

Introduction

Why do Central American Trans women flee?

The issues affecting sexual and gender minorities are interlinked with larger societal historical conflicts that since last century have convulsed Central America. Human rights abuses against gender minorities occur within contexts that have suffered from conflicts and spread poverty that deeply polarized their societies and created the perception that any challenge to the social order should be seen as a political threat. Trans individuals challenge deeply felt assumptions by many others about the proper gender roles of men and women and, in doing so they have always been considered a threat to the stability of their societies.

Furthermore, in the region the rule of law is still weak, and minorities that are subject to persecution have little or no recourse to the state for protection, particularly when state actors share the same or greater prejudices as the society at large.

As a consequence, trans women face severe discrimination; marginalization and abuses based on their gender identity, and are exposed to constant physical and sexual violence. Moreover, they are inadequately treated or denied access to health and psychological care and other social services and, in some instances, arbitrarily detained.

Despite a lack of precised data, scarce reports show that trans women are part of the new wave of international displacement affecting Central America, increasingly fleeing to other countries.

Justification

Conducting this research into the lives of trans women is particularly important given the social and political contexts in which they are immersed, and the limited systematic research on transgender migration. Additionally, it will potentially contribute to the academic research on the topic for the following reasons:

- Limited research has been done to understand why Central American trans women migrate, and the factors leading to their final decision.
- Trans and migration studies have been developed mainly in the global North, with little or no attention to the realities of trans forced migrants escaping gender discrimination and norms.
- Most research of trans forced migration has focused on the 'during' and 'post' stages of displacement, but hardly any on the decision and pre-migration phase.

Research Questions

The key research question:

Why Central American Trans women flee?



Sub questions :

1. What factors contribute to their decision to flee?
2. How these factors influence their decision?
3. To which extent these factors are determined or aggravated by a non-hegemonic gender identity and expression?



Source: Nilos transgenio / www.atandlucia.org

"Every refugee has her dreams. Every refugee will never forget her homeland". (Karla)

"Did you consider not to flee? ... Yes, because I hoped that the context would change". (Karla)

"The fear that they will be waiting for me and want to kill me. Not so much the fear for me, but for my family." (Gab's)

"My mom told me: you know, I feel like they're going to kill you ... I feel the same... Mum, I leave the country or I am dead." (Melissa)

"Actually, it was very fast..." (Muñeca)

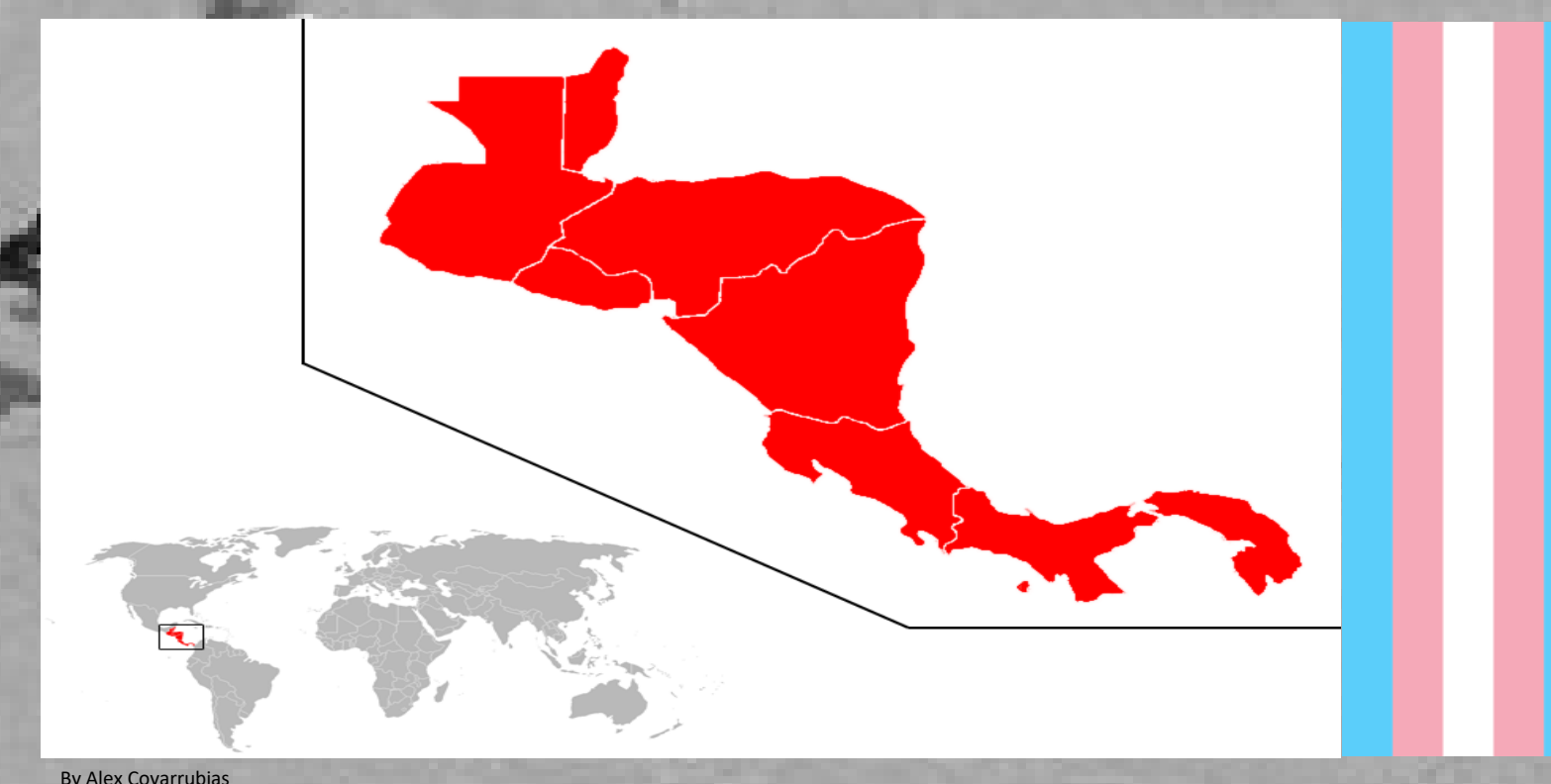
"I do not relate to a colourful flag. I feel identified with a migrant struggle, with the struggle of a refugee and a human rights defender". (Shirley)

Conceptual Framework

The concept of 'survival migration' highlights the situation of people fleeing basic rights deprivations rather than just persecution.

The concept refers to 'people who are outside their country of origin because of an existential threat for which they have no access to a domestic remedy or resolution' (Betts, 2013). Whether refugees or migrants who appear to be moving in a more voluntary way, trans women fleeing Central America fall within Betts's category. But what triggers the decision to flee? To what extent are they agents of their decision to flee? Why after years, sometimes a life of internal displacement they decide to cross an international border?

The new conceptual framework described by Van Hear, Bakewell and Long (2018) where the role of a particular factor may change over time affecting the person differently at a particular time and therefore rather than fixed, of a variable nature along the migration decision-making process, an explanation to the experiences of the participants.



By Alex Coverrias

Methods

Qualitative life histories collected through semi-structured interviews of 1-5 hours duration, preceded by social time spent together which helped us to better know each other, understand their human agency and the progression in their lives that culminated in particular decisions related to their flight. Earning the trust of participants was central to the research approach.

Purposive sampling along the following criteria: self-identified trans women of Central American origin, 18 years of age or older, having fled their country of origin.

Recruitment of participants through convenience sampling. Life stories collected in October-November 2018. At this time, all participants were refugees or asylum seekers in their place of residence.

Key findings

- The cross-border flight of these Trans women is an additional exercise of agency after a lifetime of preventive and reactive displacements.
- The reasons and objectives behind their decision to flee are multiple and interconnected. The findings suggest that although seeking a safe place in which it would be possible to build a better life is the priority, their life experiences and the decisions they make are more complex than just only responding to undesirable factors in their home country.
- The processes of displacement due to violence do not follow a clear danger-security line. In the case of Trans refugees, the violence that provoked the flight does not finish with this one, but continues in situations of exclusion and in environments often hostiles to them.
- This displacement is not a consequence of freedom. In other words, displacement is not synonym of freedom but a limited strategy to survive.
- It can be defined and "Survival migration" because despite the multi-causality of the displacement and the co-existence of the various reasons, often there are violent events that trigger the migratory movement. Insecurity and vulnerabilities are transformed when moving, but do not disappear.
- Being a target for hate crime at the hands of individuals trapped in a circle of violence and the very institutions charged with protecting against such violence means that these crimes occur with impunity and quite often this violence end up in some form of displacement.
- These displacements do not have a name, an assigned label and, therefore, are unknown and irrelevant in terms of rights linked to the modality of displacement.
- The importance of listening to their stories because in them, successive decisions to move internally first appear. For these women, forced movement is not new, the novelty is crossing a international border.

Conclusion

This study supports the need to listen and accompany the unique lives of these women to understand the multiple facets of displacement, and the changing circumstances in their reactive or preventive movements which will determine the nature of their decision to flee across a border.

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Contact

Cristina de Nicolás Izquierdo: cdni1@student.london.ac.uk