



Africa's Migration: Historical and Contemporary Trends, Routes and Destinations in Europe and America, with a Focus on Mexico

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the movements of the Black African diaspora around the world, the routes and countries of transit for Black African migrants moving to Europe and the United States. The theoretical and conceptual framework is based on the idea that the colonial history of slavery interweaves with persistent colonial racial legacies and hegemonic whiteness while crossing borders, transit countries, and destination cities: labor exploitation, marginalization, integration policies in urban areas. The case study are Morocco, Brazil and Mexico as transit countries to reach Portugal and the United States. The methodology is based on a literature review and secondary data analysis of the stocks and flows of regular and irregular South African migrants and refugees, and a comparative method of analysis to contrast racism against Black African migrants in a colonizer (Portugal) and in a colonized country (Mexico). The results show the ways how racism persists throughout the journey, crossing borders, countries, facing aggressive environments, even organized crime, and during the integration in the countries of transit and destination.

Keywords: anti-Black racism, Black Africans, decolonization, migration, refugees.

INTRODUCTION

Trends and Changes in Africa's Migration: Origin, Transit and Destination in Europe and America

International research, media, and politicians' rhetoric consider that the most frequent reasons to emigrate from Africa are armed conflicts, economic crises, limited opportunities, disasters, political repression and persecution, violent armed conflicts, and asylum seeking. This idea builds a stereotype of massive irregular, illegal and desperate refugee flows of African migrants escaping from crisis by boat to survive, crossing transcontinental borders and invading Europe, sometimes with connections to international crime, trafficking and terrorism — a security threat (Goldschmidt, 2006; Castles and Miller, 2003).

Stereotypes are based on the period of colonial liberation, when millions of people fled conflicts with colonial powers (Algeria, Kenya, etc.) and conflicts during the Cold War and proxy wars in Africa. These assumptions are not based on evidence, but on a Eurocentric focus of migration research. However, since the year 2000, studies of African migrations contradict this traditional point of view and show that contemporary transcontinental African emigration is not increasing, and it is no longer mostly caused by poverty, hunger, and violence, nor only oriented towards Europe (Idemudia and Boehnke, 2020).

After a period of internal conflicts, decolonization and the consolidation of national states unified ethnically diverse societies, providing incentives for people to stay — protection, development, education and some social mobility. These new conditions provided resources and capacities to increase transcontinental migration (Flahaux and De Haas, 2016).

Evidence shows that now Africans migrate out of the continent in possession of valid passports, visas and other travel documentation. Like migrants from other continents, most Africans migrate regularly with a passport to study, work or to reunify families (Castles and Miller, 2003; Flahaux and De Haas, 2016). And, as in other continents, only forced migration is associated with conflicts.

Firstly, most Africans continue migrating within Africa, not outside of the continent. Transcontinental migration is constant. In 2019, there were 250 million migrants around the world, of whom only 36 million (14%) were Africans. In 2020 this number increased to 40 million. In 2024 the number of migrants in the world increased to 281 million, 31 million more in five years (McAuliffe and Oucho, 2024). 53 % of African migrants live in other African countries, 27 % in Europe, 12 % in Asia, and 8 % in North America. (Idemudia and Boehnke, 2020; Yates and Bolter, 2021). Moreover, in 2022, there were 117 million displaced people in the world, among them, 71.2 million internally displaced people, 35.2 million are refugees, 5.4 million are asylum-seekers and 5.2 million are other displaced, mainly Venezuelans. The number of asylum-seekers has risen from 4.1 million in 2020 to 5.4 million in 2022, an increase of more than 30 per cent (McAuliffe and Oucho, 2024).

Secondly, under the colonial system, it was very difficult to emigrate outside the continent. After several decades of the independence processes, African nations have developed and increased educational and economic opportunities, and social mobility of urban middle and upper classes, meaning that families and networks can finance long international journeys and migrate regularly seeking better jobs and higher wages. Around 9 out of 10 migrants arrive in Europe legally, with a passport and a middle or high level of education, not by boat, but by plane. (Flahaux and De Haas, 2016).

Thirdly, this journey of a minority of irregular Black African migrants and refugees in transit to Europe throughout North Africa — the Maghreb persists, due to its geographical proximity to Europe, their strong colonial and post-colonial links to France and the labor recruitment agreements these countries have signed with European countries since the 1960s (Castles and Miller, 2004). A second route from Eastern Africa passes through transit countries like Turkey and Libia. In 2024, South Africans corresponded to 2 million of refugee applications around the world, most of them are from East Africa (58.1%), while migrants crossing the Maghreb are mostly from Central (21%) and West Africa (18%). (Table 1).

From these two transit regions the smaller group of the irregular migrants reach the Mediterranean Sea and travel to multiple points on the European coast (Menin, 2024). However, this flow of Africans to Europe is decreasing since Europe has adopted more rigid border controls and becomes more difficult to reach, and Africans are now moving alternatively to the United States, Canada, and Australia.

Table 1: Refugee status determination by country/territory of origin, 2024

	Region of Origin	East Africa	Central Africa	West Africa	Southern Africa	Total
Pending applications	Start-year	656850	410424	259713	52487	1379474
Applications	Total	661927	142288	253361	22703	1080279
	New	645366	125519	223596	18433	1012914
Decisions	Recognized - Convention / Mandate	104101	45954	46826	2186	199067
	Complementary protection	13760	2641	17024	339	33764
	Rejected	19672	29118	53277	9200	111267
	Otherwise Closed	59442	58923	30914	11625	160904
	Total Decided during Year	196975	136636	148041	23350	505002
Pending applications	End-year	1164443	425026	360627	53639	2003735
% of Pending applications at End-year		58.1	21.2	18.0	2.7	100

Source: own estimations based on UNHCR's Global Trends.

Recent Trends of Black African Migrants to Europe

In 2019, the stock of African migrants living in Europe was 450,000, most of them with a visa to study, to work, or for family reunion. Only 7.2% of African migrants in the EU are refugees. (Frontex, 2020). In 2009, refugees represented 2.4 million, and only 14 % of international migrants in Africa, and 86 % of African transcontinental migration is *not* primarily related to conflict (UNHCR, 2011).

In 2015 and 2016 international migration flowing through the Mediterranean reached a peak, due to the crisis in Syria. From 2014 to 2019, the flow of irregular immigrants continued. In this period, European authorities arrested 748,000 irregular African migrants trying to enter in Europe by land or sea (Frontex, 2020), coming from the Maghreb — mostly in transit from Morocco, and from Eastern Africa – Libya — as well as migrants from the Democratic Republic of Congo who move through Turkey and Libya (Yates and Border, 2021).

In the last decade, governments have strengthened the border controls in the countries participating in this route to Europe, and several migrants have been forced to wait, particularly in Morocco, for future opportunities to cross the border. The COVID pandemic reinforced European controls at the borders around the Mediterranean. Turkey has made agreements with African countries of transit to control migration flows and has rejected migrants at their border and territories. The context is a decrease in the number of Africans intercepted entering Europe irregularly, while migrants have changed routes, including using Latin America as a transit path to the United States and Canada. And interceptions at the Colombia/Panama and Mexico/USA borders are increasing. These are mostly not migrants from the poorest to the wealthiest countries. Although poor people do also migrate, they tend to do so less often, and, if they migrate, they tend to do so over smaller distances, initially to neighboring countries, and, lately, increasingly overseas. The higher skilled therefore tend to migrate more and over larger distances. Transcontinental migrants are people with ambitions associated with higher capabilities, information, networks, media, and resources to travel to other continents (Idemudia and Boehnke, 2020). The transcontinental destinations are diversifying, depending on the country of origin, border controls, and social networks providing them with financial resources.

African Migration to the USA

African migration to the US and Canada is diverse due to the absence of colonial ties. While more marginal, those in poorer or landlocked countries continue migrating primarily towards other African countries. Migrants from countries located on the coast, more urbanized, with a higher GDP per capita, are more advanced in the demographic transition, with a high proportion of high skilled working age population have information, capacities and resources to pay for a trip to extra-continental countries, and are increasingly directed toward America — the USA and Canada — seen as more open to high-skilled high immigration. (Idemudia and Boehnke, 2020). In 1980, around 130,000 sub-Saharan Africans were living in the United States, and, by 2018, they reached 2 million people. In 2016 there were 640,000 African migrants living in Canada (IOM, 2020).

The first to arrive had access to information and had obtained permanent residency and a job, and they progressively financed the trips of their relatives in the process of family reunion. As a result, in 2019, in the United States, 10% of Black people were immigrants. 68 % of them arrived after 2000, reaching 4.6 million in total — a number three times greater than in 2000 (1.4 million), and seven times greater than in 1980 (800,000). (Pew Research Center, 2000).

Considering the top countries of origin — Nigeria, Ethiopia, Kenya, Ghana, and Somalia, the number of African immigrants in the USA has increased from 340,000 to 1.08 million from 2000 to 2019, or from 20.9 % to 35.5 % of the total of Black immigrants living in the US. Although Black Caribbeans have the highest number among Black immigrants, Africans have increased their representation by 14.7%. (Pew Research Center, 2000). (Table 2).

Table 2: Top countries of origin for Black immigrants in US, thousands, 2000 and 2019

Country of origin	Number		%		Annual Increase
	2000	2019	2000	2019	
Nigeria	130	390	8.0	12.8	4.9
Ethiopia	70	260	4.3	8.6	4.3
Kenya	30	130	1.8	4.3	2.4
Dominican Republic	80	210	4.9	6.9	2.0
Ghana	70	190	4.3	6.3	2.0
Somalia	40	110	2.5	3.6	1.2
Haiti	410	700	25.2	23.0	-2.1
Guyana	110	120	6.7	3.9	-2.8
Trinidad and Tobago	160	170	9.8	5.6	-4.2
Jamaica	530	760	32.5	25.0	-7.5
Latin America&C	1290	1960	79.1	64.5	-14.7
Africa	340	1080	20.9	35.5	14.7
TOTAL	1630	3040	100	100	

Source: Own estimations from Pew Research Center analysis of 2000 decennial census (5% IPUMS) and 2019 American Community Survey (IPUMS)

Latin America as a Transit Region to the United States

Latin America is the transit region for migrants to cross and wait until they can reach the United States. Since 2013, the number of South African irregular migrants in Latin America has increased, reaching 5,000 in 2019. (Yates and Bolter, 2021).

Only in 2019, Mexico arrested 6,641 Africans, a thousand percent increase compared to 2014. Meanwhile, European authorities arrested 117,755 Africans in 2014, a 50 % decrease. And in 2019, these numbers were equal on both continents. (Yates and Bolter, 2021) Following the COVID pandemic, the number of migrants plummeted in late 2019, due to increased border controls in all nine transit countries until the beginning of 2020.

South Africans arrive in Latin America by plane in Brazil or Ecuador, with the objective of crossing the region and entering the United States. Brazil is the most attractive and accessible country for the first point of transit because there are Brazilian embassies in many more African countries, as well as direct flights, flexible visa requirements, and easy asylum offers, even to those arriving without a Visa. (Yates and Bolter, 2021). Ecuador has eliminated all visa requirements for all nationalities since 2008 and, until 2019, the country allowed visa-free travel for almost all nationalities. After arriving by plane, they cross more than nine South and Central American countries to reach Mexico's northern border and request asylum in the United States.

The route includes Brazil, Ecuador, Colombia, Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala and Mexico. Some also travel overland from Brazil to Bolivia and Ecuador until reaching Colombia.



Graph 1: Routes of Black African Immigrants in America to reach the United States

Source: Migration Policy Institute

In all these countries there used to be victims of language barriers, religion, lack of information and social networks, racism, violence, harassment from authorities and the civilian population, other migrants, extortion, and kidnapping by criminal groups. On the Colombia/Panama border, they are also exposed to flooding in the jungle, attacks by criminal groups, food shortages, and difficult roads. (McAuliffe and Oucho, 2024; McAuliffe and Khadria, 2020).

Some of them are unclear about their final destination, but make decisions along the way, and a small number seek to stay in South American countries, while most of them wait until they can reach the United States, a journey that can take months or years. (Yates and Bolter, 2021) In Brazil, they face difficulty in securing housing and jobs, racism, violence and harassment, as well as cultural differences (Gomes, 2024).

Black African immigrants interviewed in Mexico City describe how they arrive in Brazil by plane, they are received by Bolivian guides in the airport who support them to get a permit to stay and travel and continue their journey and to pay a total tax of 1500 US dollars for the complete trip until Panama. From Brazil, they travel by bus and cross the borders with Bolivia, Peru, and Colombia, paying for local guides in each country. The journey can last several days or weeks until they reach the border with Panama, where they take a boat to Darien and begin the trek on foot for more than 100 km for two to four days through the jungle.

Most transit countries do not offer specific policies for African and Haitian migrants. They are not provided with information about the laws, institutions, and procedures for formalizing their migrant status or their stay in the country, nor have access to permanent settlements, humanitarian protection, asylum, or other legal and permanent statuses. Almost all countries issue temporary documents to formalize their temporary migrant status to cross to the next border in a short period of time. If they are arrested by authorities, they are allowed and authorized to follow the route to the North. Their permanence is dismissed in each country, and discrimination is an additional stressful factor to move ahead. They are just supported to reach the next country in the North.

To cross the Darien, migrants need to pay for another guide to access orientation, shelter, food and means to survive in the forest. Upon reaching the Darien border with the South of Panama, The United Nations and government officials receive and direct them to the transportation to Costa Rica; this bus costs between \$40 and \$50 US dollars. This cost forces some to wait weeks or months working informally or waiting for funds from relatives until they can travel again. In Costa Rica, they receive food, shelter, and basic medical care in temporary migrant care centers and continue to Nicaragua. Panama and Costa Rica where they undergo security controls, are administered vaccinations and basic services, and coordinate actions between countries. (Salazar and Voorend, 2019).

In Nicaragua there are no protections, and military officials require a payment of \$150 to enter the country or they must hire guides to travel by boat. In Honduras, those apprehended receive exit permits to legally process their immigration status for a few days. In Guatemala, authorities give them a ten-days permit to request immigration status just to transit until Mexico. Most of them do not contact authorities during the journey and travel without temporary documents through Central America. (Salazar and Voorend, 2019).

Arriving in Mexico, until 2019 they were detained by authorities for a short period before receiving an Exit Permit valid for transit through the country for 30 days to reach the US border, where they must submit to the metering policy, apply for asylum, and wait for months or more to enter the USA and begin the authorization process. (REDODEM, 2019).

Starting in 2019, under pressure from the United States, the threat to increase tariffs on Mexican products has forced Mexican officials to control the migratory flow and to change the issuance of this exit permit under new conditions; migrants could not travel to the north border with the USA, they only could leave Mexico through the southern border — to Guatemala (Molla, 2021).

At the same time, the US Department of Homeland Security restricted the metering policy adopted by Customs and Border Protections and limited the number of asylum permits provided in the USA and Southern borders (Molla, 2021). At both Mexican borders, Southern and North, Africans face worse detention conditions than other migrants and are more easily targeted for extortion.

This situation promoted protests and threats of migrant caravans to press the government. Moreover, the USA started the expulsion of immigrants from the US in 2020. Both changes forced them to wait longer in Mexico, waiting for new changes in the migration rules, while they were exposed to arrest and detention by officials, kidnapping by criminal groups, or simply running out of money and having to look for alternative ways to work informally. Many migrants were stuck in Mexico along their journey through 11 countries, with long wait times, with no prospect of crossing the borders. Migrants are apprehended at all border crossings.

After the pandemic, the borders reopened, but arrests continued to rise, mainly in Panama. These changes resulted in the detention, in 2019, of 6,641 irregular African migrants in Mexico (increasing, mainly Cameroonians and Congolese).

At the Mexico-Guatemala border, this number increased by 6,000 between 2018 and 2019, representing a 600 % increase in one year. After the pandemic, this number decreased in 2020, and in 2021 it began to rise again.

Facing the 2019 crisis, Mexico started providing humanitarian protection or other legal status to many African migrants, although sometimes without their knowledge or consent, and they became trapped at the country's southern border. In 2019, approximately 1,300 African migrants requested asylum to the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (COMAR, 2020), some voluntarily, others without understanding the process, often due to a lack of language interpreters. As a result, they remained trapped in the country's southern states.

After a brief slowdown in the number of arrivals in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of asylum applications reached a new record of more than 130,000 in 2021, and in 2022 there were more than 118,000 individual applications, mostly Haitians, but also a minority of Black Africans. In 2024, COMAR received 79000 asylum applications, representing a 44% decrease compared to 2023. That is due to changes carried out during 2024: the temporary suspension of legal deadlines to apply, the reopening of applications for new applications, the UNHCR supported asylum seekers and released its report. In 2024 COMAR received 78,975 asylum applications, a 43.87% decrease compared to 140,720 in 2023. Mexico resolved 40% more asylum applications in 2024 and remained among the 10 countries with the most asylum applications in the world. (UNHCR, 2024).

Mexico recognized the citizenship of many African migrants, declaring at least 1,000 Africans stateless after its embassies failed to respond to officials' requests to coordinate repatriations. Mexico began granting residency to these stateless Africans and Haitians. (COMAR, 2023)

At this moment, some of them moved to Mexico City to look for a job and better conditions of life, expecting also to save some money to try again cross the USA border in the near future. Along their large trajectory, migrants experience multiple insecurities and discontinuities, with scarce, volatile and highly informal social protection.

Even after obtaining humanitarian protection and nationality, these migrants face various difficulties in their integration in Mexico, such as language and lack of interpreters and translators, cultural differences, racism in detention centers, police violence, workplace discrimination, and lack of access to the education system. They are denied food in migrant detention centers and receive food only after all non-Black migrants have eaten. Factory workers refuse to work with Black colleagues, and teachers walk out of classrooms to avoid teaching Black children. Criminal groups also identify them as easy targets for crimes and extortion, threatening to report them to the authorities if they don't pay. And some are recruited by organized crime, drug and human trafficking, connected with networks. Even children and adolescents are victims of theft, extortion, kidnapping, and sexual abuse during all the migration route, particularly at the borders. (OIM, 2023).

Forced Transit

These uncertain trajectories with multiple obstacles and risks might be much longer or even permanent and are defined as "forced immobility". Transit is considered a short period of time where migrants wait for their opportunity to move on. However, even when temporarily immobile, migrants used to engage in informal market labor, daily consumption, seeking information about a visa, receiving humanitarian assistance, and funds from relatives abroad (Stock, 2019). Therefore, transit is no longer a period of waiting and uncertainty, but implies several activities and relationships with multiple agents and organizations within and beyond national borders, shaping "transnational social protection infrastructures" that include formal, informal and semi-formal interactions between different social protection providers locally and transnationally (Mingot and Zepeda, 2019). In conclusion, moving migration routes from Europe to Latin America / USA, migrants are forced to spend long periods of time in forced transit, which makes the provision of social protection more complex due to the uncertainties and multiple and large periods of transit in Latin America, where no government organizations, informal family and social networks compromise the unstable relationships with different welfare states which are unable to provide social protection to migrants Pp 162 (Mignot and Zepeda, 2023).

Mexico City

According to estimates from civil society organizations and press reports, in 2000 there were between 3,000 and 5,000 African migrants living in Mexico City, with different regularization statuses and from diverse international routes. Most come from countries such as Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola, Guinea, and Somalia, and also from Sudan and Ethiopia. Moreover, in 2023 the National Institute of Migration (INM) registered 3,841 detentions of migrants from Mauritania, an increase of 17.4%, since during 2022 there were only 20 detainees. (INM, 2000).

Haitians started arriving after the 2010 earthquake, and continued with massive arrivals from 2016 to 2021, related to the “caravans” organized to counter the effects of the USA policy to close the border. In 2021, it was estimated that between 10,000 and 15,000 Haitian migrants were living in Mexico City, not considering the total of undocumented immigrants.

Between 2015 and 2019, Mexico detained more than 17,000 irregular African migrants, in contrast to 24,000 Asians and more than 44,000 Caribbean migrants from Haiti and Cuba. (Mexico, 2024).

In Mexico, the number of international migrants has increased in the last decade, from 460 in 2011 to 576 in 2015 and to 792 thousand in 2023, falling to 398 in 2024 and 82 thousand in 2025. The highest increase happened between 2018 and 2019, with 100 thousand or 16 % more migrants; between 2015 and 2016 (87 thousand or 15% more), and 2022 and 2023 (92 thousand or 13% more). (Secretaria de Gobernacion, 2012)

Migrants from Latin America and the Caribbean predominate in these increases, while Africa, despite contributing with a minority of migrants, has also increased the number and percentage of migrants in Mexico, particularly after 2021 (10%), 2024 (11%) and 2025 (12%). Decreases in 2022 and 2023 reflect the impact of US law. (Table 3).

Table 3: Number of Irregular Immigrants Arrested – Africans and Latin Americans per year (Million). Mexico

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	TOTAL
Total	576164	663347	642714	686618	798622	218470	143952	699757	792066	398312	81932	576164
Incremento anual		87183	-20633	43904	112004	-580152	-74518	555805	92309	-393754	-316380	87183
% incremento anual		15.13	-3.11	6.83	16.31	-72.64	-34.11	386.10	13.19	-49.71	-79.43	15.13
LAC	563460	651346	630509	673427	784475	212095	129531	672901	757766	355416	72224	563460
Africa	12704	12001	12205	13191	14147	6375	14421	26856	34300	42896	9708	12704
%Africa	2.20	1.81	1.90	1.92	1.77	2.92	10.02	3.84	4.33	10.77	11.85	2.20

Source: Own estimations based on data from CENAMMMI

In the region, the countries with a predominance of Afro-descendant population that most contributes to migration in Mexico are Belize, Cuba and Dominican Republic. Belize has decreased its participation from 80.8 % in 2015 to 2.5 % in 2025. In the same period, Cuba has increased it from 11.3% to 52.1%, and Dominican Republic has increased from 2.5% to 15.5%, Jamaica, from 0.6 % to 4.1%, and Haiti, from 0.4% to 3.0%. Among African countries, the most important increases are observed in South Africa, from 1.2 % to 4.7%, Nigeria from 0.4% to 4.0%, and Kenya from 0.2% to 1.1%, as well as other countries such as Cameroon, Ghana, Ethiopia and Zimbabwe in lower proportions. (Table 4)

Table 4: Number of Africans and Afro descendants living in México, thousand, by year and top country of origin

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	TOTAL
Belize	80.8	76.4	72.1	65.2	65.0	44.2	9.7	61.9	69.6	2.5	2.5	80.8
Cuba	11.3	15.6	18.8	24.9	25.5	42.6	49.3	20.8	13.5	49.6	52.1	11.3
Dominican Rep	2.5	2.5	2.9	3.4	3.0	4.7	13.9	5.4	3.9	15.5	16.9	2.5
South Africa	1.2	1.1	1.2	1.2	1.1	1.2	3.9	1.1	1.0	4.0	4.7	1.2
Trinidad y Tobago	0.8	0.9	1.1	1.1	1.1	0.8	1.6	1.0	1.0	4.4	3.3	0.8
Jamaica	0.6	0.7	0.9	1.2	1.4	2.1	5.3	2.4	1.6	5.9	4.1	0.6
Haiti	0.4	0.4	0.5	0.5	0.5	1.0	6.1	2.8	4.2	3.3	3.0	0.4
Nigeria	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.5	0.5	0.7	2.6	1.1	1.2	4.4	4.0	0.4

Kenya	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.3	0.8	0.2	0.2	1.1	1.1	0.2
Bahamas	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.7	0.2	0.2	1.0	0.7	0.1
Guyana	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.2	0.1	0.2	0.6	0.2	0.2	0.8	0.6	0.1
Cameroon	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.3	0.2	0.2	0.5	0.5	0.1
Ghana	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.7	0.3	0.3	0.8	0.6	0.1
Ethiopia	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.3	0.7	0.1	0.2	0.8	0.8	0.1
Zimbabwe	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.3	0.1	0.1	0.5	0.6	0.1
Latin America&Car	97.2	97.6	97.5	97.7	98.2	98.0	92.5	97.1	95.8	89.1	87.2	97.2
AFRICA	2.8	2.7	3.1	3.5	3.6	5.0	14.5	5.6	4.8	18.0	16.4	2.8

Source: Own estimations based on data from CENAMMMI

Routes, Borders and Violence

South-Africans and Haitians arrive in Mexico in transit to the United States and some decide to stay after the previous large and complex trajectories where their money is running out and they are unfunded, which is made more difficult by the ever-increasing difficulty of crossings to the northern border, compensated with the policies that promote inclusion, job and asylum opportunities in Mexico. Since 2011 the Migration Act (Ley de Migracion) established an exit permit (oficio de salida) issued by the Instituto Nacional de Migracion (National Institute of Migration) to migrants from countries without consular offices in Mexico authorizing migrants without a legal status to exit the country within a period of between 20 to 30 days in both borders, in the North or Southeast. Migrants used this document to request and wait for asylum in the USA.

Stronger border controls and difficulties in requesting asylum in the United States push many migrants to stay in Mexico after receiving the provisory legal status and informal socio-economic jobs and social protection. African migrants are much less numerous than Latin American and Caribbean migrants, and therefore are considered as a transit population, and Latin American governments are not concerned with providing special rights, policies, humanitarian protection or legal statuses, even after they are forced to stay in the country for a long period. The most evident practice is facilitating transit to the United States (Yates and Bolter, 2021, Mingot and Zepeda, 2019).

The combination of restrictive migration policies on all routes and borders has forced migrants to wait long periods of time in countries of transit where informal work, low salaries and low coverage of policies of social security and protection predominate. In these contexts where national populations are historically facing limitations in rights and welfare, migrants are not a priority, and they should share national vulnerable conditions. The option has been to support them mainly through civil society organizations (Shutes & Ishkanian, 2021) and volatile social protection mechanisms (Salazar and Voorend, 2019). In Mexico, South-African transit migrants are considered temporary people. 40% of them are men and unaccompanied, while 32% to 42% are women, both unaccompanied and family members. According to data from the Migration Policy Unit, 7 out of 10 women were victims of sexual crimes or human trafficking.

Policies and NGOs

Mexico is promoting a national strategy to combat the illicit trafficking of migrants with a gender perspective from 2023 to 2025 that includes prevention, protection, regulation of the status of immigrants, prosecution and investigation of the crimes, and data collection and integration.

In Europe it is expected that the welfare state would provide social protection for migrants. In contrast, Latin American countries have no universal welfare states (Gomes, 1994). However, increases in the migrant flows and stock of populations pressure national welfare states, unable to cover more than a half of the national population. The alternative is that social protection has changed to a mix of public, private, semi-formal, and informal initiatives (Devereux & Sabates-Wheeler, 2007; Serra Mingot & Mazzucato, 2017; Serra Mingot & Mazzucato, 2018).

In Mexico, transit migrants are temporary, state provisions are scarce, and the third sector mostly provides some protection (Candiz & Bélanger, 2018). The main support networks are organizations such as SMR (Medicos Sin Fronteras), Casa de Refugiados (UNHCR), La Casa del Migrante, and religious shelters who provide assistance.

In Mexico City, main settlements of Haitians are concentrated in neighborhoods in the center such as Tepito, Centro Histórico, Roma, Doctores, and in the South — areas of Iztapalapa municipality. They are in different phases of obtaining immigration status: some obtained humanitarian visas or refugee status, others are regularizing their status or are undocumented. They work in informal commerce, construction, and services.

In recent years, new flows have been added to the existing ones. In 2016, over 17,000 Haitian and almost 4,000 African migrants arrived at Mexican border cities such as Tapachula, Chiapas, with the purpose of requesting asylum in the United States (COLEF, CNDH, 2018). Yet, the legal difficulties in arriving and requesting asylum in the United States push many migrants to stay in Mexico under uncertain legal and socio-economic conditions (Salvadore, 2019).

Compared to Central American migration, African migration through Latin America is small, whereby most Latin American countries do not prioritize Africans in their migration management policies, which are often limited to facilitating transit towards the United States. In other words, African migrants are seen as a transit population, whereby Latin American countries have very little interest to guarantee their access to rights — by issuing humanitarian protection or other legal statuses — while in transit or even upon settling (Yates & Bolter, 2021).

CONCLUSIONS

In a context of little formal social protection, such as in Mexico, social protection strategies for migrants (especially those in transit) are particularly complex due to the relatively weak and highly stratified welfare policies, and a lack of an institutionalized civic or philanthropic culture. Facing new trends, Latin American countries had no time to reorganize policies to manage extra-regional migration, and have provided reactive, fragmented and uncoordinated responses.

Since 2014, Mexico has developed formal policies to address extra-continental migration, including migrants from Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean (Yates & Bolter, 2021). However, the lack of capacity to rapidly enforce the laws to provide protection or more permanent legal statuses, and to integrate migrants into society, and facing pressures from the US, many migrants have decided to stay. In Mexico City, migrants face racism, but also the problems accumulated in one of the four biggest metropolises in the world.

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