

Country: Mexico, North America

CRRF Pillar: Pillar 1, Pillar 3

Actors: “La 72” Migrant Shelter

CRRF Objectives: Objective 2, Objective 3

Keywords: LGBTQIA+, dignity, rights, inclusivity, religious networks, self-reliance

Good practices in building dignified reception conditions and local community resilience: An example from Mexico

Introduction

This case study is part of a collaborative project carried out by Joint Learning Initiative and UNHCR, which aims to generate locally grounded evidence and identify examples of good practices of local faith community-led responses to refugees across 6 countries: Honduras, Mexico, Uganda, Germany, Bangladesh, and Lebanon. Thirty-five interviews and one focus group with a total of 46 participants were conducted for this case study in order to gain a deeper understanding of how the La 72 migrant shelter operates in assisting displaced populations and supporting the local community¹.

La 72 is a migrant and refugee shelter founded in 2011 by the Franciscan order in Tenosique, Tabasco state. Due to its proximity to the southern border along the Gulf Route, it draws many refugees fleeing violence from Central American countries of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. Franciscans established a shelter in the region in the 1990s, providing food and shelter at a local church with the local church community. After the 2010 San Fernando massacre of 72 migrants by Los Zetas cartel near the northern border of Tamaulipas, Franciscan Fray Tomás González Castillo expanded the space, now named “La 72” in memoriam, to meet the increased flow of women, children, adolescents and other migrants.² Internal estimates put the number of refugees and migrants accommodated by the shelter between 2011 and 2018 at 80,000.³

Building dignified reception conditions through respect for diversity

Many of those utilizing La 72’s wide range of services are in one or more of the marginalized populations described in UNHCR’s Age, Gender and Diversity policy, including women and children, unaccompanied minors, and people in the LGBTQIA+ community. According to a 2018 report on Violence against Women and LGBTQIA+ groups in Honduras and El Salvador, the fear of violence and impunity of the state can be major drivers for migration as vulnerable populations seek enhanced protection either in

¹ Project leads: Prof. Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, University College London, and Dr. Olivia Wilkinson, Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities (JLI). We gratefully acknowledge the efforts and dedication of the researchers in collecting the primary data and analyzing it: Heather Wurtz (data collection, analysis and writing) and Molly Middlehurst (analysis and writing).

² Alejandro Olayo-Méndez SJ, “La 72: An Oasis along the Migration Routes in Mexico,” *Forced Migration Review* 56 (October 2017): 10–11, 11.

³ MEXmFBO020.

Mexico or the USA.⁴ La 72 creates safe and dignified reception conditions through its comprehensive programming for LGBTQIA+ refugees and migrants, as it was the first shelter in the country to develop services for these populations.⁵ Some of the key aspects of this programming include separate sleeping facilities for LGBTQIA+ refugees, LGBTQIA+ sponsored events and activities within the shelter, access to culturally sensitive medical and psychological care, and awareness raising on LGBTQIA+ issues amongst LFLs, hosts and other refugees. In addition to protection from violence and prosecution, ensuring a safe space for the LGBTQIA+ population may provide migrants and refugees the opportunity to embrace, perform and celebrate their gender identity and sexuality, potentially for the first time.

This can be particularly powerful for transgender and gender non-conforming refugees. A representative of Asociación LAMBDA in Guatemala who works with LGBTQIA+ refugees on both sides of the Guatemala-Mexico border reported that they have begun referring transwomen to La 72 as their combination of LGBTQIA+ services and “respect” of gender orientation is difficult to find elsewhere.⁶ One of La 72’s employees was particularly touched by his interactions with a transwoman in the shelter. The staffer was able to answer some basic questions about hormones and gender transition and to refer the refugee to medical and psychological support in her transition.

To see that transformation, to see someone enter as a gay man and then leave the shelter as a woman ... Here they can start their hormones, start dressing how they like, they can dress and interact like a women at the parties we have here every Saturday night ... and little by little they take on that identity. To have a space of such freedom ... where they are not discriminated against, not criticized ... where even though it's a Catholic project, they don't have to be afraid.⁷

Several LFLs and hosts emphasized this point – that regardless of many LFL and host community members’ Catholic beliefs, any social or religious conservatism in regards to exclusion of LGBTQIA+ migrants is not an issue within La 72. According to many informants, any potential for violence or harassment of LGBTQIA+ migrants is mitigated by the shelter’s firm “zero tolerance policy” towards discrimination. As was expressed by one young migrant from Honduras who identified as a cis-gender gay man:

Yeah, I think everyone feels really good there because they come from their countries after facing so much discrimination...and the discrimination [towards LGBTQ populations] in Central American countries never stops, it's part of your daily life. And it's filled with such hate. And then to arrive in Mexico to a unit specifically dedicated to

⁴ Andrea Fernandez Aponte, “Left in the Dark: Violence Against Women and LGBTI Persons in Honduras and El Salvador,” Latin America Working Group Education Fund, March 7, 2018, http://www.lawg.org/storage/documents/Between_Dangers_Part_8.pdf, 9.

⁵ Elisabet Diaz Sanmartin, “Mexican Shelter Welcomes LGBTI Refugees,” UNHCR, 2017, <http://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/2017/8/599e827e4/mexican-shelter-welcomes-lgbti-refugees.html>.

⁶ MEXmNG0030

⁷ MEXmFB0020.

*LGBT...it's like being in heaven (laughs joyfully)...this is something really special about La 72...when one flees from their country where discrimination was a daily reality, and to then find a space where discrimination and stigmatization is now allowed...it's like, WOW!*⁸

Inclusive religious activities

La 72 promotes social cohesion through inclusive religious activities that do not discriminate refugees based on religious affiliation. When asked about the religious element of the shelter and the presence and leadership of the Franciscans, one female refugee who arrived to La 72 only days before the interview asserted: "It's very reassuring, because I am a person with a lot of faith. And here there is everything – shelter, food, the Fray. Yes, I feel very good here."⁹ Though this refugee and several others from the sample identified as Catholic, La 72 draws refugees and asylum seekers throughout Central America from a number of Christian denominations. La 72's approach reflects creative adaptation and the ability to learn from past challenges. For example, volunteers at La 72 reported a shift in the religious services offered in order to better respond to these needs of changing migrant populations and their multi-denominational faiths: "Something that is really interesting that I observed in La 72 is that they used to hold a Catholic mass every Sunday. But they started to realize that many migrants came from a Christian tradition and that the mass wasn't perhaps the best approaches to meeting spiritual needs. So they shifted to a more Ecumenical service, which is what they have now on Sundays."¹⁰

Another volunteer suggested this responsiveness and drive for diversity and inclusion within and among religious denominations is led from the top down (Fray Tomas himself) and includes ensuring secular and religious spaces within La 72 are also inclusive:

*Here, there is a profound respect for faith and for the people who reside here. If you go into the Chapel, there's not a single religious image, out of respect for the different types of religion that people practice. Here, the shelter is run by the Franciscan order within the Catholic Church, but most of the migrants who come here practice other religions. So, it's very open, here, and the Fray never makes anyone feel obligated to participate in religious activities, never, never.*¹¹

According to a male LFL who has worked with La 72, this drive for inclusiveness is rooted in La 72's overall values and commitment to restoring dignity and advocating for the human and legal rights not only of refugees, but also host populations in Tenosique and the southern border region:

Human dignity comes first, above all, above any particular religious domination ... We don't want to impose rules or constraints to how people practice faith; we aren't aiming to indoctrinate anyone or to try to convert anyone to the Catholic religion. The main

⁸ MEXmREF023

⁹ MEXfREF008.

¹⁰ MEXmOTH011.

¹¹ MEXmFBO007.

objective is to uphold human dignity and to respond to the urgent needs of the population.”¹²

Building resilience of host communities through human rights programming

Despite La 72’s many examples of striving for diversity and inclusion across age, gender and religious denominations, challenges regarding local host acceptance and support of migrants and refugees remain a major stumbling block. To combat the stigma and often legitimate fear of prosecution by authorities for supporting migrants and refugees, La 72 established the School of Human Rights in order to engage and support host communities along the Gulf Route. Each community maintains a small chapel and church community group, which are part of the central parish based in Tenosique. The School draws upon this already established religious-based network to organize host communities and to equip them with knowledge and skills to offer basic support for migrants in transit. Through this network, La 72 educates host communities on human and legal rights and draws on religious principles to teach and inspire School participants. When asked about the benefits of being a faith-based organization, one researcher and former La 72 volunteer responded:

The greatest advantage is the infrastructure or network of religious based organizations...the partnerships that are formed and that work together to offer migrant support. Also, aspects of faith that reside outside of the church walls – the promotion of love for one’s fellow man. And La 72 works closely with the central parish in Tenosique to promote this message, the Franciscan message of social justice and love for one’s fellow man...and the message that Jesus, too, was a migrant. And this message, I think, definitely brings comfort to the migrants. And it’s important for the broader population, as well. To have a Friar, someone with credibility in the eyes of the people, to preach at the pulpit these types of messages, is really important to shifting people’s mentalities and breaking down their prejudice...to help them see things differently.

In addition to supporting host communities in the provision of basic humanitarian aid to passing migrants, the School of Human Rights also enhances the resilience of local host communities through information sharing and legal training, including guidance on how to engage with local authorities. As one School participant expressed: “Now we are able to protect ourselves and to tell [Migration authorities] that they cannot enter our property because it is **our property**¹³. And we have the backing of La 72 and the human rights, and with that we are able to protect ourselves”. It may also provide a sense of purpose and fulfillment in engaging with migrant populations for those who may previously have been reluctant or afraid of doing so. After working with La 72 and his community to raise awareness about providing support to refugees, one host ultimately felt: “Honestly, it’s been wonderful. I’ve met a lot of people, made a lot of friends. The experience of working with migrants really helps you to grow morally and spiritually. And through this work you learn a lot about different situations and perspectives, and you are able to share space with religious actors and with the Frays. It’s been really enriching and fulfilling.”¹⁴

¹² MEXmLFL027.

¹³ Emphasis author’s own.

¹⁴ MexMHOS016.

Core Messages

- La 72's inclusive, gender- and age-sensitive approach creates **safe and dignified reception conditions** for refugees. This includes separate living quarters and specialized programming for LGBTQIA+, women, and unaccompanied minors.
- La 72 supports **self-reliance of refugees** by expanding opportunities to access critical social services, providing healthcare, psychological attention, and legal counseling on the shelter grounds, as well as complimentary pathways to resources within the local community.
- **Social cohesion is promoted** through inclusive religious activities and other sources of psychosocial support, such as film showings followed by group reflection, weekly social events, and group projects.
- Through innovative human rights training carried out on the local level, **resilience of host communities** is strengthened while also improving access of refugees to safe and adequate reception conditions.

