

Resistance, Resilience and Survival: Central American Refugee Women

Across the U.S.-Mexico Border

Peace and Conflict Studies Honors Thesis

Swarthmore College

2020

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I had always hoped that this land might become a safe and agreeable
asylum to the virtuous and persecuted part of mankind, to whatever
nation they might belong.

—George Washington

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To Professor Atshan—thank you for your constant enthusiasm and encouragement and for always pushing me to go above and beyond what I think is possible, from the moment I arrived at Swarthmore to the moment I graduate. You have shown me the importance of empathy and humanization in Peace and Conflict Studies—my time at Swarthmore, this thesis, the person and student I am today, would not be the same without you.

To the Peace and Conflict Studies Department—thank you to all the professors who constantly demonstrated the importance and beauty of this subject. I knew this is what I wanted to study when I applied to Swarthmore, and I am incredibly grateful for the experience.

To Professor Patnaik—thank you for inspiring my interest in human rights and for teaching me to question everything. Your passion and support have meant so much to my academic and personal growth.

To my friends—thank you to my roommates for cheering me on while I wrote, to Lily for encouraging me when I got tired, to Naomi for always being by my side and reminding me to take a breath.

To my family—thank you for the guidance, for the love, for always believing I can make it happen.

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Introduction



(Left) Maria Luisa Vasquez and her children, Brittany and César, from Guatemala. (Right) Fanny Gabriela Regalado, from Honduras.

In a 2019 photo series, Federica Valabrega of NPR shares the stories of twelve Central American women applying for asylum at the US-Mexico border. Some of them are mothers seeking a better life and opportunities for their children, some are young women escaping everyday gender-based violence and discrimination in their home countries, and many of them are fleeing domestic violence. Along with the pictures, Valabrega accounts their individual backgrounds, the trials of their journeys north, and the difficulties of the asylum and border crossing process. The photos show the women in the temporary camp at the border where they must wait for their asylum claims to be processed—after the difficult and dangerous journey north, they must now join the list of 5,000 other asylum seekers in an extended process that very rarely guarantees them the protection of asylum in the United States. Some of these women, and many Central American migrants in general, may attempt to cross the border illegally if they are not granted asylum. Despite the threat of violence, deportation, and family separation, migrant

women, like those in Valabrega's series, will do whatever it takes to ensure a better future for themselves and their children. The courage and strength demonstrated by Central American women in this context is a crucial part of understanding the migration and refugee crisis today because it shows the gravity of the situation, and the necessity of making social and legal changes to protect the human rights, lives, and futures of migrants.

The past few decades have seen a significant rise in migration into the United States, particularly from Mexico and Central America, and the numbers of Central American migrants and refugees who are fleeing violence and environmental disaster, seeking asylum, and seeking economic and educational opportunities have increased greatly. In 2016, there was a reported 40,000 asylum claims from Central American migrants in United States immigration courts, almost five times more claims than reported in 2012 (Soto et. al 2019: 10). Many of these migrants are undocumented, which not only makes border crossing and legal procedures more difficult for incoming migrants, but also means it is easy for migrants to disappear between borders when they are not accounted for or recognized as legal human beings. The rise in migration has had numerous effects in the United States, including increased xenophobia and anti-immigrant rhetoric, heightened border security and militarization, and a convoluted understanding of refugee terminology in American law and media.

Part of this issue is the conflation of classifications of those crossing the border—while many are refugees seeking asylum from violence and persecution in their home country, the American media and public often labels all Central Americans as economic migrants. This label not only makes the specific needs of refugees invisible, but also carries a negative connotation, as many people fear that economic migrants are coming into the United States to take American jobs. As I explore throughout this thesis, the terminology plays an important role in the migration

crisis and the situation at the US-Mexico border, and the lack of understanding or clarity of classification is central to this issue. In this thesis, I use the term migrant as an umbrella term to encompass all Central American movement into the United States, but I make clear the differences in the experiences of refugees and economic migrants. I explore these differences in depth in the first chapter, but I want to note here that the terminology used in the American media and in the law is complicated and contributes to a lack of understanding of Central American migration today, as well as a more complex and difficult asylum process.

In order to understand the refugee crisis at the US-Mexico border and to improve migration and asylum processes, it is necessary to examine where these issues originated and how they have evolved over time. The increase in migration is not a new phenomenon—while “[l]imited economic development, changes in economic patterns, and easier access to the US via a land route through Mexico contributed to migration movements throughout the 1970s” (McBride 1999: 295), Central American migration into the United States began to rise significantly in the early 1980s in the wake of civil war, economic disaster, and political turmoil in several Central American countries, including El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. Economic disparity and widespread unemployment in these countries led to civil unrest, and “[s]upported by the United States, the governments in these countries responded to the massive rebellions by sharply escalating military force and violence. Subjected to repression and the governments’ refusal to carry out political and economic reforms, the aggrieved began to organize, mobilize economic resources from poor and wealthy opposition leaders, and engage in armed resistance” (Hernandez 2005: 181). United States involvement in the political turmoil escalated tensions and led to increased levels of violence, pushing many Central Americans out of their home countries and towards the United States in search of safety, opportunity, and a

better life. The cause of the rise in migration is clearly directly related to the stirring of conflict in Central America, and the violence of United States-backed regimes in these countries.

However, this is not the only direct driver of Central American migration, and the lasting effects of conflict on economic, social, and political structures continue to push people from their home countries today. The lasting, ripple effects of United States involvement in the region continue to shape and add to the political and economic instability that not only push people from their home countries but fuel social inequalities that systematically oppress the most vulnerable—low income populations, indigenous peoples, the LGBTQ+ community, and women, among others. For women, these social inequalities and hierarchies result in gender-based violence and discrimination that often not only limit their economic and educational opportunities but also put them in dangerous situations of sexual violence and domestic abuse. Additionally, the threat of violence is heightened in times of conflict and political turmoil, and since many of these Central American countries have had difficulty recovering economically and politically from the civil wars of the 1980s and 90s, the lasting social and political tension continues to put women in physical, mental, and emotional danger in their home countries.

Before discussing the role of gender in the border and migration crisis, it is important to examine the way that the American public, media, and government has dealt with and portrayed Central American migration over the past few decades. As I said above, public perception plays a crucial role in determining the journey, safety, and status of Central American migrants. The United States is and has been generally unaccepting of Central American migrants, both politically and socially. Xenophobic and anti-immigrant rhetoric has increased following 9/11, and a growing fear of foreigners and the “other” contributes to the United States’ resistance to incoming migrants from any country. Central American migrants have been labeled as

dangerous, criminal, and job-stealing by the American public and politicians, which not only promotes a false perception of Central Americans but makes their migration and asylum process more difficult.

With this growing fear of the “other” comes increased border securitization and militarization, and they continue to fuel each other, especially when encouraged by American politicians. Donald Trump’s presidency has had a heavy focus on anti-immigrant policy and sentiment, which began with his 2016 campaign platform of building a wall between the United States and Mexico at the border and is now evident in the Trump administration’s zero-tolerance policy regarding immigration. This policy has resulted in heightened border security, increased Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) activity around the country, higher numbers of deportations, and the dangerous, inhumane conditions of border detention centers. The Trump administration’s promotion of anti-immigrant rhetoric and zero-tolerance policy have negatively affected Central American’s ability to safely cross the border and receive asylum in the United States. In 2018, American immigration courts rejected the highest number of asylum applications since the early 2000s (Valabrega 2019). Along with the legal and political side effects, anti-immigrant rhetoric makes life across the border dangerous for Central American migrants, who are at risk of violence, discrimination, and lack of economic and/or educational opportunity due to racism, xenophobia, and the threat of deportation or family separation.

While Trump’s presidency has certainly had a negative effect on public perception of Central American migrants and refugees, the increases in border security and deportations and detainments were also present during Obama’s presidency, and estimates show that “between 2009 and 2015, the Obama administration removed more than 2.5 million people through immigration orders” (Coleman 2018: 184). The anti-immigrant and xenophobic rhetoric

encouraged by the Trump campaign and administration is an important and destructive factor in the current political climate on migration, the legal processes of asylum, and treatment of migrants at the border. However, the rhetoric and the fear that it produces are not new phenomena, and it is necessary to note that increased enforcement of immigration control and border securitization are trends of the past few decades.

The asylum process in the United States has been motivated by political and security concerns since the increase in migration numbers in the late twentieth century. Despite the fact that asylum and legal protection from persecution is considered a fundamental human right, “the ways in which humanitarianism and policing go hand in hand to enable Western states to keep refugees in ‘spaces of exception’—that is, removed from the reach of legal jurisdiction. Although asylum has rarely been a purely humanitarian act, driven instead by political considerations, new developments call into question the extent to which the humanitarian policy of asylum has been transformed into a system of deterrence” (Ben-Arieh 2018: 247). Along with state-funded border militarization and political advocacy for better security, the American public has been encouraged, especially by the anti-immigrant rhetoric of the Trump administration, to take matters into their own hands. This has resulted in increased racist sentiments and racially charged violence against Central Americans in the United States, whether or not they are documented and regardless of how long they have been living in the country. The violence and tension are heightened at the US-Mexico border, as “[a]pproval of civilians for patrolling the border has especially resulted in the murdering of many immigrants who were crossing the border through private U.S. property” (Hernandez 2005: 181).

There have also been instances of mass violence against Central Americans as a result of anti-immigrant sentiment and a rise in nationalism in the United States. For example, an extreme

case is the shooting in El Paso, Texas, in August of 2019. The shooter, a white Texan man, opened fire in a Walmart and killed twenty-two people. Authorities later discovered an anti-immigrant manifesto he had posted online hours before the shooting, in which he expressed his fear of a “Hispanic invasion” and “race-mixing” in the United States (Romo, NPR 2019). This devastating example shows the danger of the fear of the “other,” which is escalated both by border securitization and a government that encourages racial hate. The rise in migration numbers has caused tension in the United States over the past few decades, and I argue that fear of the “other” or the “alien” is a large factor in increased levels of violence against migrants. Again, this type of anti-immigrant fear is not new or unique to the United States, and its trends and presence across different crises were incorporated into the initial drafting of the UN Millennium Goals. In 2000, the UN General Assembly stated the necessity to “take measures to ensure respect for and protection of the human rights of migrants, migrant workers and their families, to eliminate the increasing acts of racism and xenophobia in many societies and to promote greater harmony and tolerance in all societies” (UNGA 2000: paragraph 25). Xenophobia in response to migration and incoming refugees has evidently been a global issue over time, and its presence in the United States today is a clear threat to the human rights of migrants as outlined by the UN.

In this thesis I examine this fear as it has evolved over time, how it affects migrants along every part of their journey, and what it means for the future of refugee and migrant law, protocol, and human rights both in the United States and internationally. I focus on the experience of Central American migrant and refugee women because of their specific experiences, vulnerabilities, and strengths in the face of violence, the trials of migration, and the humanitarian understanding of refugees and asylum processes in the United States. Gender has a crucial role in

shaping the experiences of Central American refugee and migrant women, from their lives in their home country, their experiences along the journey north, the border-crossing process, and resettlement in the United States. Gender-based violence is very present in many migrant and refugee women's stories, and women are at a higher risk of sexual and physical violence, human trafficking, and coercion on the migrant trail north and at the US-Mexico border. They must adapt the way they travel, who they trust, and the decisions they make to take into account the specific vulnerabilities and threats they may face as women and mothers traveling with young children. Upon arrival at the border, and in their new lives in the United States, gender hierarchies, xenophobia, and racism further disadvantage and threaten the lives and well-being of Central American migrant women.

It is clear that gender is a critical part of the Central American migrant woman's story, but for most Central American women, if not for all, it is not the only identity that shapes their journeys. While I focus on gender and gender-based violence as important aspects of Central American migrant women's journeys, I also acknowledge and take into account the various identities and backgrounds that contribute to their experiences, including but not limited to indigenous ethnicity, low-income status, LGBTQ+ identity, and age. All of these identities can help determine a woman's survival and success along the migrant journey, in both positive and negative ways. Gender and other marginalized identities put migrant women at a higher risk of violence from their home country to life in the United States and affect their ability to secure work and education across the border. However, as I explore throughout this thesis, there are also ways in which these identities inspire incredible demonstrations of strength, bravery, and community among Central American migrant women.

It is just as important to take into account these strengths as it is to examine the vulnerabilities of women along the migrant trail and in the space of the border. In the larger discussion of migration, in the United States and in general, it is easy for the individuality and humanity of migrants to be lost due to generalization and the reduction of migrants to numbers and statistics. International and national media often depict migrant and refugee women as weak and helpless, which risks generalizing the types of violence, threats, and trauma they may face both in their home countries and throughout the journey and arrival across a border. Additionally, it can erase the strength and bravery shown by migrant women, and the lengths they must go to in order to keep themselves and their families safe. The resilience of migrant women is as crucial to their humanity as their trauma.

In this thesis I argue that it is necessary to acknowledge the experience of the individual migrant in order to understand the larger processes of migration and refugee crises and to emphasize the humanity of migrants. By focusing on the specific experiences of Central American refugee and migrant women, we can better understand the origins of migration, as well as how perceptions and representations of human movement affect legal processes for refugees and migrants. For example, understanding the history of civil war and international politics in a Central American country can help to show how the issues that push people to migrate or flee are often directly linked to conflict. The political turmoil and unrest in Central America in the 1970s were responsible for the rise in migration in the following decades, and the lasting effects of unstable economies and political structures continue to motivate people to migrate to the United States today. Conflict and post-conflict countries are especially dangerous for women as gender-based violence, discrimination, and lack of social and economic opportunity for women are exacerbated in times of conflict and disaster.

In this thesis I will track the experiences of Central American migrant women from their home country to resettlement in the United States, organized into pre-arrival, arrival, and post-arrival at the US-Mexico border. I use these sections as both temporal and geographic categories for the migrant experience—they allow me to closely examine each step of the migrant journey across the physical landscape of the migrant corridor, and to discuss how gender-based violence and discrimination materialize in the social, political, and legal realms of every step of migration. Additionally, I note there is also a large influx of Mexican migrants and refugees into the United States (Aguila et. al 2012), and that many Mexican migrants must still travel on the same paths to the US-Mexico border, but I focus on Central American women in this thesis for several reasons. First, migrant women coming from the Central American countries I discuss (Nicaragua, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras) must travel greater distances through the most treacherous parts of Mexico and the migrant corridor. And secondly, as I discuss in detail in the first chapter, the social, political, and economic issues in Central American countries that drive outward migration and refugee flows are in many ways tied to United States involvement in the region. The United States' hand in Central American politics and conflict in recent decades continues to contribute to a cycle of violence against Central Americans, from international policy to civil war, to state and structural violence, and to the dangers of the migrant trail all the way to the United States southern border.

My discussion of Central American migration will focus on the recent surges and steady rising numbers of migration in the United States today, and will take into account the ways in which these current numbers, patterns, and migrants were, and continue to be, influenced by United States involvement in the region in the 1970s-1990s. In order to attempt a holistic discussion of the experiences of Central American migrant women in the context of current

political climates, legal systems, and social structures, I draw from a variety of sources, including anthropological studies, international human rights law and refugee classifications, journalism, political science texts, and more. Most importantly, I attempt to give voice to the women and the experiences I discuss by including quotes from interviews done by migration scholars and journalists. By providing first-hand, personal, and emotional accounts of the various issues and dangers that Central American migrant women face, I hope to emphasize both the importance of understanding the specificity of their migrant experiences, and the urgency of recognizing the humanity in migrants and refugees in any global crisis.

This testimony from Central American migrant women helps put the reality of their journeys, traumas, successes, and lives into the larger discussion of legal processes and political structures, and also helps to uplift the voices of the most vulnerable and overlooked. However, these are only a few quotes from a few interviews, and while they show the types of violence and trauma experienced by Central American migrant women, they do not represent a single, unified migrant experience. It is important to keep in mind that although not all stories can or will be heard, the threats, lives, successes and tragedies of migrant women are numerous, varied, and equally as critical to providing solutions to the migration crisis and improving the entire journey and process for Central Americans.

The first chapter, pre-arrival, focuses on common motivations for migration in Central American countries, for migrants and refugees in general and specifically migrant and refugee women. It also addresses the specific threats and vulnerabilities women face along the migrant trail through Central America and Mexico, including the physical dangers of the journey, gender-based and sexual violence, and human trafficking. In the second chapter I discuss how the threats women face during the journey are present upon arrival at the border in the forms of violence

from border officials, law enforcement, and American civilians, as well as the difficulties of the asylum process and the dangers of illegal border crossing. The final chapter focuses on the post-arrival resettlement process for migrants and refugees, taking into account documentation and legal status, family and gender dynamics, and economic and social opportunities, or lack thereof. In this chapter I also discuss the grassroots activism and community organizing of Central American women in the United States, highlighting specific efforts and successes to improve life and access as migrant workers, mothers, and community members.

By attempting to understand the Central American migrant woman's experience in the context of the US-Mexico border crisis today, we can work to improve border conditions and asylum processes for migrants and refugees not just in the United States but globally. This can be done by listening to migrant women's stories, giving them the platform and tools to share their experiences with other migrants and with the American public, and promoting awareness of the individual humanity and lives of these women. In order to understand the refugee crisis and the migrant experience in the United States, we must understand the experience of one Salvadoran woman who risked her life, family, and livelihood to escape persecution, one Guatemalan teenager seeking an education, one Honduran mother trying to ensure a better future for her daughter. Migration and refugee crises cannot be solved if the reality of the experiences and the actual people are not taken into account. The right to asylum from persecution and violence is a fundamental human right, but it cannot be enforced and the perpetrators of state and physical violence cannot be held accountable unless we truly recognize—legally, socially, politically—the humanity of migrants.

Chapter I

No Other Choice: Gender-Based Violence and the Journey

Introduction

In order to understand the bigger picture of migration and the public, political, and humanitarian perceptions of refugees, it is important to first go back to the origins of migration. We must critically examine why people migrate, what factors drive them from their home countries and into dangerous in-between spaces and state of the migrant, and what is particularly unique about their gender and nationality in that experience. The story of a Guatemalan mother traveling to the United States with her young children may seem very different from a young Salvadoran woman seeking employment in the US, but they cross the same border, encounter the same threats on the trail north, and they might be fleeing from similar circumstances. The specific experiences and journeys of Central American women are key to the conceptualization of the modern-day refugee, as are the unique dangers they face from border to border. In this liminal and invisible space between borders, the stories and voices of migrants are lost, resulting in a loss of individuality in the general public's understanding of refugees within the host country. What we see instead is a report of numbers and a collection of bodies, and the language used to describe migration becomes reductive and insensitive to the reality of the refugee experience.

To avoid dehumanizing migrants by mass descriptions, it is crucial to look back at the causes of migration and the unique set of experiences that bring people to the US-Mexico border. I chose to focus on women because the specifics of their motivations, journeys, and refugee experiences are significantly understudied, but also because a lot can be learned about the conceptualization of refugees in general by examining how the world views refugee women. The assumptions made about migration and migrants are inherently gendered, which creates ideas about and images of refugee women that fit them into categories. This leads to a formulaic,

global understanding of refugee women in the media and public perspective: weak, impoverished, helpless, people of color. While these categories may often be true, they are not the end nor the beginning of the refugee story, and we must look deeper at the individual level to learn about the larger process, both in general and in the case of Central America. I chose to focus on Central American women because of the timeliness of the US-Mexico border crisis, the ways in which it is influenced by the current political climate, and the interesting and problematic way that Central American refugees are spoken about and conceptualized by the US media and public.

The path of migrants across Central America to the US-Mexico border is treacherous and terrifying for all who make the journey. Whether traveling on foot, bus, or on the top of a cargo train, migrants must face unforgiving terrain and weather along with threats to their physical safety, including kidnapping, abuse, sexual violence and death. The presence of gangs and corrupt law enforcement often result in migrants being taken advantage of, stolen from, or killed, and many who start the journey never finish it. Already fleeing from political turmoil, economic and environmental crises, and structural violence from the state, migrants must re-encounter these dangers on the journey while processing past trauma and violence. All migrants in this context are at risk of these dangers, regardless of age or gender, but there has been a great deal of scholarly work done on the specific vulnerabilities of women during this migration (Timmerman et. al 2018). The prevalence of sexual violence, kidnapping, and forced prostitution means that women face a unique set of dangers. Additionally, women often travel with family members and must also worry for the safety of their children and younger siblings.

Gender-based violence is a real and prevalent threat to Central American women, and a significant factor in decisions to migrate, but it cannot be separated from the ways in which it is

linked to national and international social, economic and political issues. Of course, gender-based violence is not unique to Central American countries, and the reason it acts as a driving force for female migration is because it is escalated in times of crisis, civil war, and natural disaster. No country is free from gender-based violence, and the belief that only countries in the Global South struggle with these problems not only ignores problems in developed countries but also assumes that when migrants arrive to destination countries, they will be safe from those dangers. The experiences of Central American women throughout the migration process show that the same gender-based violence threats that women face in their home country are reproduced in various forms and figures from the beginning of the journey to arrival and processing at the US-Mexico border. Every detail of the migrant woman's journey is specific to her experience in her home country, and what she must go through and process along the way will in turn affect her life across the border. These small details, though often overlooked, can shed light on the larger process of migration, the refugee crisis, and how we understand both in modern day border processes and policies.

By tracing the migrant journeys of women from Central America to the US, I show that every step of the journey, every decision made, and every driving factor of migration is absolutely crucial to truly understanding the refugee crisis at the US border as a crisis and not simply an issue of economic migrants. I critique the idea of choice throughout this process, as the lack of options, necessity of fleeing, and fear do not constitute a real choice for many of these women. I use both "migrant" and "refugee" to describe these women, as they are not completely inseparable terms and for some women, both are applicable. I will discuss the importance of terminology, individuality and the idea of vulnerability throughout this chapter. Through this, I show that the experience of Central American refugee women is more complex and dependent

on multiple factors than it often appears to be in the media and much scholarly work. The story of an individual Central American woman—her family, her physical and emotional trials, her perseverance, her voice—is not only useful but extremely necessary to understanding the refugee experience, both at the US-Mexico border and on a global scale.

Slow Violence and Vulnerability

Before examining the physical, mental and emotional hardships and tactics of resilience in Central American women's migrant journeys, it is first important to understand the motivations for movement. If we are to attempt to understand the gravity of the migrant experience, we must trace the journey from the very beginning, from the home country. For women, this origin is crucial to their physical journey as well as the long-term mental health and well-being of them and their families. The first question, then, is: why do women migrate? In general, people migrate to find work, to join their families in the destination country, to escape political conflict, violence, environmental disaster—the reasons behind migration are almost endless. It is sometimes a choice, sometimes a necessity, sometimes forced. But what reasons specifically drive female migration, and what is unique about the factors that drive Central American women?

While the driving factors of migration are numerous and sometimes hard to identify, they often take the forms of active and/or slow violence. Active violence includes immediate threats to physical safety, such as political turmoil resulting in violent regimes and military force against the people, or the presence of corruption and gang violence. Slow violence refers to long-term, structural issues that reinforce social, political and economic inequalities in the everyday, leading to social hierarchies and inequitable policies from governments that systematically leave behind

low-income people, racially marginalized groups, and women. Active and slow violence are not mutually exclusive, however, and sometimes violence and threats come from more than one direction (Kaufman 2014: 442). Social and economic issues can lead to an increase in violence as tensions between government and people over harmful policies and corruption create unrest. Slow and active violence can act as the cause or effect for threats to physical safety of people and their families, and many choose to escape their home country in search for a better, or at least a safer life.

These driving factors are, of course, subject to political and economic change over time, and the increase in migration rates from Central America to the US and Mexico since the 1970s (Brick et al. 2011: 2) reflects the escalating violence, structural issues, and different crises in Central American countries. The increase in migration is parallel to increased rates of violence in these countries in the past decade, with Honduras and El Salvador ranking as two of the top five most violent countries in the world, with extremely high, and rising, levels of physical violence and femicide (Schmidt et al. 2017: 141). This trend has resulted in a large influx of refugees into Mexico and the US, with asylum applications to the US from Central America almost doubling between 2013 and 2014 (UNHCR report 2015: 6) and increasing exponentially each year.

There is also a significant increase in the number of women attempting cross the US and Mexico borders. This shows a “feminization of migration,” with women now making up over half of all migrants in Latin America (Schmidt et al. 2017: 142). This surge in female migration is dependent on many factors, but the trends and specifics of female migration, including the reasons women migrate, have not been written about as extensively as the threats that women face. In general, women often appear in the conversation about migration as relative to men, as their movement is assumed to have the purpose of reuniting them with husbands or other male

family members seeking employment on the other side of the border. However, more and more women are making the journey to the border for independent reasons, whether to find their own employment, provide for their families, or escape violence in their home countries. The reasons for making this treacherous journey are crucial to understanding both migration and asylum processes for Central American women, as well as the ways in which the dangers they are fleeing are reproduced throughout the journey.

The surge in Central American women moving across borders in recent years can be traced to political conflict, gang presence, and economic crises leading to increased rates of violence against women. These larger scale issues can certainly accentuate or escalate social tensions, leading to increased gender-based violence, but issues of gender-based violence are present regardless of the political or economic climate. Domestic abuse, forced marriage, sexual assault and prostitution can be driving factors of female migration whether or not they are a result of political unrest, economic or environmental crisis. Unfortunately, these issues are common and consistent around the world, and are not unique to Central America, other countries with high rates of outward migration, or any country in general. It is important, however, to examine how larger structural inequalities, political and global hierarchies and even international conflicts have had an effect on the everyday lives of women in this region. Therefore, it is necessary to be aware of how gender-based violence acts as a driving factor both during times of crisis and as a result of broader structural issues, not only those specific to Central American countries but also global inequalities and hierarchies that marginalize women and put their physical and mental well-being in danger every day.

For example, in their study on reasons behind Central American migration, Valdez et al. cite drug cartel violence as one of the most common factors pushing Central Americans, and

women in particular, from their home countries (2015: 3). Gangs and drug cartels will extort families for money, and threaten them with violence when they cannot pay, or they will recruit children and younger family members, forcing parents to take their children and flee.

Government officials and corrupt law enforcement may also extort vulnerable populations, meaning that there is nowhere to turn for families under threat of gangs, and no option but to flee the country.

While these issues affect families and communities as a whole, there are specific ways in which women and girls are vulnerable and ways in which they are targeted. If a family is being threatened by gangs or corrupt officials, mothers or other female family members may turn to or be forced into prostitution to earn money for their family's safety. Kidnapping and human trafficking also occur as a result of families being unable to pay, either as an intimidation tactic or extortion of another resource in replace of the original payment. Even if a family is not under immediate threat from extortion, they may decide to migrate in order to prevent it and to save their children from violence and/or recruitment. Access to education and employment are also strong incentives for migration because families want to keep children from these dangers. In general, the desire to provide for and protect family is a common driving factor for all migrants, especially women, as "Latin American mothers are expected to be responsible for the upbringing of their children and as a result, women migrate partly to fulfill gendered expectations of motherhood" (Schmidt et al. 2017: 150). Women migrate to escape violence and to seek better lives for themselves, but also to fulfill their responsibility as mothers, sisters, daughters, and wives. The factors that drive them from their home countries are deeply tied to social hierarchies and gender constructs, which continue to inform their safety on the journey.

One of the most present threats for Central American women both at home and on the migrant trail is sexual assault, which is often tied to other dangers and forms of exploitation, as seen in the example of cartel violence. Sexual violence is a prevalent and everyday issue for many women, but Berman et al. note “the differences between institutionalized (wartime) and non-institutionalized (peacetime) sexual assault” (2006: 37). Many women live in fear of sexual assault in their day to day lives, whether from abusive relationships, gang or police violence, and this threat can be weaponized in times of conflict. In a country experiencing regime terror and active political unrest, civil war, or military violence, rape is often used as a tool to intimidate and control the opposition, and to torture civilian women and their families. In times of peace, sexual violence is a product of social and gender hierarchies, and in times of conflict, this power imbalance is heightened and women’s bodies are used as battlefields for state terror and political statements (Das, 2013).

Experiences of sexual violence, both in periods of conflict and periods of peace, are common for Central American women before and during their migration. In the cases of Guatemala and El Salvador in the past, sexual assault was state-sanctioned and a widely used military tactic of control. Even post-conflict, a lasting fear of authority and government or law enforcement officials can mean that sexual violence is underreported. For example, in their conversations with Central American women who migrated to the US, Argüelles et al. show that many women were told by their family members to migrate north in order to escape this form of sexual violence. Marta, a nineteen year-old Salvadoran woman and daughter of a police officer, was raped by the son of the mayor in her town. Because of the power dynamic and her father’s fear of damaging his position, Marta was sent to the US to live with her brother. In another case, a Mexican teenager named Dolores was sent to the US by her mother in an attempt to save her

from her uncle, who had been sexually abusing her for years. Because the uncle financially supported the family, there was nothing Dolores or her mother could do about the situation except to send her alone on the journey north (1993: 263). These experiences show some of the desperate circumstances that motivate women to migrate and push them from their home countries and families as a last resort for their physical and mental safety.

Unfortunately, escaping their home country often does not mean that a family or individual is free from the same threats they left behind, as these threats are reproduced along the migrant trail. Because many migrants cross borders and countries illegally, and usually with little to no money for the journey, they often must take the most treacherous route, in terms of terrain and lack of structure. Many pay guides known as coyotes to take them across Mexico and through borders, but these guides are known to take advantage of migrants, especially migrant women, and extort them for money or use them to facilitate drug smuggling across borders (Wheatley et al. 2016: 403). Without reliable modes of transport or police presence and with travel through scarcely populated areas, the trail becomes a highway for gangs, robbers, and corrupt law enforcement looking to extort migrants. Women on the trail are particularly vulnerable to physical violence, murder, sexual assault and forced prostitution, along with kidnapping and human trafficking. Often without documentation, the protection of community, and sometimes without the accompaniment of male family members, women traveling alone or in small groups are at a high risk for all of these dangers.

Documentation is a crucial part of the migrant journey because it can determine their ability not only to cross borders but to start a new life on the other side, and it can also be used to manipulate and control migrants on the trail. Migrants are robbed of their documents, or they give them to guides and other officials in order to facilitate crossing. Sometimes they are charged

a large sum to get their documents back, and women “are often told that the only way to recuperate their missing documents is to pay for them through prostitution” (Schmidt et al. 2017: 151). Corrupt law enforcement, gangs, and untrustworthy trail guides take advantage of the importance of documentation and use it to extract labor and money. Whether their documentation was stolen or they did not have it to begin with, undocumented migrants are at greater risk of harm and death because they do not have access to healthcare and are hesitant to seek help from police or other officials for fear of being deported or further extorted.

Lack of documentation or money makes women more vulnerable to violence, forced prostitution, and human trafficking. The rate of sexual assault on the migrant trail is high, and “estimates indicate that eighty percent of women and girls crossing into the United States through Mexico are raped while in-transit” (Schmidt et al. 148). Many migrant women and teenage girls take birth control pills preemptively because they expect this violence. The perpetrators of this violence include gang members, robbers, police and border officials, coyotes, and fellow migrants. Even male family members “who believe they have failed to protect themselves and their families may become perpetrators” as a way of “recovering control and power” (Radan 2007: 151). The migrant trail produces danger from every direction, and the psychological stress and physical threats a woman may have experienced in her home country are just as present along the journey. On top of this, residual trauma from past experiences of violence deeply affects both men and women and informs how gender and violence intersect on the migrant trail. Violence on the journey is usually a given, but the desperate circumstances of migration create spaces and conditions where women have no choice but to expose themselves to danger. Many migrant women are raped or sold into sex trafficking by the coyotes they paid to guide them. Migrant women who are traveling alone, with young children/family members, or

without a man, may put their trust into these guides because they believe it will keep them safe, but they are very often taken advantage of both monetarily and physically.

The ways in which women are extorted, humiliated, and dehumanized through sexual violence along the migrant trail parallel the way that rape is used as a tool in many of their home countries. Women on the migrant trail are reduced to their bodies, which can be bought, sold, traded, manipulated, and harmed. The needs of migrant women, such as the importance of holding on to documentation and keeping their families safe, are used to further extort women's bodies. Because of the dire circumstances that contribute to driving factors for migration and the physical journey itself, I want to critique the use of the word "choice" in this context. Migration is often framed as an active choice to search for a better life or employment, and while this may sometimes be true, the reasons for migration I have outlined above show that for many migrants, movement comes from necessity and not from choice. This is especially true for women, who are particularly vulnerable in times of conflict and also suffer gender-based violence in their everyday lives. Often, as in the cases of Marta and Dolores above, the decision to make the journey north is made for them by family members in order to save them from harmful and dangerous situations. Movement that is motivated by having no other option but to flee dangerous conditions is not a choice, and many of the actions women take along the journey to protect themselves and their families are also made out of necessity.

In the larger discussion of borders and public perception of migration in the United States, as I will address in following chapters, assumptions about the choices of migrant women can have significant effects on the asylum process. The driving factors of migration for Central American women are specific to time and space, deeply ingrained in social, political and economic issues, and crucial to understanding—and hopefully helping—the experience and

trauma of these women from border to border. In the treacherous terrain and liminal space of the migrant trail, the bodies of women are left out in the open, and there is little they can do to prevent harm. With them they carry their belongings, their children, their identities, their trauma, and their hope for a better life on the other side of the border.

Mobility Decisions

The space between Central American, Mexican and American borders is a transitory, purgatory-like and dangerous place. The constant movement, endings and beginnings of journeys, and disappearances of human lives mean that both documented and undocumented migrants become invisible. While this invisibility may be useful in evading local law enforcement, deportation, and other threats, it also makes the Central American migrant invisible to the international view. The stories and experiences of these migrants can get lost in public discussion and understanding of the situation because there are no documented faces or voices. On the migrant trail, people are reduced to bodies, which are also disappeared and lost in a space that does not track them, account for them, or help them. This invisibility can be even more harmful to women, whose specific experiences are generally overlooked both globally and in scholarly work on migration. To address this, I want to explore the idea of choice, mobility decisions, and the social, economic and physical ways in which Central American women move through this space.

The idea of choice is present throughout the migrant trail, and while Central American women may not have much of a choice in beginning the migration process, there are decisions they must make along the way that affect their journey. Along with threats to their personal and family safety, migrants must factor in mode of transportation, economic resources,

documentation, extreme heat or cold, and weather conditions into their travel. The way that migrants travel, the routes they take, and the decisions they make about the journey are a very important part of the process, even though most scholarly work on migration “focuses on either: a) decisions migrants make in their country of origin on whether to migrate and which migration destinations to go to, or b) decisions in their destination country related to integration and employment” (Schmidt et al. 2017: 142). While it may be an understudied area, the decisions made on this journey are informed by the same gendered, economic and social factors and fears that cause people to flee their home countries. Additionally, as I will explore in the next chapter, the risks and dangers to their physical and mental safety that migrants face on the journey are again reproduced in new forms upon arrival at the US-Mexico border. But first, it is necessary to pay attention to the in-between, and the ways in which the liminal space of the migrant trail creates harmful and life-threatening obstacles to those travelling north. The decisions that migrant women make to overcome these obstacles can determine their ability to reach their destination, their need to settle mid-journey, or even return to their home country.

Both the decisions that women make and the kinds of decisions they are forced to make along the migrant trail have changed with the feminization of migration in the past few decades. More and more Central American women are making this journey alone, or without male family members or husbands. Migration scholarship in the past has often assumed that women migrate to reunite with husbands or children on the other side of the border, but it is now common for women to migrate to seek their own employment and better lives independent of men (Timmerman et. al 2018). A woman travelling alone, with other women, or with children must make different decisions than she would make if traveling with a man. Of course, the presence of

a man is not a guarantee of safety and can have its own risks, but it may deter robbers or kidnappers from singling out women who are on their own.

With the increase in female migration, women's decision-making processes and tactics for remaining safe on the journey change. All of these decisions are affected by the physical aspects of the journey—transportation, terrain, border crossing—and “understanding these spaces, particularly how women and men interpret these places differently, helps interpret the mobility decisions that are themselves distinctly gendered” (Schmidt et al. 2017: 142). In order to protect themselves from kidnapping, sexual assault, and other violence, women traveling alone or with children have to develop strategies for traveling, such as finding and learning from women-oriented networks. These networks are crucial because “the creation of informal and knowledge-related norms are best suited for men” and “when women use these same networks they find themselves in situations of greater vulnerability than when under the protection of their own networks” (Cueva-Luna 2016: 205). The decisions of migrant women are specific to their experiences and vulnerabilities, and they cannot follow the same routes in the same ways that men do.

One of the first decisions that Central American migrants must make is which mode of transportation they will take across Mexico. Again, these decisions are made out of necessity, and the lack of safe and accessible options means that this is not truly a choice. The decision to take a risky form of transportation or travel over rougher terrain could be made to save money or to attempt to avoid areas controlled by gangs. The majority of migrants coming from Central America across Mexico by land are from low-income populations, meaning that often the only way they can afford to travel is through the most dangerous areas and on the most dangerous forms of transportation.

The most common mode of transportation across Mexico are cargo trains known as “La Bestia” (The Beast), so named for their hazardous conditions. Travelers have to sit on top of the train and risk falling off, being hit by passing tree branches, or being robbed. If they get off the train, they are at risk of gang violence, kidnapping, and murder. Despite being the most dangerous form of transportation, most migrants travel on La Bestia for economic reasons or to avoid police officers checking visas and documentation at bus stops and major highways, and the tightening of border security throughout Mexico is only pushing more and more undocumented migrants to La Bestia. For women traveling with their families, the risks of riding on top of La Bestia are high, as small children may be hard to keep track of in the general chaos and could easily fall off the moving train. But without the economic resources and documentation needed for the bus, the trail must be traveled by train or on foot, and walking makes one even more susceptible to physical violence and life-threatening health risks from heat and exposure.

Movement along the trail is difficult and risky in any form, but one strategy women have developed is to take advantage of the support of migrant shelters along the way, as well as the social networks built by women on the trail before them. These networks provide women access to the knowledge and strategies that are specific to their needs and vulnerabilities, and help them move, survive and process throughout the journey. Along with this critical survival information, these networks “provide a sense of human behavior and have a bearing on the decision that women take regarding whether to press on, stay put, or return to their places of origin” (Cueva-Luna 2016: 205). Sometimes the journey is too difficult or dangerous, and a lack of material resources, injury to themselves or their family members, or absence of safe travel can force migrant women to stop where they are, or even return all the way to their home countries, where many will attempt the migration again.

If women do need to stop along the way, there are migrant shelters available that provide food and a place to sleep. Some of these shelters are run by Samaritan religious groups, but many are informal shelters—local homes along the trail opened up for travelers to stop and have a meal, bathe, or rest. The shelters provide brief but necessary relief from travel on La Bestia and the constant threats that the trail holds, and many “women embarked in their journey with the idea of enduring what was necessary to reach their goal; however, they were smart enough to seek accommodation and institutional protection when it was available” (Lemus-Way et al. 2019). It is possible that staying at a shelter could expose women to violence from fellow migrants, untrustworthy coyotes, or gangs who target shelters looking for vulnerable travelers, but often these shelters are a safe haven for exhausted, starving and desperate migrants, and the decision to stop in one could be life-saving. Additionally, some shelters are women-only, providing a safe space for women to seek help and resources and to build networks, community, and travel groups with other women.

Wheatley and Gomberg-Muñoz share a story of two female migrants: Manuela, a married woman in her twenties who was traveling with her husband to reunite with their children in the US, and Ruby, a teenager who was separated from her family while attempting to cross the US border. Both women were indigenous and spoke their respective native languages as well as Spanish. On their second attempt to cross the border, Manuela and Ruby became close, and Manuela started sleeping in women’s shelters with Ruby so that the younger woman was not alone. Connections like these show that on the migrant trail, “women are often their own best and most effective resource in reducing the risks that they and their *compañeras* face” (Wheatley and Gomberg-Muñoz 2016: 404). Women form bonds with other migrant women to share the burdens—psychological, emotional, physical—of the journey, and whether they are taking

younger women under their wing or seeking wisdom from older women, these bonds are crucial to their experience. Participating in this process is one of the most important mobility decisions that women must make, and the necessity of it shows how these mobility decisions are inherently gendered and motivated by the dangerous conditions of the journey.

The harrowing and hazardous conditions of the migrant trail force women into impossible situations and difficult, life-threatening decisions. The bonds and connections made between women in shelters and throughout the journey are critical to their survival on the trail, whether they are traveling with family members, men, or alone. These connections also transcend the space and time of the journey and extend across borders into life post-migration. Women who choose to return to their home countries can also revisit these networks to facilitate their next attempt at the journey. Networks between female migrants also bridge cultural and language gaps that can negatively affect a woman's chance of survival. For example, indigenous women who speak no or little Spanish can use these networks to connect with others who speak their native language, or other indigenous women who understand their experience. Even this understanding across social and cultural barriers can provide significant support and strength for the common goal of survival as women. In the midst of the uncertainty and danger on the migrant trail, community can become a lifeline. Knowing how to travel, when to stop, and what to be aware of are necessary tools for any woman on the journey. As I will discuss in the next section, the building of these networks and the support shown and found in the communities are demonstrations of the incredible resilience of migrant women.

Vulnerability vs. Resilience

Strategizing and making the best decisions from terrible options are not the only ways that migrant women must deal with the hardships of the journey. Mobility decisions can help determine the safety of migrants and the outcome of their journey, but women also carry the burden of trauma, anxiety and fear for themselves, the family they travel with, and the loved ones they have left behind. Many women must protect themselves and their travel companions while processing past and new trauma in a space that does not allow the time or resources to fully address these psychological issues. The social networks and connections discussed above are key in creating spaces for women to share their traumas, bond over similar experiences, and heal as communities in transit.

The strength that individual migrant women find in themselves and in these communities is overlooked and underestimated by global media and public understanding of the Central American refugee crisis. The image presented in mainstream media of female refugees is basically standardized—they are portrayed in photos and articles as distressed, weak, tired, dirty, poor, helpless. This is often true of depictions of refugees from any country. Central American refugee women often only appear in photos and discussions of the US-Mexico border, as they are usually lost in the in-between state of migration. But in these photos of detention centers and border crossings, women are still depicted as desperate and completely helpless. The few voices that are heard are not stories of success or of hope but cries for help. This image of refugee women is certainly representative of the hardships they have encountered in their home countries and along the journey, but that is only one part of the refugee woman.

Like media portrayal of the refugee crisis in Central America and Mexico, much of the literature on women and migration focuses on the multitude of vulnerabilities of women in this

process. It is clear that “female migrants are the most vulnerable among the vulnerable” (Schmidt et al. 2017: 143) because of their likelihood to experience sexual assault, human trafficking, extortion, and other forms of violence. They are also psychologically vulnerable because of the physical and mental trauma they may carry from past experiences of conflict, violence, and fear in their home countries. Additionally, many female migrants are children and teenagers, and because age increases vulnerability, they are at an even higher risk for these dangers. For women entering and moving through the “death corridor” of Mexico, the threats come from every possible angle, and even in instances where they must make decisions on the ways they travel, the element of choice is basically nonexistent.

Given the innumerable dangers of the journey, it seems that there is no safe way for women to travel this migrant trail, and often no silver linings or moments of hope on the journey. For the most part, and for many, this may be true. However, it would be reductive and harmful to assume that there are no moments of strength, resilience, and courage to be found in the journey and the experiences of Central American women. To do so would further harm the individual experiences of these women and contribute to blanket depictions and descriptions of migrant women by American and global media and scholarly work. Exploring and understanding the various skills and tactics of community and healing that Central American women bring with them—from indigenous cultures, family traditions, social practices and beliefs—gives invaluable perspective into the experiences of migrant women. There is no one “migrant woman,” but there is a collective agency and bravery that shapes the movement, the lives, and the deaths of Central American women.

In their study of migrant women’s narratives, Lemus-Way and Johansson explore themes of internal strengths such as spirituality, endurance, and courage, and external strengths such as

social support networks and relatives. The internal strengths show how women's practices and beliefs keep their spirits up and push them forward on the migrant trail. Religion is an important part of this, and many women use prayer as a way to reassure themselves that God is looking over them. Besides the support of other women, family members, and the promise of a better life on the other side, spirituality provides hope and calm in an extremely stressful time and place. Endurance is another key strength for migrant women. Lemus-Way and Johansson interviewed a Salvadoran woman named Lupe who was making the journey north, who expressed that "you leave everything you have, everything you are used to and well you have to adapt here, and you have to have courage and be willing to endure everything." Another woman interviewed for the study was Monica, a Guatemalan woman on her second attempt to cross the border. Speaking on the role of courage in the journey, she said: "I've arrived here because I have courage and faith. When you say 'I will arrive and I will arrive and I will arrive' you arrive." The authors also note how past experiences of trauma may increase these women's capacity for courage and perseverance, along with the fact that there is often no choice but to press on through pain, loss, and fear in order to reach the destination.

Women also demonstrate their internal strength by making the difficult mobility decisions along the journey. For example, reliance on the migrant shelters discussed earlier is just as much a sign of strength as perseverance along the journey:

"While strengths can arise in complex situations, they can also arise in situations where people have the time and peace of mind to think about and embrace their resources and abilities. In addition, it was not necessary for women to endure or show courage all the time to demonstrate their strength, but they also demonstrated it by knowing how to

make the correct and most appropriate choices regarding their needs” (Lemus-Way et al. 2019).

The journey produces countless threats to the physical and mental safety of women that can add to previous traumas and create new traumas that they must deal with for the rest of their lives.

Hopefully, along with internal coping mechanisms and skills, women have the external support of families and social networks to encourage them to push forward, rest, or return if needed. Children are also sources of motivation and support because the risk of a mother’s journey is made in the interest of their well-being, whether they travel with them or not. As Patricia, a Salvadoran woman, said of the journey, “you have moments of weakness, sadness, loneliness, where you cry, where you miss your family, where [you] cry with them but at the same time [it] is in those moments when you take the strength to continue” (Lemus-Way et al. 2019). The ways in which Central American women find moments of strength in this trying and terrifying process is admirable, and their determination to arrive despite any obstacles and traumas they may face sheds light on the severity of the issues they are fleeing from in their home countries.

It is clear that the strengths of migrant women are as necessary to the greater discussion of migration as the examination of their unique, gender-based vulnerabilities. However, it is also important not to romanticize the migrant experience as a hero’s journey, a building of moral character or an impressive feat of bravery. Lemus-Way and Johansson explain how the hardships and trauma experienced before and during the journey can “increase the psychological growth and capacity of enduring” (2019) of people, but I hesitate to see this as a process of “reinventing.” Again, the idea of choice, or lack thereof, for migrant women is relevant here—while the efforts and trials of migration do require incredible bravery, the journey and the

decisions made along the way are made out of necessity. There are moments of agency, where a woman is able to make decisions that benefit her and her experience and perhaps make the best out of the current situation. But without true freedom of choice, agency is rare, and the type of trauma that motivated one woman may leave another woman immobilized.

Any personal growth gained before or during the migrant journey cannot and should not be separated from the trauma that produced it, not only because it underestimates the horror of the experience, but also because it assumes that every migrant woman is able to use her trauma to motivate her and propel her forward. Given the scarcity of space, time, and resources for healing and processing on the migrant trail, this is often not the case. Romanticizing the process and the physical, economic and political space of migration seriously risks underestimating the severity of the situation because it ignores the very nature of the refugee crisis—that it is involuntary. We cannot neglect the resiliencies of Central American women in migration and the tactics and knowledge they gain from community building, but we must also be careful not to gloss over the dark realities of this process.

In many cases, with vulnerability comes strength, and with overcoming hardship comes knowledge, and hopefully, healing. The communities that women build along the migrant trail are a necessary part of the journey, and they have a crucial role in the post-journey re-identification and re-homing processes that migrant women must go through on the other side. Whether this other side is a new life in the US or a second attempt at the migrant trail, the experiences and trials of the journey have lasting effects in both negative and positive ways.

Conclusion

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reports that women are particularly vulnerable in migration processes simply because of the fact that they are women. Women do face specific threats to their physical and mental safety and well-being because of gender, as I have shown throughout this chapter, but nothing about their vulnerability is simple. Threats of gender-based violence, sexual assault and human trafficking do not appear out of nowhere. The dangers Central American women face in their home countries are a product of social issues, political unrest and corruption, and the way they are reproduced throughout the journey is also determined by social, political and economic factors in the spaces through which they move. These dangers do not appear because women are women. Accepting that women face certain threats because of their gender is far too simplistic and ignores the variety of factors that contribute to migration and to the dangers women face along the journey. It is clear that gender strongly informs migration processes and driving factors for migration, but using gender as an explanation for the trauma of these women enters the dangerous territory of denying responsibility for making structural changes that could actually keep them safe. In order to begin changing the structural issues that contribute to mass migration, refugee and border crises, it is necessary to examine the specific manifestations of gender-based violence throughout the process while remaining aware of where these issues of gender-based violence originate.

The specifics of migration are hard to track at any point in the process, especially in a space that systematically, institutionally and politically loses, forgets, and ignores the human beings moving through it. Once they enter the in-between of the borderlands, migrants are reduced to bodies and numbers, and even those are hardly all accounted for. The issue of documentation forces migrants to travel in the most dangerous ways, and the number of people

killed by violence or transportation such as La Bestia, sold into human trafficking (which I discuss in the next chapter), and disappeared between Central America and the US-Mexico border is most likely higher than any reports show. In this way, the liminal space of Mexico's migrant corridor becomes a purgatory for those in transit where coming out on the other side is not a guarantee.

It is especially easy for Central American women to get lost in this space, as they are often overlooked in the process and their experiences undervalued in critical discussions of migration. The culture of fear that surrounds migration in the US means that public perception and media often focus only on the perceived dangers of migration. Speaking on migration in a 2015 speech, Donald Trump said of Mexico/Central America: "They're sending people that have a lot of problems, and they're bringing those problems with [them]. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists" (Washington Post 2015). Trump's rhetoric before and during his presidency has shaped American public perception of the refugee crisis in Central America in many ways, and has contributed greatly to the idea that men from these countries are dangerous people who want to bring drugs and other crime into the US. Along with the harmful negative effects of this language and ideology on migrant men and migration as a process, the focus on "dangerous" men forgets and ignores endangered women making the same journey.

Looking at the reasons why Central American women migrate not only gives them much needed visibility in the larger conversation on migration and the refugee crisis, but also provides a human side to an issue that is highly politicized and tends to forget its humanity. One woman's voice or story can say more about the Central American woman's experience, the refugee crisis, and the migrant corridor of Mexico than reports of numbers of deaths and disappeared peoples. While it is useful and necessary to zoom out and look at the issue of migration on a larger scale, I

show with this chapter, and with this thesis, that much can be gained from viewing this issue from a more focused lens. Considering the human, individual side of migration provides incredible insight into the inner workings of global systems and policies because it shows us the process of migration and asylum through the migrant's perspective. Additionally, the experiences of migrant women demonstrate the social and cultural decisions and adaptations that women make to keep themselves and their families safe.

Zooming in on the specific vulnerabilities, strengths, and tactics of resilience that Central American women experience and employ is crucial to understanding the bigger picture of the migration process, from driving factors and the physical journey to asylum processes and policy-making on the other side. The human aspect of migration is not only useful to understanding but morally necessary to making positive change. When we cannot empathize with and understand the Central American migrant woman's journey—as a mother, daughter, sister, community builder, human—this leads to invisibility and erasure in the mainstream media and public view. The only way we can find this critical information, perspective, and voice is by recognizing the individual experiences of Central American women and incorporating those into the way that we conceptualize and make decisions about migration.

Chapter II

Proving Humanity in Border-Crossing and the Asylum Process

Introduction

Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) states that “everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.” Drafted in 1948, the UDHR was created as a response to the horror of World War II and the genocide of millions of Jews and other minorities in Europe. In order to prevent such tragedy and loss of human life in the future, the international community drafted a list of rights considered fundamental for any human being, and the right to seek asylum in another country was one of these original rights. The panic, displacement, and tragedy of World War II showed a need to outline specific rights in order to protect people from this kind of danger, and also to determine what this protection would look like. Many Jews fled their home countries and sought refuge in other parts of Europe, and many lives were saved in that process, so it was clear that the right to seek this refuge when the conditions in one’s own country were dangerous and life-threatening needed to be included as a human right.

The UDHR is crucial not only because of the fundamental rights it outlined, but also because these rights provided a legal and universal conceptualization of what it means to live humanely. By declaring the right to education, freedom, a family, asylum, and more, the UDHR defined what the UN members at the time saw as key elements of any human life and human dignity. These rights, and this idea of the components of humanity, continue to influence international law and processes today, including the definition, understanding, and acceptance of refugees and asylum seekers. However, as I show in this chapter, the conceptual part of the UDHR that attempts to define the human may be universal in theory but is often not in practice.

In the case of Central American migrants and refugees, there is a process of dehumanization that happens throughout the migrant trail, as I showed in the previous chapter,

and continues across the border and asylum application procedures. The fundamental human right that recognizes refugees and asylum seekers and also expresses their valid need to be accepted into other countries as protection, is dependent on these refugees being considered human and having humanity. However, in the decades since the 1948 Declaration, the politics of fear, rising numbers of migration, and increase in the importance of national security have affected the definition of the refugee in reality, and the process of accepting vulnerable and displaced peoples into other countries. In the United States, the line between migrants, refugees and asylum seekers is often blurred in the media and politics, as all Central Americans attempting to enter the US are often categorized as “economic migrants.” This assumption contributes to the invisibility of the individual migrant by placing one identity, one purpose for migrating, and one life experience on every Central American that attempts to cross the US-Mexico border. The blanket depiction of Central American migrants is dehumanizing in and of itself because it tends to describe a mass of numbers rather than a group of people, and it also ignores the very valid and critical asylum claims of many Central American refugees and asylum seekers.

Given the confusion of definitions, it is necessary to explain the difference between these terms before exploring how they operate within processes at the US-Mexico border. The difference between refugee and asylum seekers is often overlooked, although it is an important distinction throughout immigration procedures, because how a migrant is classified at the border can determine their border-crossing and asylum process. Amnesty International defines an asylum seeker as someone who has made a claim for asylum but has not yet received a decision, and though asylum seekers may or may not be considered refugees after this decision, all refugees are initially asylum seekers (Amnesty International website). The terms are often used

interchangeably, and although they are not always mutually exclusive, the distinction may be key during asylum application processes.

The relationship of asylum and refugee terminology, the asylum grant process, and the social and political space of borders is highly complex and sensitive to the current political climate in the United States. The specific experiences and vulnerabilities of Central American refugee women within this context show the gendered dimension of border and asylum processes, and demonstrate the racially and politically charged violence of the border that so often manifests in gender-based violence. The dehumanization involved in detention, deportation, and the border-crossing process challenges the fundamental human rights of all Central American migrants and refugees by categorizing them not only as the “other” but as something less than human. For Central American women, who travel through and exist in the migration process as the most vulnerable of the vulnerable and the most invisible of the invisible, their humanity and dignity are threatened through gender-based violence, mental abuse, and the denial of the ability and opportunity to protect their families and advocate for themselves in the asylum process.

Central American migrant women encounter the double threat of racism/xenophobia and misogyny upon arrival at the border, and the same vulnerabilities they carry throughout the journey are often exploited by border officials. The specific ways in which Central American women are degraded, abused, and dismissed upon arrival at the United States border not only exacerbate past trauma but create new trauma and pain in a space that is supposed to provide them with safety. As I discuss in the following sections, the mistreatment of Central American women in this space shows not only a pattern of misogyny in understandings of and approaches

to migration, but also a larger problem with the perception of asylum seekers and refugee crises in general.

Asylum and Humanity

For Central American migrants, the physical journey to the US border is long, difficult, and dangerous, and often arrival at the border offers little relief. Various factors can affect a migrant's experience at the border—whether or not they are crossing legally, if they have the correct documentation, if they are travelling with their family or attempting to reunite with people on the other side, their reasons for wanting to enter the US and how long they plan to stay—and the infinite variabilities in migrant experiences makes the crossing and asylum process very complex. Additionally, just as the journey north is affected by the economic resources and gendered qualities of migration, the ability to cross the US border, and the difficulty of the process, is also highly dependent on these factors. As I explore in this chapter, the same gender-specific vulnerabilities that place women in difficult and dangerous positions along the migrant trail re-manifest upon arrival, not only threatening their physical and mental safety but also the validity of their claims to asylum. It is critical to recognize the specific dangers that are present for Central American women due to the combined threat of misogyny and racism at the border. The ways that Central American refugee women are classified, categorized, and dehumanized throughout the asylum process by American state and government officials is representative of a larger perception problem in the humanitarian refugee crisis, and shows the importance of this perception and terminology in determining the lives and safety of hundreds of women each year.

Borders help to construct and maintain imaginary differences between sections of land and people through their nationalities, and the definition of refugee and asylum seeker limit the

movement through these borders. The importance of terminology in the context of migration can determine a person's likelihood to be allowed to cross a border, and to be given the resources they need to start a new life on the other side. Under international human rights law and as stated in the 1951 UN convention on the Status of Refugees, a refugee is someone who:

“owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it” (UNHCR report on protocol 14).

It is important to note that the original 1951 document, drafted in the aftermath of World War II, was targeted specifically at refugees fleeing from European countries after January 1951. The space and time constraints were not removed until the 1967 Protocol amendment (UNHCR).

Today, the right to seek asylum is considered a human right for all people under the UN Convention and in the United States' Refugee Act of 1980. As I discuss in this chapter, however, the actual practices at the US-Mexico border and throughout the asylum process, combined with American public perception and rhetoric that challenge the “human” aspect of those seeking asylum, it is clear that not all are afforded the opportunity or resources to claim this right.

While the international legal definition of a refugee may have been expanded since the 1951 UN Convention, the problem with the current crisis at US border, and in many other places, is that “[m]any migrants are neither obvious refugees with protected status under international law, nor completely voluntary arrivals with no right to enter or stay.” Because migrants often exist in this in between space of terminology and classification, “their presence often ignites

heated political debates and legal battles over how to balance territoriality and humanitarianism” (Hamlin 2015: 321). Additionally, as discussed in the previous chapter, the way that American politicians and law enforcement have portrayed Central American migrants in the media ensure that they are kept in this space, which makes the border-crossing and asylum process more complicated and difficult.

The grounds for asylum are a credible and provable fear of past persecution in the refugee’s home country, or future persecution if they return. This includes persecution based on social, political, and cultural opinions and membership as stated in the Protocol above. In the years since the 1951 Convention, international refugee law has expanded the specific types of persecution to include sexual orientation and gender-based persecution as valid reasons for granting asylum. Although some American federal courts and organizations such as the Board of Immigration Appeals (BIA) and Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) have recognized gender-based persecution in the past, in general the “gender-related claims of women asylum applicants usually can be established based on the ‘political opinion’ or ‘particular social group’ categories of the refugee definition” (Kelly 1994: 143). Not all refugee women make asylum claims because of gender-based persecution, and some might apply for asylum based on political or religious persecution, but often they are put under these categories anyway if they do cite gender-based claims.

When gender-based violence became a common and accepted consideration in asylum applications, the UNHCR created specific procedures for addressing refugee women’s cases in the 1991 Guidelines on the Protection of Refugee Women. This document provides various tools and recommendations for dealing with the sensitive and personal claims of gender-based violence, including sexual abuse and assault, forced abortion and sterilization, forced marriage,

femicide, domestic abuse, and others. It recommends awareness of cultural differences and the signs and symptoms of PTSD, both of which could affect the way a refugee woman speaks and interacts in an interview. Additionally, the UNHCR states that refugee women should be interviewed alone and should have female interviewers because they can relate to them and may be less threatening than male officials (Kelly 1994: 154). These guidelines are intended to ensure that refugee women are treated in the most humane way while detailing their traumatic experiences to strangers in a foreign country, and they also outline the most effective ways to gain sufficient information for an asylum grant. Although these are the UN's official recommendations for addressing gender-based violence and persecution in any and all asylum processes, the reality of the process is that these guidelines are often not put into effect, particularly in the case of Central American women in the US, who also face various types of racism, sexism, and violence from border officials and law enforcement.

As stated in the previous chapter, there has been a surge in migration from Central America into the US in the past decade, with more and more migrants crossing or attempting to cross the border every year. The UNHCR reported 164,000 refugees and asylum seekers from Central America at the end of 2016—an increase of nearly ten times over the previous five years (UNHCR Refworld). The increase in the numbers of asylum applications, to the US and in general, has necessitated that the UN expand the definition and understanding of asylum seekers and forms of persecution. However, despite the increase in applications and adjustment of definitions, the rates of asylum granted have either stayed the same or decreased over the past decade (Ben-Arieh 2018: 230). In the case of Central American refugees in the United States, the stable numbers of asylum grants is representative not only of the inconsistencies and misunderstandings in international refugee law and definitions, but also, and particularly, a result

of “the informal practices, rulemaking, managerial direction, and discretion in administrative processes that serve to maintain a restrictive national asylum system” (Ben-Arieh 2018: 231).

One of the operational issues of the asylum process is that the purpose of refugee protection law as outlined in national legislation often does not match up with what actually happens during these legal procedures. Because immigration policies in the US focus mainly on border security, detainment, and deportation, lawyers working on migration and asylum cases are met with a “conflicting purpose that undermines the role of law and legal process in the protection of refugees” (Ben-Arieh 2018: 229). Even if the terminology in national legislation on refugees is accurate and inclusive of all those seeking asylum in the US, actual policies and practices at the border and throughout the legal process are often more concerned with maintaining security than providing protection to migrants. For Central American women, who suffer most in the unpredictable, hostile, and often violent spaces of the US-Mexico border, this securitization overlooks both their humanity and their legitimate claims to asylum.

Another issue of the asylum process is that before an asylum case is brought before a judge, the applicant is screened by agents at the border in order to prove there is a “credible” fear of return to the home country. Even though “[a]dvocates maintain that the fact that people are making the costly and difficult journey multiple times is sufficient evidence that they have an urgent need to flee” (Ben-Arieh 2018: 238), many refugees are detained, questioned, and deported before they are given a chance to appear before the court and argue their claim because this fear is difficult to prove. A Human Rights Watch report from 2014 stated that most Central Americans apprehended by US Border Patrol are deported without the chance to express fear of persecution upon return, and only a small percentage of those who are actually interviewed are referred to an asylum officer for official review (Ben-Arieh 2018: 240).

The government's focus on border security and border agents' reluctance to validate refugees' fears shows the "culture of disbelief" and general distrust of Central American migrants, particularly Central American women. After the massive influx of Central American migrants in 2014, most of whom were women and children, some American lawmakers and border officials who were concerned about protecting the border accused many migrant women of "gaming the system" by adopting phrases and citing specific fears they knew would qualify them for asylum (Ben-Arieh 2018: 235). This was targeted especially towards migrants who had previously been deported and were attempting to cross the border again in order to reunite with their families or for other reasons. This suspicion of Central American migrants' intentions not only further enforces a perception of them as untrustworthy and criminal, but also assumes that none of the migrants had legitimate claims to asylum or refugee status. Additionally, this accusation was based on the fact that many of the migrants who were suspected to be "gaming the system" had been detained after illegal entry into the US, and so were making fake asylum claims to avoid deportation. However, as I explored in the last chapter, the presence of violence and extortion on the migrant trail, and the lack of economic resources or correct documentation, means that many migrants are forced to cross the border illegally, whether or not they are seeking refuge on specific asylum claims.

The assumption that migrants are using asylum to trick the system ignores the validity of these very real asylum claims as well as the human experience, suffering, and loss that pushes these migrants to the US. This is especially true for migrant women, as the underlying, socially ingrained disbelief of the severity of sexual violence and trauma makes them even more vulnerable to these accusations. Their traumas and experiences are second-guessed because gender-based violence is rarely considered valid enough for a claim to asylum, and they are often

believed to be making their stories up to trick their way into the country. Additionally, this distrust of migrant women assumes that there exists a “true refugee” who is deserving of safety, freedom, and the resources to survive if, and only if, she is able to prove each of her fears and traumas. Given the ambiguity that the terms refugee and asylum seeker already hold, there is a clear contradiction in how the US government understands refugees legally and politically. In legal terminology and public perception the concept is confusing and often not agreed upon, but when border security and the fear of the other come become an issue, then suddenly the understanding of the true refugee is so clear that there becomes the possibility of a bad refugee. To qualify for asylum, a Central American refugee must prove not only their credibility as a refugee but also their humanity.

The asylum-granting process at the US-Mexico border has never been a simple process, as the processing of refugees never is. Suspicion of migrants is also not a new phenomenon, but the current political climate, and a fear of outsiders that has been growing in the US for the past several decades, are certainly responsible for an even higher tension and paranoia around migration in general. The distrust of the motives of migrants is born from and contributes to a political and social construction of fear, and despite the very valid asylum claims, life experiences, and threats of persecution that Central American refugees have, they are often turned away before they are given the chance to advocate for their own safety. The presence of borders both enforces this distrust and often stops the asylum process before it can begin.

The Border Space

The ways in which the fear of the “other” and the concept of borders interact pose the question of which came first. Although the chicken and the egg analogy is far too simplistic for

this context, it is true that these two entities continuously fuel and create each other, and it is not always clear which is responsible for the other. Borders are created to allocate and assert territory, to control human movement, and keep people in or out of countries. As discussed above, the language of the “other”—alien, illegal, unauthorized—produces a fear of those on the other side of the border. This fear leads to the securitization and protection of borders, and the anti-immigrant, anti-foreigner rhetoric that this heightened security fuels only serves to create more fear, and so the cycle continues.

Borders are complex, politically charged, and difficult to navigate spaces that often fuel and maintain a sense of paranoia for the outside and the other. The demarcation of states is imaginary and often arbitrarily drawn, but nevertheless, borders have been and still are a central part not only of nation building but also of nationalism. The borders in which one is born determines nationality and citizenship, which are both necessary to have in order to be recognized under national and international law. Because many refugees and asylum seekers are stateless, or do not have documentation or records of their nationality, this makes crossing these borders—and starting a new life on the other side—very difficult, and sometimes impossible.

The social and political importance of belonging within a certain border, and to a certain nation, contributes to refugee crises by influencing the perception of borders. The distinctions that borders draw between people and places are not only responsible for the creation of statelessness, but also contribute to the difficulty of the asylum process by restricting or limiting human movement and creating fear or distrust of those on the other side. Borders are perceived as legitimate demarcations of space, and through that, they create differences between groups of people. While people would most likely continue to be displaced regardless of whether or not borders existed, it is clear that the political and humanitarian associations with and perceptions of

borders greatly impact the ability of people to migrate, access the resources they need, and begin a safer, better life in another country. The perception of refugees through terminology is further enforced by the nature of borders as a concept, a political tool, and the ways in which the history of the US border continues to contribute to the refugee crisis in the US today.

The American public and political perception of the US-Mexico border has had significant effects on the migration of Central Americans and the asylum process in the US, and this is not a new phenomenon. In the late sixties, “a shift occurred where the perception of crisis began to emerge among government officials and the public depicting the U.S.-Mexico border as dangerous and out of control” (Angulo-Pasel 2019: 6). In the following decades, international and US politics contributed to a growing fear of outsiders. Nixon’s war on drugs, focusing on cartels and drug trafficking coming from Mexico and Central America, inspired fear of migrants coming from that region, and post-9/11 suspicion of any foreigners intensified this feeling of distrust (Angulo-Pasel 2019: 6). Migration and crossing, whether illegal or legal, of the US-Mexico border have been persistent issues in American politics and policy for years, but the past decade has seen a significant increase in numbers of people entering the US (O’Connor, Migration Policy). The increase in migration is mirrored by a heightened sense of fear and desire to further securitize the border against incoming migrants. This xenophobia has been fueled by Donald Trump’s presidency, especially in response to Central American and Mexican migrants coming into the US—the anti-migrant rhetoric portrays all migrants as dangerous criminals or workers trying to steal American jobs and perpetuates the fear of the “other” both in politics and in the public view.

These patterns of fear throughout history not only affect public perception of borders, but also of refugees and asylum seekers in general, and can change the way these terms are defined

and used in political contexts. For example, suspicion of the Soviet Union during the Cold War led the US government to change the definition of a refugee in US law in the 1965 Hart-Celler Act. In the act, along with the UN definition, “Congress added a geographic criterion: to qualify for refugee status in the United States, one must have fled a communist country or the Middle East” (Hamlin 2017: 323). During this period, the terms refugee and asylum seeker were used as political tools to combat communism, a policy that was not only “more ideologically restrictive” than the UN Protocol, but also placed little attention on refugees from other regions and contexts that may have needed asylum in the US at the time.

While this part of the definition is no longer as relevant, it serves as an example of how critical the definitions of refugee and asylum seeker are to border and immigration policies. Just as important, however, is the way that Central American migrants are referred to in the media and politics outside of formal legal language. Policies and rhetoric motivated by fear of the “other” are still present in the US’s approach to the US-Mexico border crisis today, and the terminology used to discuss the issue in American media and politics further contributes to a disjointed understanding of refugees and asylum seekers. The most common terms used to describe Central American migrants in the United States today include “illegal,” “alien,” and even “undesirable.” The use of these terms is also relatively modern, as the concept of illegality in regards to migration has only been prevalent since the end of the 20th century (Ackerman 2013: 73). Along with further enforcing negative, racist perceptions of Central Americans, these terms can seriously impede any claim to asylum or refugee status that could be crucial to a migrant’s safety by denying their humanity and making the entire process more difficult for an applicant. Additionally, the other language used to describe the situation at the border—migrants are reported to be “apprehended” and “detained” at the border, which immediately connotes

criminality—portrays the space of the US-Mexico border as being full of dangerous people, and therefore a threat to the US and the American people.

Classifying people into the categories of legal and illegal and person or alien strips them of their humanity and therefore changes the way they will experience the border, because “[o]ne is either deemed a ‘safe-citizen’ that needs to perform according to those bordering expectations, or an ‘unauthorized’ migrant that needs to run and hide to avoid apprehension and deportation” (Angulo-Pasel 2019: 10). Even being designated a “safe-citizen” does not necessarily protect a migrant from the danger that is possible in these border spaces. This is especially true for migrant women, who are at risk of extortion, intimidation, and violence from law enforcement and border officials regardless of their legal status. I discuss these dangers further in the next section, but it is important to note here how dehumanizing terminology and classifications of migrants are large contributors to violence they may experience at the border.

The word “illegal” is particularly dehumanizing because it reduces migrants to a state that is closer to illicit goods than to human beings. For migrant women in particular, illegality can commodify their bodies—without documentation, women are at a higher risk of being extorted, and the ways that illegality forces migrants to navigate borders makes migrant women extremely vulnerable to human trafficking and forced prostitution. In the same way, the term “alien” means that women are “‘doubly threatened’ in the United States because they are exposed to the violent mechanisms of disciplinary regulative power as ‘aliens’ and as women” (Cisneros 2013: 300). The effect of these terms shows how gender-based vulnerabilities manifest in the border-crossing process—the same gender and social hierarchies that put migrant women at higher risk of sexual and physical violence on the migrant trail affect their entry into the US by making them more vulnerable in legal proceedings and border spaces. The terms “illegal” and

“alien” not only dehumanize Central American migrant women, but also turn them into “anticitizens”, meaning they are undesirable, threatening to American security, and the type of person that does not belong within the borders of the US as a citizen or as a refugee.

If a Central American migrant or refugee is placed into this category of illegality, because they are undocumented or have attempted to cross the border illegally, the punishment is detainment and/or deportation. However, this punishment is in fact a direct violation of the UN Convention on Refugees and its policy on nonrefoulement. The convention states that asylum seekers should not be punished for illegal entry, as “the seeking of asylum can require refugees to breach immigration rules. Prohibited penalties might include being charged with immigration or criminal offences relating to the seeking of asylum, or being arbitrarily detained purely on the basis of seeking asylum” (UNHCR Convention and Protocol 3). The US’s treatment of Central American migrants at the border clearly goes against this part of international refugee law, but since they are so often classified as economic migrants or simply immigrants rather than refugees or asylum seekers, this section of the Convention manages to not technically apply.

The increased securitization of borders in the US is a direct effect of the fear that these “illegal aliens” pose a threat to the American public and nation, but it does not only happen on the US’s side. In 2014, the Mexican government started to heavily enforce their border security under pressure from the US to control the situation on their side of the border. In response, Mexico developed the Southern Border Program (Programa Frontera Sur, PFS), which increased security along the US-Mexico border as well as doubling-down on deportation, detainment, and security along the border with Guatemala to ensure that migrants could not even travel through Mexico towards the US. The pressure from the US government and Mexico’s subsequent actions came after “a significant number of unaccompanied children from Central America arrived in the

U.S., overwhelming Border Patrol (BP) personnel and causing a media frenzy and public outrage in many southern states” (Angulo-Pasel 2019: 7). The PFS, and similar border security tactics and programs, are often framed as working in the interest of migrants by reducing the dangers they may face along the journey through Mexico (Angulo-Pasel 2019: 10). However, the dehumanizing terminology used in efforts to secure borders and limit migration, “[w]hether the category is ‘unauthorized’, ‘illegal’, ‘alien’, ‘irregular’, or ‘undocumented’... force[s] migrant women to put their bodies, health, and lives at risk in order to survive” (Angulo-Pasel 2019: 10).

Additionally, and in a similar circular trend as the border-fear relationship, the pressure of illegality actually pushes more migrants towards illegal entry into the United States because they fear deportation, detention, and the violence associated with the US-Mexico border. Even those who need asylum and have valid claims to it may be deterred from going through the proper, legal procedures of crossing and applying for the grant because they are intimidated by the people, process, and physical, militarized space of the border. This is another way in which Central Americans who desperately need the protection and resources of asylum are deterred from seeking it and are often put in greater danger through illegal crossing because they wish to avoid the intimidation and violence of the border. Therefore, not only does the notion of illegality harm Central American refugees’ chance of survival and put them at a higher risk of physical and mental harm, but it also negatively affects public perception of them and the refugee crisis by ignoring their humanity and dismissing any violence against them.

The US-Mexico border has a constant presence through the physical intimidation of guards, walls, gates, etc., and the fear of deportation, detention, and violence that follows migrants and refugees throughout their journey and crossing. This deters many refugees from even attempting to cross the border legally, and those who slip under the radar by crossing

illegally or being trafficked across the border may also need the protection of asylum but do not even have the option because of their circumstances. Often, refugees cross the US-Mexico border illegally because there is no other choice, and as a result, many Central Americans disappear in this space. In 2016, the Colibrí Center for Human Rights reported at least 2,035 Central American migrants missing along the Tucson Sector of the border with Arizona, which in recent years has become the site of 45% of apprehensions of migrants (Reineke 2016: 134). This section of the border is a common crossing point for migrants because it is mostly uninhabited desert, but the numbers of migrants disappeared at this point is due to high rates of apprehension and death caused by the harsh conditions of the terrain.

For Central Americans attempting to cross the border, invisibility can be both harmful and helpful. Just as they are forced to travel dangerously along the trail to the United States, migrants and refugees are forced to risk their lives crossing at dangerous points and terrain in order to avoid detention. Invisibility may be key here in order to make it across the border without being apprehended and having to face possible violence and mistreatment at the border, but invisibility also makes it easier for their lives to disappear and become just a number in a report. The journeys of Central American migrants are made more difficult because they must navigate the threatening space of the border in order to advocate for their place in a country that often does not consider them as legitimate refugees, or even human beings. Just as the fear of the other and the importance placed on borders continuously influence one another, the public perception of Central American refugees has significant effect on how the situation at the border is viewed as a crisis of invasion, not a refugee crisis.

The human side of Central American migration—the desperate situations that push people from their home countries and present various threats to their safety, as well as their

treatment at borders and by law enforcement—is what makes the situation at the US-Mexico border a refugee crisis, and not just an immigration problem. In this way, what terminology is used, and what is not used, to describe Central American migrants has a great effect on the asylum-granting process as well as their treatment throughout the process. The ways in which security, asylum processes, and borders are affected by terminology and perception of migrants show that a border is not only a physical barrier but a “process that has the potential to materialize anywhere” (Angulo-Pasel 2019: 10) throughout the journey, while crossing into the US, or applying for asylum.

Ignoring the humanitarian concern of this crisis not only puts Central American refugees at high risks of violence and death—both from the situations they may be escaping in their home countries and violent treatment at the border fueled by xenophobia—but also contributes to higher rates of illegal border crossing. Often, the physical dangers and risk of deportation or detention that come with illegal border crossing is a better option for Central American migrants who cannot return to their home countries. Additionally, viewing this as an immigration problem rather than humanitarian crises extends the liminal space of migration and places Central American refugees, especially women, in physical and mental danger at the border.

Gender-Based Violence at the Border

As the previous chapter showed, making it to the US border through Central America and Mexico is a dangerous, physically and mentally taxing, and often life-threatening journey. Even if a Central American migrant successfully arrives at the US border, they must then go through the difficult process of crossing it, and whether they are doing this legally or illegally, the process offers little relief from the dangers of their journey. For women, the same threats they

encountered along the migrant trail are reproduced in new forms in the highly securitized, militarized, and paranoid space of the border. The dehumanization of Central American refugees within the space of the border increases their invisibility as individuals and as a population, which makes them more susceptible to harm from border agents or law enforcement and makes it harder to hold those perpetrators accountable. For female migrants and refugees, this harm can take the form of sexual violence, physical and mental abuse, and the painful process of having to re-tell or re-live their past experiences and trauma in order to prove they deserve asylum. Often already under extreme stress from the journey, upon arrival at the border migrant women must face intimidation, racism, xenophobia, inhumane conditions of detention, and separation from their families. The conditions that border securitization and fear produce once again place migrant and refugee women in impossible and dangerous situations where the element of choice is nonexistent.

The United States government's approach to the situation at the border since 2014 has been based on the intimidation of migrants, which is first enacted in the threat of detention and deportation in order to deter migrants and refugees from even attempting to cross the border. Once Central American migrants enter the space of the border, whether by crossing or attempting the asylum grant process, they are then vulnerable to other forms of intimidation, including physical and sexual violence, mental abuse, and mistreatment and inhumane conditions in detention centers. Through these intimidation tactics, the US border, and the country as a whole, becomes yet another violent and danger-filled space, rather than a place of refuge, and the asylum process is transformed "from a process intended to protect refugees into a deterrence system in violation of our own commitment to asylum, human rights, and the dignity of these women and children fleeing persecution" (Ben-Arieh 2018: 229).

For refugees seeking safety and asylum in the United States, the physical and emotional dangers they face at the border often seriously impede their ability to access critical resources and the chance to even begin the asylum process. Refugee women are threatened by the intimidation of border agents and law enforcement and the fear of deportation, and both are often used by border officials to control current detainees and deter others from attempting to cross (Riva 2019: 311). Along with the threat of violence or deportation, this intimidation can affect the asylum process for refugee women by scaring or forcing them into silence. Ben-Arieh explains that the circumstances of detention centers make the asylum application process even more stressful, and “[s]ince the detention centre did not have a childcare facility, the women were forced to answer traumatic questions, including detailing instances of rape, while their children were present. As a result, the client I represented chose not to speak about her rape in her interview with the asylum officer” (2018: 237). Having to speak about such personal and emotional experiences is difficult enough, and some women may be too ashamed to talk about this in front of parents, children, or other family members. Additionally, many women feel their trauma, especially experiences of sexual violence and abuse, are not valid or not enough to be granted asylum, and so they do not share them with asylum officers in interviews. The process and context of the border produce fear and anxiety and put Central American women in uncomfortable social positions—both of which often affect their ability or willingness to advocate for themselves.

The intimidation of migrant and refugee women at the border also very often includes sexual and physical violence from border officers and local law enforcement around the border. Racism, misogyny, and the dehumanization of migrants in general contribute to a clear power

imbalance that puts American authority figures above migrants, particularly migrant women. Argüelles gives an example of this racially motivated sexual violence:

“Maria Rosa, a woman from El Salvador, shared her experience and emphasized its seemingly culturally sanctioned nature. She put it this way. ‘An officer from ‘la migra’ (INS) raped me. He kept calling me ‘Wetback’ and ‘Indian’ as he did it. He also said that he was an officer, and so he could do this. Another officer was watching and smoking. I guess they figure they have the right to do this. Who would challenge them?’ After a long pause Maria Rosa added, ‘To be seen as a woman as bad enough. But to be Salvadoran here is a curse. You can’t do anything to avoid that’” (Argüelles et al. 1993: 265).

‘Culturally sanctioned’ is the key term here, because it shows how complex the power structure is in this border space, as well as the various sources of hate-based violence that Central American women experience at the US-Mexico border. Their humanity and well-being are ignored by human traffickers, coyotes, and corrupt law enforcement as they travel the northern corridor through Mexico, and upon arrival in the United States they are again reduced to less than human in a space that is created and maintained by fear and manifested in violence. The story that Argüelles shared of Maria Rosa was from the early 90s, and the anti-immigrant rhetoric and current political climate surrounding the US-Mexico border and refugee situation have only become more negative and fueled by hate. The United States’ fear of the other, as represented in the media and by much of the American public, is increasing as numbers of migration rise, and Central American women detained at the border are at a high risk of becoming outlets for the national and political tension.

The Central American refugee woman is at risk of all of these physical dangers and threats to emotional and mental well-being regardless of whether they attempt to cross the border with the correct processes and documentation or are detained while trying to cross illegally. A woman travelling with young children or other family members is further susceptible to this harm and intimidation because “[b]order policing strategies work to exacerbate the vulnerabilities of women by severing them from traveling companions during the process of detention and deportation” (Wheatley et al. 2016: 403). Separation of families is another tactic used by US Border Patrol to intimidate and control incoming Central Americans. Often, husbands and other male family members are deported or detained separately, leaving women alone either at the border or in surrounding towns without the familial support and safety that comes with traveling with a man. Being left alone in these spaces puts women at a greater risk of danger and also makes it more difficult to attempt to cross the border again.

If women are detained, with or without their families or travel companions, they are placed in situations of high risk and violence. The mistreatment of migrants has received extreme backlash in the past few years in response to reports of horrible, inhumane conditions in detention centers at the US-Mexico border and around the United States in general. At these centers, migrants are separated from their families and placed into holding cells, which are known as *hieleras*, or freezers because of their icy temperatures. These *hieleras* are overcrowded and the migrants are not provided beds or blankets, and the inhumane conditions combined with the presence of guards means that migrants are in a constant state of stress and sleep-deprivation. Additionally, many mothers are separated from their children for extended periods of time without any information on where they are

or how long they will be detained. Along with these physical and emotional stressors, migrants are degraded by border officers who verbally abuse them, calling them names such as “parasites”, “dogs”, and “whores” (Riva 2017: 310). These slurs contribute to the dehumanization in the terms “illegal”, and “alien”, and in this context are specifically motivated by racism and misogyny against Central American women. This shows how the space of the border is inherently gendered and racially charged, and how the combination of this puts Central American refugee women in extremely vulnerable and dangerous positions within a process that is supposed to give them refuge.

For Central American women, both the detainment and asylum grant process transform the US-Mexico border into a space that simultaneously ignores their humanity and individuality and forces them to expose the most personal, vulnerable parts of themselves. They may be depicted as a mass of numbers or bodies in the media and in policy, but if they are given a chance to advocate for themselves and fight for their right to life and safety, they must expose the innermost parts of themselves. The vulnerabilities migrant and refugee women may have faced along the journey are reproduced in this space in different forms, and during interactions with border agents and law enforcement—whether they are being interviewed for an asylum grant, detained, or deported—they must not only display their personal and emotional traumas, but also fear the possibility of further abuse at the border.

Conclusion

Through anti-immigrant sentiment, fear of the “other,” and use of the words “illegal” and “alien,” the US-Mexico border has become both a physical and social space of violence, suspicion, and dehumanization. As I have shown in this chapter, the tension of the border very

often results in racist and gender-based violence, and so Central American refugee women bear the most burden in this space. Many Central American women come to the United States hoping to escape the fear and violence they experienced in their home country, and to search for a better life in a place where they can be free and have the time and resources to process their trauma. Unfortunately, the border-crossing process is not simple or stress-relieving for any woman, whether she crosses legally or illegally, is traveling alone or with family, is able to make a case for asylum or is never even given the chance to interview. The dangers and stressors of the migrant trail are reproduced through the social and political power imbalance and gendered dimensions of the border, systematically disadvantaging and threatening Central American women in the struggle for their own safety.

The border exists in the presence of guards, law enforcement, coyotes, documentation, local resistance to migration, and various other forms. As a concept, the border is not stagnant, and as a physical and legal barrier, it is directly dependent on political and social changes in the United States. These changes affect the way that border and asylum processes operate, and also show how the crisis and identity of refugees and asylum seekers are becoming a political issue rather than a humanitarian concern. In the context of today's political climate and border situation in the United States, it is clear that the original fundamental rights laid out in the UDHR are not universal in practice, especially not for the vulnerable population of Central American refugee women. At the US-Mexico border, the very humanity of Central American migrants and refugees is in question, which not only seriously harms their chances of being granted asylum, but also feeds into the assumption in the American media and politics that they do not deserve it to begin with. How can a person be guaranteed a fundamental human right when they are not only considered illegal and undesirable, but "alien?" The asylum process at the US-Mexico

border is flawed on several levels—from legal discrepancies to interpretations of terminology to the dismissal of asylum cases and applicants before they are given a chance—and often results in not only the deportation of refugees back to the countries they are fleeing, but violence against some of the most vulnerable people arriving at the border.

The crisis at the border today is both violent and bureaucratically complex and unclear, and the rise of anti-immigrant rhetoric in recent years fuels the American government's tendency to refuse refugees and asylum seekers. Ben Arieh relates the asylum process with a medical treatment:

“the government comes up with a scheme to limit the number of people who will receive the diagnosis. In other words, once they have the diagnosis, the law says they have to be treated—but if they never receive the diagnosis, there is no obligation to treat. In this scenario, limiting access to a diagnosis would raise concerns about the effectiveness of the process in achieving its purpose. Similarly, if the government's deterrence policies so limit bona fide refugees from accessing the asylum process, this should raise serious concerns about RSD [refugee status determination] as a legal institution” (248).

The process of determining refugee or asylum status often seems careless, as so many Central Americans simply disappear at the border, and the asylum screening procedures are rushed and overlook most refugees. However, it is clear through the mistreatment, dehumanization, and abuse of Central American migrants and refugees in detention centers and at the border that the ineffectiveness of this process is specific and directly influenced by the fear of migration. The number of asylum applications to the US from Central America have increased significantly in the past few decades, but the rates of asylum

granted have not. It is crucial not to underestimate the affect that rhetoric, public perception, and the concept of borders have on this process.

When the crisis at the border is framed as a refugee crisis, it recognizes that many Central American migrants are refugees and therefore makes the receiving government responsible for following UN convention and protocol under the eye of international human rights law. By generalizing Central American migration as an economic issue and migrants as invasive or criminal, the US denies this responsibility, and denies the care and treatment that refugees desperately need. Through changing understandings of refugees and asylum seekers and the anti-immigrant sentiment that the current presidential administration incites and fuels, the situation at the border is only becoming more complicated, militarized, securitized, and based in hate. The current asylum process in the United States operates through deterrence and intimidation rather than ensuring that every person is granted their fundamental human rights. The vulnerable Central American women arriving at the US-Mexico border, often as a last resort, are not only denied this fundamental right but are further dehumanized by the violation of their other human rights. In order to drastically improve the asylum process, detention conditions, and the border situation in general, it is necessary to understand the specific ways in which the most vulnerable suffer within this space.

Chapter III:
Post Arrival: Gender, Community, and Re-homing Across the Border

Introduction

In the first two chapters I traced the generalized experience of the Central American migrant's and refugee's journey north from their home country, through the dangerous liminal space of the Northern corridor, and to their arrival at the US-Mexico border. I have outlined the threats that they face along the journey, and the specific, gender-based vulnerabilities of female migrants and refugees that put them at a higher risk of sexual and physical violence, kidnapping, and death throughout the migration process. These same threats are present at the US-Mexico border, taking the form of violence motivated by fear, distrust, and racism. Undocumented migrants in the United States continue to exist in a liminal space where they are invisible to the legal, medical, and monetary resources they need, but are in constant danger of becoming visible, and being deported.

To understand the refugee crisis at the US-Mexico border and the experience of Central American refugees and migrants in the most holistic way, we must take into account the post-migration experience. The lives and humanity of Central Americans are certainly in danger along the journey north and throughout the border process, but making it into the United States, legally or illegally, does not guarantee safety or success in starting a better life. The process of adjusting and creating a new life in the United States is complicated for various social, economic and political reasons. Although there is much more information available about the post-arrival lives of migrants, documented and undocumented, even these are limited to their financial and employment struggles and often lack the social and familial aspect of cross-cultural, transnational ties between family members and social networks constructed through the migrant journey. I would also like to note that while there is a fair amount of scholarly work focusing on migrants' adjustment in the United States (Abrego, Chavez, Menjivar), very little of it makes a

distinction or a direct focus on refugees. Often, migrants are mentioned as asylum seekers in the discussion of their legal status, but there is not as much research or comparative studies on the experiences of refugees and other migrants. Therefore, my analysis in this chapter will focus mainly on other migrants, but I would like to keep in mind that the adjustment experience of refugees would contain other legal processes and social and political dimensions that I cannot address fully here.

If a migrant crosses the border, legally or illegally, or if a refugee is granted asylum in the United States, they must then begin the process of re-homing, a term I use to explain how migrants settle in the United States, adjust to a new place and circumstances, and begin to process the trauma of their particular histories, experiences, and lives in their home countries. This concept is important because it includes the various factors of everyday life, community creation and care, and world rebuilding that happens in the adjustment process, including the mental and emotional side of life post-migration. I use the word “home” here because it encompasses more than the practical side of this process, such as finding employment and financial stability, and includes the emotional aspect of fleeing violence, carrying the burden of trauma, reuniting with loved ones, and leaving loved ones behind. I have emphasized the human side of Central American migration and the refugee crisis from the journey to the process of border crossing, and it is just as important in the lives of migrants and refugees once they arrive in the United States.

Much like the networks built along the migrant trail that help women survive the journey north, community building across the border can help migrants and refugees thrive under difficult social and economic circumstances and in the invisible but dangerous state of being undocumented. Additionally, many migrants and refugees are still connected to family members

in their home countries, whether they are attempting to help others cross the border or sending money back to children and spouses they had to leave behind. There are many variables that shape the post-migration experience besides employment, money, and education, and the social, emotional, and personal aspects are just as crucial to the process. Migrants and refugees enter the United States in order to search for a better life and to create a new home when the situation in their origin country has become unlivable. Therefore, I call this a process of re-homing in order to keep in mind the intention and immense emotional labor that is required of migrants and refugees in the host country. Additionally, as I discuss in the last section of this chapter, the same factors that challenge the everyday lives and adjustment of migrant women are also key to the ways in which they demonstrate resilience and resistance. Much of the activism, advocacy, and community building done by Central American migrant women in the United States is inspired and fueled by their struggles and successes in the re-homing process.

The migrant experience in the United States is incredibly varied, complex, and sensitive to current political climate and time period, but it is often an emotionally stressful process for undocumented and documented migrants alike. The position of Central American women in this process is particularly interesting, and often particularly difficult, because of the gendered social roles and the specific vulnerabilities of women I have discussed previously. As I show in this chapter, the breaking of traditional gender and family norms can provide opportunities and agency for migrant women but can also further limit their mobility in the post-migration context. Life in the United States is not simple for any migrant or refugee—language barriers, financial struggles, lack of employment opportunities, and access to education make the adjustment anything but smooth, especially for undocumented Central Americans. Additionally, connections to and responsibilities for the family left behind in their home country adds another layer of

emotional and financial stress for migrants who are attempting to start a new life. The pain of separation and loss many migrants and refugees carry from their past and the journey is unimaginable for most of the American and global public who have not experienced similar displacement. Combined with the pressure and fear of legal status and social acceptance by the American public, Central Americans often have great difficulty attempting to start a new life and create a home in the United States. However, just as I acknowledged the resilience of migrant women along the journey, I want to emphasize the strength of migrants in navigating a new life in a place where they are systematically ignored, targeted, and often separated from their family.

Adjustment and Legal Violence

Undocumented migrants in the United States face several obstacles to creating a new and sustainable life across the border. The invisible state of many migrants creates a liminal legality in which their “mobility and interactions with US institutions are restricted by their undocumented status” (Hershberg and Lykes 2015: 37)—they are both unrecognized and illegal. Central American refugees who have been granted asylum status are eligible for government assistance, but those who are fleeing violence but did not qualify for asylum must deal with the same obstacles as other undocumented migrants (Chavez 1990: 42). Their status makes it difficult to find employment, and most of the available jobs pay very poorly and have terrible working conditions because employers are not held accountable for undocumented workers, and the workers are not in a position to advocate for their rights. Undocumented status not only makes migrants vulnerable to inhumane treatment but also to exploitation by employers, who may use the threat of exposure of their status as an intimidation tactic (Abgreo and Menjívar 2012: 1384). Migrants are often under great pressure to make money to sustain themselves in the

United States, to send back to their families in their home country, and sometimes to pay off debt from their border crossing (Hershberg and Lykes 2015: 50).

While this responsibility is often shared by women and men, migrant women make even less money than migrant men, regardless of education or experience level (Abrego and LaRossa 2009: 1072), and the jobs available to women include mostly domestic and housekeeping positions. These jobs are often more unreliable than the restaurant, construction and gardening jobs of migrant men because they are less regulated. However, they are also less public, and sometimes mean that women can find jobs faster due to the ability to work unseen as an undocumented migrant (Menjívar 1999: 608). Along with lower pay rates and greater instability, many of the jobs that are available to undocumented migrant women also “include more forms of exploitation than those restricted to men” (Abrego and LaRossa 2009: 1075). In 2012, Human Rights Watch reported that “hundreds of thousands of immigrant worker women face a high risk of sexual violence and sexual harassment in their workplaces” (Peterson 2014: 392). Again, not only are women vulnerable to these abuses at their jobs, but they are often unable to report instances of violence for fear their undocumented status will be revealed. For migrant women, there is also little opportunity to advance in their line of work or receive pay raises, even if they have been working the same job for over a decade. This is usually due to undocumented migrants’ inability to advocate for themselves, resulting in many migrant families continuing to live in poverty despite coming to the country to find financial stability. Instead, they are unable to sustain their own life in the United States, let alone support family in their home country.

Despite the terrible conditions, treatment, and wages that these jobs offer migrant women, the intersections of labor and gender for Central American migrants in the United States demonstrates how gender adapts to and affects the migrant experience across the border. The

ways in which migrant women navigate undocumented life through the available job market, both the advantages in their work and the dangers, demonstrates how migration “brings about changes in gender relations that have complex and uneven effects; it presents women with opportunities and, at the same time, imposes constraints” (Menjívar 1999: 603). For example, some Central American women have expressed they feel a sense of freedom or agency because the conditions of employment in the United States makes it necessary for them to exist outside of traditional, patriarchal control (Menjívar 1999). This can also happen for Central American women who remain in their home country when their husband and/or male family members migrate to the United States, as they must fill the roles and jobs left by men in the community (Arias 2013: 433). Although, this is not the case for all Central American women, migrants or not, and often the pressure and danger of the migrant context can lead to far more harm than freedom. And, as I discuss in the next section, the traditional gender roles women may have experienced in their home country often re-emerge in different forms under the strains of migration and changing family dynamics.

The various identities of migrants—their home country, gender, age, ethnic and cultural backgrounds—further influence their social, economic, and legal mobility in the United States. For example, the day-to-day reality of living in and adjusting to life across the border presents other challenges for migrants and refugees coming from indigenous communities in Central America, as many do not speak English and speak limited to no Spanish. A 2014 study noted that thirty-five percent of migrant workers spoke no English at all, and many more were illiterate or spoke only their native language (Peterson 2014: 393). The language and cultural barriers for both indigenous and non-indigenous migrants create the need for community and network building, which I will return to in the next section. This need has resulted in the concentration of

migrant groups in certain areas of the United States—California has become a common destination for Salvadorans and Guatemalans, while there is a large Honduran population in New York (Chinchilla and Hamilton 2007: 332). Within these larger populations, however, indigenous communities are often separate from non-indigenous migrants, most likely due to language and cultural barriers.

The experiences of indigenous migrants show the variety of different challenges Central American migrants may face in their attempt to settle, find employment, and build a life, which are very dependent on their backgrounds and identities. For example, about thirty percent of migrant agricultural workers in rural California are indigenous Central Americans. They experience specific disadvantages and limitations due to language barriers, and “migrant indigenous women face other intersectional oppressions that are compounded through the violence of producing a state of extreme vulnerability and exploitability in which many migrants are denied the right to get a driver’s license” (Blackwell 2015: 139). In this case, indigenous migrant women are limited in a variety of ways—through language, gender-based violence, and decreased mobility in rural areas due to lack of access to state services. Without public transportation in rural California, indigenous migrant women have difficulty getting to their jobs, picking up their children, and shopping for groceries. Often, it is not only the intersectional identities and documentation status of Central American migrants that create limitations to their life and movement, but also the physical and spatial constraints of their environment.

Language barriers, along with undocumented status, can pose significant challenges to accessing basic rights and resources, including education. Additionally, many Central American migrants work in agriculture because they are able to be employed without documentation (although they are paid very little and must endure inhumane conditions and treatment), and this

means they often move due to the seasonal nature of the work. This movement can interrupt the education of these migrants' children, whether those children are undocumented or born citizens (Green 2003: 57). The circumstances of living undocumented can have this type of generational effect—invisibility and fear of deportation force migrants into low-paying and difficult work, which affects their children's access to education and ability to thrive. The lack of stability and safety in the lives of undocumented migrants heavily influence not only their ability to sustain a life in the United States, but also their children's opportunities for social and financial success, even if those children are documented, lawful residents.

Along with the everyday difficulties of accessing healthcare, education, and employment, Central American migrants must also be wary of immigration officials, especially if they or a member of their family is undocumented. Often, migrants' spouses or parents are deported, leaving undocumented family members and children alone in the United States, further limiting their ability to have a normal everyday life, work, and school experience. Deportation continues to loom as a threat for migrant and refugee families, especially with the surge in ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) raids in recent years. During Obama's presidency, more than 2.8 million migrants were deported and billions of dollars were spent on border security and ICE activity (Uhlmann 2019: 34). The administration's migrant policy had a "focus on 'Felons, not families,' further conflating immigrants with a threat to the nation's security" despite the fact that migrants were and are so often deported for very minor offenses (Uhlmann 2019: 35). ICE raids and activity have only increased under the Trump administration following Trump's first executive orders on border security protocol in 2017. These policies, combined with anti-migrant rhetoric and hate, mean that migrants today are at risk for both state and public violence. Due to the threat of exposure of undocumented status, and the subsequent threat of

deportation, migrants are forced to remain in terrible conditions of available employment, housing, and healthcare, making it incredibly difficult if not impossible for any social or economic upward mobility. However, the migration flow persists despite this, demonstrating how terrible the conditions in Central American migrants' home countries must be. If an undocumented life in the United States, given its various threats, is comparatively less dangerous to a life in one's home country, the urgency and intensity of this crisis is clear.

Just as the liminal space of the migrant corridor through Mexico creates a space of invisibility and violence for Central Americans traveling through, the liminal legality of life across the border puts migrants in a legal "no man's land" where they are vulnerable to both physical and structural violence. The combination of the threat of deportation and the difficulty of creating a normal, everyday life is a result of legal violence, or "the harmful effects of the law that can potentially obstruct and derail immigrants' paths of incorporation" into American society (Abrego and Menjivar 2012: 1383). The way that immigration law operates in the United States debases migrants to their status as either documented or undocumented, which not only puts them at risk of detainment and deportation but also creates social hierarchies that greatly affect migrants' ability to thrive and sustain a life across the border. The violence that migrants experience at the border—dehumanization, humiliation, physical, sexual and mental abuse—can appear again in different forms due to the lack of protection they are afforded by the American government.

It is clear that the adjustment process presents many social, economic, and legal obstacles for undocumented migrants in their attempt to start new lives in the United States. However, it is important to note that many of these obstacles are still present for documented Central American migrants and lawful permanent residents. Even if they have proper documentation, many

migrants still struggle to secure regular employment with reasonable wages and have difficulty accessing education and other social resources. Many migrants come to the United States to escape economic issues and poverty in their home country, but proper documentation does not guarantee them a steady job, and often they remain low-income as permanent residents.

Therefore, they experience similar obstacles to access of basic resources—the slow, structural violence of poverty, malnutrition, barriers to education and healthcare, and systematic disadvantage due to policies that overlook or ignore them. This violence also manifests in social hierarchies that place Central American migrants, even documented, lawful residents, below “natural” American citizens through racism, sexism, xenophobia, and fear of the “other” in the American public (Abrego and Menjívar 2012: 1386).

While undocumented migrants undoubtedly have a great amount of trouble navigating employment, education, and social services due to their unrecognized and illegal status, even documented migrants have difficulty re-homing in a country that is generally socially, economically, and politically inhospitable to foreigners, particularly Central Americans. The social stigma and culture of fear surrounding migration in the United States, which I discussed at length in previous chapters, greatly affects any migrant’s or refugee’s ability to create a new life and thrive across the border. Regardless of documentation, government protection, or length of time they have been in the country, it is clear that Central American migrants are often treated as outsiders (and sometimes as dangerous), damaging their ability to access basic resources and a normal, everyday life. This is not to say that no Central American finds success or happiness post-migration—there are certainly migrants that find the life, family, and/or safety they were looking for in the United States. And, as I discuss in the next sections, there are many ways in which migrants, and migrant women in particular, form communities and networks that both

uplift their shared experiences and cultures and work to resist and change the social and political structures that harm them. Creating a new life may be difficult for Central American migrants and refugees, but the living, thriving communities of Central American migrants in the United States today show that life may not always be as limited as it seems.

New and Engendered Roles for Women

In a time and place where undocumented migrants are forced to live outside the protection of the law and without basic social and physical resources, family takes on a crucial role in the re-homing process. Many migrant families are transnational, existing across borders and in multiple countries, and often they are mixed status—some documented and some undocumented. Often, undocumented migrants give birth to children after migrating, meaning that their children are born as US citizens. While a parent’s citizenship status can be passed on to their children, children born to undocumented migrants in the United States cannot extend their legal status to their parents. This creates complicated family structures, and can completely change traditional family dynamics and social hierarchies within migrant families and communities. Mixed status can affect family structure, authority, and financial and social responsibility, and the circumstances of migration and adjustment greatly influence the expected gender roles for migrant women within these structures.

Financial responsibility is a crucial factor in shaping migrant family life and structure in the United States. Although it is often very difficult for migrants to secure long-term or reliable employment that pays a living wage, the money that migrants send back to their parents or children can make a significant difference in their home country. In Honduras, for example, “[r]emittances comprised 17 percent of the nation’s gross domestic product (GDP) in 2011,

according to World Bank estimates” (MPI report 2013: 1). This money can send children to school or fund the journey north to reunite family members who were left behind. Remittances can also have significant effect on the lives of women in Central America, because those who receive this financial assistance are more likely to gain financial independence, buy their own houses, and pursue their own economic or employment interests independent of their families and/or husbands (Arias 2013: 438). Despite the fact that migrant women make significantly less than migrant men and that “Latina immigrant women in the United States are largely concentrated in menial, poorly paid jobs” it is still common that “in some transnational families women remit more than men” (Abrego and LaRossa 2009: 1071).

The financial responsibility of many migrants sustains transnational family connections, which can affect family relationships across borders and change the nature of who is the primary provider. In their efforts to explore family life of transnational families, Hershberg and Lykes conducted various interviews with Central American migrant women between 2010 and 2012, focusing on their gendered experiences of migration, language barriers, family relationships, and employment. One of the cases they present is of Lola, a Guatemalan woman who migrated to the United States with her husband. They were both undocumented and searching for any work in order to send money back to their four children in Guatemala (Hershberg and Lykes 2015: 43). In their interview with Lola, the authors note the difficulty migrant parents have in being separated from their children or other family members, and how they often become stuck in place while attempting to secure regular work, sometimes remaining in the United States years longer than they originally intended. Many Central Americans migrate to the United States to flee violence or political turmoil, and many make the journey north because the economic situation in their home country is unlivable. While some may intend to stay in the United States

for the indefinite future, often migrants plan to make enough money to support their family and eventually return home. However, the difficulty of finding work and generating enough income to send home, especially as an undocumented migrant, often extends their stay. Financial struggles exacerbate the strain on family relationships caused by separation, putting more pressure on migrants to sustain themselves and their family in their home country.

Financial issues are an important part of the motivations of migration, the ability to travel and cross the border safely, and mobility on the other side, but “[w]hile there is documentation of the significant financial strains on migrant families in the United States, far less research has explored transnational dimensions of family life and how sociopolitical factors contribute to socio-emotional and psychological challenges in transnational, mixed-status families” (Hershberg and Lykes 2015: 38). Another important aspect to Central American mixed status migrant family life in the United States is the fact that undocumented migrants often give birth to US citizens. This was the case in Hershberg and Lykes’ interview with Julia, a Guatemalan woman who migrated with her husband in order to make money to send back to their two children. Julia and her husband’s stay in the US extended far longer than they expected, and during the decade they lived in the United States they had two more children. Julia and her husband did not make enough money to arrange unauthorized travel to the United States for their children in Guatemala, and their teenage daughter expressed that “I don’t want to [go to the United States] because I am going to be scared in the desert, because they say that in the desert ‘you are going to suffer’” (Hershberg and Lykes 2015: 47). With this particular case, Julia successfully changed her status from undocumented asylum seeker to lawful resident, and her Guatemalan children were then able to travel legally to reunite with their parents. However, as I discussed in the previous chapter, the probability of being granted asylum is very low, and

therefore families must often take the most dangerous route to reunite or remain separated for indefinite periods of time.

The financial strain on transnational families, the everyday dangers of living undocumented in the US, and the threats of the journey across the border contribute to the difficulty of settling and creating a new life and leads to emotional stress for children and parents (Hershberg and Lykes 2015: 45). In recent years, crossing the US-Mexico border has only become more difficult, with heightened security and the presence of border and immigration agents who are attempting to detain all undocumented migrants. The increase in ICE raids has also affected the ability of families to reunite, and recently, undocumented migrant parents are being separated from their children and deported, leaving their children alone in the United States. The emotional and financial strain on transnational families has always been difficult for migrants and refugees to navigate, but in recent years it has become more dangerous to their physical and mental well-being and safety.

The family is clearly heavily affected by the adjustment process in the United States, and the issue of family separation contributes to the difficulty of actually creating a new home. The mixed status of many migrant families makes them vulnerable to deportation and separation, especially in recent years with the increase in ICE activity. Central American women who have migrated to the United States with or without their children are in specific vulnerable positions, this time as mothers who are outside the protection of current migration policies. Obama's 2012 program, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) works to protect undocumented migrant minors from detainment and deportation, but it does not include their undocumented mothers. Since children with US citizenship also cannot extend their status to their undocumented parents, "[w]ithout a way to emerge from the shadows of the threat of

deportation, undocumented mothers' lives, and those that are interdependent with them, continue to be vulnerable to insecurity" (Sousa-Rodriguez 2016: 17). Along with the threat of separation and/or violence, studies on transnational migrant families show that "families with migrant mothers often face great social stigma and that children have different expectations of their migrant parents by gender" (Abrego & LaRossa 2009: 1071). Undocumented migrant mothers are often put in the extremely difficult position of having great social and financial responsibility for their family while being limited or unable to provide for and protect their children in the United States and in their home country.

Another of Hershberg and Lykes' interviews shows the case of Mireya, a single mother from Nicaragua, whose story demonstrates the often-impossible circumstances of being undocumented and under the threat of separation. Mireya came to the United States under a legal medical visa, as her twin sons had a medical condition that could not be treated in her home country. Because she could not find work in Nicaragua to support her family, she decided to stay in the United States after the medical visa had expired. The family managed to live undocumented in the country for a short period, but eventually Mireya was deported and her sons were left behind and put into the foster care system. The reason she was deported in the first place is because of her involvement with police after she reported domestic violence from her then-boyfriend (Sousa-Rodriguez 2016: 23). This example shows not only the stress and danger undocumented women must put themselves in to protect and care for their families, but also how they are outside the protection of the law, especially in cases of domestic and sexual violence. If Mireya had been documented, she may have had a different process of reporting her abuser, and she would not have been forced to leave her children because of the violence she experienced.

Mireya's case shows how desperate and dangerous circumstances can be the cause and/or effect of living undocumented in the United States, and women often bear much of the responsibility for their families under these conditions. Migrant women are put in a specific position in the re-homing process because of traditional and expected gender roles, which they are expected to fulfill whether they are left behind in their home country or migrate to the United States. However, women must often fulfill these roles not only because of cultural and social expectations but because the circumstances of undocumented life in the United States require it of migrant mothers, daughters, and wives.

Isabel Sousa-Rodriguez, who migrated to the United States as a child with her undocumented father, shares her personal story in her discussion of mothering and transnational family dynamics: "The constricted means imposed by our illegality placed on me social reproductive duties often associated with traditional understandings of mothering: cleaning, cooking, and raising my sister who has a mental disability." Sousa-Rodriguez explains how her life experiences as the daughter of an undocumented migrant and her research on the subject have "allowed [her] to reflect on how [her] father's legal status pushed [her] to fill the void of becoming the mother for our household" (2016: 18). This example shows how migrant women are often placed in positions of social responsibility within their family, even if they are not a parent or older family member—this is also common in those who remain in their home countries, as girls often become the caretakers of their younger siblings and older grandparents when their mother and/or father migrate to the United States.

What Sousa-Rodriguez experienced, and what she demonstrates in her research, is a process of social "mothering" that happens for Central American migrant women across the border. This could take the form of migrant women becoming community mothers for other

undocumented migrants, or, as in Sousa-Rodriguez's case, taking on the authority and social responsibility of the mother if there is no mother present or she is undocumented and therefore has limited social and financial mobility. Along with younger family and community members taking on the role of mothering, actual undocumented mothers develop certain "strategies for navigating experiences of exclusion" in the United States (Sousa-Rodriguez 2016: 21). This exclusion includes the limits to their mobility that result from legal violence, and their invisibility as undocumented or "illegal" migrants.

While traditional gender roles may further limit migrant women, these women also employ their own strengths and strategies for resilience post-arrival, including building networks and communities similar to those they may have been a part of along the journey north. As I discussed in the first chapter, these networks are crucial to the migrant journey, especially for women, and they often extend into life in the United States, helping migrant women find employment and access the resources and support they are not given by the government. Often, both documented and undocumented migrant women will live together in apartments or other cheap housing to reduce costs of living, especially if they are single or are in the United States without their spouse or other family members (Chavez 1990: 47). Not only does this strategy offer financial support, but it creates community between migrant women who are far from their homes and families, and offers the safety and comfort of similar experiences, shared language, and culture.

These networks, like the networks on the migrant trail, are specific to migrant women because of the gendered experiences and vulnerabilities women encounter along the journey, at the border, and in the United States. Additionally, their ability to form and access certain networks is dependent both on gender and family status:

“When women migrate as part of a family move, they are able to capitalize on their family networks, independent of the previous migrant’s gender. When women attempt to migrate on their own, either as independent migrants or to reunite with their husbands who have migrated before them, male members of their families often oppose their move. In these situations, women must rely on the help of ‘women’s networks’ composed of female family members and friends” (Curran and Rivero-Fuentes 2003: 291).

The guidance and support that migrant women need is specific to their experiences as women, as survivors of violence, as mothers, as daughters. Studies have shown that migrant women have more extensive networks than migrant men, and that a Central American’s woman ability to access women-oriented networks may influence her decision to migrate in the first place. It is also interesting to note that many migrant men also benefit from these women-oriented networks in the United States—over the years, migrant women have become involved in a greater variety of jobs than men, and so they can provide connections or assistance in the employment search to both their fellow migrant men and women (Curran and Rivero-Fuentes 2003: 303). The migrant woman’s role of community mothering is evident in this process. In general, because the process of migration, border-crossing and settlement in the United States is inherently gendered, it is clear how crucial these woman-specific networks are to the survival and success of migrant women from their home countries to a new life across the border.

Migrant networks are not only specific to gender and family, but also to the time period in which they are formed or used, and since every migrant group or community “faces a historically specific confluence of factors in the receiving context, the content and form of and potential for assistance from their informal ties will differ” (Menjívar 2000: 116). While they

may extend over years and across borders, migrant networks, like the political, social, and economic circumstances on either side of the border, are not stagnant—they respond to the ever-changing nature of migration processes, as well as the needs of those involved, whether that is determined by gender, age, family status, country of origin, or indigenous identity. For migrant women, these networks can provide opportunities for mobility both within the restrictions of undocumented life and traditional gender roles. Additionally, the support and solidarity they offer can inspire larger communities and movements of activism, sanctuary, and resistance.

Migrant Resistance and Sanctuary

The financial, social, and legal barriers to a normal everyday life greatly affect migrants and their families, regardless of mixed status or transnational family ties. The lack of opportunity afforded to undocumented migrants can in turn affect the lives and futures of their children, whether their children are undocumented or lawful residents, still live in the home country or have been reunited with their family in the United States. The threat of family separation and deportation and the legal liminality of undocumented status work to keep migrants in these disadvantaged social and economic positions. However, the migrant experience of adjustment and re-homing is not entirely devoid of hope or possibility. In the face of increased anti-migrant rhetoric and violence, there has been a rise in undocumented migrant and refugee ally work in the United States in recent years. American humanitarian and activist groups focus on protecting migrant rights within a legal and political system that simultaneously ignores them and marks them as a threat. These groups include the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and Amnesty International, but there are also many smaller American organizations that take grassroots and community-based approaches to this issue. Organizations such as these do great

work for undocumented Central American migrants, but there are also many important ways and tactics through which these migrants advocate for themselves and resist the structures that limit them, even under threat of violence and deportation.

The role of migrant women in migrant social and political movements is crucial to addressing the intersectional needs and vulnerabilities of Central American migrants. As I discussed in the first section, indigenous migrant communities encounter specific challenges in the United States, and within these groups, women have specific vulnerabilities and needs as migrants, indigenous Central Americans, and as women. Central American migrant women's participation in activism and resistance in the United States is just as important to the lives and well-being of migrants as their social and financial roles in the family. In this section I address large-scale movements and activism for Central American migrant rights, migrant women's advocacy work, and why the perspective and identity of migrant women is key to the process and success of resistance.

Trump's election in 2016, and his first executive orders surrounding border security in early 2017 may have caused public panic, but in many cases this fear was "channeled into mass mobilization in the form of protests, vigils, and marches, as well as more sustainable creative projects that sought to prevent deportations and reduce the social impacts of deportation on immigrant families and communities" (Kocher 2017: 166). The rise in sanctuaries was a result of this mobilization. The idea of sanctuary originally referred to cities, meaning that the city government would refuse to use public resources, including police, to aid any ICE or border patrol activity. The Sanctuary movement, which was created by religious organizations, has been around since the 1980s, after the rise in Central American migration to the United States due to civil war and political unrest in Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua (Chinchilla et al. 2009).

However, following Trump's election in 2016, the idea of the Sanctuary was extended to other institutions, and schools and colleges around the country began to declare themselves as sanctuaries, therefore extending protection to undocumented students by refusing to assist in any ICE investigations. Another tactic of migrant support and protection is the organization of rapid response to ICE raids and other activity, which includes publicly sharing and documenting these events over social media in order to warn undocumented migrants in advance and hold ICE officers accountable for violent and inhumane treatment during arrests and detainments (Kocher 2017).

A third strategy focuses on offering legal, financial, and social support to families who have been separated, especially if a parent has been deported and their children left behind. For example, a Latino migrant community in Columbus, Ohio created the Community Deportation Advocate position to provide these resources to community members both proactively and as a response to ICE raids (Kocher 2017). Strategies and positions like this not only offer necessary resources but also the safety and emotional support of a community that share similar experiences, fears, and hopes for the future. This tactic also demonstrates how migrant networks can operate in the United States in both formal and informal ways, offering guidance and opportunity for political agency as well as emotional, personal support for those struggling with the stress and anxiety of living undocumented.

Along with community and large organization-based legal and political support, grassroots activism and resistance plays a crucial part in advocating for migrant rights and empowering Central Americans. Just as the intersection of different identities is important to the creation of migrant communities and networks in the United States, grassroots migrant activism and resistance also often arise in response to the specific needs or struggles of migrant groups.

The Indigenous Front of Binational Organizations (FIOB) is a grassroots organization that focuses on protecting the rights of indigenous migrants, particularly indigenous women. As discussed earlier, indigenous migrants experience specific challenges in the United States, and therefore may require additional or alternative resources than the majority of Central American migrants.

FIOB, based in California, advocates for indigenous rights in the United States while uplifting female leadership in indigenous communities and movements. FIOB's activism includes advocacy and protection of indigenous migrant rights, as well as celebrating and uplifting the creative and traditional work of indigenous women, such as cooking and embroidery (Blackwell 142). They focus on highlighting and re-teaching language and cultural practices as a form of preservation and support in the difficult context of adjustment. Cultural celebration and preservation are powerful forms of resilience and resistance, and a necessary part of the re-homing process for both indigenous and non-indigenous Central Americans. The diverse identities and backgrounds of Central American migrants create and sustain the networks that facilitate mobility and success for migrants in the United States, and so it is important that they are uplifted.

FIOB's work is also important because indigenous women in the United States often experience "challenges to their organizing linked to the tension between forms of historical patriarchal exclusion—the policing of women's participation in the public sphere (in terms of mobility, sexuality, and propriety), for example" (Blackwell 2015: 139). The traditional gender roles of women and the family adapt to the circumstances of documentation and mobility in the United States, providing new opportunities and new restraints for migrant women socially and in the job market (Menjívar 1999). In the context of grassroots activism, migrant women's

participation can demonstrate a break from these traditional roles and expectations, but it is also often limited by these roles. The intention of FIOB and similar organizations is to encourage grassroots resistance for and by migrant women in order to ensure their specific needs and voices are heard.

While traditional gender roles may often limit migrant women, they can provide new economic and social opportunities across the border, and they can also be resources of agency and resilience within communities and resistance movements. The practice of mothering has an important part in migrant activism because it “has been relied on by different groups and social movements as a source of political legitimacy and agency” (Pallares 2015: 38). Motherhood was the founding principle of the migrant rights organization La Familia Latina Unida (LFLU), started by undocumented migrant mother Elvira Arellano in the early 2000s. After she was deported and separated from her son, she started this organization to resist family separation, emphasizing “her right to stay with her citizen child in the country where he was born, and his right to be mothered without having to leave the United States” (Pallares 2015: 39). Arellano’s activist work shows how the traditional role and expectations of motherhood inspired her resistance to United States migration and deportation policy, taking the form of “militant motherhood” (Carrillo 1998) or “activist mothering” (Naples 1998). This case demonstrates migrant women’s particular strengths and position in advocating for themselves and their communities by adapting their expected social roles in the context of undocumented life.

In general, women’s activist and resistance work, “when anchored in community betterment activities that do not capture a public spotlight, is not recognized as either ‘political’ or ‘leadership’” (Seguro and Facio 2008: 296), although this work is crucial for emotional support and empowerment within migrant communities in the United States. Central American

migrant women have been active in social and political resistance for decades — advocating for workers’ rights and labor conditions, supporting community members, pushing for legal and political visibility, preserving cultural traditions, and much more. Women’s roles in the re-homing process, both for the family and the community, are also critical parts of their activism and resistance. It was migrant women who used their networks and connections to build the faith-based Sanctuary movement in the 1980s, and since then, “[a]daptation to life in the United States often has been facilitated by women helping other women through the aegis of organizations within organized religion” (Seguro and Facio 2008: 297). Migrant women often work behind the scenes, but the work they have done and continue to do to create a new home for themselves, their families, and their communities is undeniable.

Conclusion

In the first two chapters I discussed the specific vulnerabilities of Central American migrant women, and the threats of physical, sexual, and gender-based violence and mental/emotional abuse they may encounter along the journey north and at the border. I also highlighted the strength and resiliency of these women, and the important tactics and ways in which they survive, process and find hope in the face of extreme hardship and trauma. It is necessary to understand both the vulnerability and strengths of migrant women in order to understand their experiences as humans, women, Central Americans, indigenous peoples, and survivors along the migrant trail, and to contextualize these experiences in current political and social circumstances on both sides of the border.

Identity and background are very important in shaping and assisting the re-homing process in the United States, as well as fueling the social and political activism of migrants and

migrant communities. Migrant women approach this process and resistance by both using traditional gender roles to their advantage and upturning them in the context of a new life, new social and economic circumstances, and the necessities of living undocumented. For example, the gendered expectations that often limit women's involvement outside of the domestic sphere can sometimes give migrant women an advantage in finding work in the United States, although the conditions and pay they experience are often worse than those of migrant men, and sometimes even put them in danger. The context of migrant life in the United States sometimes provides new opportunities for women in employment and the social sphere, but in general they experience inhumane treatment, sexist and racist oppression, and a lack of mobility and visibility as undocumented or documented migrant women. Again, while it is important to discuss migrant women's social and economic successes in the United States, it is also critical not to forget that the same threats to their safety and self are still present in life across the border.

Despite the danger and everyday stress of undocumented status, traditional gender roles can be used to empower migrant women and resist the social and political structures in the United States that systematically ignore and oppress them. The role of and expectations for motherhood can take on new meanings in the re-homing process when traditional family dynamics are affected by legal status, especially for mixed status and transnational migrant families. Teenage girls often take up the social role of "mothering" in households without a mother or if the mother is undocumented and therefore limited in her social abilities. Women, those with and those without children, become community mothers and help support the lives and adjustments of their fellow migrants. Motherhood can be a powerful form of activism in the face of deportation and family separation, and Central American mothers have built movements and campaigns off of the importance of family and the cruelty of separation. And, while

motherhood can be a resource of strength and motivation for migrant women, it can also be a burden, as financial responsibility, caretaking, and the various constrictions on undocumented life can make motherhood a very challenging job. There is no one experience of motherhood for a Central American woman, and it is critical to recognize the positive and negative aspects of this role in the context of resettlement.

Overall, it is evident that although migrant women may have many forces acting against them, they are able to use their inner strengths, communities, networks, and family ties to fuel both their everyday lives in the United States and any activism or resistance they may take on, whether small or large scale. Life is certainly difficult for Central American migrants in the United States, especially those who are undocumented, because they are socially, legally, and politically invisible and therefore unable to access quality healthcare, education, and employment, but are simultaneously considered a threat to the country. The ways in which they survive, thrive, and resist may occur in the form of large-scale activism or in the preservation of cultural traditions and language, but all are equally crucial to their ability to find hope and freedom in creating a new life, whatever that life may be. For Central American migrants, documented or undocumented, re-homing in a new, often hostile country, carrying past trauma and responsibility for family, and even simply existing and living in the United States is an everyday act of resistance.

Conclusion

The United States is a country built of and by immigrants. The food, culture, music, languages and people are the result of hundreds of years of migrants coming to the country to start a new life, reunite with family, and/or escape persecution or violence in their home country. Early settlement of the American Northeast was done by English Puritans seeking a place to freely practice their religion, and the following centuries brought thousands of Europeans to the United States in search of both economic opportunity and freedom from persecution. The United States has always been a receiver not only of immigrants but of people who have nowhere else to go—refugees of war and violence, survivors of famine and economic ruin, and those who want a better life for their family. In the last century, particularly the last few decades, attitudes towards migrants and refugees in the United States have undergone great change, and the approach to migration and the United States border today is motivated more by fear and security concerns than the protection of human rights. In this case, the American public and government's concerns are for the safety and protection of the American border, and not the lives and safety of the vulnerable migrant populations.

This is not to say that migration has always been an easy and smooth process, or that migrants were never hated or feared before the 20th century. As I have made clear in this thesis, resistance to migration and the fear produced by xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment are not new phenomena, and it is crucial to understand how they have developed and changed over time. In order to understand current American migration policy and the American public's perception of migrants and refugees, we have to examine the history and motivations behind Central American migration as well as the political and social events that stimulated the negative attitudes towards and portrayals of migrants today. Keeping the United States' history as a nation of immigrants and a host country in mind, it is clear that the changes in migration policy and the

public perception of migrants today are linked to increased fear of the “other” and the militarization and securitization of the United States border, especially the US-Mexico border.

In this thesis I explored the role of fear in the migration and refugee crisis in the United States today, and the ways in which it fuels and is fueled by increased securitization at the border. I discussed the place of this fear in American politics since the initial rise in migration numbers in the 1980s and the panic following 9/11, and how it has shaped the policy-making decisions of Donald Trump and Barack Obama’s administrations. I also discussed the significant effect this fear has on the American public and American media, and how it has motivated racial violence and anti-immigrant sentiment in the country, especially under Trump’s presidency. I argue that this fear plays a major role in making the migration and border situation the crisis that it is today by influencing American public perception of migrants, seriously harming the border crossing and asylum processes, and systematically ignoring the humanity of the most vulnerable populations. I examined fear as it exists in the United States, and the ways in which it affects every step of the migrant journey, from their home country to resettlement in the United States.

In particular, I focused on how it shapes the safety, success, and survival of Central American migrant and refugee women along the journey, and how these women remain resilient in the face of intense trauma and threats to their lives and well-beings. Women are crucial to the discussion on the migration and refugee crisis in Central America, Mexico, and the United States today because they suffer the most in the invisible, liminal space of transit and the border. Central American women are very often targets and victims of the fear-motivated violence towards migrants in the United States, experiencing the compounded effects of xenophobia, racism, misogyny, and extreme nationalism at the US-Mexico border and in their life and resettlement in the United States. Because of this, Central American women are considered the

most vulnerable of an already vulnerable population, and they must face extreme obstacles and threats to their lives and mental well-beings in order to leave their home countries, make the journey north, and cross the border. Central American women travel alone, in groups with other migrant women, or with their families, and each travel decision carries its own dangers. Many women travel with their children, which makes them even more vulnerable. However, throughout the trials and tragedy of the migrant journey, the pain and danger Central American migrant women go through to ensure a better life for themselves and their children shows a critical aspect of what it means to be a migrant and a refugee, and what it means to be human.

The experiences of Central American migrant women are dependent on the context of their lives in their home country, their socio-economic backgrounds, indigenous identities, language ability, family status, and countless other factors. The obstacles and threats they encounter at the border and in the rehoming process in the United States are also dependent on these things, along with the political, social, and legal climate they enter into after crossing the border. This is true of any migrant or refugee in any country, because all migrant journeys are shaped by the unique circumstances both of their home and host country and the history, motivations, and resilience of the individual. It is crucial to keep this in mind in order to avoid generalizing a single migrant experience, because doing so risks making millions of people invisible both to public empathy and legal and political protection. However, by examining the stories of Central American migrant women, we can learn a great deal about the migrant and refugee experience in general—the factors that push people to migrate, how the intersections of identity affect the migrant journey, the threats to migrant lives and well-being that exist in migration crises across the globe, and what can be improved in international law to better protect the human rights of migrants and refugees everywhere.

Today, migration and refugee crises exist across the globe, and due to climate change, environmental destruction, and social and political conflict, more and more people are being forced to leave their home countries not just to pursue a better life but to escape desperate and dangerous circumstances. The UNHCR reported 70.8 million forcibly displaced people worldwide by the end of 2018, which includes 25.9 million refugees—a number that has doubled since 2012 (UNHCR). The reasons behind these refugee crises are various—refugees are fleeing political turmoil and conflict in Sudan, genocide in Myanmar, economic crisis in Venezuela, and in many places, corrupt and violent regimes. The rise of climate change is contributing to existing crises as well as creating new ones, pushing people across borders due to environmental destruction, natural disaster, drought, and floods. The climate refugee crises already present warn us of the danger that climate change poses, particularly to forced migration. Given the rate of climate change and both natural and man-made environmental disaster in recent years, there is no telling how many more climate refugees there will be in the next several decades.

There is a great diversity of causes and effects within the global refugee crisis, and throughout history there have been various attempted solutions with different levels of success, including return of refugees to their home country, integration into host country society, and settlement in refugee camps. While these efforts are necessary, the World Refugee Council claims that the “crisis is a political crisis that will respond to sound political leadership and enhanced accountability—at the local, regional and global levels” (Centre for International Governance Innovation Report 2018: 2), and many current solutions fail to hold accountable the perpetrators of state violence and/or disaster who are responsible for the creation of thousands of refugees. Additionally, solutions theorized or applied to the global refugee crisis often do not include the thousands of people who are trapped in violent situations and conflict zones, and are

unable to leave their home countries to even attempt to seek asylum somewhere else (Centre for International Governance Innovation Report 2018: 2). For example, almost two million Palestinians are trapped in the Gaza strip, an area which is now considered uninhabitable due to environmental and conflict reasons. They are living in unimaginable conditions of violence and poverty, under constant threat from bombings and lack of resources and they are unable to leave to seek refuge anywhere else. The refugee crisis is often thought to only span international borders and create problems in host countries, but it is critical to acknowledge there are many potential refugees and refugee populations that are completely isolated from any international support or ability to advocate for their own human rights.

Given the significance and numbers of the global refugee crisis, many countries are now limited by both space and resources in finding solutions for the refugee populations within their borders. A common strategy to address this issue, which was used in post-Holocaust Europe, is repatriation, defined as “the movement of refugees back to the state in which they lived, typically as citizens, before their exile” (Bradley 2014: 104). Of course, repatriation would not be an option for those whose home countries were in a state of active war or conflict and in which their lives would be in immediate danger. The point of repatriation is to relieve an underfunded and resource-lacking host country and to return refugees to their ancestral lands and hopefully their former way of life, but Bradley also sees it as “a possible opportunity to restructure political relationships between states and citizens, with a view to ensuring a more equitable future” (2014: 105). With the goal of creating lasting political change in the refugee’s home country, repatriation is ideal, but it may not always be plausible to rebuild the social structures and state stability necessary to do so. Again, the chance of this kind of repatriation being a success is

heavily dependent on the context of the country, region, and the motivations of its refugees, but it could be a useful solution or tool in solving specific issues of the refugee crisis.

Refugee crises are an international humanitarian issue, and throughout history have resulted in the loss of millions of human lives and put many more in danger. Each refugee and migration crisis is unique in its own way, and the level of the crisis is dependent on various factors—the situation in the host country, the militarization of borders, the type of danger that refugees are fleeing, and the ethnicity and race of the refugee population, to name a few. Because of this, it is difficult, if not impossible, to compare crises and border situations. However, by examining the specificities of one context, as I did in this thesis, I argue that we can better understand the general trends and factors that shape and evolve these crises over time, and in doing so both improve current asylum and migration processes and be better prepared for future crises.

Refugee and migration crises may differ greatly depending on a variety of factors, but in the end, all of these crises are centered around one thing—human beings. Asylum is considered a universal human right, as outlined in the UDHR, but it is clear that this right is not always afforded to migrants and refugees, especially in situations with high tension, fear, and concerns about border security, like the United States. At the US-Mexico border and with the migrant situation in the United States in general, the terminology of asylum and the classification of migrants are critical to the function and success of the process and the safety of migrants at and across the border. The political climate and intensity of the border situation today makes the legal proceedings of asylum and migration very difficult both for lawyers and their clients. Seeking asylum is a complicated and rarely successful process in the United States due to the

complex qualifications and proof that are required for someone to be granted asylum, as I discussed in a previous chapter.

Without legal advocacy at the border and within the United States, undocumented migrants and refugees are at a greater risk of deportation before they are even given the chance to present their case. Because of this, legal representation of asylum seekers must use “strategic litigation” to ensure safety and to increase the chances of an asylum grant, which may include promoting social change within migrant communities and at border facilities and working specifically with migrant women, children, and others who may be unable to advocate for themselves. This strategy “appears to be one of the most efficacious routes to the decriminalization of migration” as it relies on “the assertion of universal human rights to meet the protection needs of migrants” (Atak and Simeon 2018: 382). Using the terminology of the UDHR and universal human rights can be key for Central Americans entering the United States to be recognized as refugees and asylum seekers in a political, social, and legal climate where they are often classified solely as economic migrants. The efforts of migrant advocates and lawyers in border detention centers and in legal representation of documented and undocumented Central Americans in the United States are crucial to the safety of many individual migrants as well as to improving legal processes and national understanding of asylum. I want to recognize that although the situation at the border, in detention centers and in the dangers of illegal crossing, is complicated, inhumane, and often seems hopeless, there are many advocates and lawyers working tirelessly and pro-bono to help migrants and enact social and legal change.

The situation at the US-Mexico border today is clearly in need of a holistic and urgent solution. Migrant flows into the United States are continuing to rise, and with the growing numbers comes a growing fear and concern for the safety and security of the American border.

As I discussed in the last chapter, there is a great amount of work being done by Central American and American activists to improve the conditions at border detention centers, the lives and resettlement processes of migrants in the United States, and the safety of migrants throughout the border-crossing and asylum process. Central American migrant women living in the United States continue to do incredible activist work to improve living conditions and access to economic, educational, and social opportunities in their communities and to advocate for their own human rights as documented and undocumented migrants. These efforts are critical to addressing social issues and disadvantages for migrants, as well as working to change national perceptions and acceptance of refugees and migrants. This grassroots activism is just as important to creating a lasting solution to the US-Mexico border crisis as changes on the legal and political fronts.

I have discussed at length the dangers that Central American migrants face along the journey and at the border, as well as the difficulty of the convoluted and extended asylum process, but given the continuous rise in migration, what does the future of Central American migrants actually look like? Along with legal and activist work, the United States government has kept a consistent strategy of repatriation—between 2012 and 2018, the United States and Mexican governments together repatriated 1.4 million Central American migrants (Soto et. al 2019: 1). As I discussed in the context of the global refugee crisis, repatriation can be a successful solution and may be able to provide the necessary resources for refugees to rebuild their lives in their home country. However, in the case of Central America, the resources needed to repatriate are often limited and come with several challenges, including “[d]ifficulty obtaining the official ID that allows returning migrants to access these services, limited awareness and geographic distribution of services, difficulty matching returning migrants’ skills with labor-

market needs, and barriers to reintegration posed by social stigmatization and employment discrimination” (Soto et. al 2019: 2). Overall, repatriation is a possibility, but it comes with its own obstacles and may not be an option for many migrants.

For Central American women, the solutions available carry their own challenges and dangers that are linked to the issues of gender-based violence and discrimination they experience in their home countries. Along with the challenges of repatriation listed above, Central American women may be returning to unstable or dangerous situations in their home, social, and professional lives, and could be at risk of the same violence—domestic, gender-based, state—that they were attempting to escape. When considering repatriation as a solution for Central Americans, or any refugee population, it is necessary to take into account that the specific issues and threats that push women to migrate are often imbedded in the social, political, and/or legal structure of their home country, and so returning is not an option. If the situation in their home country is stable and safe, returning to one’s country, culture, and family could be a positive option for some Central American migrants. However, given the fact that most Central American countries are still experiencing high levels of outward migration, this may not be the reality for many migrants in the near future, particularly women.

The reality of the US-Mexico border situation, and the challenges of any possible solution, make it difficult to predict the future of Central American migrants and refugees. The issues and dangers of the entire migration process that I have discussed in this thesis require multiple solutions on several political, legal, and social levels, from the moment a migrant leaves their home country to their resettlement in the United States. These solutions should focus on making the asylum process easier and more fair for all migrants and refugees, regardless of documentation status, and on decriminalizing border-crossing, providing livable and humane

conditions at border detention centers, and ending sexual and physical violence and mental abuse of migrants by American border officials and law enforcement. They must address issues of racial violence, xenophobia, and lack of access and opportunity for Central Americans in the United States, both in the American public and politics. They should also include efforts to make the migrant journey north safer for all migrants, especially women, children, and the most vulnerable. Realistically, there may not be one solution to the migration crisis that can put an end to all of the issues and dangers involved. Humans will continue to migrate and search for a better life, regardless of political and economic stability. However, to create lasting change in a system that ignores, abuses, and denies the human rights of millions of people in the United States and worldwide, we must address the root issues of violence across societies, governments, and borders.

My reason for centering the voices and experiences of Central American women in the context of both the US-Mexico border and the global refugee crisis is that I believe there is significant potential for creating holistic change in understanding the humanity of the migrant experience. When this humanity is ignored or made invisible, it is difficult and sometimes impossible for the human rights of migrants and refugees to be recognized and fulfilled. It is critical that we understand the specific threats and disadvantages that migrants face every day. However, because a migrant is much more than the pain and trauma they may carry, it is also necessary to acknowledge the resilience and resistance efforts of migrants, and the agency they have in advocating and fighting for themselves, their families, and their communities. By focusing on migrant women and their specific vulnerabilities and strengths in this context, we can better understand both the processes of migration and the larger factors that continue to motivate migration, including gender-based violence and socially and politically imbedded

misogyny. Additionally, understanding the specific needs of migrant women will help us to provide a platform for migrant women to share their stories, support community growth and cultural preservation, and advocate for migrant rights, opportunities, health, access to resources, and ability to thrive. If we attempt to understand and humanize migration, a process that has been criminalized and damaged by fear, we can work to bring justice, safety, and freedom to migrants and refugees in the United States and across the globe.

Looking forward to future studies, there are several other topics and specific areas that would be beneficial to understanding the United States migration crisis and developing better solutions. It would be useful to focus on one Central American country and to explore in more detail the historical and political contexts that motivate outward migration, as well as the intersections of gender-based violence and socio-political structures in that country. I recognize that each Central American country I spoke of in this thesis—Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala—each have their own histories, indigenous cultures, and a variety of other factors that would affect their migration patterns differently. I was not able to address these individually or in depth in this thesis, but the diversity of experience and background from each of the countries would certainly benefit a larger, holistic analysis of Central American migration trends. Additionally, if I were to focus on the larger scale of the global refugee crisis, it would be interesting to compare Central American migration into the United States with another refugee or migrant population in another country or region, such as Syrian refugees entering Europe. Because I discussed at length the influence of public perception and media portrayal of migrants and refugees in the United States, comparing national and public attitudes towards migration and refugee crises between the United States and another context could be beneficial to understanding the gravity of public opinion in these situations. Overall, there are several

directions of further study I would like to pursue to supplement this thesis, both on a micro and macro level. The reality of the global refugee crisis must be discussed and understood on many levels in order to create long-lasting solutions and relief for both refugees and host countries.

Although the migration crisis, the tense climate at the US-Mexico border, and the everyday threat to migrant lives and well-being in the United States are serious and require immediate change, it is critical not to lose hope. The journey that Central American migrant women make every day—traveling hundreds of miles through treacherous terrain on foot or dangerous transportation, navigating the liminal space of the migrant corridor, and arguing their case for safety at the border—shows the strength and resilience required of these women, and the hope of a better life and future that motivates many of them. In a world where hope is often all a migrant has, it is necessary for those of us who are in positions to help to hold onto this hope as well, and to uplift their voices in any way we can. By listening to the stories of Central American migrant women, attempting to understand their experiences, and recognizing their humanity in the legal, social, and political spheres, we may be better equipped to enact real change in the United States, and do our part to ensure a better future for migrants globally.

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