela.

As mentioned above, the main objective of the study is to show how this particular group of women communicate emotions that arise because of the situations consequent to their being migrants. A secondary purpose is to raise consciousness about these women’s lives and the dehumanization they face for being poor, displaced and women. Studying and exposing topics about the human condition can help combat ignorance and preconceptions about groups of people who are seen as “the other.”

The paper is structured as follows: The first part is an overview of what caused the large displacement of people from Venezuela to other countries. The second part consists of a theoretical frame that draws from the notions of generative metaphors (Hardman, 2006; Hardman et al., 2013), and semantic fields (Gao & Xu, 2013). Next, there is a description of the methodology and analysis of the testimonials of women who migrated to other South American countries, classifying them in three groups. Finally, there are concluding remarks.

The Venezuelan Crisis: An Overview

The Venezuelan crisis is filling the headlines and it truly deserves the world’s attention. It is a wake-up call to all as it holds relevant lessons for both developing and developed countries. Venezuela is



suffering a severe humanitarian crisis which makes it “the second country of origin for people displaced across international borders after Syria, which has been immersed in a civil war since 2011” (Van Praag, 2019). Its economy has declined at a faster pace than any other peacetime economy worldwide. Just between 2014 and 2021, under the authoritarian rule of Nicolas Maduro, Venezuela’s economy contracted by 80% (Wordliczek, 2022, p. 24). Fundamental human rights in Venezuela were infringed also by its previous president, Hugo Chavez, but with only domestic consequences. Since Maduro took power, the violation of human rights and the deepening of an economic and humanitarian crisis has created mass emigration to neighboring countries, potentially destabilizing the entire region (Wordliczek, 2022, p. 24). Hardship and repression have led millions to flee the country creating a refugee crisis in Colombia and other neighboring countries. Millions more are expected to flee unless conditions improve.

Venezuela has long had a unique economy based on the world’s largest crude oil reserves; for decades its economy has been dependent only on oil exports (Stetz, 2022). “This economic position led Venezuela to be South America’s most prosperous and promising democracy during the 20th century” (Stetz, 2022, p. 2). Hugo Chavez rose to power in February 1999 after winning the December 1998 presidential election in a landslide, promising to deliver salvation to a weary, crisis-battered citizenry by rooting out corrupt elites and delivering prosperity to the virtuous “people” (Cf. Andrews-Lee, 2022). Venezuelan & Ausman (2019) summarize the problem well:

Venezuelans gave all the power to one man, Hugo Chavez, who generated the illusion of prosperity through short-sighted populism and sank the country into communism and lawlessness by abolishing property rights and the rule of law, by expanding the government’s footprint in the economy, by over-regulating whatever is left of a private sector, by destroying all institutions that are key to a civilized society, and by allowing corruption to contaminate all government’s functions. It is also the story of the rise and decline of a

revolution that went from being applauded by many in the world to becoming an illegitimate dictatorship.

After Chavez’s death in 2013, Nicolas Maduro became the new president. The list of President Maduro’s anti-democratic actions is very long and includes government interference in the operation of democratic institutions in Venezuela, political prosecution of the opposition, restriction of freedom of speech, seizing control of the media, elimination of separation of powers, suspected cooperation with drug criminals, and rejection of international humanitarian aid (Wordliczek, 2022, p. 24).

Venezuelan Migration and the Experience of Gender-Based Violence

The UN General Assembly’ Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (1994), Article 1, defines “violence against women” as:

any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life (p. 3).

Amnesty Intentional (2022, p. 4) states, “Gender-based violence is violence directed against a person or which affects them disproportionately because of their gender or sex. Gender-based violence can take multiple forms and is found in all contexts where people interact.” Women who have been displaced from their country of origin, as it is the case of many Venezuelan women, can be particularly vulnerable.

Migration has important effects on the lives and health of people; it can increase inequalities and exposure –mainly of women and adolescents– to violence. Among migrant women, the main perpetrators of violence are people who are close to the assaulted women, and the situation of displacement could aggravate previous abuse. In shelters, the perpetrators may be intimate partners, relatives or



acquaintances or military and police forces, and perpetrators outside the shelters may also be strangers who take advantage of their vulnerability (Makuch et al., 2021, p. 2).

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' website provides the following statistics:

By the end of 2022, 108.4 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide as a result of persecution, conflict, violence or human rights violations. This includes: 35.3 million refugees; 62.5 million internally displaced people; 5.4 million asylum seekers; 5.2 million people in need of international protection, a majority from Venezuela. Alarmingly, more than 7.3 million Venezuelans have left the country since 2014. This is the largest exodus in Latin America's recent history and one of the largest displacement crises in the world (as of February 2023). The vast majority of Venezuelans, 6 million, are hosted by countries in Latin America and the Caribbean (as of March 2023). 20 percent of the population has fled the country and people continue to leave at an average of 2,000 per day (UNHCR, 2023).

According to del Campo (2022), more than 6.1 million people have fled Venezuela since 2015, with five million going to other countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. More than three million are in Colombia and Peru, and more than 50% of them are women and girls. A press release by UN Women (2020) categorized gender-based violence as a "shadow pandemic" throughout the region, but there are certain conditions that leave these Venezuelan women in situations of greater vulnerability. These conditions are not the same everywhere. For example, in Colombia, migrants, especially women and girls, are particularly exposed to violence in their host communities, and often suffer from symbolic violence in which they are assumed to be prostitutes or sex workers. Furthermore, in focus groups for some studies, women generally talked about sexual and gender-based violence inflicted by their partners and families even before leaving Venezuela (Cf. Calderón-Jaramillo, 2020).

In Peru, Venezuelan female migrants suffer higher rates of nationality-, gender-, and age-based discrimination than their male counterparts. They are devalued, both in public and work settings, through hyper-sexualization and criminalization, via interpretations of moral integrity and stereotypes at the intersection of gender, sex appeal, nationality, age, and condition as migrants (Cf. Perez & Freier, 2022). In Brazil, domestic violence is a common situation at the shelters. Women suffer frequent episodes of physical aggression, psychological threats and verbal aggression from their husbands and intimate partners (Cf. Makuch et al., 2021). Ecuador and Chile also receive a great number of Venezuelan migrants; women constitute 51% of Venezuelan migrants in Chile. Latin American immigrants, including Venezuelans, suffer difficult living conditions in Chile: an estimated 29.6% of migrant households live in poverty and 18.9% in overcrowded conditions. In most cases, these are irregular migrants who might have experienced violence, intimidation or political prosecution (Cf. Gonzalez-Agüero & Burcu, 2024).

THEORETICAL FRAME

This study is based on the concept of metaphor. Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 15), who created a taxonomy of metaphors, write about "conceptual metaphors," which are figures humans use to understand and experience ideas or facts in terms of another. The authors state that "Primarily on the basis of linguistic evidence, we have found that most of our ordinary conceptual system is metaphorical in nature" (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p.15). Their study was aimed at identifying why metaphors structure how we perceive things, how we think, and what we do. The authors argue that metaphors are concepts through which humans structure everyday activities. The implication of this is that we are constantly using metaphors to think and to talk about our experience. In other words, metaphors can be often explained with a formula such as A is B, in which concept A is understood in the terms of concept B.

The main definition of metaphor I will use throughout this paper is the one developed by Hardman (2006) and Hardman et al. (2013), who



call this kind of figure the “generative metaphor.” According to Hardman (2006), “generative metaphors” are “those that allow a whole sluice of metaphors that everybody understands because the generative one underlies the general thinking patterns; e.g., war, or sports, or business, etc.” (Hardman 2006, personal communication). In their book, Hardman et al. (2013) explain that this kind of metaphor is a “basic structure of ordinary language use” and that “any generative metaphor is specific to a given language or cultural complex” (p. 59). Three examples in U.S. English that Hardman et al. (2013) give of generative metaphors derive from the concepts of war (violence, battle), sports, and sex. In a sense, to understand generative metaphors, one can link them to the notion of “lexical field or domain,” which refers to a set of words (or lexemes) related in meaning (Nordquist, 2019). The theory of semantic fields or field-theory was originated by German and Swiss scholars in the 1920s and 1930s (i.e. Ipsen, 1924; Porzig, 1934; and Trier, 1934). The most prominent of field-theories is Trier’s, who stated that some words could form a semantic field under a common concept. For instance, by including cat, dog, horse, tiger, elephant and so on within the concept of “animal,” one can form a semantic field. Trier also proposed that the meanings of words in the same semantic field are interdependent and underdetermined (Cf. Wangru, 2016). In other words, a semantic field is “a combination of a group of words that interact, dominate, distinguish and depend on with each other” (Gao & Xu, 2013, p. 2031). In any given language, some words, under the domain of a certain concept, when combined together form a semantic field. For example, under the common concept of furniture, words such as table, closet, bed, etc. could be generated as a semantic field (Gao & Xu, 2013, p. 2031).

Out of the three domains prevalent in U.S. English (i.e., war, sports and sex) according to Harman et al. (2013), the most prominent one in the analyzed testimonials was the warfare metaphor. This is not surprising at all, given that these displaced peoples have been victims of harsh treatment by their own partners, their government and, in many cases, by their host society. Mey (2001, p. 203) gives us one of the best images to describe how war metaphors

work: “[M]etaphors are always charged with high pragmatic explosives.” Metaphors are rooted very deeply within a culture and may serve to express deep states of mind and emotions. They are a mechanism to digest circumstances that can be hard to describe with plain language. As Carter et al. (2001 in Nordquist 2019) put it: “Cultural attitudes to particular areas of human activity can often be seen in the choices of metaphor used when that activity is discussed.” Therefore, metaphors of survival are also found in the corpus analyzed here, since it is what these women feel happened to them: they have been to war and came out of it wounded but alive. Taylor (2021, p.464) argues that one of the components of a metaphor’s persuasive power lies in its ability to evoke emotions. I will add that metaphors also have the power to convey emotions, and are one of the main ways humans express deep emotions and feelings verbally.

Finally, in order to deal with other aspects of these refugees’ discourse, this paper also draws from the Discourse Analysis methodology. Discourse may refer to an instance of text or talk in its social context (van Dijk, 1989) or to a sociological phenomenon—the ideological process of constructing knowledge about a topic (Foucault, 1978). The term may also be “used abstractly to mean statements in general or to refer to a particular group or type of statements” (Philo, 2007, p. 176).

Heras Monner Sans & Foio (2007) explain the following about the creation of discourse:

there are frameworks or contexts created by our discursive practices, which, in turn, provide meaning to our actions, and engender (make possible) specific actions, ways of acting and perceiving realities on their own [...Therefore] one can support the premise that social imagery, discursive practices and actions and interactions, constitute specific communities’ resources and become cultural ways of understanding the world (p. 4).

For the most part, the discourse of these women revolves around sexualization and dehumanization, pain and embarrassment, and grief and hopelessness. In all of them, metaphors of war and survival appear.



METHODOLOGY

The testimonials analyzed in this paper belong to real women who were displaced from their country of origin, Venezuela, and now live elsewhere in South America. Most are found in “Pies para que te tengo, testimonios de personas venezolanas refugiadas y migrantes” (*Feet, What Do I Have You For: Testimonials of Venezuelan Refugees and Migrants*) published by RED CLAMOR, ACNUR, in 2020. The testimonials derive from interviews that took place in eleven cities in four counties: Colombia, Ecuador, Panama and Peru. The information was cross-checked with The Interagency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants (R4V), which is made up by over 200 organizations (including UN Agencies, civil society, faith-based organizations and NGOs, among others) that coordinate their efforts under Venezuela's Refugee and Migrant Response Plan (RMRP) in 17 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean.

A few other testimonials come from other humanitarian organizations, Care.org and Amnesty International, two reputable, non-profit organizations based all over the world. Care.org is a nonsectarian organization whose advocates have prevented deadly cuts to U.S. foreign assistance funding that delivers lifesaving interventions for mothers and their babies, feeds children and families, and allows millions to lift themselves out of poverty. In 2016, and again in 2022, CARE Action advocated for the passage and subsequent reauthorization of the Global Food Security Act, which ensures the U.S. keeps its commitments to fighting global hunger and malnutrition through supporting women smallholder farmers (Cf. CARE Action Two Page Brief, 2023). Amnesty International is a global movement of more than 10 million people who fight for universal human rights. It is based on global voluntary membership. On their webpage, they state that their vision is that of a world where everyone can enjoy the human rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights mechanisms. To achieve this vision, their mission is to undertake research and action focused on preventing and ending grave abuses of these rights (Cf. Amnesty International).

The translations for the testimonials in the RED CLAMOR, ACNUR book are mine. Care.org and Amnesty International provide testimonials in Spanish and in English translation. English translations were used after being checked for accuracy.

Even though some of these testimonials were published in a book (with no mention of names), and others are publicly available on the organizations' websites (with the names of the sources), they will be treated all as anonymous testimonials. Therefore, as shown in Table 1, each testimonial will be coded with the letter “W,” for woman, a letter to identify the country they are at, a number and the source of the testimonial:

Table 1
Codification of Participants

Code	Meaning
Letter W	Means “woman.”
Number	Assigned at random to each testimonial, starting with one (1).
C	Colombia
CH	Chile
E	Ecuador
P	Peru
AI	Amnesty International
Care	Care.org
Clamor	Red Clamor, ACNUR

For instance, the first testimonial is from Care.org, given by a woman in Colombia. Therefore, it is coded as **W1C-Care**.

After a close reading of the book and web testimonials, those given only by women were extracted. Those with substantial generative metaphors of war and survival were then identified. Even though there are other heart-rending stories, this paper is based on the analysis of ten testimonials that stand out in that regard. The scope of the analysis is linguistic, and it is based on generative metaphors and semantic fields theory, as mentioned above. The aim is to provide a qualitative analysis on how these women



describe themselves and their experience throughout the journey of leaving their country and arriving in new societies which are, more often than not, hostile towards them. The aim is to explore how these women talk about their emotions and communicate their experience of the violence that comes with being displaced from one's home country.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Testimonials that revolve around the Semantic Field of Warfare and Survival

W1C-Care migrated to Colombia from Barquisimeto, Lara State, in Venezuela, with her mother, son and three nephews. She declares:

It was tough because when you leave Venezuela, you leave everything. But my biggest motivation was my son. **I fought¹** for him because in Venezuela, when I had to take him to his pediatrician, I had no way to cover those expenses, especially because he gets seizures, and it was very difficult for me to buy [his medication] there (Care.org).

This woman speaks from a place of abandonment and desolation when saying she left everything behind. During her testimonial, she makes it clear that the reason to move on to the next "battle" is her son. The verb "to fight" emphasizes this feeling of coming from a battlefield: she speaks as if she were a soldier returning from a war and, possibly going to another one because now, in Colombia, on the other side of the combat zone, she still does not feel she is in the clear. **W1C-Care** is tentative about the new society she is learning to navigate, but it feels like a potential minefield "[My hope is] that [people] do not **undermine²** us, even though we are immigrants, we are human beings just like them" (Care.org).

However, and in spite of the hardships she has endured, **W1C-Care** still has strong confidence in herself. Metaphors of survival and perseverance

sprinkle her speech: "I value myself. **I consider myself a warrior woman.**" She still has strength to keep going and encourages her family in Venezuela to do the same in spite of the hardships: "The situation over there hit hard, but carry on, that's what I say."

W2C-Care's speech also falls within the semantic field of war and survival. She decided to leave her country because her son has a psychomotor delay and, in Venezuela, a medical, neurological, pediatric consultation is very expensive. This woman has been a victim of domestic violence and it seems that by fleeing the country, she has also managed to escape that situation:

I continue in the fight with him and supporting him day by day. Also, I experienced domestic violence from my son's father [...]. But since **I have been here for a year and a half, I have managed to overcome my barriers and thank God I am still fighting to get ahead** (Care.org).

As with **W1C-Care**, this woman (**W2C-Care**) ends her account from a place of empowerment in spite of all the difficulties she has encountered.

W3C-Care also migrated to Colombia because the situation was very hard. She and her ex-husband had to close their business. A weapon metaphor describes what prompted them to leave:

The trigger [for leaving] was the economic situation. My business was not enough anymore. We did not know whether to buy merchandise or buy food, because every day the [prices] went up. One leaves, more than anything, aside from hunger, for our children, so that they have a better future (Care.org).

Thus her journey was like a detonation set off by the two powerful causes: hunger and the hope to protect her children and give them a better life. Similarly, **WE4-Clamor**, who left her kids in Venezuela

¹ Emphases with bold letters are added.

² In Spanish, the woman uses the verb *socavar*, whose direct synonym is *minar*: enterrar artificios explosivos para contener el avance del enemigo (DRAE). This literally means "to undermine."



to find work in Ecuador, received a call saying her kids had to leave the place where they were living. Her three kids were sent by bus, by themselves, to Ecuador, where their mother could only wait at the border for them. Because of visa restrictions newly-imposed on Venezuelan citizens at that very moment, if she left Ecuador she was at risk of being denied re-entry and losing everything. When waiting for the kids with her cousin in Rumichaca, a bridge that divides the border between Ecuador and Colombia, she describes her feelings as if she had lost a war: “We were waiting in Rumichaca, looking everywhere for them, desperate. We were in the Red Cross tents, and we felt defeated, because we couldn’t find them” (Red Clamor, 2020, p. 18). Luckily, for this woman and her kids, they were able to reunite and go to her new place in Quito, Ecuador.

Testimonials that Express

Otherness: The Discourse of Hopelessness

It is striking that some of these women feel bad for migrating into other countries. They feel the tension that their presence in the host countries creates. At the same time, they are tired of not having decent job opportunities, being unhoused, having limited access to education and health services, suffering discrimination and xenophobia and, in some cases, tired of suffering sexual orientation discrimination (Red Clamor, p. 13). For example, **WC5-Clamor** uses a war metaphor to apologize for whatever she feels she and other migrants are doing wrong. There are also traces of hopelessness in her words when she says that this was their last recourse:

Really, sorry for **invading your space**. We are invading a space, and that was not something we wanted. No. It’s what we had to do because we had no other choice. It’s not because we want to, but because we had no other choice (Red Clamor, 2020, p. 13).

For as much as they did not want to migrate and they do not want to be in a different country, they see no other solution to their problems.

This is also the case of **WC6-Care**. She and her young son walked days at a time, their feet bleeding and blistered, in search of a better life. “There’s nothing you want more than to be in **your** country with **your** traditions, with **your** people, **your** family,” she says. “The situation in Venezuela is getting more critical every day.” This speaker employs repetition of the possessive pronoun *your* to emphasize the fact that she belongs somewhere else that is not the host society, which is hostile towards her and her family. After arriving in Colombia, they discovered that finding legal work as Venezuelans is difficult. The family had to live on the street, begging for food and facing discrimination and harassment for months before deciding to continue on to Peru where they have friends and a better support network. And just as structures collapse when there is a bombing, **WC6-Clamor** says: “I traveled with the illusion that my profession was going to allow me to work and help my family. **All of my illusions crumbled** with time. I left with a suitcase filled with dreams and ended with a bag of nightmares” (Red Clamor, 2020, p. 12). The final metaphor, a suitcase filled with dreams that turned into a bag of nightmares, conveys feelings of displacement, rejection and ostracism upon entering a new society that is not welcoming.

WCH7-AI is a journalist. In Venezuela, she worked on one of the major newspapers in her region. In 2018, she fled her home due to a lack of food and medicine for her son, as well as threats from Bolivarian National Guard officials because of her work as a freelance reporter.

While holding regular immigration status in Peru, she was able to apply for a visa that the Chilean government requires for Venezuelans for entering Chile. The Chilean Consulate in Peru took more than eight months to process this visa application, despite the humanitarian nature of this sort of visa. In February 2020, the Consulate granted them a visa, valid for three months, to enter Chile. **WCH7-AI** planned a journey but was not able to go because of border closures during the Covid-19 pandemic. Months later, when the border was opened in November 2020, her visa had already expired. She applied for the visa again, but it was rejected without any explanation. **WCH7-AI** says



that her situation became untenable: “I started selling water at traffic lights on the streets of Lima. I **plunged**³ into a depression. I didn’t even recognize myself. I wanted to commit suicide, I felt like my head was going to explode.” The use of the verb “to plunge” to talk about depression is very significant, given that this verb, according to the Merriam Webster Dictionary, means entering quickly and forcibly into something, or to enter a state or course of action usually suddenly, unexpectedly or violently. Usually, people talk about “falling into a depression.” Therefore, by using the verb to “plunge,” WCH7-AI intends to convey how quickly her situation precipitated a deplorable state of mind. The war metaphor used in this testimonial (“I felt like my head was going to explode”) very vividly illustrates not only her physical pain, but the extreme-psychological agony this person was experiencing in that situation. In the case of WCH7-AI, having to migrate again, this time from the first host country, pushed her toward suicide—seeing no place for herself in this world. However, the interview with her took place in Santiago de Chile. We do not learn the details of her situation there, but Amnesty International explains that she got there by walking and with the aid of a Coyote (people smuggler):

Venezuelan people travel long distances by bus and on foot, often with their young children. The closure of land borders, the imposition of visa requirements and the difficulty of obtaining consular visas are factors that push people to cross borders irregularly. To reach the Chilean border, they have no choice but to travel long distances on foot, a physically strenuous journey, during which they are exposed to hostile climatic conditions, such as the driest desert on the planet, and are at high risk of abuse, including robberies, fraud and sexual violence, at the hands of the criminal groups that dominate those territories (Amnesty International, 2023).

Testimonials About Sexualization and Dehumanization

It is often the case that Venezuelan migrant women are sexually harassed just because of their origin. Pineda & Avila (2019, p. 82) argue that, from the moment they start their journey from their country of origin to the host country, women face multiple forms of violence and gender-based inequalities, such as prejudice, stereotypes, harassment, sex violence, prostitution, kidnapping or recruitment from sex traffickers. It is also documented that Venezuelan women, have been blamed—particularly in Colombia—for an increase in infidelity cases thereby destabilizing families (Cf. Pineda & Avila, 2019). Many Venezuelan women who were interviewed by Red Clamor reported suffering discrimination, sexual harassment, sexual assault or sexual aggression. In their host societies, they are constantly asked if they are Venezuelan, and not in an “innocent” way; the question is often followed by propositions for sex in exchange for money, food, or a place to sleep. At other times, the question is accompanied by sexual violence or other violent attacks. (Red Clamor, 2020, p. 54).

Some of the women who have suffered this kind of violence explicitly talk about their experiences. That is the case for both WC8-Clamor and WE9-Clamor who suffered sexual assaults while receiving a service or when providing it. WC8-Clamor took a taxi and, a few moments later, the other passengers traveling in the car stepped out of the taxi. It was she and the driver from there on. This woman states that when she talks, people immediately know she is from Venezuela, and when that happens they start yelling at her. That day, the taxi driver asked her “Are you Venezuelan?” to which she said yes. After talking about the situation in Venezuela for a while, the man started grabbing her inappropriately and pulling her shirt to take it off. He drove to a high and solitary place and locked the doors of the car. She describes the following:

I thought: Oh my God, **he is going to rape me here** [...] he started taking his clothes off and to take his thing out so I would grab it, he took his member out [...] I started looking inside my purse. I have a small cologne spray and I

³ It is important here to note that the word used in Spanish by WCH7-AI is the exact equivalent of plunged: “Me sumergí en una depresión [...]” which is not a common expression either in this language to talk about depression. The regular expression is “caer en depresión,” literally “to fall into depression.”



sprayed him with that. After that, **I opened the door and ran**. He left a stench in me, in half of my face. When I got home, and felt the stench in my body, I showered, but I could still feel that smell (Red Clamor, 2020, p. 54).

The resemblance to war permeates in this woman's discourse. In a war-free country such as Colombia, in a day-to-day situation, women are not expecting these sorts of thing to happen them, but this Venezuelan-migrant woman literally had to defend herself and run to escape after being a victim of sexual assault. After that, and as it is the case of many assaulted women, **WC8-Clamor** could not get rid of the sensations this assault imprinted in her mind and body. She was left suffering from post-traumatic stress just as victims of war often are.

The testimonial given by **WE9-Clamor** about her experience in Ecuador is similar. She and her sisters escaped a mob of men who tried to take revenge on them for a crime committed by a Venezuelan man they did not even know. They were in the city of Otavalo, staying in the town square because they had no house. They noticed more traffic and movement than usual the day this happened. They were asleep and suddenly woke up:

one of [the men] said "kill them, kill them." **We ran and ran**, barefoot. They said "look for them, look for them" [...] In the evening [...] people explained to us what happened: a Venezuelan man had killed an Ecuadorian woman, and that is what was happening when they attacked us. **They stole our things and they tried to rape us and kill us**, and because of that, we decided to go to Quito (Red Clamor, 2020, p. 37).

This is the kind of extreme situation that occurs in countries at war: women running barefoot trying to escape rape and death, their possessions stolen and their spaces ransacked. But this happened in Ecuador; there was no war. These are women who had to run for their lives because, as Venezuelan migrants, they were scapegoats for someone else's crime.

The vulnerability of women and LGBTI+ Venezuelan-refugee and migrant persons worsens due to their displacement. Women, amongst them transgender women, suffer xenophobic discrimination that is tied to gender-based violence, a consequence of the unequal power dynamics that emerge in relationships with men. This sort of discrimination manifests itself in the sexualization of their bodies and in sexual violence (Red Clamor, p. 18-19). Just in the year 2018, for example, in the Caribbean Region of Colombia, 23 cases of violence against LGBTI+ Venezuelan persons were registered. A transwoman was murdered, five died of AIDS for the lack of access to medicine, there were two complaints about police violence against transwomen and 42 complaints of discrimination and xenophobia based on national origin and being part of the LGBTI+ collective (Cf. Pineda and Avila, 2019).

WC10-Clamor is a transgender woman whose case is a good example of this. She recalls an assault that took place while walking through a cold part of Colombia:

There were moments that one would never want to remember. They took advantage of our situation. On one occasion, in a place in Colombia where it is too cold, we asked an 18-wheeler driver to get us out of there [...] **I had to beg on my knees** so he would get us out of that place because the cold was going to kill me. And the man did give us a ride, but still, he took advantage of the situation, **he made me do things that I cannot talk about** (Red Clamor, 2020, p. 19).

The act of begging on one's knees can also be compared to when, in war situations, a person begs for their life, or when being forced into that position before being executed. **WC10-Clamor** reports that she and her travel partners were in such an extreme and vulnerable position that she had to go down on her knees to get out of it alive. Finally, the fact that she cannot bring herself to talk about what the man made her do to give them a ride is a sign that it was very traumatic. It can be argued that, in this case, not naming the facts but using a euphemistic expression



“...things I cannot talk about” is comparable to remaining silent. “Silence is a multifunctional communicative feature with different sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic functions” (Méndez Guerrero & Camargo Fernández, 2015, p.7). It has been proven that silence is a tool that some speakers utilize when they cannot bring themselves to talk about certain topics, either because it makes reference to what they consider “unspeakable” topics, or taboo topics, or when the topic touches some deep fibers that make strong emotions arise. According to Agyekum (2002, p. 49) “silence is effectively employed when the topic is particularly delicate, a taboo, or when the situation is emotionally loaded and the speaker is ‘at a loss’ for words.”

CONCLUSION

Venezuela is experiencing an unprecedented humanitarian crisis that has caused an exodus to neighboring countries, leaving women and girls particularly vulnerable. Studies show that migrants tend to be more exposed to sexual and gender-based violence due to the normalization of such forms of violence (Cf. Calderón-Jaramillo, 2020). Through a series of testimonials gathered from reputable humanitarian organizations—Amnesty International, Red Clamor, ACNUR and Care.org— it was possible to identify several metaphors used by displaced women when talking about their experience. This group of women, who do not know each other and who now live in different regions or countries, all migrated from a place that is experiencing dramatically difficult circumstances. The women have a common denominator that shows in their speech: the use of metaphors of war and survival.

After a close reading and detailed analysis of the Venezuelan migrant women’s discourse chosen for the study, a reasonable conclusion is that hardship and trauma have molded their view of the world; they now understand it as a battlefield. The sample is not very big, but it could be argued that the results showed here can be extrapolated to a large portion of the female Venezuelan migrant population.

The main objective of the study was reached, which was to show that this particular set of women, a group of Venezuelan migrants, have a specific way of communicating their emotions when it comes to their situation as poor and displaced women. Their speech revolves mainly around metaphors of war and the semantic field of warfare and survival. They speak of themselves as survivors of an “unofficially declared” war against them because of their nationality and their gender. They have been subjected to persecution, rape and blatant discrimination.

Finally, one may hope that the secondary purpose of the article will be fulfilled by raising consciousness in the general public and among the members of the scientific community. It is necessary to remind ourselves again and again that millions of women live their lives like this and endure similar situations every day. Moreover, it is crucial to understand that the testimonials analyzed for this article belong to the women who could talk, the ones who were given the chance to have a voice and tell their stories. There are untold millions who suffer in silence and, finally, there are the ones who lost their lives while searching for a better life, and who will never be able to tell us what they went through.

Future investigations may include testimonials from men and cover the lives of Venezuelan migrants in other regions of the world.

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