

Idea of Home in Central American Migrants' Journey¹

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Resumen: En este artículo se explora la idea de hogar desde el punto de vista de los migrantes Centroamericanos que viajan por México para llegar a los Estados Unidos. Se revisa el concepto de hogar y se pone en contexto con la travesía que los centroamericanos viven para llegar hasta la frontera México-Estados Unidos. Al igual que se presenta el argumento de que tanto los albergues de migrantes en México como el viaje mismo es el nuevo 'hogar' de los migrantes.

Palabras Clave: América Central; migración; hogar; albergues.

Abstract: In this article the idea of home is explored from the point of view of Central American migrants who travel through Mexico to reach the United States. The concept of home is reviewed and placed in context with the Central Americans journey to reach the US-Mexico border and the argument that both migrant shelters in Mexico and the journey itself is the new 'home' for migrants.

Keywords: Central America; migration; home; shelters.

'Not a flat. Not an apartment in back. Not a man's house. Not a daddy's. A house all my own. With my porch and my pillow, my pretty purple petunias. My books and my stories. My two shoes waiting beside the bed. Nobody to shake a stick at. Nobody's garbage to pick after. Only a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem'
- 'A House of My Own', Sandra Cisneros

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Introduction

The idea of home has hunted human beings since the beginning of times; being able to be secured and in a place where one can developed memories is essential to human nature. John S. Allen presents the idea, in his new book *Home: How Habitat Made Us Humans*, that humans more than being homebodies, are *homeminded* (Allen 1). Meaning that the idea of home comes from the emotions humans created for centuries and these emotions are pass down from generation to generation. This idea does not change for migrants. Political scientists who study patterns of migration overlook the concept of home, taken more into consideration policies and reasons that may cause migration as the focus of the research. The idea of home is as crucial in the journey for migrants in transits as it is for people who have never migrated. This essay will explored the idea of home for Central American migrants, and how through their journey, they keep in mind the idea of home as they inherited for their ancestors. The idea of home was pass down for generation to generation is explored further in Allen's book, where he mentions that as any other animal, primates have to nest and develop an emotional connection with the physical space; therefore, a more complex idea of developing a home was developed as time passed (Allen 64).

What is home? In this essay I will present the different concepts of 'home': Can a migrant shelter be a home? Can an imaginary home exist even if they are in movement? These questions may not have an answer as of now, due to the fact that there are three stages of movement in migrants' journey: leaving the homeland, trespassing different borders and settling in the recipient country, and find empirical answers to these questions will take years of ethnographic research. Although, I must put forward the idea that a home is created in migrants' journey. I would like to explore this idea of home as more than just one physical space; for instance, it could also mean the journey migrants live while in transit. To demonstrate how these spaces become 'home', my focus will remain on two shelters located in Mexico: *La 72*, *Hogar Refugio para Personas Migrantes*, located in Tenosique, Tabasco and; *Hermanos en el Camino*, located in Ixtepec, Oaxaca.

The concepts of mobility and home come to mind when referring to the topic of migration. In the Political Science tradition, the idea of home has not been revised fully; rather the studies done in migration take a look at political institutions that may have caused migration in the first place. Such works as the project by Jorge Durand and Douglas S. Massey *Crossing the Border: Research from the Mexican Migration Project* (2004), or the work of Alfonso Gonzales *Reform without Justice: The Homeland Security State and Latino Migrant Politics* (2014). Durand and Massey's work take a look at migration through a quantitative standpoint; their objective was to define a database that could presents the different causes of Mexican migration to the United States. On the other hand, Gonzales' work take a look at the policies that control Latino migration bringing into account neo-Granscian theory and empirical fieldwork. It is important to note that these are not the only works on migration in the political science field, but rather these are works that have brought an insight to recent migration trends.

It is worth noting that in this work, because of the lack of studies in the subject in political science, is mostly empirical; making an observation of what may the idea of home mean for the migrants' journey and how their journey itself, the houses/shelters and immigration policies are political institutions that very much defined what home means for this migrant group.

In Political Science what is taken into consideration are the normative political institutions that may influence the causes of migration, for example: unstable government/political climate, no welfare programs, and lack of education. In the case of Central American migrants, the idea of home is left to the side and what is examined are the institutions that form part of a migrant's journey, like immigration offices, the sending and the recipient country, but never the migrant houses/shelters. The definition used in this work for institutions is the one pertaining to the Political Science field³. Regardless of how migrants' journey began – violence, abuse or poverty – migrants leave their country of origin to find a new, better 'home' in another place.

Ideas of Home

The idea of home has different meanings for different disciplines. As defined by the Oxford dictionary, *home* is 'the place where one lives permanently, especially as a member of a family or household' (Soanes, and Waite). This could be the standard definition of 'home,' but home can mean much more than just a space where one lives. In *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* home is defined as follows: 'house, native place XIV; one's own place or country XVI; collection of dwellings, village, estate, house'. It can be seen that home is the native state/homeland, when migrants decided to leave their nation-state; they begin a journey in a search of home. 'Home' can mean belonging, being part of a space where one feels protected and comfortable, being part of a community that suffers the same struggles. 'Home' can mean many things.

John S. Allen mentioned in his book that home is,

What we share, and what the vast majority of humans share, is an ability to form an emotional relationship with the places in which we live, the spaces we occupy. Over the course of our evolution as a species, home became the building block for human culture. From the outside looking in, these building blocks are different in size and composition: the actual structures (i.e., houses) that provide the physical setting of home vary from culture to culture, and the designs of households are determined by cultural traditions (Allen 14)

In this quote Allen makes it clear that home is more than just a physical space. It is an ability to create an 'emotional relation with the places in which [we] live [in]' (14). Central American migrants, who stop at the shelters, make this emotional connection with their migrant community when they reach the shelters and when they are in the actual road to the U.S.-Mexico border.

Home can be defined as the physical space migrants left when they start their journey to the United States. Home can also be the migrant's houses they visit to rest,

³ Definition of institution as defined by the Encyclopedia Britannica: "Institution, in political science, [is] a set of formal rules (including constitutions), informal norms, or shared understandings that constrain and prescribe political actor's interactions with one another. Institutions are generated and enforced by both state and non-state actors". Look on work cited for full information on web page citation.

but also home is more than the physical space. When the migrants arrive to one of these migrant shelters a sense of community is created and some migrants have call this community home. These ‘homes’ could be spiritual, symbolic, or even literal spaces where migrants feel safe when traveling.

One of the physical spaces that becomes ‘home’ would be the migrants’ shelters on the route that leads migrants to the U.S.-Mexico border. These shelters provide migrants a place to stay, food, medical and legal assistance, and, in some cases, spiritual support; these houses, in a sense, become home for them.

It is important to understand why these shelters play an important role upon the idea of ‘home’ in migrants’ journey. It is important because these shelters become the safe net where migrants can rest, get medical assistant and be protected from the abuses of the state police and migration officers. These shelters may not fall into the standard definition of what ‘home’ may be, but rather take on a new meaning for the immigrants, volunteers, and staff working and living there, and become ‘home’. As mentioned before, these shelters become home because migrants have the opportunity to stay in the physical space for long periods of time, and because the volunteers and staff in these houses/shelters understand how difficult their journey is and a new type a home is created.

At the houses/shelters migrants are not just displaced people, but rather they are humans with dreams of a better life. Volunteers, migrants, staff and priests come together in these shelters and share their tragedies. In *La 72* website under the tap ‘¿Quiénes somos?/ Who we are?’ they mentioned how they share the disadvantages of migrants:

La fraternidad universal, el servicio evangélico que dignifica, la ternura profética que acoge y libera, la búsqueda de la justicia serán los ejes que guíen nuestros pasos. Y con las víctimas migrantes asumimos la parte de persecución que implica su acogida y su defensa. Sabemos que si hay personas migrantes expulsadas de su país y perseguidas, sacrificadas, extorsionadas, derramando su sangre en el nuestro, es porque hay un estado de derecho sepultado junto con las víctimas de una violencia institucional⁴

Universal fraternity and evangelic service dignifies the work staff and volunteers alike do for migrants in the house. Once again, as Allen mentioned in his book, the emotional connection is what creates the idea of home for any human being, and it is clear that for the staff, volunteers and migrants this connection is shared through the hardships of the migrant journey.

The migrants leave their homeland for different reasons. As was presented in the pragmatic project of Douglas S. Massey and Jorge Durand *Crossing The Border: Research from The Mexican Migration Project* (2004), causes of migration differ from region to region. Yes, some migrants may migrate because they need financial support for their families, but they also migrate due to violence, political instability and to fleeing their communities due to fear of being assassin (Durand and Massey, 9).

To understand that home is also created in the minds of migrants and that possibly houses/shelters could serve as their new non-traditional home of migrants, it is important to understand the human right to have a home. It caught my attention that in Article 13 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR) is stated that

⁴ La 72 Hogar Refugio Para Personas Migrantes: http://www.la72.org/?page_id=458

every human being has the right of mobility⁵, but there is no mention of the right to settlement of having a home once one has migrated.

This article protects anyone who wants to move between borders, but as it has been proved, the right to mobility does not protect the right to settlement. It is also broadly defined what mobility is in the Human Rights Declaration, giving countries the autonomy to create their own immigration laws, which can be xenophobic and can go against this principle. As is noted by Tanya Colash-Boza and Cecilia Menjivar in their article titled ‘Causes and consequences of International Migration: Sociological Evidence for the Right to Mobility’ published in *The International Journal of Human Rights* in 2012,

Because of the receiving countries’ role in creating migration flows in the first place and the human rights consequences of immigration policies to restrict flows, we argue that the right to mobility must entail both the right to leave and the right to enter (1216).

In addition to the lack of understanding and acceptance from the receiving countries, such as Mexico, the idea of ‘home’ has been left out when arguing if these migrants have the right to enter the country and settle down, ‘The right to enter another country, however, does form part of existing human rights conventions and treaties. In the prevailing human rights tradition, the ‘freedom to leave is a more fundamental right than the freedom to enter’ (1216).

It is understandable that people will migrate if they suffer from extreme poverty, any type of violence or political instability (Durand and Massey, 21). In a humanistic point of view what is left out is the idea that every human has also the right to have a home. Political institutions such as the immigration offices and xenophobic laws like Plan Frontera Sur negate when migrants decide to leave their country the right to belong to or have a home to them.

In particular Plan Frontera Sur (Southern Border Program) is one of the most aggressive policies passed by the Mexican government. The law was put into action on July 2014, its intentions are to militarize the southern border to prevent the entry of Central American migrants into Mexico as is noted by an analysis titled ‘Mexico’s Southern Border Strategy: *Program Frontera Sur*’ (2014) by Christopher Wilson and Pedro Valenzuela. The plan is financed with U.S. aid allocated in ‘Non-Intrusive Inspection Equipment (NIIE) and approximately \$3.5 million in mobile kiosks, operated by Mexico’s National Migration Institute, that capture the biometric and biographic data of individuals living and transiting southern Mexico’ (2).

This policy not only targets in an aggressive manner migrants, it has also created a crisis in human rights. As noted by the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) in the ‘Assessing the Alarming Impact of Mexico’s Southern Border Program’ (2015) report,

The number of Central American children and families arriving at the United States border in an attempt to escape violence in their home countries has fallen significantly compared to last year’s peak, but at what cost? The latest official data shows that Central Americans continue to flee north in large numbers and that a massive immigration

⁵ For full see citation on “Causes and consequences of International Migration: Sociological Evidence for the Right to Mobility”, 1215.

crackdown in Mexico has resulted in increased deportations of Central Americans, raising serious human rights and due process concerns (1)

Although the human rights violations of this policy can be discuss and analyze in depth in a separate work, it is worth noting that because of laws like this, houses/shelters are established in the South Border of Mexico, changing and defining the journey of migrants crossing through this border and finding a home in these shelters.

The sending country and the receiving country deny these undocumented migrants the right to have a home, therefore, they will have to find a way where they can belong in society's constructed idea of home. Before leaving their homeland, migrants belonged to a home, a physical space that rooted them to the country, when Central America migrants decided to migrate to the United States; they encounter different societies that reject them for being foreign. To be part of a home, then, becomes a challenge, one of the places that allows them to have a home and to be part of a society again is the houses/shelters in Mexico.

It comes to my attention that once migrants leave their homeland, they maintain that emotional connection to their homes there. Remembering home becomes nostalgic, especially if migrants have left family behind they face the challenge to create a home, and sometimes this home is the shelter/house they encountered in their route to the U.S.-Mexico border.

Home takes another meaning when one migrates. Home as we know does not exist anymore, home becomes an ideal, a utopia that as immigrant subjects we will never achieve. We are too foreign for this land, and traitors from the one we left. Home becomes this nostalgic feeling, home is this pain in your chest that suffocates you and reminds you every time that you're not there home is no longer home. Home is looking in the wrong places, in the wrong people, and when you think you've found that home, it leaves you with a broken heart because they don't understand that you're missing a part of you and that makes you bitter, insecure, sad. Home thinks you're strong and pushes you away without knowing that you're as fragile as the most precious glass in the world because you don't belong anywhere.

Furthermore, I would like to bring to the foreground the idea that migrants find a home in the solidarity of their fellow migrants; the people they travel with to reach the U.S-Mexico border. Although, this topic of a 'mobile home' can be studied in the future and in further detail, I would like to suggest that beyond find a home in the houses/shelters, migrants also find a home in their journey. As mentioned before, this 'mobile home' is found in the solidarity of other migrants *en route* to the United States, the migrant's shelters, and the grassroots organizations that help this community to achieve their destination. This idea of belonging to a 'mobile home' has been explored in the literature of the diaspora as mentioned in the book titled *Diaspora, Memory, and Identity: A Search for Home* edited by Vijay Agnew: 'In crossing borders and boundaries, they imagined and reimagined their homes and bonded with those they had previously thought of as strangers in order to form new communities' (19).

It is difficult to think of a 'home' in movement because we do not think of 'home' as an imaginary space that can provide the safety and warmth as the physical space does. Our western way of understanding the concept of 'home' pushes us to think of 'home' as a physical space and when we do not have it, we are considered homeless. I would like to propose that the immigrant community traveling from border to border is not homeless. They, from the moment they leave their country of

origin to the moment they reach their final destination, belong to a 'home', the houses/shelters in Mexico; the idea of home is then reinforced by the staff and volunteers as well as by the grassroots organizations that help the migrants in their journey. These imaginary and physical spaces become the 'home' immigrants need and desire; their 'home' is in the spirit of belonging to a community that protects them and helps them reach their destination.

When migrating and crossing different borders, Central American migrants find spaces that welcome them and allow them to keep that concept of 'home' alive. The idea of 'home' sometimes mean that we have become who we are because of the physical space we lived in, and the people who lived in that space with us, but the immigrant community leaves that physical space to enter new realms of identity. When they enter this new realm, they get to know themselves as migrant subjects who are rejected by inhumane laws that prohibit them from creating a life worth living. What they know to be 'home' becomes nothing but an illusion to belong. Migrants sometimes find this opportunity in the houses/shelters through Mexico.

In the next section, I will go over the basic analysis of two houses located in the South of Mexico. These two houses are key to migrants' journey as these shelters provide them with a place to stay, medical and legal assistance, and above all, these shelters become home for migrants at times.

Shelters: *La 72* and *Albergue Hermanos en el Camino*

When Central American migrants decide to migrate to the United States, they do it with full consciousness that they will be leaving their homes behind. They understand that what was familiar to them as a home will no longer be and they will have to spend the rest of their journey looking for a home. What they are not aware of is that along their journey they will find homes that will provide them not only a place to live but also a place where they feel like they are protected. These homes will be the migrant's shelters in Mexico. These shelters are located in key locations of the route migrants take up North. These shelters become institutions in which migrants start to be part of a community that moves through borders and, that in essence, have the same goal: reach the United States and have a better life for them and their families.

Grassroots organizations and the Catholic Church usually run these shelters in Mexico. Most of the time, shelters are dedicated to bringing peace of mind and making of the physical space a safe one like a home. Noted on WOLA's report 'Mexico's Other Border: Security, Migration, and the Humanitarian Crisis at the Line with Central America' (2014), there is a necessity to established shelters in the Southern border. These houses provide classes to teach the immigrants how to protect their rights when traveling through Mexico, what their civil and human rights are, and the institutions they can approach in case they suffer of a crime (Isacson, Meyer, and Morales 5). One fundamental lesson that all migrants are taught in these shelters is that no human being is illegal. Standing in this principle, migrants learn how to be resilient and fight for the right of mobility. But often, migrants will encounter the hatred and xenophobic laws of the Mexican government and the abuses from members of the organized crime who will remind them that they are the strangers in the land

and that there is not space for them to settle down and have a home in the country (15).

Mexico is known for having a xenophobic policies that suppresses and criminalizes migrants crossing the country. The latest of these policies is Plan Frontera Sur (Southern Border Plan). The U.S., with the intention to prevent migrants from reaching the U.S.-Mexico border and potentially enter and settle in the United States, has financed this law. Plan Frontera Sur has been one of the most aggressive laws passed by the Mexican government to prevent migration, the idea is to increase police surveillance in the Southern border of Mexico and have raids near immigration check points and the routes migrants take to reach the northern part of the country (10).

Most of the time, when the raids happen, migrants are mistreated and basic rights, such as the right to have a lawyer, to contact a family member, etc, are negated to them. When migrants are released to be deported, shelters such as *La 72* makes sure to denounced the abuses these people suffered while in the Immigration Offices.

Therefore, the reason to establish these types of houses came directly from the abuses the migrant community suffered. One of these house was *La 72, Hogar Refugio para Personas Migrantes*, opened on April 2011. There was a Catholic Church in the border town of Tenosique, Tabasco, Mexico that took care of the Central American migrants crossing the Mexico-Guatemala border to take “La Bestia” the cargo train that would take them to Lecheria, Veracruz to keep their journey up North. Often times, because the church was a small space, migrants could not there for long periods of time as their numbers kept increasing. The migrants were victims of extortion by the community members that would charge them very high tariffs for food and a place to rest. The organized crime robbed them and sometimes kidnapped them in order to get their family members to send more money or forced them to be part of their gangs (14). It was a necessity to open the shelter.

On April 2011, *La 72, Hogar Refugio para Personas Migrantes*, was opened on the basis to help the protection of migrants’ human rights. *La 72* was named after the 72 migrants’ corpses found in San Fernando, Tamaulipas victims of the organized crime. *La 72*’s intention is to create a safe space for migrants who stay at the house and a safe journey. *La 72* created a message that brings to the foreground their main goal as a migrant shelter:

El personal que atiende el Hogar – Refugio está formado por los Franciscanos, miembros de la Provincia ‘San Felipe de Jesús’ inserta en el Sureste mexicano y por un cuerpo de voluntarios. Queremos revestir a ‘La 72’, del sayal franciscano y en ella ejercer lo que San Francisco y Santa Clara de Asís nos dejaron como herencia espiritual: ‘... la restitución de nuestros bienes a los pobres y excluidos, que son nuestros maestros y señores...’. La fraternidad universal, el servicio evangélico que dignifica, la ternura profética que acoge y libera, la búsqueda de la justicia serán los ejes que guíen nuestros pasos. Y con las víctimas migrantes asumimos la parte de persecución que implica su acogida y su defensa. Sabemos que si hay personas migrantes expulsadas de su país y perseguidas, sacrificadas, extorsionadas, derramando su sangre en el nuestro, es porque hay un estado de derecho sepultado junto con las víctimas de una violencia institucional (La 72, 2016).

La 72 is a ‘home’, a refuge where the migrants fleeing the adverse circumstances in their country of origin can find support. The intention of *La 72* is to

not just be one more shelter, but a house where all immigrants, from all places and ages can feel like they have a home. Some of these migrants prolong their time at the shelter for up to six months. During this time they are applying for refugee status or traveling visas. The chores of the shelter are distributed among the volunteers and the people staying there, for example, the women or men that know how to cook are welcome to participate in the making of the food for all migrants at the house. Migrants that know about construction are encouraged to help in the construction projects of the shelter. Since 2011, the shelter has constructed a nursery, one building for women and children, and one building for men, a kitchen, and dining hall (La 72, 2016).

In some instances, when a volunteer is proficient in English, he or she teaches English classes; also recreational classes where men and women alike are welcomed are taught at the house. The children who arrive are sent to school, if a teenager does not want to attend school the personnel at the house tries to find a way in which the teenager can be occupied and not fall into bad habits like doing drugs, alcoholism, or falling into the hands of the organized crime. Most importantly, every time a new group of migrants come into the shelter, they are gathered in the dining hall where the director welcomes them to the house and gives them a little introduction of the town the rules of the house, and a basic introduction to their human and civic rights. In this introduction the director tells them that ‘ningún ser humano es ilegal, como ciudadanos del mundo tienen derecho a migrar’ (La 72, 2016).

Standing in this principle, that no human being is illegal, the director tells the immigrants about their right of mobility, the opportunity to apply for refugee status or for a traveling visa that will protect them if they choose to travel through Mexico. If a crime has been committed against them and in case they choose to file a complaint against the criminals, the director or a person from the staff at the house takes them to the police offices.

One essential part of the shelters like *La 72* is that when new immigrants come into the house, they ask for their names, country of origin, and if they will take the train or other routes to get to the U.S.-Mexico border. This information is stored and shared only with other shelters in Mexico. It is an easier task to have this information store in case something would happen to the immigrants, the shelters have a network of information and to find and/or help the immigrants.

The same circumstances are happening in Ixtepec, Oaxaca, when the *Hermanos del Camino* shelter opened its doors to immigrants. This shelter, as *La 72*, was created under the supervision of the Catholic Church, opened on February 2007 with the initiative of Priest Alejandro Solalinde (Hermanos Unidos, 2016). Like *La 72*, *Hermanos en el Camino* has a key location for immigrants, as the shelter is located near the railroad where *La Bestia* passes by,

Misión: Ser un organismo de asistencia humanitaria integral capaz de brindar toda la orientación necesaria a las personas migrantes en su tránsito por México.

Visión: Ofrecer servicios compensatorios de calidad como así también defender y promover los derechos humanos de las personas migrantes acompañándolas y promoviendo su constitución como sujetos activos, hacedores y transformadores de su realidad (Hermanos Unidos 2016).

Their vision and mission is similar to the one *La 72* has. Their intention is to provide some sort of relieve to the immigrants staying at the shelter, but also, to protect their human rights and remind them that they have the right to mobility. Like *La 72*, *Albergue Hermanos en el Camino* is committed to teach these immigrants their rights and protect them. *Albergue Hermanos en el Camino* knows that most of the immigrants that come to their shelter are coming from Tenosique, Tabasco.

In March 2016 a documentary concentrating on *Hermanos en el Camino* and the journey of migrants was released. This documentary follows the daily activities of the shelter and pretends to give a humanistic outlook to the immigrant crisis happening in Ixtepc, Oaxaca, and in a broader context, Mexico. The founder of the house is priest Alejandro Solalinde, who has been very active in the defense of human rights of migrants in Mexico. This is his message about the shelter,

El mayor desafío que tengo que superar es el de la intimidación, el acoso y la falta de respeto constantes de personas que no quieren que lleve a cabo mi labor de ayuda a los migrantes. Muchas autoridades locales, bandas de delincuentes y traficantes de droga quieren librarse de los defensores de los Derechos Humanos (Hermanos Unidos 2016).

The biggest challenged, as he mentions above is the intimidation, harassment and lack of respect towards the migrant community in Mexico. Therefore, he saw as crucial to establish a house that would protect the human right of Central American migrants. These motives can be also found in *La 72*, who is committed in the protection of human rights.

Conclusion

One can be born into a home, one can acquire the physical space of a home through hard work, but one can never forget what home feels like when one is away from it. Central American migrants experienced this emotional connection of a home when they travel through Mexico and find the migrant shelters. These shelters provide the basic needs for migrants to stay short periods of times, or until they resume their journey to reach the U.S.-Mexico border.

The idea of home is a difficult concept to define, especially because the concepts and ideas of home have not been developed fully in the field of Political Science, therefore, the concepts in this essay have been drawn from different disciplines such as psychology, sociology and human rights law. Home can be political institutions; these institutions can be found, in the case of migration, in shelters/houses in Mexico. In these houses the lessons taught are that before anything else migrants are human beings, that they have rights that should not be violated by anyone. Also, shelters are homes for the migrants because they serve the basic needs a home may offer, such as food, a place to stay and medical assistant. Also, these shelters/houses create the emotional connection that may have been lost in the process of migrating. Therefore, the shelters/houses are a crucial in migrants' journey.

Still a lot of work needs to be done in immigration policy making, in the protection of the human rights of immigrants, and in defining and bringing to light

these type of topics into the academia, so fields like political scientists can develop empirical research.

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