

The Experiences of Migrant Women and Human Smuggling¹

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Introduction

The news is filled with accounts of women and children from Central America arriving at the U.S. border and seeking asylum. While we are learning a great deal about their struggles once they arrive at the southern border, far less is known about their journey from Central America to the United States. Government statistics show that many women are migrating with their children, and the number of families apprehended at the border has increased in recent years. Many of these women rely on human smugglers to transport them and their children across Mexico to the U.S. border. Our research revealed the reality of human smuggling from the perspective of migrant women from Central America. Their testimony and experiences can teach us about the trauma they face during migration and how it continues to impact them when they arrive in the United States.

The United States and Mexican governments' efforts to deter unauthorized immigration across the southern border have made the journey even more perilous. Migrants now cross in extremely hostile terrain to avoid arrest by the Border Patrol. They contend with high heat, the risk of traumatic injury, encounters with wild animals, violent gangs, corrupt police, and high rates of sexual assault, robbery, and violence. As a result, more migrants are turning to human smugglers, known as *coyotes*, to assist them in the process of migrating.

Human smuggling functions as an underground, illegal endeavor. However, in Mexico and Central America, the smuggling business is well known, and smugglers typically find clients through word of mouth and even newspaper advertisements. Traveling north from El Salvador, Guatemala, or Honduras typically requires a fee ranging from \$6,000 to \$17,000. Prospective migrants borrow these funds at high interest rates through underground lenders, and there is often a threat of lost family property or violence as motivation for the migrant to repay. In exchange, smugglers coordinate the journey, arrange financing, and lead migrants along various legs of the trip. Latinas who hire smugglers may be transported by freight train, tractor trailer, or meat truck, and are lodged in "safe houses." The threat of death or abandonment during migration forces women to remain with smugglers despite the dangers the smugglers themselves pose. Women endure these conditions because the prospect of work in the United States offers an image of hope, especially when compared to the ongoing violence and abject poverty in Mexico and Central America.

We interviewed Latina immigrants from Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala and Bolivia who had successfully made their way to the United States. We talked to them about their

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experiences during their journeys, and the interviews produced consistent narratives of interpersonal violence. These women described what it was like to be human cargo, and how they lost their agency in the hands of smugglers. Yet despite the danger, violence, and repeated arrests and deportations, none of the women considered returning home, and all inevitably crossed the border. They explained that they had little choice given that they owed money to lenders (who were often affiliated with criminal syndicates) and because of their belief that the United States offered a better future for them and their families.

Preparing for the journey

Aware of the hardship and possibility of violence they'd encounter, the women we spoke to did their best to prepare for the worst prior to their journeys. Anticipating a lack of nutrition, they took vitamins and, knowing rape was a possibility, they received a contraceptive injection prior to leaving. One woman said she kept money in her hair, which she wore piled high atop her head. Another slipped several pieces of family heirloom jewelry in her pockets. *Luciana* mailed vital family documents to her husband in the United States, and he sent her a first-aid kit in case she or her children were injured while walking through the desert.

The journey

Traveling from Central America through Mexico to the United States involved walking or running for days while suffering thirst and hunger, running to grab hold of a moving freight train, crossing a river, and spending nights hiding. At times, women described having nothing to eat or drink for days. One woman found herself separated from her group and became terrified. "Imagine, walking for seven hours by myself...I was always running because I was hoping they would be waiting for me ahead. I was all scratched, all full of thorns and my face was scratched and full of blood. My shoes had become unfastened but there I went."

Violence, or the threat of violence, continued throughout the journey north. The women we interviewed described incidents including unwanted invitations to consensual sex, physical assault, robbery at knifepoint, being held in virtual captivity in safe houses guarded by men and dogs, and threats of abandonment in dangerous places. "Safe houses" are hiding places run by smugglers where immigrants could be lodged as they waited for coyotes to lead them on the two-to three- day walk to the U.S. border. In some cases, safe houses were sites of extortion, with threats of abandonment if the women refused to call families to ask for ransom money. One woman described how she suffered rape in Mexico after being abandoned near the Guatemalan border. *Teresita*, originally from El Salvador, she was kidnapped in Mexico with her four children, after a group of men tricked her into thinking she was being led to a safe house to wait for someone to lead them across the border. Instead, the men locked the family in a house with bars on all windows and a steel door that could only be opened from outside. A man handed her a cell phone and told her to call her husband and ask for \$60,000; failure to produce the ransom would result in the family's death. They waited there for eight months as her husband struggled to obtain the money. "The only thing I would do there was cry, cry, cry. I even lost my hair, all of this until now it's grown back. I arrived here bald."

One woman stated that in a safe house in Mexico, "a woman would get an offer that if they slept with them, they would not hit her ...They will take you to a room. And one time there was a woman that came crying that she did not want to sleep with them but they still forced her. Because they will close you in a room and they will abuse you and if you used force against

them, they always had dogs.” Another woman said, “We were scared of the *coyotes*, because we heard that they robbed on the border, if they didn’t find anything on you they would hit you. That was our fear, that they would hit our children or that they would rape my 11-year-old daughter, or I don’t know. It was something we had in mind,” one Mexican woman said.

Encounters with law enforcement

Despite the violence, the migrants felt that contacting the police for assistance was not an option because of their lack of legal status. *Salvadora* described an encounter with law enforcement near the U.S.-Mexico border: “The Mexican soldiers caught us and took all of the money we had, more or less \$300. They were uniformed and they told us to give them everything we had and after we gave them the money, they left.” Though she and her group had avoided use of a *coyote* to enter Mexico, they ultimately relied on a gang to cross from Mexico to the United States. A man she had been told about in Honduras connected her to Los Zetas, a notoriously dangerous drug trafficking gang in Mexico. After dark, two gang members helped the group to cross Las Pietras River into Arizona, using ropes to pull their raft ashore. Her experiences illustrate the effects of illegality: Police robbed her; gang members brought her ashore in the United States Her own status as “illegal” forced her to work with gangs and to avoid police.

Alejandra was abandoned by her smugglers near the Mexican border, and shortly thereafter, Mexican police arrested her and her group and took them to a police station where they were questioned by police. One officer asked her what she planned to do, and asked why she was in Mexico. “I told them I wanted to work. I was on my way to the United States for a better life,” she said. At that point, a police officer smiled and made an offer: “He offered to let me work in his house. He said, ‘I can give you work in my house.’ He said he would pay me well, that I could earn the same working for him as I could there (in the United States) I said I was going to the United States. He then gave me a smile and said he would let me pass into the United States. They then took my fingerprints...”

A U.S.-based smuggler picked up *Abril* and her 11-year-old son together with several other migrants. The man sped along an Arizona highway, reaching speeds of close to 100 mph. They were stopped by a police officer who called the Border Patrol. Before the patrol arrived, the smuggler escaped and fled on foot. “The people from Immigration looked us over from head to toe and took the little things we had, and they opened our arms and legs. Then they took us to Immigration (police station).” While in custody, she and others were placed in a large room to await deportation, joining other immigrants who had been apprehended. She watched another woman beg for a sanitary napkin only to have the request ignored. “We were in there from about 6 in the morning to 4:00 that afternoon. They wouldn’t give us any food or water either.” They were each given water and a chocolate cookie as they boarded a bus taking them back across the border. The bus stopped at a border town late at night in an area that offered no shelter or assistance to migrants who were presumably expected to find ways to return home.

Crossing the border

The process of crossing the border into the United States, as described by the women, illustrates how migrants are shipped like – and in one case with – commodities to finally reach the United States. After being forced to run to keep up with coyotes as they tried to cross the desert as quickly as possible, *Marianna* and others were herded into a ‘safe house’ that she

believed was near Tijuana. By then, the desert sun had blackened her skin and caused her lips to crack. Others in the journey had lost shoes and jackets from falls and theft during the trek. *Marianna* crossed the border safely after coyotes seated her in a truck filled with frozen fish that discharged its human cargo in Los Angeles. This manner of crossing is worthy of note not just because of its elements of degradation and physical harm to the migrants in question.

According to Marianna:

They put me on a tractor-trailer that did not have air. I remember they had us there in one of those, like 375 people and you suffocate in the tractor-trailer. It is a truck that does not have door. It is sealed and it only has one small window on the bottom that gives air....Two women almost suffocated because it is a lot of people and the heat makes you suffocate. Before getting on the trailer, they give you a water bottle and an apple... Some of us are sitting and they open our legs and they put us in line with open legs and there are three or four in one space...They do not have us eat one day before getting on the tractor trailer so we will not have to urinate or use the bathroom.

Dehumanization and the consequences of illegality

Immigrant survival strategies now include acquiring the means to travel thousands of miles while avoiding detection and apprehension. It is worth noting how their lack of legal immigration status in the United States, Mexico, and other countries they passed through affected the women's journeys. Because they were traveling illicitly, using illegal *coyotes*, and lacked legal immigration status, the women were even more vulnerable to abuse and violence. Coyotes subjected them to terrible conditions and violence, knowing that the women were desperate to get to the United States and dependent on the smugglers to do so. They also understood that the women would not seek assistance from law enforcement because they feared detection and deportation. When they encountered the police, the women were subject to additional harassment or worse, in addition to deportation. Due to their lack of legal status, migrants can easily be relegated to a space dominated by dangerous people.

Moreover, women's descriptions of their journeys pointed to the dehumanization goes along with being human cargo. One woman described how she and eight other migrants were herded through a swamp, as they held hands to avoid losing one another. "We were animals. Snakes," she said. Another said she was passed with other migrants from *coyote* to *coyote* to complete the journey. She described this as a transaction in which *coyotes* paid one another for the rights to move the group. "We were there (near the border) like eight days. He (the *coyote*) was looking for someone to cross us...And that person paid the first coyote \$200 for each of us. On that trip we were seven, counting my son. The Honduran *coyote* didn't know the way (through the desert) and looked for another coyote to buy us. After buying us... he took us to another person to sell us again. This new man paid the second coyote..." Notably, throughout the interview, she used the verb, *comprar* (to buy) when discussing how *coyotes* negotiated fees for their human cargo. It is rare that people are referred to as a product being bought and sold, but these migrant women perceived themselves as having been bought and sold, presumably for a profit. But they endured it in order to reach the United States. in hopes of a better life.

Women were also subjected to the timeworn practice of evaluating them based on their physical attributes. *Irisima* recalled how she was assaulted and humiliated.

They took my clothes and made me walk naked for a long stretch. They later gave me my clothes to put on and they made fun of me saying rude things. The worst is that they raped me in front of the other people but no one dared to defend me because they were scared they would be left in the desert or that they would be killed or raped as well.

Unlike *Irisma*, who was older and was forced to run naked for their amusement, the smugglers spared younger, more attractive women, who were perceived to be more valuable.

Implications for social work and advocacy

We sought to illuminate the violence embedded in the migration journey through Mexico to the United States. As illustrated here, the price of human smuggling, beyond the fees paid to coyotes, includes becoming potentially subject to adverse experiences including robbery, sexual assault, extortion, and kidnapping. The women we met showed extraordinary resilience; they reached their destinations despite violent crime and/or detention by law enforcement.

Nonetheless, their circumstances forced them to contend with extraordinary moments of peril, whether crossing the border in a dangerously hot tractor trailer or suffering sexual assault and degradation by human smugglers. The stories told by the women reveal that they were an underground, unprotected population even before becoming unauthorized immigrants in the United States. Without legal status, they could not call upon law enforcement to protect them. Rather law enforcement was feared and avoided.

Our hope as social workers is to raise awareness and illuminate the need for services to Latinas and other immigrants who might have suffered violence in the process of human smuggling. At its core, social work empowers vulnerable and oppressed populations and can support women who have survived the immigration journey, and those who will do so in the future. Social workers can support efforts to create more avenues for legal immigration so that migrants can come to the United States without resorting to hiring human smugglers. Social workers can also focus on obtaining more resources to assist survivors of human trafficking. Currently, agencies that wish to assist undocumented Latinas are challenged by this population's ineligibility for Medicaid and other federal programs. A recent study of agencies providing housing, legal aid, and counseling to undocumented immigrants found that social workers are frustrated with the barriers to providing services, citing lack of resources and referral sources. Finally, case management support could be helpful to undocumented Latinas. Social workers could provide outreach to undocumented immigrants who might not otherwise be aware of programs or treatment options.