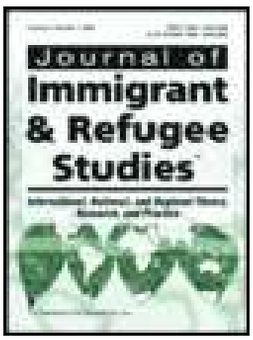

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Searching for the 'Chilean Oasis': Waiting and Uncertainty in the Migration Trajectories of Venezuelan Women

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ABSTRACT

Venezuelans escaping from the crisis in their country count currently among the largest displaced populations in the world. Chile seems to offer them an oasis of political and economic stability. This ethnographic study explores the migrant trajectories of Venezuelan women. We disentangle their migration process, including destination imaginaries, the journey, and their life in Chile. We discuss how uncertainty is permanent in their trajectories and how the imagined oasis turns out to be just a mirage. The women end up waiting, perhaps perennially, to be able to return home. Meanwhile, they develop strategies to survive in an oasis without water.

KEYWORDS

Venezuelan migration; female migration; trajectories; uncertainty; Chile

Introduction

On 9 October 2019, President Sebastián Piñera declared that Chile is a "true oasis with a stable democracy," favorably comparing the country to a "Latin America in turmoil" (Somma et al., 2021). With this statement, he meant that Chile, in contrast to other Latin American countries, has a stable democracy and a steady economic growth that has allowed for the creation of thousands of jobs, while also increasing wages. Chile is the first country from South America to join the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the so-called "rich man's club" of nations (Salazar, 2014). In fact, until the first days of October 2019, Chile seemed an outsider to the recent upheaval spreading across Latin America, an *oasis country* in the political-economic wasteland surrounding it. Chilean exceptionalism is not new. Throughout history, Chileans have stressed that the country is an inaccessible *island* because of its geographical frontiers. These imaginaries of an exceptional country, are reinforced by climatic arguments: the *cold* weather from the southern part to set the country apart from *tropical* Latin America (Salazar, 2013). Moreover, these imaginaries of exceptionalism have been defined as a "white" and "European" culture, projecting a racialized image, which is depicted against a nonwhite other (Tijoux & Córdova Rivera, 2015). Good development indicators support Chilean exceptionalism, with large poverty reduction, eradication of undernutrition, and high growth of labor productivity being a successful example for Latin America (UNDP, 2010). Several international institutions, such as the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean and UNDP, endorse the imaginary that the Chilean economic path is an example for development and political stability within Latin America.

The idea of Chile being an oasis captivates potential migrants from other Latin American countries and attracts a considerable number of them. While many Central and South Americans[1]

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would prefer to immigrate to the United States, Canada, or Europe, tougher immigration laws and border reinforcements have deterred them from attempting the journey to the North. Historically, for example, Venezuelans tended to migrate to the US, Spain, and Canada. However, increasing migration restrictions in these countries led to new destinations, usually in the South. In this context, the imaginary of Chile as an oasis—being the country with the highest standard of living in the region—becomes very appealing (Gomez, 2018). The combination of the imaginary of Chile as an oasis and the apparently mild migration policies made Chile an attractive destination for Venezuelan migrants. Paradoxically, the support to Venezuelan migrants was just a sparkle of a mirage. As a reaction to the Venezuelan crisis, the Chilean government created a special visa, not a refugee policy, just a consular visa that allows them to enter without a passport. In June 2019, the special visa created just one year earlier was restricted again, and was suspended in November 2020. However, the Chilean oasis kept reflecting and dazzling Venezuelans, and Venezuelan migrants have not stopped arriving, even without a special visa and authorized routes. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the crisis in planetary human mobilities was radicalized due to a global health situation (Guizardi et al., 2020). With many borders closed, the mobility of some people stalled or stopped, while others found a way to continue moving; hundreds of Venezuelans continued to cross the border illegally and set up a quarantine camp in Huara, a small town in the middle of the Atacama desert.[2]

This article focuses on the migratory trajectories of a group of Venezuelan women to Chile. We analyze their entire migration process, from the moment the women decided to leave their homes and the imaginaries that influenced their decision, to the journey, their arrival in Chile and their settling. The focus on trajectories serves as a relevant analytical lens in migration research because it represents the outcome of the intersection of individual aspirations, social networking practices, policy interventions, and socio-political structures (Schapendonk, 2017). Migratory trajectories are experienced differently according to hierarchies of power, influenced by race, gender, age, and class (Hannam et al., 2006). Emotions, affect, and subjectivities also matter in the migration process, which has implications for the women's bodies and their corporality (Torres, 2018). Most studies on migrants in Chile have focused on housing conditions, job practices, and the impact on neighborhoods or global care chains (Stefoni, 2012). Little attention has been paid to what happens during the actual migratory trajectory (Dalakoglou & Harvey, 2012), especially in the context of migration between Latin American countries. Likewise, the significant recent Venezuelan migration to countries in the South has been little studied so far. The characteristics of this massive migration are relevant because they arise from a different social and political contexts compared to migrants coming from other Latin American countries. Even less studied are the experiences of Venezuelan women. Therefore, the research reported here focuses on Venezuelan migrant women who were living in Valparaíso[3], Chile, between 2019 and the first months of 2020.[4]

The theoretical approach of this article is inspired by transnational studies. This focus helps to explain the tendency of migrants to maintain, build, and reinforce multiple linkages with their countries of origin (Glick Schiller et al., 1995). Transnationalism can explain the process by which migrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement (Basch et al., 1994). As they settle in their new homes, members of these populations develop multiple social, economic, and political ties that extend across borders, including organizations that link the home country with one or more societies in which its population has settled (Glick Schiller et al., 1995). Migrant networks can be mediated by the circulation of money, affections, information, or even objects, as well as by migrants' involvement in collective and/or institutional initiatives that directly address their motherland through cultural activities, collective remittances, political support, or whatever else (Boccagni, 2012). They live their lives simultaneity in two or more countries (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004).

To this general framework we need to add a gendered approach, because research argues that the transnational experiences of men and women are qualitatively different. Women do not always have access to mobility and their movements are framed within a set of normative and

culturally gendered rules (Anthias, 2012). For example, Ala-Mantila and Fleischmann (2018) indicate that recently arrived migrant women have more significant disadvantages in finding work than men. Furthermore, on the labor market motherhood is a penalty, especially for migrants with small social networks. Women's migration decisions and experiences are distinct from men's in that women have to face both reproductive and productive labor demands (Cresswell & Uteng, 2016). Therefore, we present fragments of the trajectories of fifteen Venezuelan migrant women, as narrated by themselves. These migration (hi)stories involve imaginaries, ideas about migrating and living abroad, decisions regarding when and how to begin the journey, who is going to leave (and who will stay), which routes are to be followed, what should be taken along, and so on. Fears and uncertainties are also part of the journey experience, as well as immobilities and pauses (Salazar, 2020). Observing these processes in migrant women is particularly relevant because they are the ones who suffer the most violently the onslaught of racial discrimination due to arrival loneliness, skin color, speech, or body shape (Ameeriar, 2015; Tijoux, 2016). Feminist theory emphasizes the causes of discrimination as linked to an inextricable web made up of race, ethnicity, religion, culture, sexuality, body-ability and economic as well as educational level (La Barbera, 2012).

International migration also involves living in a new country and the unceasing evaluation of such a situation, especially if, as in this case, the Chilean oasis turns out to be a "fata morgana." When the women arrived in Chile, they noticed that the political and economic stability they had imagined was a mirage. Moreover, the expected stability and calm was shaken by a so-called social outbreak starting on 18 October 2019, when a student-led fare-dodging protest against a fare increase in the capital's subway evolved into a wave of both peaceful demonstrations and violent riots and lootings across the country (Somma et al., 2021). The *oasis country*, as President Sebastián Piñera had noted just a few weeks earlier, had become unrecognizable (Márquez, 2020). The social outbreak shook the country and its institutions, questioning the social inequalities of the "Chilean model" and the political system's lack of legitimacy. A key demand from the social movement was to change the constitution, enacted under the Pinochet dictatorship in 1980, which underpins the controversial Chilean Model. As a result of the protests, a plebiscite was organized in October 2020, with over 80 percent voting in favor of constitutional change. So, a country that seemed once so stable is now going through one of the most important changes of its history.

Imaginaries of the Chilean oasis, the decision to migrate, the actual journey, and their life in Chile all shape the women's migratory experiences, which form the basis of our anthropological analysis. The rest of this article is organized in four parts. First, we discuss our research methods. Second, we provide background information on recent changes in Chilean migration patterns, emphasizing Venezuelan migration. Third, we present our ethnographic findings, organized in three sections. We expose migration imaginaries, emphasizing all the elements that Venezuelan women have considered for their choice of where to migrate to and why. A solid, stable economy and the possibility of making money are a glimpse of the Chilean oasis they envisioned. The uncertainty of waiting during their trajectories emerges in the second section, highlighting the continuous decisions during the trip shaping the way to the imagined oasis. The last section reveals that life in the oasis is characterized by serious thermal oscillations. It is not easy to survive in a highly privatized oasis marked by deep economic inequalities. Waiting, perhaps perennially, to be able to return home, these migrant women search for strategies to develop their precarious lives in the meantime.

Methods and study cases

This article is based on ethnographic research conducted in the Chilean city of Valparaiso. The fieldwork started in June 2019 and is ongoing at the time of publication. Our findings are the outcome of both participant observation and fifteen in-depth interviews with Venezuelan women conducted in two phases by one of the authors: before the October 2019 social uprising

(June–September 2019) and during the coronavirus pandemic crisis (June–July 2020). As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the methodological strategy was modified *in itinere*. Whereas the first phase included face-to-face interviews and participant observation in three institutions (two migrant NGOs and one public office), in the second phase we resorted to non-face-to-face research techniques; virtual sources and online strategies, such as social media sources (e.g., WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter) as well as telephone calls and on-line interviews. This shift in research strategies for the second phase was a direct consequence of the virus containment measures.

The participant observation was key to establish contact and generate rapport. After this, interviewees were selected using a snowball strategy based on a theoretical sampling. The interviewees varied in terms of age, job, educational level, family situation (traveling alone, with children, partner, etc.), and date of arrival in Chile (see Table 1). This last feature is particularly important because it determines the regulatory conditions for Venezuelan migrants: before the implementation of the Democratic Responsibility Visa (DRV) in April 2018, when only passport holders were allowed; during the first phase of this visa implementation between April 2018 and June 2019, when migrants without passport could demand a visa directly at the Chilean border; and during the second phase of this implementation from June 2019 onwards, when only those who hold a visa granted by a Chilean consulate were allowed to enter the country. As stated in the informed consent letter, the interviewees' names were changed to protect their identity. We used pseudonyms and changed ages and the job(s) that the interviewees held back in Venezuela. The interviews focused on the decision-making process that led them to migrate, the organization and planning of their journey, and the migratory journey itself.

Venezuelan displacement, Chilean placement

Venezuelan migratory patterns have gone through a significant transformation during the last decades. Venezuela used to be a migrant receiving country. The last decade, the trend has reversed and the country has become a migrant sending country. It is estimated that at least 10% of the Venezuelan population has emigrated during the last decade (Koechlin et al., 2018). Approximately five million people have left Venezuela, being the largest displacement movement in Latin America's recent history (IOM, 2020). Furthermore, there has been a transformation in the characteristics of Venezuelan migrants. Since 2015, Venezuelan migration has been characterized by an increased participation of lower middle classes who do not always have high education levels. In this new migratory reality, new destinations began to appear, especially those closest and best accessible by land. Although Peru, Ecuador, Brazil, and Chile are implementing

Table 1. Venezuelan migrant women interviewed.

Pseudonym	Age	Profession in venezuela	studies degree	Family situation for travel	Date of arrival in chile
Taimar	38	Cook	High school	pregenant with patner	06.10.2016
Stefany	38	Engineer	University	With childrens	07.12.2017
Escarlata	42	Secretary	High school	With patner and childrens	13.01.2018
Margarita	40	Bussiness assistant	University	With childrens	02.02.2018
Freije	29	Touristic Operator	University	With childrens	27.03.2018
Marilén	49	Teacher assitance	High school	With patner and childrens	01.04.2018
Chiqui	48	Engineer	University	With childerns	24.10.2018
Angeles	49	Bussiness assistant	High school	With childrens	12.12.2018
Suti	43	Teacher	University	Alone	07.01.2019
Lara	40	Lawyer	University	With children	17.02.2019
Zabiana	36	Cook	High school	Alone	05.03.2019
Adriana	27	Bussiness assistant	University	Alone	12.03.2019
Liz	49	Physician	University	Alone	30.04.2019
Paola	34	Physician	University	With Children	30.05.2019
Espiritu	60	Sociologist	University	Alone	17.07.2019

Source: Fieldwork, 2019–2020.

increasingly restrictive migration policies for Venezuelan citizens, Venezuelan migrants continue their journeys to South American countries (IOM Chile, 2019), many of them crossing borders via unauthorized routes. Thousands of Venezuelans even cross various South American countries on foot (IOM, 2020).

Over the last years, the arrival of Venezuelan migrants to Chile has increased significantly. In general, the migrant population in Chile grew progressively and even tripled in recent years. Until 2015, Chile's main migrant populations came from neighboring Peru and Bolivia. In fact, before 2015, Venezuelan citizens did not even appear in the top ten list of foreign-born residents (IOM Chile, 2019). From 2015 onwards, however, there have been significant movements of Venezuelans to Chile. At present, Venezuelan migrants are the main nationality of foreign residents in Chile, reaching 23% of the migrant population (IOM Chile, 2019). In fact, despite the general decline in the growth of migrants during 2019, the Venezuelan population continued increasing.

The arrival of Venezuelans in Chile skyrocketed in 2018, when the DRV for Venezuelan citizens was created, along with a broad reform of Chilean Migration Policy. The new visa for Venezuelan citizens allowed them to enter the country with a valid or expired passport. This reform entered into force on 18 April 2018,[5] privileging Venezuelan migration and limiting Haitian migration. While in the migration policy reform Haitians have an annual quota for entrance and can only apply for family reunification, Venezuelans receive preferential treatments. Chilean migration policies are not haphazardous. As Chung (2020) emphasizes, migration policy develops hierarchies of non-citizens and creates differences in the access to goods, services, and resources, and institutionalizes the privileged status of some migrants over others. In fact, migration policies in general favor the movement of certain groups, while criminalizing the movement of others (Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013). Chilean migration policies also privilege skilled migrants, with a special visa for professionals. The preference for skilled migrants is frequent in migration selection policies and some scholars indicate that this has gendered and ethnic outcomes (Boucher, 2020). In fact, some studies argue that there is a racialized, nationality-based hierarchy operating in Chile, with Venezuelans and Colombians holding the top positions, followed by Peruvians and Bolivians (Ryburn, 2018). The arrival of Haitian migrants added a new level at the bottom of the hierarchy, with xenophobia and racism now oriented mainly toward this group.

Searching for the "Chilean oasis": migration imaginaries

Venezuela is experiencing its most serious crisis in recent years (Cadenas, 2018). According to the women we interviewed, the most common reasons to leave Venezuela include: (1) the lack of food to feed their families who are experiencing hunger and malnutrition; (2) the dramatic currency devaluation that increases the perception of economic instability (see also Donoso, 2020); and (3) the high levels of violence and insecurity within the country. There are multiple reasons that make migrants leave their home behind. Indeed, migration cannot be understood as the result of a singular moment of decision-making. Rather, it is an assemblage of past experiences, specific triggering events, and future expectations. Escarlata (42, Secretary), for example, told us how after several months of unemployment she began to feel the psychological and emotional consequences of her situation. She began to think about migrating and discussed the idea with her family. As is clear from Escarlata's story, the decision to migrate is never easy. She emphasized how difficult it was, since it implied leaving her mother behind. Only when the difficult decision was made, she started thinking of destinations. As Collins (2018) noted, the prospect of migration is often influenced by family links and orientations, encounters with images and imaginaries of different places, the mobility of others, as well as the influence of friends or other actors. Escarlata decided to migrate to Chile, because it "*was the country with the most solid economy, compared to the rest of* [Latin American] *countries*." As Best-Cummings and Gildner (2004) indicate, in the decision-making phase women begin to examine various

opportunities, identify options, and put plans in place. Escarlata, for instance, considered migrating to Peru, Ecuador, and Chile, but online research and the advice of a friend led to Chile as the final choice. So, in the decision-making phase she actively began to gather information and talk to others about the planning and preparation for change (Best-Cummings & Gildner, 2004). When decisions to migrate are made, what follows are a series of steps – of negotiations – that become quick moments of organizing, of storing a life away for an indefinite period of time (Soto, 2016).

As Grillo (2007, p. 209) emphasizes, there are a multiplicity of projects in migrant trajectories, and while some may have a clear-cut project, others will, consciously or not, sift through their options as circumstances, personal and collective, change, uncertain about what to do. In contrast to highly planned and carefully organized migration, many migratory experiences begin suddenly, almost without planning, with people sometimes not even realizing they are migrating. Suti, a 43-year old teacher, traveled to Colombia to buy medicines and visit her sister. When she remembered this trip, she told us that she thought, "*Well, I'll go for a few days and come back, but I never came back*." Suti did not have time to even imagine her migration or to think about those she was leaving behind, such as her son or her parents, whom she has not seen again since then. Suti lived in Colombia for two and a half years, and then moved to Chile.

Despite the multiplicity of projects and trajectories, all of our interviewees stressed political stability, growing economies, safe streets, good health and educational systems, and fair migrant policies as important features they assessed when looking for a country to migrate to. Moreover, several of them also highlighted the opportunity of remittances, saving money to send it to Venezuela, as a criterion. Motivations to undertake migratory mobilities are usually multiple, but greatly linked to the ability of migrants and their social networks to imagine other places and lives (Salazar, 2011, 2014). In all our cases, certain expectations pushed these women to leave their country. The story of Zabiana (36, cook) is very telling about how imaginaries of the oasis influenced her. She used to live with a friend in Bogotá, when another friend talked to them about "grandiose Chile." Zabiana did not know anything about Chile until then. Between laughs, she told us that she even thought that the Chilean currency was US dollars because the friend who talked her about Chile, showed her a wad of dollars: *"come here, come to Chile' Here you will earn lots of money, here you will save dollars*."

These women's imaginaries about Chile were fed by various sources. Comments and stories of friends and acquaintances are very important to shape their imaginaries, as are social media accounts, and website information as key in the construction of their image of Chile an oasis of stability and economy grow in the middle of a confused desert of Latin America. Currently, several Venezuelan websites and Facebook pages offer information and support to migrate,[6] but they also portray imaginaries about the country and they contribute to shape migrants' aspirations and expectations. "*Chile is one of the few countries in Latin America where there is adequate infrastructure, it has one of the lowest crime rates in the region, and it has a stable economy*" one of these websites states.[7] As Salazar (2014) emphasizes, the images and ideas of other (better) possible places to live – often (mis)represented through popular media – circulate in a very unequal global space and are ultimately filtered through migrants' personal aspirations. In the evaluation of countries to live, some of the women we interviewed considered the political situation and economic stability as crucial aspects to migrate to Chile.

In the decision to migrate are embedded the questions where, how, when and with whom to migrate, especially which family members (related to parent's care, opportunities for children, etc.). Usually, women have the burden of the care for their parents. Some of them therefore decided to bring their parents along to Chile. In female migration, women usually keep their gendered roles, household divisions of labor and identities as mother or daughter (Lawson, 1998). As Collins and Daly (2021) indicates many Venezuelan women migrate to secure material resources and to provide for their families because they assume it is their responsibility as mothers, wives, and daughters to do so. The story of Lara (40, lawyer) reflects this concern well. She organized her relocation well before the actual trip, and she requested the DRV almost

one year before leaving. Regarding the choice of a destination country, she visited Colombia as a tourist, but she did not like the level of violence. Then she visited Chile to evaluate and prepare the relocation of her family. Just a few months later, Lara convinced her mother of following her and travel to Chile. All these preparations were already part of the journey, which starts at home, in the moment of planning the trip, evaluating the routes, and analyzing the costs and risks (Bagnoli, 2009).

Another important element to contemplate are migration policies, not just of the final destination but also of the countries to be crossed en route. This assessment includes the ease of obtaining all required papers, the recognition of educational degrees, and the documents required for entrance, among others. This is especially important for Venezuelans today, with several countries closing their borders to them as result of the high number of Venezuelans migrating within Latin America. In August 2018, the Ecuadorian government announced the border closure for Venezuelan people without a passport and a visa. In June 2019, Peru also enacted a hostile migration policy toward Venezuelans. Far from dissuading migration, this series of border closures encouraged some of our interviewees. In Chiqui's words, "*I suddenly got out of Venezuela. Faced with the announcement of the closure of borders to Venezuelans, I decided to leave as quick as possible*" (Chiqui, 48, computer engineer).

The Chilean government, however, seemed to be (politically) more empathic toward Venezuelan migrants. Besides the mentioned DRV, in February 2019, Sebastián Piñera, the Chilean president, traveled to Cucuta, the border between Colombia and Venezuela, to attend an event organized by the Colombian government, and the leader of the Venezuelan political opposition and self-proclaimed president, Juan Guaidó. The event pretended to be a claim for democracy in Venezuela, but in fact, it was also a kind of "refugee show," a mediatic event that uses the migrant crisis with an implicit political manifestation that condenses a whole discourse against the Maduro government (Machado, 2020). It helped to spread and reinforce the idea of Chile as a Latin American oasis, which not only has a stable democracy and economic stability, but also is favorable to Venezuelan migration. The Chilean government has had a speech in support of Venezuelan migration and seems to be empathetic with those who escape from the Venezuelan situation. The right-wing government in Chile has used the Venezuelan crisis politically. They have used several times the expression *Chilezuela* to depict the catastrophe that would befall Chile if it were to adopt left-wing policies. In other words, Venezuela's crisis is used as a symbol of chaos in opposition to the stability and growth of the Chilean Model.

Uncertain trajectories: en route to the South

After having considered all elements, the Venezuelan women of our study decided to go looking for their Latin American oasis, leaving behind their homes, which implies leaving not just a house or place, but also leaving behind the associated familiarity, emotions, and security. They leave their home, that place where they created a meaningful relationship of distinctive emotions and functions (Boccagni, 2017). To them, Chile seems a good choice to live this period, waiting. Importantly, only one of our interviewees stated that she had left Venezuela for good, not thinking about returning, because her mother had died and the rest of the family lived abroad. Almost all of the women imagine their lives outside of Venezuela as a transitional period. They expect to return to Venezuela when the political and economic crisis is over. Their waiting involves ambivalent feelings, including the desire to return vs. the recognition that this is impossible any time soon, and the desire not to become rooted in Chile vs. the need to make something during they are living abroad, especially because these Venezuelan women are carrying a sense of responsibility for their family's care (Collins & Daly, 2021). While they are living abroad, waiting, they are not passive or (im)mobile. While waiting, labor and social strategies flourish (Conlon, 2011).

The migrant condition implies a permanent reassessment of their lives. Even when settled, migrants still consider the possibility of moving again. Stated differently, migrant's lives are not

just anchored in the present but in an ongoing process whereby past, present, and future are folded together (Collins, 2018). Transnational studies emphasize the migrant ability to remain connected with home, maintaining one foot there while staying with the other foot in the destination (Boccagni, 2017). Indeed, this continuous evaluation process led some women of our study to move to Chile while living in other Latin American countries. Several of our interviewees lived first in Peru, Colombia, or Argentina. Scholars on migrant trajectories emphasize that perceptions of risk, viability and opportunity change, so people may move on after a while, some even years later. This means people may move to one place initially with the *intention to settle*, but then revisit their situation and move on when things do not work out or reality does not meet expectations (Mallett & Hagen-Zanker, 2018). Suti, for example, lived in Colombia for two and a half years, but always with the idea of continuing her journey toward a then-unknown destination. It was during her time in Colombia that Suti started to think about migrating again. This time it would be to Chile, with a big project in mind, namely a family reunification with her son who had almost finished his studies in Venezuela. She evaluated the opportunities that different destinations offered them, especially in terms of degree recognition and professional job opportunities. In this sense, her migration aimed to "open the route" for her son. As Abrantes (2013) emphasizes, female mobility is grounded less in individual prospects than in family prospects. Family plays a key role in Suti's trajectory. From arranging her mother's and sister's care before leaving to her permanent concern about her son's opportunities, family issues constantly framed Suti's migration decisions. As Collins (2018) notes, migrants express a complex interplay between desire, strategic planning, and opportunism that manifest in movements to achieve or avoid certain kinds of futures. In this vein, Chiqui (48, Engineer) told us how family members' problems can trigger migration or influence the route. Because of xenophobia in the city streets and specially on their daughters' school, they decided to move to Chile. Xenophobia is indeed a key factor. Unfortunately, xenophobia and criminalization of Venezuelans has increased across Latin America, fueled by the "Venezuelan's exodus" that significantly boosted the number of Venezuelan migrants (Ordóñez & Arcos, 2019). Feeling socially accepted and having job oportunities are two other crucial aspects.

Regardless of the level of planning, family issues, and gendered structures, uncertainty is central to the women interviewed. They all reflected on how they learned to live with the unknown. Expressions such as "*Let's try it*" or "*Let's go to try our luc*k" fill up their stories. This shared trait is even found in the most planned trajectories, such as Lara's one. She settled in Valparaiso by coincidence. In Santiago, the migration procedures are awfully long, and she heard that in Valparaíso things were managed quicker. She traveled with her son to Valparaíso to submit their papers to the police and they loved the city. "*So, we moved to Valparaíso*".

As the literature suggests, the migration trajectory may involve multiple attempts to leave a place and does not necessarily end when a destination is reached (Schapendonk et al., 2021). Flexibility is a virtue here because it allows migrants to adapt to changing contexts. Some interviewees even depict the migrant life as living adrift. They call their migration process a *travesía*. This Spanish concept aims to capture the uncertainty embedded in a journey during which many things can happen. This uncertainty is reflected in what some women called a lifestyle expectant, waiting for the next move. The narrative of Freija (29, Touristic operator) is very telling of this feeling. She shared with us that she wants to go to Uruguay, that she feels living in Chile is a transitory experience, but that she is stranded until she has enough money to travel. Some scholars indicate that a re-routing in the migration processes implicates continuous adjustments and navigations (Schapendonk et al., 2020). Expectations for eventual changes requires a state of mind to pay attention to, everything that happens around. This condition of expectation, however, can become more or less permanent. In Freija's case, it has lasted more than a year. Expectation shows the multiple temporalities and rhythms of migration (Collins, 2018) and highlights that migration is not a linear or finite process. On the contrary, it involves permanently "ongoing", transitory, and multiple processes (Sheller & Urry, 2006). In fact, migration rarely involves a clear mobility plan because it hardly involves a single decision. Conversely,

it is more likely that multiple decisions will have to be made during the process (Amit & Knowles, 2017), which take shape more or less randomly, in a negotiation that involves imaginaries, regulatory policies, family concerns, and power structures. Despite their different motives and contexts, all of the women of our study crossed Latin America en route to the South, looking for a better life. Most of them looked for the imaginary of Chile as oasis, the mythical country that is politically stable and with a dynamic economy. However, the October 19 uprising and COVID-19 crisis revealed this oasis to be a mirage. In the next section, we explore some aspects of the experiences of these women living the Chilean dream within the oasis.

Living in the 'Chilean oasis'

It is true that Chile had a constant economic growth since 1980 and a dynamic economy (Ffrench-Davis, 2003) but this came at a cost, literally. In the Chilean oasis, access to services and wealth is determined by your ability to pay for them. Chile is known for being a laboratory for radical neoliberal policies. During the 1980s, a new economic system was implemented, characterized by massive privatization, in particular of health, education, and public services (Garretón, 2012). Among other things, this resulted in basic services being owned by foreign multinationals that charge market prices for water or electricity services. The governments that came after 1990 did not significantly alter Pinochet's productive or economic structure, but instead implemented a social protection network for the most dispossessed (Espinoza et al., 2013). The Chilean oasis rests upon this neoliberal model, which is secured in the current national Constitution, inherited from the times of Pinochet's dictatorship.

The highly privatized Chilean system has strong impacts on the precarious economy of migrant women. Several of the Venezuelan women of our study reflected on the difficulties associated with the inflated cost of living in Chile. As Taimar (38, Cook) told us, "*a minimum salary here is not enough, it's really not enough for paying the rent, water, electricity, gas, and food.* […] *Here you don't make money, you only survive*" (Taimar). But this situation is not specific for Venezuelan migrants. Ryburn (2018) found that a key issue for Bolivian migrants was that although the salaries they earned might yield enough for subsistence, they did not provide enough to save, buy land or a house, support their children if they wanted to go to higher education, or in more general terms, to "look to the future."

National statistics support our interviewees' feelings. The minimum wage in Chile is US $416, one of the highest in Latin America. However, about 50% of the workers receive less than that (INE. , 2018). Moreover, the cost of living in Chile is awfully expensive. A crucial element for understanding the October 19 social outbreak in Chile is the gap between the excessive cost of living and the low wages and miserable pensions. This gap is bridged by credit mechanisms, with many middle class families resting on credit cards to make ends meet, to access social security services as housing, education, and health. In the Chilean oasis, there are ample facilities to access credit, and migrants have not fallen behind. Indeed, migrant populations show elevated levels of indebtedness. While the debt of Chileans is about US $2,400 in average, this indicator grows up to US $2,900 for migrants (Universidad San Sebastian, 2019). Indebtedness is a necessary tradeoff for living in the oasis. However, researchers have also identified some alternative strategies of migrants to cope with the high cost of life, such as using alternative loan networks (family and friends) rather than bank loans (Galaz & Perez, 2020) or inhabiting informal settlements, which allows migrants to reduce rent and service costs (López-Morales et al., 2018).

Despite this, Venezuelan migrants have better opportunities compared to other migrant groups. As Ryburn (2018) emphasizes, a racialized, nationality-based hierarchy operates in Chile, and Venezuelans are well ranked. The comparatively high educational levels of Venezuelan migrants have helped them to occupy the higher positions in this structure and let them profit from the social prestige of professions. This aspect can make a significant difference in their experiences within the "Chilean oasis." For example, our interviewees holding teacher or engineering degrees are usually employed as sellers or cleaning ladies, whereas physicians and lawyers held jobs

much closer to their professions, e.g. as caregivers (Liz and Paola) or lawyer assistant (Lara). Furthermore, the high social prestige of these professions also results in a differential treatment from both citizens and institutions, even leading to police officer's discretionary decisions.

In contrast, women without university degrees just get access to low-paid jobs, many times without a contract, but they also shared with us the most severe experiences of labor abuse. Zabiana's (36, Cook) story is illuminating here. She got disillusioned with Chile quite quickly. The only job she was able to get was in a small fast-food restaurant, and since she had no place to sleep, the owner allowed her to stay overnight in the restaurant's cellar. She told us how hard the job was. She used to work without rest every day of the week from the moment the restaurant opened in the morning until it closed at night: "*I never had a day free, not even a lunch break, never*". When she encouraged herself to quit the job, her shameless employer did not pay her salary, and told her: "*you should be grateful because we let you sleep in the restaurant*". During the two years that Zabiana has been living in Chile, she accumulated a continuous history of labor abuse, sometimes manifestly without contract or with false promises of one.

Holding a professional degree or having children are crucial elements that can lead to important differences in the female migrant experience. Single mothers are especially susceptible to widespread abusive practices. As they produce the only family income, they are compelled to work in any job. The anxiety of not knowing if they will make ends meet, of struggle to both buy nutritious food and finance debts or support their families, is a daily reality for many (Ryburn, 2018). Freija, for instance, used to clean two offices and worked as a waitress in a restaurant before the pandemic. She finished one job to start the other, clocking more than 12 hours of work per day. During the pandemic, she kept only one job, cooking sushi at a small restaurant where she earned just enough to pay the rent. Communal caring strategies became salient during the coronavirus crisis. Freija and a friend, another Venezuelan single parent, organize the care and feeding of their children together. While her unemployed friend takes care of the children and organizes home-schooling, Freija can work. This collaborative strategy is the one that Freija has found to solve feeding, rent, and care in the middle of a pandemic. These collaborative practices are strategies of agency during waiting. As Hage (2009) argues, waiting is not passive, but there is an enormous activity taking place during waiting. There are multiple and ambivalent ways in which agency takes shape in waiting. In the middle of the chaos, in one of the most unequal countries on the continent, frequently subjected to abuse, mistreatment and job insecurity, these collaborative strategies seem to be the only way to survive in the Chilean oasis, waiting while the situation improves.

Conclusion

After having reviewed different migratory trajectories of Venezuelan women in Chile, their imaginaries before migration, the expectations regarding their departure from Venezuela, the routes followed, the reassessments along the way, and their life in the Chilean oasis, it becomes clear that life in the oasis is far from how they had imagined it to be. The route of these Venezuelan women in search of an oasis seems to be an incessant search for a mirage. They arrived in Chile yearning for a country with political stability and economic development where Venezuelans were welcomed, an island in the middle of a chaotic Latin America. While the first phase of the Democratic Responsibility Visa facilitated the arrival of migrants, the second phase made it even more restrictive, since the document needs to be requested at a consular office, which requires planning. However, as we have shown, it is not always possible to plan migration. Given the complex situation, people often migrate without much planning. Restrictions and impediments to the entrance of Venezuelans are deepening, as the DRV was suspended, generating greater irregularity in the process.

The uncertain migratory trajectories are expressed in the multiple routes the Venezuelan women of our study have taken to reach Chile, but also in the mental state with which they

face their daily lives, trying to solve day-to-day challenges, but also in their situation of uncertainty, waiting expectantly, always ready to respond to the next move. The uncertainty and permanent appraisal of their migrant situation, the continuous adjustment of migrant trajectories allow us to understand why in June 2020,[8] a group of Venezuelan migrants camped out in front of the Venezuelan embassy, requesting the opening of borders to be able to return to their countries or requesting their repatriation. In November 2020, a camp of Venezuelans was created in the midst of the Atacama Desert, with migrants waiting for the mandatory quarantine to keep their route to the South. In sum, migration processes are in permanent motion.

The pandemic crisis has affected migrant populations strongly. If living in the Chilean oasis was difficult before the crisis, now the difficulties have worsened. To stay with the metaphor, some women certainly enjoy the fresh water from the oasis, taking advantage of the benefits of a liberal economy. They feel that, despite the problems, they are better off in Chile than in Venezuela. For an important number of Venezuelan women, however, the Chilean oasis has been nothing more than an illusion, a mere mirage. Single mothers, people without university degrees or even those who do not have a highly prestigious profession are exposed to experiences of labor rights violations and an informal labor market. For them, the Chilean oasis remains just a fata morgana— an illusion in the middle of the desert, without any water.

Paradoxically, while these migrant women were seeking stability, Chile is amid a great political transformation. In October 2020, the constitutional change was approved, and in the coming years, a constitutional assembly process, unique in the history of the country, will be launched, with gender parity and including quotas for indigenous peoples. In this sense, Chile is in the midst of significant changes that will lay new societal foundations, and that could allow fresh water to develop within the currently dry oasis, hopefully also for migrants.

Notes

1. While Latin America refers to countries with Romance languages (Spanish, Portuguese, and French), Central and South America is a geographical concept that divides de countries of the Caribbean, which are included in Central America, and the nations south of Panama called South America. Latin American countries are thus included within Central and South America.
2. See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iiJEgFn29Vs&ab_channel=T13 and https://cooperativa.cl/noticias/pais/region-de-tarapaca/la-realidad-de-los-migrantes-venezolanos-varados-en-huara/2020-11-03/130200.html
3. Valparaiso is located 115 km west of Chile's capital, Santiago. It is the country's second largest region in terms of population (almost 1 million inhabitants in 2017). Valparaiso is also the second region in Chile in terms of migrant population.
4. As their trajectories are in permanent motion, some of the women involved in this study live in other Chilean cities today, and one of them returned to Venezuela.
5. The reform was changed on 22 June 2019. In the period between April 2018 and June 2019, Venezuelan citizens could apply for a special visa upon entering the country. As of June 2019, applications had to be made in advance at a Chilean Consulate.
6. https://venezolanoenchile.com/guia/ andhttp://www.decapack.com/es/los-5-mejores-paises-de-latinoamerica-para-migrar-y-mudarse/
7. https://padondenosvamos.com/como-vivir-en-chile/?amp#
8. https://www.cooperativa.cl/noticias/sociedad/salud/coronavirus/casi-400-venezolanos-sin-techo-cumplen-mas-de-dos-semanas-acampando/2020-05-18/033823.html

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Ethical approvement

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