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Cruzando Fronteras: The Immigration Experiences of Central American Women

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

CRUZANDO FRONTERAS:
THE IMMIGRATION EXPERIENCES OF CENTRAL AMERICAN WOMEN

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN SOCIAL WORK

BY

CECELIA MARIE QUINN

CHICAGO, IL

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This project would not have been possible without the voices of the *compañeras* who shared their immigration stories for this project. Their bravery and resilience in the face of adversity will forever be an inspiration. Their stories offer hope for all of the women who come after them, looking up to the same moon for light in the darkness. This dissertation is also dedicated to the countless Central American women who did not survive their journeys north. May we always remember them and strive to keep future immigrants safe throughout their journeys.

I would also like to thank my committee members, dedicated female scholars, who guided me throughout the process. My chair, Dr. Maria Vidal de Haymes, ignited my passion for immigration issues and reform and encouraged me to pursue a PhD. Dr. Prudence Moylan, whose feminist vision helped shape my research question, pushed me to embody the feminist spirit throughout the project. Dr. Susan Grossman, who fought for the women's voices to come out clearly, provided words of encouragement that saw me through the finish line.

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To my mother

Hay muchas cosas que sólo pueden ser vistas a través de ojos que han llorado.
(There are many things that can only be seen through eyes that have cried.)

—Oscar Romero

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ABSTRACT

The present study explores the immigration experiences of Central American women. As violence and poverty mounts in the Northern Triangle; Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, immigrants continue to migrate north. Immigrant women risk their lives seeking safety, opportunity, and reunions with loved ones. Central American women's immigration journeys are unique and they face the added danger of gender-based violence. This exploratory, qualitative study guided by feminist standpoint theory allowed the women to tell their stories in their own language, as they saw fit. Twelve Central American Latinas shared their immigration experiences, responding to semi-structured interviews. Through the use of interpretive phenomenological analysis and a strengths-based perspective their immigration stories emerged. Central American Latina's expertise in their lived experiences offer vital information for treatment, policy, and future directions for work with the population.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Latinos are the fastest growing immigrant population in the United States and the U.S. Census Bureau estimated that by 2015 there were already 56.6 million Latinos living in the United States, making up 17.6 percent of the total population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Immigration of Central Americans to the United States has increased dramatically since the 1980's (Santa-Maria & Cornille, 2007; Menjivar, 1999). As of 2015 3.4 million Central Americans were living in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Those from the Northern Triangle, countries included in this study, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador constituted eighty-five percent of the Central Americans living in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015).

Central Americans migrate in order to escape economic poverty, violence, persecution, lack of opportunity, natural and man-made disasters, and to join loved ones in the north (Andersson, 2005; Macabasco, 2006). In addition to the difficulties they may face at home, they face numerous dangers on their journeys to the north. As they are burdened with crossing two or more borders, their journeys are inherently more treacherous than those of their Mexican counterparts. More than 4,000 Latino immigrants lost their lives attempting to cross into the United States before 2007 (Nevins, 2007). Since 2007, the Institute for Women in Migration (IMUMI) in Mexico estimated that upwards of 50,000 migrants died journeying through Mexico in just six years (2013).

Latinas have become just as likely as their male counterparts to immigrate to the United States, making up roughly half of the population (Miranda, Siddique, Der-Martirosian, & Belin, 2005; Pew Research Center, 2008). The risks Central American immigrants may face on their journeys include beatings, robberies, rape, mutilation, starvation, and death (Andersson, 2005; IMUMI, 2013; Nazario, 2006; Rodriguez & Urrutia-Rojas, 1990). Despite widespread knowledge of the dangers they face on the journey north, Central Americans continue to attempt to enter the United States.

Female immigrants face unique challenges that cannot be captured in previous research conducted with their male counterparts. Amnesty International estimated that 60% of Central American women and girls are raped while immigrating to the United States (Goldberg, 2014). Another investigation conducted by the media outlet, Fusion, on migrant shelter directors concluded that up to an alarming 80% of female immigrants are raped (Goldberg, 2014). Immigrant survivors of rape may be much more common than previously thought due to underreporting associated with fear of repercussions, such as deportation, and the shame and stigma survivors experience (McIntyre, 2014).

According to the Pew Research Center, in 2013 the number of unaccompanied minors from Central America nearly doubled and the number of girls surpassed that of boys (Krogstad, Gonzalez-Barrera, & Lopez, 2014). In the following year, 2014, the number of Central Americans who were apprehended on the U.S. border outnumbered the number of Mexicans who were caught for the first time (U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 2016). In the fiscal year of 2016, 408,870 Central Americans who were migrating irregularly were apprehended at the U.S. Mexico border (U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 2016). Despite the threat of violence and death, Central Americans continue to immigrate in large numbers. Their ability to face such bleak

danger and to overcome the harrowing task of migration attests to their perseverance and strength as well as to the power of the forces driving them to leave.

Central Americans' experiences of trauma and violence while traveling through Mexico have been documented in literature, documentaries, newspaper articles, and other sources. When discussing the high price of failing to arrive safely, Andersson (2005) notes that their "failure-and many do fail-can entail robbery, rape, mutilation and murder" (p. 28). Women's immigration experiences then, contain vital information about how they endured the journey and what the experience was like for them. Throughout the literature on immigration, women's voices are sorely missing. Female immigrants' standpoint, or point of view from that of a subordinated group, offers vital information about their unique experiences. Their standpoints offer an essential piece of the immigration puzzle. Historically, immigrant women that are interviewed were rarely asked specifically about their immigration experiences. Due to their vulnerability to gender based violence and abuse as immigrant women and to the great impact the immigration experience may have on their lives, the stories of their journeys are invaluable. Their stories are necessary to provide a more holistic and accurate record of women's experiences as well as their needs throughout their immigration journey and upon arrival. Such stories may also influence policy makers to protect female immigrants and their well being whenever possible.

This exploratory qualitative study uses semi-structured interviews to delve into the experiences of Central American women who have migrated irregularly to the United States. Irregular immigration is a term used to describe immigration that takes place outside of the accepted regulatory means of immigration. I focus specifically on women from the Northern Triangle, which includes Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. I include an analysis of the Central American women's experiences with trauma during immigration and of what coping

mechanisms and strengths they employed during the journey. I also explore other themes as presented in the interviews. Through using a strengths-based perspective, I was able to allow the participants to talk about the methods they used to prepare for the journey and to complete it, despite numerous obstacles. As I will discuss further in my methodology chapter, using a gender lens permits the specific voices of women to share their experiences of trauma along the journey. My intention was to highlight the strengths of this doubly vulnerable population. Specifically, my research question is; what are the immigration experiences of Central American women?

The current study was conducted using a feminist standpoint theory framework. Feminist standpoint theory (FST) is a critical theory that asserts that knowledge can be generated *for* marginalized groups and not just *about* them (Hesse-Biber & Yaiser, 2004). The starting point is the marginalized position and women in that position are recognized as experts in their own life experiences. Feminist standpoint theory stresses that researchers have an obligation to contribute to eliminating inequality and injustice (Hesse-Biber & Yaiser, 2004). FST also notes the importance that the researcher highlights the strengths and resiliency of the research population so as to avoid categorizing the participants merely as victims.

This study offers Central American women the opportunity to voice their experiences of immigration, including the trauma and/violence they encounter and the aftermath of such experiences, while simultaneously noting their strengths in the ability to make such perilous journeys. Paris (2008) notes that, “the act of migration itself can be seen as a survival strategy, given the conditions in home countries, as well as a demonstration of ability and resourcefulness” (p. 141). The research contributes to the assessment of participants’ needs, analyzation of policies that affect them, and suggestions for improving social services with the population.

In the present study I explore the lived experiences of female Central American immigrants. I believe that FST offers the best theory from which to do so. In exploring specifically the women's experiences, I assess the various facets of their lives including the intersectionality of being a woman, a minority, a Central American, an immigrant, a mother, etc. I explore the gendered trauma they experience including sexual violence, rape, domestic violence, and other abuses. Finally, I look at their strengths as women, including their traditional role as caregivers and mothers.

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) offers the perfect methodology for small-scale, in-depth qualitative research such as that conducted in this study. It allows the researcher to interpret how the researchee makes sense of her life experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Like FST it avoids predefined categories allowing participants to give their own views of events. Through the assumption that people are actively interpreting their lives IPA also views them as experts in their lived experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). The researcher, then, is the expert in her own lived experiences just as the researchee is the expert in her particular lived experiences. As the analyst facilitates and makes sense of the experience, she also strives to respect those experiences as she does her own, immersing herself in the stories (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

The importance of this research includes the implications for treatment models for immigrants, particularly females, and for policy formation and reform regarding similar vulnerable populations. Policies that impact the Central American population can be reevaluated taking into consideration the immigration experiences of the population and their subsequent needs related to such experiences. Research with at-risk populations must be conducted in order

to both develop appropriate treatment methods as well as to advocate for their protection and rights.

Undocumented immigrants are often reluctant to seek help due to fears of deportation, lack of knowledge about services that are available, and language barriers (Tam, 2014). Female survivors of trauma are at risk for a variety of mental health issues including depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and addictions (Covington, 2003; Herman, 1997).

Understanding these stories of immigration trauma and the subsequent mental health signs and symptoms described by participants in this research will better equip social workers to address the mental health needs of female immigrants in addition to the multiple factors that impact one's ability to adjust to life in a new country.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Central Americans' immigration journeys have long been recognized as dangerous, violent, and life threatening. Their journeys pose many more obstacles and threats than those of their Mexican counterparts, for example, due to the long distances they travel over at least two borders. Women, in particular, face higher risks due to gender-based-violence, which they face at the hands of authorities, *coyotes*, or human smugglers, criminals, and fellow travelers alike. Due to the inherent danger of the women's journeys, they face numerous physical and psychological challenges. Furthermore, family separation, culture shock, and isolation upon arrival may continue to threaten their health and well-being. Their stories, therefore, are particularly relevant to the fields of social work, health care, and gender studies. This study focuses on women from the Northern Triangle: Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. The *compañeras* interviewed for this project immigrated between 1962 and 2011 and were between the ages of 17-38 at the time of immigration. (They were all adults by the time they participated in the interviews.) Their particular journeys took between one day, for those who flew in with a temporary visa, and two years for one woman who was stuck in Mexico. This literature review provides an overview of the research population and the policies that have impacted them.

As the current study focuses specifically on Central American women's immigration experiences, it includes a review of existing relevant research, beginning with a brief history of United States immigration policy. First, I present the events and factors that contributed to

relevant changes in immigration policy and analyze how those changes have impacted Central Americans specifically. Next, I review relevant Mexican and Central American immigration policies. I then present the reasons for migration from Central America, looking at both past and current motives throughout the region. Starting with political instability and violence, the literature review notes what Central Americans themselves have cited as contributing factors in their own decisions to immigrate, including violence in countries of origin, economic crisis and lack of opportunities, natural disasters, and family separation and reunification. I also provide an overview of the Central American population in the United States. The review includes a discussion of the immigration journey, including the psychological impact of immigration, the potential dangers of the immigration journey, and the significance of the population for social work and other helping professions. Next, I provide a summary of literature on the methodology of feminist standpoint theory and its relevancy to the research. Finally, I review and discuss the use of interpretive phenomenological analysis.

History of United States Immigration Policy

Immigration is a fervently contested issue throughout the world. One only has to turn on the news to learn about immigrants all over the world desperately attempting to enter other countries. Immigration laws beg the questions; who is allowed to cross a border and enter into a territory and who is denied that privilege? As well as who is allowed to remain within a border and who must leave? International borders are human-made, sometimes by creating arbitrary divisions of land that were previously non-existent and/or have changed over time. Many borders were created out of convenience for colonizers and separated peoples that previously lived together. In 1920 and 1924 the United States Congress established national quotas for accepting immigrants that clearly favored Western Europeans and aimed to keep immigration

numbers in general low (Van Ham, 2009). The Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 provided numerical limits for people of each nationality restricting certain ethnic groups more than others (Hartry, 2012). Due to high unemployment at the time, the strict immigration regulations were popular (Van Ham, 2009).

After World War II in the 1940's thousands of displaced persons were prevented from returning home. Thus sparking questions about where they should go and in which countries would they be allowed? Communities were wiped out entirely, resources depleted, and populations were denied access to their former homeland (Van Ham, 2009). In 1947 the Committee on Displaced Persons (CCDP) was formed and noted the U.S. privilege and responsibility to welcome displaced persons (Van Ham, 2009). These twentieth century immigrant advocates addressed many ethical concerns about immigration rights and responsibilities that are still relevant today.

According to Massey & Pren (2012), immigration from Latin America increased in spite of immigration reforms. The *Bracero* Program, which in part allowed temporary migrant workers from Mexico, offered a legal avenue for Mexican immigrants to both work in the U.S. and return to Mexico. When it was terminated in 1964, the 450,000 migrants that entered temporarily each year under it, no longer had legal recourse to access work in the United States, thus terminating circular migration (Massey & Pren, 2012). Immigration was again restricted in 1965, imposing numerical limitations on immigrants from the Western Hemisphere, causing an upswing in unauthorized immigrants (Massey, Durand, & Pren, 2014). The 50,000 immigrants from Mexico that had previously entered yearly with resident visas were capped at 20,000 (excluding family members of residents), essentially limiting Mexican immigration from the previous 500,000 yearly legal entrances to just 20,000 (Massey & Pren, 2012).

Furthermore, according to Chavez (2008), the idea of the “Latino Threat” increased throughout the 60s, 70s, and 80s. Due to rising economic inequality, immigrants were perceived as more of a threat in the media, which began using increasingly negative language against them (Massey & Pren, 2012). The Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986 both legalized some already present immigrants while at the same time increasing border patrol efforts.

Between 1986 and 2000, the U.S. saw the border patrols nearly triple in size (Kandel & Massey, 2002).

The rising number of border apprehensions and the intensifying threat narrative, in turn, had profound political consequences, galvanizing a shift toward conservatism among voters and increasing support for more stringent immigration and enforcement policies, setting off a chain reaction in the public sphere (Massey & Pren, 2012, p. 22).

A bill that was intended to regulate crime and combat the trafficking of narcotics, the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988, expanded the reasons to legally remove undocumented immigrants by creating a category titled ‘aggravated felony.’ Aggravated felonies as well as ‘crimes of moral turpitude,’ which were only vaguely defined, would result in the removal of those undocumented immigrants that were found guilty (Hartry, 2012). Operation Blockade of 1993 and Operation Gatekeeper of 1994 further increased the number of undocumented immigrants remaining in the U.S. Immigrants became more fearful of crossing the border and were no longer willing to risk return and re-entry so they stayed in the United States. (Kandel & Massey, 2002).

In 1996 Congress passed the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIR) and the Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act (AEDPA) (Hartry, 2012). Three events led to the 1996 reform, including the bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993, followed by Proposition 187 in California in 1994, and the Oklahoma City bombing of 1995 (Human Rights Watch, 2007). The bills essentially combined the growing fear of terrorism with

intolerance for undocumented immigrants. As Hartry states, “This link between immigration and crime has had a profound impact on how Americans view immigrants” (2012, p. 13).

In October 2001, legal immigration to the U.S. dropped a full twenty-nine percent from the previous year (Mitchell, 2002). In 2003, the Department of Human Services created the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), an agency solely dedicated to the detention and deportation of criminal or fugitive immigrants (Kanstroom, 2007). The Bush administration practices demonstrated what enforcement-only policies on immigration can cause as ICE officers began a series of notorious raids (Medina, 2009). “The countless stories of nursing mothers being forcibly separated from their children, towns shut down, and their children-American citizens-being left behind will forever be remembered as a low point in America’s history” (Medina, 2009, p. 16).

Central Americans have also benefitted from some policies created to assist those already here. For example, in the late 1990’s, due to a series of natural disasters, undocumented Central Americans from El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua became eligible for Temporary Protected Status (TPS), protection against deportation with authorization to work. According to Zong and Batalova (2017), “TPS has been renewed for Honduras and Nicaragua until July 2016, and El Salvador until September 2016.” These temporary solutions, as indicated by the title, do not offer permanent residency, nor guarantee extended protection after expiration. The 1997 Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act (NACARA) also provided other opportunities for Central Americans to legalize their status (Zong & Batalova, 2017).

In 2008, Secure Communities, a deportation program, called for the cooperation of federal, state and local law enforcement. According to the official website of the Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement prioritizes “the removal of

criminal aliens, those who pose a threat to public safety, and repeat immigration violators” (2017). During the 2015 fiscal year ICE deported 235,413 undocumented immigrants (ICE). That same year the United States deported 110,000 Central American immigrants from the Northern Triangle, while Mexico apprehended 173,000 immigrants, returning them to their countries of origin (Villegas & Rietig, 2015). It is important to note that as Mexico increases its ability to apprehend and deport Central Americans and others, we can no longer just look at ICE statistics.

Despite so many efforts, immigration laws and policies have been widely unsuccessful in preventing undocumented immigrants from entering the United States. In fact, the laws have oftentimes resulted in unintended disastrous consequences (Kandel & Massey, 2002). Forcing immigrants to travel more dangerous paths, led *coyotes* to form organized smuggling rings. Immigration-curbing efforts have generated more violence against immigrants on both sides of the border (Massey et al., 2014). The threat of violence against immigrants who are smuggled into the United States does not cease until all their debts are paid impacting relatives in the country of origin, those currently traveling, and those already in the United States.

The bigger the dangers are, the more lucrative the business is for smugglers. Immigrants who arrive with a debt cannot send money home to their families until they pay it off. The vicious cycle keeps immigrants in the United States longer, paying off debts before being able to make any money. Furthermore, immigrants are much less likely to return to their countries of origin, knowing how difficult it will be to try to return again (Massey et al., 2014; Desjonquères, 2015). In fact, from 1970 to 2010 \$35 billion of taxpayers’ money was wasted on border enforcement, which actually served to increase the number of undocumented immigrants in the United States by damaging the rates of return migration (Massey et al., 2014). Rosenblum (2012), referred to this

as a “caging effect”, a phenomenon that describes migrants feeling locked-in once they settle in the United States.

Mexican and Central American Immigration Policies

The massive rise in immigrants crossing Mexico’s southern border and the violence that has accompanied that rise forced Mexican authorities to rethink their immigration policies (Desjonquères, 2015). The Mexican government both recognizes its responsibility to protect the human rights of immigrants and at the same time bears blame for some of the conditions that allow the violence against immigrants. In the 1990’s Mexico began to see its southern border as a strategic barrier and to align their political immigration policies with those of the United States (Desjonquères, 2015). In 1998 Mexico implemented *Operación Sellamiento* (Operation Sealing) with the intent of sealing the border from drug trafficking and undocumented immigrants, causing immigrants to further depend on organized criminal networks or traffickers (Desjonquères, 2015). Mexico has also attempted to grant limited rights to Central American immigrants in the 2010 Migration Law (*Ley de Migración*), which allowed limited free travel between the Northern Triangle and Mexico (Carte, 2014).

In conjunction with the United States after a massive surge in immigration in the summer of 2014, Mexico implemented the Southern Frontier Programme, which has been largely responsible for the significant increase in deportations from Mexico (Tuckman, 2015). Between October of 2014 and April of 2015 a shocking 92,889 Central American immigrants were deported from Mexico, almost double the amount of the previous year. In comparison, the U.S. only detained 70,226 people, less than half of the 159,103 Central Americans detained the previous year (Tuckman, 2015).

Mexican apprehension of Central Americans, while making border patrol easier for the U.S., does not address the life-threatening conditions of violence and poverty that are driving people to attempt the journey in the first place. According to Desjonquères (2015), over the years criminal groups have gained from the vulnerability of undocumented immigrants. The number of extortions, rapes, kidnappings, and trafficking of people and even of human organs rises proportionately with the continual arrival of numerous and vulnerable Central American immigrants.

Central America has also updated their immigration policies, recognizing the hardships for their citizens traveling northward and streamlining the process of getting a visa. Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua signed the Central America-4 (CA-4) Border Control Agreement in June of 2006. It created a time-limited passport between the four countries (Nowrasteh, 2014).

The Central American Population in the United States

In the United States over 13.5% of the total population is foreign-born (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). An estimated 11,009,000 people who immigrated irregularly reside in the United States (MPI). Almost eight million or 71% of the undocumented immigrant population alone are from Mexico and Central America (MPI). Latinos are one of the fastest growing populations in the United States, and within the Latino community Central Americans represent one of the quickest growing immigrant populations (Marotta & Garcia, 2003; U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). By 2013, 3.2 million Central American immigrants were living in the United States (Zong & Batalova, 2017).

According to Passel and Cohn (2011), Central Americans account for 15% of the population of undocumented people living in the United States. The Northern Triangle alone accounts for 14% of the population of undocumented Central Americans (MPI). By 2015 Central

Americans represented 8% of all immigrants in the United States. In their comparison of undocumented immigrants from Mexico and Central America, Massey, Durand, & Pren, (2014), noted that Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala provide the most undocumented immigrants after only Mexico. While the number of undocumented Mexican immigrants living in the United States has decreased, the number of undocumented Central Americans has steadily increased, with undocumented Central Americans making up over half of the population of Central Americans (Massey et al., 2014).

Central America, the southern most portion of North America, includes the countries of Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama. According to the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) 1.1 million Central American people entered the United States legally between 1970 and 1999 (Lundquist & Massey, 2005). That number would swell with the estimate of those that entered without permission. One quarter of all El Salvadorans moved abroad since the civil war of 1980's. Yet, less than 3% of the Central Americans that applied for asylum during that time were granted it (Aron et al., 1991). According to the Annual Report by the Office of Immigration Statistics (OIS), in 2010 Central Americans were the most common people apprehended after Mexicans (2011). In 2009, there were approximately 2.9 million immigrants from Central America living in the United States (Terrazas, 2011). That same year, one out of every ten unauthorized immigrants in the United States was from Central America (Terrazas, 2011). Due to the status of undocumented immigrants as well as the flaws of the Census gathering methodology, many estimates of Central Americans in the U.S. are much higher (Chun, 2007).

Female immigrants once lagged behind males due to dangerous passages, lack of work, and the desire to care for the family in countries of origin. Now, however, female immigrants

from Central America are just as likely as their male counterparts to come to the United States. The migration of Latina women from the global south to the United States first began to rise in the seventies when political and economic crisis plagued the region (Hollander, 2006). The population of Central American women has been steadily increasing since the 1980's (Menjivar, 1999). According to the Migration Policy Institute in 2013, 51% of all immigrants to the United States were female (Ruiz, Zong, & Batalova, 2015). Despite the significant growth of the Central American population and its visibility in the U.S., little has been done in terms of researching the irregular immigration experiences of the undocumented female Central American community living in the United States. The exact number of undocumented Central American women is unknown. This research focuses on Central American women's irregular immigration experiences and the impact of those experiences.

Factors Driving Central American Immigration to the United States

Political Unrest

Extreme violence caused by political instability, gang warfare and economic crisis have contributed to the growth of Central American immigration to the north. The rise in the sixties of progressive political movements in Central America was met with violent military repression, which caused instability throughout the region (Hollander, 2006). What is commonly known as the Central American Crisis of the late 70's included civil wars, guerilla uprisings, and violent responses in Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. Neoliberalism, enhancing the private sector of the economy, combined with the Free Trade Agreements and the eradication of social service programs caused severe economic crisis throughout the region. The growth of immigration despite the anti-immigrant climate in the US, attests to the extremity of the causes driving migration (Massey et al., 2014).

United States Involvement

When addressing immigration from Central America to the United States it is imperative to note the U.S. involvement in the region, which has continuously contributed to the mass migrations since they began in the 1970s. The United States governments' support of right-wing parties in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala combined with their involvement in the Nicaraguan Contra War accelerated the rise in violence and the resulting influx of undocumented immigrants (Massey et al., 2014). Throughout Latin America, state governments enforced a reign of terror, characterized by extreme human rights abuses, disappearances of citizens, seizure of land, widespread intimidation, kidnappings, forced recruitment into armed forces, torture, and murder (Hollander, 2006; Rodriguez & Urrutia-Rojas, 1990). Violence, war, conflict, and persecution were commonplace (Menjivar, 1999; Coutin, 2014). Whole families were threatened with violence in some communities (Rodriguez & Urrutia-Rojas, 1990).

The terror tore through the region as each country experienced its own violent wars and rebellions. The United States backed Contra War in Nicaragua lasted from 1979 until 1990 causing a climate marked by fear and insecurity and contributing to the rising number of immigrants (Lundquist & Massey, 2005; Massey, Durand, & Pren, 2014). In neighboring Guatemala, the civil war devastated the country for thirty-six years, lasting from 1960-1996, and claiming two hundred thousand lives. The Salvadoran civil war from 1979-1992 included death squads and disappearances that became commonplace in Central America during the Central American crisis (Shifter, 2012). Throughout the region, government and guerrilla fighters caused widespread panic and traumatic fears. This proved useful to the government that could capitalize on peoples' realistic fears:

State terrorism of El Salvador and Guatemala is a form of psychological warfare, whose express purpose is to instill in the population at large a fear so great as to assure a permanent sense of insecurity, such that people's capacity for independent action will be dulled, diminished, and ultimately thwarted (Aron et al., 1991, p. 42)

Organized Crime

Violence in Central America did not stop when the conflicts ended and, in fact, has intensified throughout the region. Political violence, already plagued by corruption and violence against civilians, gave way to organized crime or gang violence and Central America competes with the most violent areas of the world. Migrants, then, are forced to continue to flee the violence. Location is a key factor in the rising violence in Central America as it is sandwiched between the largest drug producer, Colombia, and the largest drug consumer, the United States of America (Shifter, 2012). San Pedro Sula, a city in Honduras, is the world's murder capital with a shocking rate of 187 homicides per 100,000 citizens (Krogstad, Gonzalez-Barrera, & Lopez, 2014). Complicating matters even more, The Coup of Zelaya in Honduras in 2009, which resulted in the overthrowing of then president Manuel Zelaya, stifled resources that could have been used to combat organized crime (Shifter, 2012). El Salvador recently ranked second in terms of murders in Latin America with Guatemala coming in at fifth (Shifter, 2012).

Gang violence in Central America can also be traced to the United States and policies that have impacted immigrants. In the 1980's Salvadoran immigrants who lacked opportunity due to their undocumented status and who were influenced by American gangs at the time formed the Mara Salvatrucha (MS13) in Los Angeles. As members of the gang were arrested and subsequently deported they recreated the gang culture they learned in the United States in El Salvador. They are now considered a transnational criminal group, contributing to making Central America one of the most dangerous places in the world (InSight Crime, 2017). Other

gangs have followed their lead, forming transnational gang networks (Massey, Durand, & Pren, 2014). The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIR) and the Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act (AEDPA) made deporting such criminals a priority (Hartry, 2012). This also allowed for the deportation of legal residents. Mass deportations of youth from the United States to Central America provide the perfect recruits for such gangs. Honduras has the largest gang presence in the region with some 36,000 gang members (Shifter, 2012). Lack of opportunity and poor access to education ensure that gangs have willing participants. Jailing gang members proved futile, as jails have been turned into hotbeds of powerful recruitment centers for organized crime (Shifter, 2012).

Violence Against Women

Violence against women takes many forms and increases the risk women face both in their countries of origin and during the immigration process. Therefore, including women's particular experiences of violence is a vital piece of this research. Violence against women has been increasing rapidly throughout Central America. According to a World Health Organization report (WHO, 2012) Latin America offers alarming evidence of the systematic and purposeful murders of women. The rate of murders against women in Central America is appallingly high and the rising rates of reported domestic violence have mirrored those of femicide, intentional gender-based murder also known as hate-crimes against women. El Salvador has the highest rate of femicide in the world. There the rate has increased from less than 200 reported cases of women murdered in 2000 to over 600 cases in 2011. Domestic violence reports have increased from approximately 1,500 to over 6,000 cases. Similarly, Guatemala has the third highest rate of femicide and Honduras ranks number six in the world. In 2008 alone, over 700 women were murdered in Guatemala (Center for Gender & Refugee Studies, 2011). Although, femicide is the

gravest consequence of violence against women, the impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators combined with the increasing viciousness of the acts are particularly appalling. Women are often tortured, raped, and/or mutilated before being murdered (WHO, 2012). In the report entitled “Central America: Femicides and Gender-Based Violence” the Center for Gender & Refugee Studies notes that,

Not only are these murders widespread, but they are carried out with horrific brutality. According to one news report in El Salvador, bodies generally appear burned, with hands and feet bound. Some have been beheaded, and autopsies reveal that the majority of the victims suffer torture and sexual abuse before dying (n.d.).

Factors that contribute to increased risk for femicide and other forms of violence against women include lack of employment, poverty, gender inequality, misogyny and low education, many of the very reasons Central American women decide to leave their countries of origin (WHO, 2012). Furthermore, less than 3% of reported cases of femicide are brought to justice in court, allowing the perpetrators of violence against women to walk freely (Center for Gender & Refugee Studies, n.d.). Such impunity and lack of organization sends a clear message that there is no reason to report violence against women and that women’s lives are not valued enough to prosecute the perpetrators. Furthermore, the perpetrators themselves have no reason to fear getting caught or punished for their violent acts against women.

Lack of Economic Opportunity

Violence has not been the only factor contributing to Central American immigration. Lack of economic opportunity, loss of livelihoods, unemployment and underemployment are also key factors in the increase of immigration. In the 1980’s Central American governments began industrialization and crushed the livelihood of the farming families. The rural poor and indigenous populations were disproportionately impacted by such changes. The impact of

globalization and global neoliberal policies further disadvantaged the already poor (McGuire & Martin, 2007). Neoliberalism, a market-oriented policy, has maintained the power of global corporations and increased economic disparities, misery, and transnational migration (McGuire & Martin, 2007). “In reality, capitalism in the United States is a deeply entrenched ideology (belief system) that has survived and benefited from slavery, immigrant labor, and other forms of exploitation” (Machado, 2011, p. 723).

Throughout Latin America, international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and United States policy makers have imposed structural readjustment programs that have eradicated previously implemented governmental social services. In 1975, 81% of El Salvador’s national income came from Agriculture (Hollander, 2006). In 2004, 70% of its income came from remittances (UNDP, 2005, as cited in Wiltberger, 2009). The economic crisis forces more and more Latin Americans to immigrate to the global north in a desperate search for a way to maintain their livelihood (Hollander, 2006). Today, El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala are among the poorest nations in Latin America (Pew Research Center, 2014).

Both neoliberal forces contributing to the economic need for migration and laws and restrictions against immigrants have increased. In 2005, the US-Dominican Republic-Central America Free Trade Agreement (DR-CAFTA) was approved by the US Congress despite evidence that the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) devastated the livelihoods of thousands of Latino farming communities and was the basis for an increase in immigration throughout the region (Nevins, 2007). Like its predecessor NAFTA, CAFTA opens borders for goods, promotes deregulation, pushes outsourcing of jobs, and supports privatization of basic resources such as water (Machado, 2011).

One net effect of these policies has been the end of family farming as a way of life and as a way of economic sustenance for millions of families throughout Mexico, Central American, and Caribbean nations. In other words, the systematic social and economic displacement of millions of people has contributed greatly to the migration patterns of the past several decades (Chacon, 2011, p. 467).

Central American women have suffered economic losses disproportionately as their traditional livelihoods were under exclusive attack. Women, who traditionally migrated last, started coming to the United States in higher numbers as demands for labor changed and they became as employable or more employable than their male counterparts. Latinas are now as likely as Latinos to immigrate to the United States (Miranda et. al, 2005). Hollander states,

In the past 20 years, the free market globalization project has entailed an intensification of social, economic, and psychological impingements on women's lives throughout the region. In fact, many human rights organizations assert that the historical function of the era of state terror throughout Latin America was to eliminate alternative economic models to free market capitalism and its unfettered implementation throughout the hemisphere (2006, p. 67).

Natural Disasters

Natural disasters, including hurricanes and earthquakes in Central America have also contributed to the increase of immigration. In 1998, Hurricane Mitch became the deadliest hurricane in the Atlantic since 1780, claiming more than 11,000 lives. With up to 75 inches of water reported in some areas, resulting flooding destroyed Honduran infrastructure and demolished parts of Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Belize. Beyond the death toll, crops were destroyed, villages were washed away, and many people were left homeless or displaced (National Climatic Data Center, 2009). In 2001, El Salvador and Guatemala experienced two earthquakes on January 13th and February 13th. A total of 1,317 people were killed, most of who were from El Salvador. Eight of the casualties were from Guatemala (Afonso, 2014). According to

the World Food Program (2015) 3.5 million people in the Northern Triangle have been affected by the severe drought in the area, adding to increasing numbers of immigrants.

The Immigration Journey from Central America to the United States

The Human Threat

Central American immigrants face numerous dangers on their immigration journey through two or more countries including the threat of violence, robberies, beatings, and death (Nazario, 2006; Rodriguez & Urrutia-Rojas, 1990; Andersson, 2005; Diaz & Kuhner, 2007). Over 4,000 immigrants have lost their lives attempting to cross the U.S. border (Nevins, 2007). That number has steadily risen as more and more immigrants are killed before reaching their destination. Violence along the immigration route has escalated to mass kidnappings and murders. According to the National Security Archive (2013) and reported throughout the world, in August 2010, seventy-two immigrants were massacred with a gunshot wound to the head and their bodies were discovered in San Fernando, Mexico. The impunity by which the Zetas, a powerful drug cartel acted, caused fear and outrage throughout the immigrant community.

Sadly, it is often the human threat that is worse than the physical dangers immigrants face. Robbers, gang members, and bandits are only part of the problem. Immigrants also suffer abuse at the hands of *coyotes*, police officers, *migra* (migration authorities), border patrols, human traffickers, and fellow immigrants (Menjivar & Abrego, 2012). Due to the enforcement of stricter border policies since the 1990's, *coyotes* have changed their strategies in the movement of people and have improved their networks, essentially becoming members of smuggling rings, in some ways indistinguishable from human traffickers (Menjivar & Abrego, 2012). Put bluntly, Tobar (2009) states, "Those smugglers are transforming the trail into a journey of intimidation and horror." (LAT section, para. 6).

As immigrants travel through countries illegally, they are often denied the protection of the law. Fear of repercussions or punishment in the form of deportation or containment for breaking the law prevents them from reporting abuse. In fact, the very people that are supposed to uphold the law; police officers, immigration authorities, and border patrol guards are often the perpetrators of abuse of immigrants and have been implicated in extortion, beatings, and even rape (Rodriguez & Urrutia-Rojas, 1990; Diaz & Kuhner, 2007). Mexican civilians are also perpetrators of extortion, threatening to inform authorities of immigrants' presence (Diaz & Kuhner, 2007). In one study of Central American women detainees in Mexico, over half of them reported facing extortions and paying ten to one hundred dollars per incident. Some of the women faced five to twenty incidents of extortion (Diaz & Kuhner, 2007).

Physical Threats

Other dangers include illness, starvation, dehydration, exhaustion, mutilation, drowning, and death (Diaz & Kuhner, 2007). The journey is long and those that make it can only carry the bare essentials. Often they travel through hostile climates and weather for which they are not prepared. They have little opportunity and recourse to eat well and are often hungry. There are also few safe places to sleep and modes of transportation are treacherous as migrants hide in vehicles, ride atop trains, and are stuffed into unfit places both trying to hide from authorities and trying to save money (Nazario, 2006).

Sonia Nazario, a journalist who has made the journey through Mexico on the freight train which is a common mode of transportation for immigrants traveling from southern to northern Mexico, notes that it is referred to as "*el tren del muerte*," or the death train (2006). The train has also been referred to as *la bestia*, or the beast (Nazario, 2014). As cargo trains, they have no passenger cars, forcing people to ride on top, on the sides, or anywhere they can fit. People who

choose to travel by train do so because it is free and it runs along multiple lines from southern to northern Mexico. It has also provided a route that was less monitored by authorities so that Central Americans without Mexican visas could elude authorities (Villegas, 2014). However, individuals riding the train have to run after it, jump on and off of it while it is moving, and are often fatigued and starving when they do so. Many people have lost their lives or their limbs under the trains' powerful wheels (Nazario, 2014; Diaz & Kuhner, 2007).

Sexual Violence

Despite knowledge about the dangers of the journey, the experiences of women and the aftermath of their journey have been largely ignored (Simmons, & Tellez, 2014). Sexual violence is used as a weapon to intimidate immigrants who are at the mercy of those they encounter along the way (Diaz & Kuhner, 2007). Amnesty International reported that an estimated sixty percent of women and girls crossing Mexico are raped (2010). This percentage is probably low due to the stigma of being a survivor of sexual violence. Another investigation conducted by Fusion with directors of migrant shelters, found that the directors believed that an astonishing eighty percent of female immigrants are raped (2014). Although a lack of accountability, fear of deportation, and underreporting make it impossible to determine the exact number of Central American survivors of sexual violence during immigration, it is clearly a looming threat for female migrants (Simmons & Tellez, 2014).

The threat of sexual violence is ongoing and may be viewed as a condition and not just an instance.

Women and girls are victimized and re-victimized over time in a number of ways. Many of the immigrants are victims of sexual abuse by family members and acquaintances in their home country before they ever consider migrating. Throughout their journey, not just at the U.S.-Mexico border, they suffer exploitation. This exploitation continues in border crossings (Simmons & Tellez, 2014, p. 45).

They go on to note that abuse can continue even after reaching their final destination. Survivors of rape may have to deal with unwanted pregnancies in addition to the psychological impact of enduring sexual assault (Rodriguez & Urrutia-Rojas, 1990). Women often travel in groups in an effort to stay safe but the journey takes days, weeks, months, or longer and there is no way to guarantee that they will not be separated. Fusion (2014) noted that, “Perpetrators can be coyotes, other migrants, bandits, or even government authorities.” Gang rape is one scare/control technique that train gangs use. Rape is also commonly used by coyotes during the journey or in drop houses, where survivors may be held against their will, a form of human trafficking that is not acknowledged as such (Simmons & Tellez, 2014).

Perpetrators of rape may leave ‘evidence’ of their crimes in the form of ‘rape trees,’ found along migrant trails, containing women’s underclothes. The trees are a testimony to the frequency of the abuses and the atmosphere of intimidation (Simmons & Tellez, 2014).. The threat of rape during the journey is so common that women have begun making efforts both to prevent rape and if that’s not possible, to avert subsequent pregnancy by taking birth control (Simmons & Tellez, 2014). However, taking birth control still leaves female survivors of rape at risk for sexually transmitted diseases, a public health issue (Diaz & Kuhner, 2007). Some Central American women have gone so far as to shave their heads and make shirts that state, “*Tengo SIDA*” (I have AIDS) (Nazario, 2006). As Simmons & Tellez (2014) noted when speaking about the sexual violence thousands of immigrants face each year, “This is a massive human rights abuse that is almost completely unknown and done almost completely with impunity” (p. 65).

Separations

Separation from family and children is another consequence of irregular immigration. In addition to being separated from children still in their countries of origin many mothers become

separated from their children *during* the immigration journey (Diaz & Kuhner, 2007). Such separation contributes to the trauma of the journey for both mother and children and may impact their stages of development as well. The increase in female immigrants also means the increase in mother-child separations. Current treatment of immigrant mothers may not always be adequate. As Falicov (2007) notes, “Clinics in many large American cities treat, primarily with medication, the in-creasing number of women solo immigrants who present with symptoms of depression or psychosomatic complaints but who seldom talk about the stress of separation.” (p. 161).

Psychological Impact of Immigration

Understanding the immigration experiences of Central American women is invaluable for the development of culturally-informed treatment methods, appropriate support services, and needs assessments for medical and mental health professionals, lawyers, and other advocates working with Central American women and their families. Asner-Self and Marotta (2005) note that migration affects many different aspects of people’s lives including socioeconomic status, social networks, and cultural norms and values. Those living with lower socioeconomic statuses and with lower support systems are at higher risk for mental health problems (Hudson, 2005). Central American women, when compared with others have had higher levels of unemployment or underemployment, less education, and fewer English language skills (McClowsky et al., 1995; Green et al., 2010). Mothers who immigrate to the United States are often forced to leave children behind (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2011). Furthermore, Central American mothers in one study were the most likely to be diagnosable for post-traumatic stress disorder (McClowsky et al., 1995) and in another reported more depression and stress (Green et al., 2010). Political and economic oppression and exposure to trauma can impact the acculturation process, which is a stressful

adjustment (Asner-Self and Marotta, 2005). Immigrant Latina's who are exposed to violence are more likely to have psychological strains as well as more symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (McCloskey et. al, 1995).

“If the psychological problems of Central American women refugees are to be addressed meaningfully, we must attend not only to the special characteristics of the assaults they have endured, but also to features of the pre-trauma environment in which they lived, and the post-trauma experience of exile” (Aron et al., 1991, p. 37).

In one study on the psychological effects of violence on Latina mothers and children, Central American mothers were found to be the most likely to have post-traumatic stress disorder. In the same study, the majority of the female survivors of violence had received death threats (McClowsky et al., 1995). In another study of 133 Latino immigrant children, over 75% had experienced one to thirteen potentially traumatic events even before leaving their country of origin. The average immigrant experienced three to four potentially traumatic events during the immigration journey and six traumatic events throughout their lives. Females in general in the study reported more sexual assault and health problems experienced during immigration (Rodriguez & Urrutia-Rojas, 1990). Although youth's experiences cannot be generalized to the adult population, it is likely that adult family members have been exposed to more traumatic events as parents may have attempted to protect the children from such experiences. In another study on survivors of violence, the mothers recalled many more violent events than the children (McClowsky et al., 1995).

Immigrants who come from countries with long histories of war and political unrest are especially at risk for developmental disruptions in trust. Long-term exposure to unpredictable and uncontrollable events may lead to the development of an impaired capacity to accurately assess one's own physical or psychological safety. The resultant stress may increase these immigrants' risk for such mental disorders as posttraumatic stress (PTS), depression, and anxiety (Asner-Self & Marotta, 2005, p. 162).

According to the *Diagnostic Statistical Manual (DSM V, 2013)* trauma is experiencing, witnessing, or learning about a threat or perceived threat to one's life or one's physical integrity. Survivors of trauma may experience a range of symptoms including those associated with posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety. Trauma also may affect one's daily functioning by causing disturbances in sleep and eating patterns as well as hyper-vigilance, physical pain, such as headaches or stomachaches, and other distressing symptoms (DSM V, 2013). Survivors of trauma may experience mistrust, identity confusion, difficulty in relationships, and isolation (Asner-Self and Marotta, 2005).

Disorders related to trauma include post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), dissociative identity disorder, dissociative amnesia, depersonalization disorder, dream anxiety disorder, brief reactive psychosis, dissociative fugue, conversion disorder, somatization disorder, and antisocial personality disorder (Covington, 2003). There are also high comorbidity rates between women with post-traumatic stress disorder and depression, panic disorder, anxiety, phobic disorders, physical disorders, and substance abuse (Davidson, 1993).

Women who survive rape are more likely to report breakdowns, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts (Herman, 1997). Central American survivors of rape must also face the issues of relocation, legal status, and support or treatment, each of which poses a potential problem to the women's recovery (Aron et al., 1991). The threat of rape combined with the prevalence of rape throughout Central American women's immigration journeys puts them at high risk for developing PTSD and other related disorders. In one study, half of the Central American immigrants that participated had PTSD-related symptoms, twice as many as Mexican immigrants (Santa-Maria & Cornille, 2007). In another study on Mexican and Central American immigrants one out of four Central American children lost their fathers to a violent death

(McCloskey et. al, 1995). Indeed, immigrant Latinas are also at high risk for depression, which affects the quality of their lives (Paris, 2008; Miranda et. al, 2005).

Herman (1997) referred to the stages of recovery from trauma as safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection. As Julia Skinner (2009) noted in her personal narrative about her experience with rape, the reactions of others to the event shape the process of recovery. In her case a detective belittled and berated her until she falsely “confessed” to having made up the event in a desperate attempt to get out of his office, to which the detective replied, “I knew you were lying” (Skinner, 2009, p. 173). The reactions then, of social workers to survivors of trauma, specifically sexual trauma, is extremely important and it is the profession’s ethical duty to provide both an empathetic ear and more importantly, appropriate services (NASW, 2008).

Central American women traveling without documentation cannot count on the help of the law for fear that they will be deported, abused, or otherwise targeted. They are beyond the law, in a sense. Social service workers, doctors, mental health professionals, lawyers, health workers and other advocates must then provide the lifeline needed in order to recover from traumatic incidents and the psychological impact of the journey and all it entails. Often, perpetrators of crimes against immigrants are those that are supposed to enforce the law such as police and migration officers (Nazario, 2006), furthering immigrants’ distrust/fear of authority. Ms. Skinner, a survivor of rape (2009) had a negative experience with the law but was assisted by her family, who supported her unconditionally. Immigrants however, are separated from family members, furthering their vulnerability. Therefore, the reactions and support of social workers and other providers to immigrant survivors of trauma, is of utmost importance to mental health outcomes.

McClowskey et. al (1995), found in their study of Central American and Mexican immigrant survivors of violence that Central Americans were more likely to be unemployed or to have low-wage, low-status jobs. They were also less likely to have legal documentation and to know any English. Central American mothers were found to have significantly less education than those coming from Mexico as well as smaller support systems as demonstrated by relatives living in town. All of these factors may contribute negatively to health and well-being as well as mental health outcomes.

Immigrant Advocacy and Feminist Standpoint Theory

This research strives to move away from the restriction vs. expansion dialogue that plagues current debates about immigration and to move closer to what Van Ham (2009) refers to as immigration advocacy. He states that it “constitutes organized efforts to humanize the image of immigrants and act as a sympathetic intermediary between immigrants and society at large” (p. 625). Immigrant advocacy includes the belief in the fair and just treatment of immigrants including social equality and empowerment of immigrants themselves. “Implicit in the turn toward defending the undocumented is an appreciation of global poverty as an oppressive force that challenges assumptions about the regulation of national boundaries” (Van Ham, 2009, p. 637). Furthermore, it aims to include Latinas in the debate on Latino immigration to the United States. Wiltberger (2009), noted that “political discussions on US immigration should be in dialogue and collaborate with communities, organizations, and governments in Latin America that are also responding to the question of migration but from different points of view” (p. 522).

Feminist standpoint theory is a critical theory that is ideal for work with disadvantaged populations (Hesse-Biber & Yaiser, 2004). It asserts that knowledge can be produced *for* marginalized groups and does not just have to be *about* marginalized groups for use by the

dominant group (Hesse-Biber & Yaiser, 2004). The marginalized position is the starting point. In this manner, it also becomes possible to combat preconceived or stereotypical ideas, and to give previously silenced voices, a platform for reflection (Harding, 1991). The standpoint of the oppressed allows them to gain a more complete view of social reality as they recognize both the dominant view and their own (Swigonski, 1994). Furthermore, marginalized populations also may have a more complete knowledge, as they have no stake in maintaining or reinforcing the dominant views of the most powerful groups (Harding, 1991). Therefore, their knowledge is invaluable in research. Bottom-up research, which is conducted from the bottom of the social hierarchy, provides insight that is masked by research conducted from the top down, as traditional research is often done (Hesse-Biber & Yaiser, 2004). Feminist standpoint theory aims to represent the interests of the oppressed and the other (Harding, 1991). In the present study then, the oppressed population represented are Central American women who immigrate irregularly to the United States.

Feminist standpoint theory acknowledges that all research conducted is inherently value-laden. FST then, merges beautifully with the goals of the social work profession, which is value-directed and committed to social reform and client empowerment (Swigonski, 1994). The commitment to political activism and social justice is a key point in ethically conducted feminist informed research (Hesse-Biber & Yaiser, 2004). Other methods of research as well as meta-theories posit that the responsibility of the researcher does not encompass political action. However, feminist standpoint theory asserts that researchers are obligated to be active in the goal to eliminate inequalities and injustices. They should not wait around for the next social movement to promote equality and to unearth oppression (Hesse-Biber & Yaiser, 2004). Through simply choosing a research topic, the researcher is making a political statement

(Swigonski, 1994). “Social work research must be grounded in an epistemology that honors all of our professional commitments. Feminist standpoint theory offers one such opportunity”

(Swigonski, 1994, p 389). This research project notes then, that undocumented Central American women are important, valuable, and that the stories of their journeys to the United States have important treatment implications.

It is also important to highlight the strengths and resilience of the research population. In doing so, the researcher avoids categorizing the population merely as victims and acknowledges that the participants are active players in their lives. Even more important, by acknowledging that the research participants are the experts in their situations and that the researcher is not, the researcher hopes to avoid the perpetuation of hierarchies and to create a body of new knowledge both by and for the research participants (Hesse-Biber & Yaiser, 2004). Diaz and Kuhner (2007) note that Central American women detained in Mexico had many positive assets including courage, initiative, and hard work. They were so determined to better their lives and those of their families. Many of them planned to attempt the journey again if deported.

Central American women face life-threatening dangers in order to arrive in the United States. Despite general knowledge about the perils they face, little has been done to assess their mental health needs or document the experiences of their journey. Through the use of feminist standpoint theory, this research builds upon knowledge about immigration and Central American women by adding the women’s own experiences. This necessary step helps to provide social service workers invaluable insight into the research populations’ expertise on their situation.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This section examines the research methods used in the current study on the immigration experiences of Central American women who were undocumented when they came to the United States. I begin by providing a statement of my own standpoint, including my interest in women and immigration. I expose my own outlook first in order to inform the reader of any personal biases I may have as well as why I chose the research population and topic. Then, I address the importance of qualitative research. I include a discussion of the participant criteria, the use of a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews, and how I accessed the population. I then turn my focus to feminist standpoint theory and explore the tenets of the theory along with the details of the methodology. I continue by providing a background on interpretive phenomenological analysis in order to explain the research process in greater detail. Next, I provide a reflection on the goodness of fit of the research population and the chosen methodological theories. I include a statement about the ethics of sensitive research with the population. Finally, I discuss how I analyzed the data and the findings of the research.

My Standpoint

Furthermore, being reflexive in an on-going way supports an ethical stance, including raising awareness of power issues such as the relationships between researchers and informants, between members of research teams, in field relations, and in dissemination and uptake of research findings. (Gilgun, 2015, p. 742).

Feminist standpoint theory (FST) is a research method that requires the researcher to maximize objectivity through reflexivity, or honest reflection on her interest in the research topic, thus

revealing any bias she may have. Supporters of FST recognize that theories and methodologies are, by nature, value-laden and therefore reflect the researchers' beliefs. As the researcher asks questions of a population, so must she ask questions of herself. In order to answer such questions the researcher must first discuss her own standpoint (Hesse-Biber & Yaiser, 2004). A standpoint is one's position in society or knowledge about one's social location, which allows one to see clearly certain aspects of reality and obscures others (Swigonski, 1994).

My interest in gender issues stems from growing up in an all female family with my mother and two sisters and the unique struggles that entailed. Early in my education experience I developed another key interest, that of immigration. I have a bachelor's degree in Spanish and have studied, worked, and traveled extensively throughout Latin America. After I finished my undergraduate studies I entered the Peace Corps as a teaching methodologist and continued to develop an interest in gender and immigration issues. During the Peace Corps I lived in Turkmenistan, a Muslim country that was formerly a part of the Soviet Union. I witnessed the discrimination of immigrants from other areas of the former Soviet Union and ethnic minorities that had been living in Turkmenistan for generations. Language restrictions in the workplace and other new laws forced some of my colleagues and neighbors out of their jobs and in some cases, restricted them altogether from gaining legal employment. Minority women appeared to be particularly affected as they faced the dual impact of discrimination and sexism and several women stated that they were forced to join the sex industry in order to sustain their families, further ostracizing and isolating them.

I went on to receive a Master's in Women and Gender Studies and a Master's in Social Work, where I became interested in the use of feminist theories in social work contexts. During my final semester as a graduate student at Loyola University in 2007, I completed my second year

internship in Mexico. The impact of immigration was immediately noticeable in the small towns of Puebla, Mexico. It was clear that within the last ten years, the area had become one of high out-migration. Men and adolescent boys were conspicuously absent from daily life. Those that were present in the middle schools spoke to us of plans to come to the U.S. for work and seeking better lives.

My colleagues and I also traveled to Veracruz, located on the Central Eastern border of Mexico, to learn more about Central American immigrants attempting to cross through Mexico. We had the opportunity to visit a shelter for immigrants located next to train tracks for a freight train, which changed my life. Upon my arrival the shelter's director quickly ushered me over to a clearly troubled young man because the shelter had no mental health workers. In fact, they had no actual staff, aside from the few volunteers. I spent the better part of the day, speaking to a young man from Honduras who was suffering from acute stress disorder due to the violence he experienced just days before while traveling on the freight train. According to the American Psychiatric Association (2013), acute stress disorder mirrors the symptomology of posttraumatic stress disorder but occurs right after the trauma and has been persistent for at least three days but less than one month. Manuel (names have been changed to protect individual identities) was twenty-one and had left Honduras with his older brother, Pedro, and his younger sister, Alma. Gang members that profited off of the immigrants boarded the train that Pedro and Alma took. When their demands for money were not immediately met, they retaliated. They shot Manuel's older brother Pedro, and threw him off the train to his death. Then they gang-raped his sister. Manuel, who was on another train car, was spared. When he arrived in Acayucan, Veracruz he learned the story of his brother and sister. When I met Manuel three days later he was too frightened to return home and felt paralyzed at the shelter. He carried a newspaper clipping of a

front cover that featured the face of his dead brother and warned of the magnitude of gang violence and their threat to unarmed immigrants. As I listened to his struggle, I found myself troubled about his sister, who, to the best of Manuel's knowledge, was in a hospital on the border, recovering from her brutal attack. It was her story that kept me up for weeks. Women face sexual and physical violence that it is often overlooked and underreported. Alma's story inspired my interest in the stories of the other Central American women embarking on the journey north.

Upon returning from Mexico I began working as a therapist and since then I have worked with many Latina women living in Chicago. The intersection of gender and immigration continues to capture my interest. I worked with a young woman from Central America who was referred to my office for an apparent mood disorder during pregnancy. She revealed that her *coyote* raped her several times during her journey to the United States, and left her pregnant. She was heartbroken because she felt that she had betrayed her five-year-old, for whom she came to work in order to pay for his education. Since then, I have heard countless stories of similar woes from women in the immigrant community. Ultimately, it is these women's stories that led me to the research question: What are the immigration experiences of undocumented Central American women living in the United States? Specifically related to their immigration experiences, I also wanted to know: What are the strengths that sustain them and what are their experiences of trauma throughout the journey?

Qualitative Research

In order to uncover the immigration experiences of undocumented Central American women, I conducted an exploratory qualitative investigation. Qualitative research allows the researcher to look beyond causal relationships and numerical values and to explore the meaning participants place upon phenomena (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). It produces results that can be descriptive in

nature, rather than merely predictive. It is also dynamic, allowing for interviewees to shape their own answers, instead of giving them a few options from which to choose, which can limit their responses and individuality. Through the use of qualitative research the researcher may probe participants further to clarify their responses and to observe participants' behavior and non-verbal communication (Carey, 2009). As Pietkiewicz & Smith (2012) noted, "a great deal of qualitative research aims to provide rich descriptive accounts of the phenomenon under investigation" (p. 361). The resulting descriptions then, become the foundation for theory construction and interpretation (Gilgun, 2015). Through additional analysis, research material gained in qualitative research may help the researcher to form interpretations and generate theory. Theory can be conceptualized as the recognition of interrelated concepts we see situated in scholarly research (Gilgun, 2015).

By reviewing descriptions, including excerpts from research, observations, or other materials, researchers form interpretations (Gilgun, 2015). Since a researcher herself chooses what to include and exclude, interpretation is always used. Through the formation of interpretations and subsequent analysis of them the researcher develops theory. Thus, both the researchers' and the participants' interpretation of phenomena are vital to the analysis (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). Creative thinking and on-going reflexivity aids the construction of theory as existing research is linked to a working hypothesis. (Gilgun, 2015).

Sample Size

Qualitative research allows the researcher to explore the experiences of small groups of people in great detail (Carey, 2009). Robinson (2014) noted that research involving interviews that have a specific aim seek small enough samples for the preservation of individual cases and the ability to analyze them thoroughly. The in-depth study of small samples is an advantage of qualitative

research. The small sample size also allows for extremely detailed and timely analysis (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012).

Although there is no specific rule for the number of interviewees, Pietkiewicz & Smith (2012) suggest that four factors can help determine that number. These include the depth of study, the richness of each case, the use of comparison and/or contrasting, and any practical restrictions. In the present study such restrictions include time restrictions, access to the population, IRB restrictions, as well as the researchers own limitations. In light of those factors, it has been suggested that research involving in-depth interviews may follow a limit of between 3-16 participants per study (Smith et al., 2009). This allows the researcher to assess for generalities amongst participants without the weight of too much information. Individuals, then, maintain their own identity as well (Robinson & Smith, 2010). For example, in her dissertation research on Homeless Mothers' Standpoints, Thérèse M. Craine Bertsch (2014) examined other dissertations guided by feminist standpoint theory and noted that eleven women was recognized as an appropriate sample size. British clinical psychology programs have recommended six to eight participants for a qualitative dissertation specifically using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Turpin et al., 1997). Due to the depth of information contained in each interview as well as the broad categories, each interview in and of itself contained an entire story. Themes were saturated and often times overlapped. Comparing and contrasting their lives in their countries-of-origin alone was a major project. Furthermore, their immigration journeys were each unique and detailed, requiring a tremendous amount of analysis of the data. My sample size of twelve participants is consistent with the chosen methodologies and the research population.

Participants

The criteria for participation specified that participants were adult females from Central America, and that at some point they traveled to the United States without permission to enter the country and/or without permission to remain. Of the seven Central American countries, women from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador were included because of their shared violent political histories, governmental instability, and similar economic situations (Rodriguez & Urrutia-Rojas, 1990). Women from Belize and Costa Rica were excluded because they are not countries of high expulsion, have fared better economically, and are an immigration destination for some Central Americans (Lundquist & Massey, 2005). Panamanian women were also excluded due the country's distant location and the comparably lower numbers of Panamanians living in Chicago. Women from Nicaragua were not purposely excluded but the population was not easily accessible. Initially, one Nicaraguan woman was included in the research but she immigrated irregularly to Costa Rica and by the time she arrived in the U.S. she was documented so her experience was not consistent with the other participants. As is often the case with IPA (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012), the participants are homogeneous in that they are all Central American adult female immigrants currently living in the United States.

On the other hand the women are heterogeneous in terms of country of origin, current age, age at the time of immigration, year of immigration, and time spent in the United States. Out of the twelve participants, seven women are from Guatemala, three women are from El Salvador, and two women are from Honduras. They immigrated between 1962 and 2011 when they were between the ages of 17-38. All of the women identified as native Spanish speakers and they all spoke varying degrees of English.

Accessing the Population

I began the research by accessing the population through community and social service organizations, places of worship, and other locations the population of interest is known to frequent such as restaurants and stores. Then, through the use of snowball sampling, participants were able to identify possible future participants, increasing trust in the researcher, and protecting the vulnerable population (Carey, 2009). Snowball sampling is a form of purposeful sampling, which is ideal for groups of people that are considered difficult to access (Carey, 2009). Participants and others who were willing and/or able to refer others to the project were instructed to give the researcher's information to possible interested candidates that fit the criteria. Those that contacted the researcher were offered the opportunity to participate in a recorded interview. The women who participated were referred to the project through others they trusted, such as relatives, colleagues, social service workers, and religious contacts.

Snowball sampling is a useful technique for sampling subcultures in which the members routinely interact with each other (Monette et. al, 2008). This is particularly pertinent for research with Central Americans who arrive in the United States and tap into previously formed communities from their host country, often arriving to a pre-arranged network of support. Network members may consist of kin or friends and provide a great deal of support for Central Americans (Leslie, 1992). Leslie (1992) notes that these small groups of support remain in frequent contact and rely heavily on one another. This suggests that group members trust one another. They may also be likely to remain in their small groups due to the political climate and mistrust of outsiders. Snowball sampling also allows the researcher to avoid only reaching one portion of the population, such as those that present for treatment at social service agencies. Those who have not come to social service agencies may have greater needs and fewer skills to

seek help. In her research on Latina's realities in public relations organizations, Donnalyn Pompper (2007) used snowball sampling to recruit twenty-five research participants and noted the usefulness of the sampling method for reaching the specific population. However, research participants may socialize with others who are similar to them, which may result in a more homogenous sample.

Feminist Standpoint Theory

Research conducted within a feminist framework is attentive to issues of difference, the questioning of social power, resistance to scientific oppression, and a commitment to political activism and social justice (Hesse-Biber & Yaiser, 2004, p. 3).

Through the use of feminist standpoint theory (FST), I set out to provide the opportunity for the research population to tell their story in their own words and their native language. Of the twelve participants, all but one chose to do the interview in Spanish. The woman who chose to interview in English still incorporated some Spanish where it was most comfortable for her. Feminist standpoint theory is an alternative to traditional research methods that resonates with the social justice goals of social work (Swigonski, 1994). It is a type of critical theory that asserts that knowledge can be produced for marginalized groups and not solely about them (Hesse-Biber & Yaiser, 2004). In FST the marginalized position is the starting point of the research. Through starting with the lives of marginalized people, FST acknowledges the importance of their lived experiences and the insight that such experiences provide. Marginalized populations' experiences, perceptions, and meanings are valued, allowing individuals' experiences to serve as evidence. Personal experience is the consciousness that arises from participation in events. Personal narratives about the events people experience comprises data in feminist scholarship and may reveal important insights into their reality (Foss & Foss, 1994).

Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions allowed the participants to tell their individual stories and to answer as they saw fit. Recognizing the importance of the women's expertise in their own situation makes the political statement that their experiences are all important. As Swigonski (1994, p. 387) notes, "In societies where power is organized hierarchically (by class, culture, or gender), there is no possibility of an impartial, disinterested, value-neutral perspective." Marginalized groups then, offer a less partial standpoint than those of the dominant group as they are aware of the dominant cultures world view and how it contrasts with their own. This double world-view helps them to navigate oppressive situations. By beginning with the lived experiences of marginalized groups, assumptions are decreased, and the researcher upholds the value of the researched as experts in their own life experiences (Hesse-Biber & Yaiser, 2004).

In an effort to advance the goal of FST to benefit other women and participants, the current study asked participants for advice they would give to women thinking of making the same journey. The ability to pass on advice from their lived experiences increases the connection between women who have not yet attempted immigration and those that have successfully immigrated to the U.S. (as measured by their arrival).

Feminist standpoint theory honors social work's commitment to social change and client empowerment (Swigonski, 1994). Examining minority women's discourse about their life experiences illuminates complicated and contextualized understandings that are otherwise obscured by traditional vantage points (Buzzanell, 2003). Conducting research in this manner, not only calls for more work, it produces more accurate results (Harding, 2004). Feminist research addresses mechanisms of power and domination, which results in the ability to criticize those same mechanisms (Oke, 2008).

Feminist standpoint approaches have also been essential in assisting practitioners in changing and enacting policies that benefit vulnerable populations (Buzzanell, 2003).

Critical theorists wish to link social research to a progressive political agenda, and they think it is imperative to reflect on the ideology underlying social research. They disagree with the view that research is, can or should be value-free. Whether intended or not, research always assumes and reinforces certain values. Critical theorists are particularly hostile to the way in which social research is often used for conservative purposes, for identifying malfunctions or problems of social order (Baert, 2005, p. 106).

Feminist standpoint theory requires the researcher to use an ethic of caring, which has helped to produce knowledge about participants skills and strengths (Swigonski, 1994). Highlighting the strengths and resilience of the research population is consistent with respecting their expertise. In doing so, the researcher also avoids categorizing the population merely as victims and acknowledges that the participants are active players and decision makers in their lives. Feminist research highlights the choices women make in an effort to control their lives despite the obvious multiple constraints they often face (Fisher & Davis, 1993). Paying careful attention to the women's uniqueness and strengths through a review of the innovative techniques they use along the perilous journey is essential to understanding their active participation and decision-making despite apparent obstacles. Through the current research study, my aim was to give Central American women the opportunity to voice both the trauma and violence they encountered, including the aftermath of such experiences, and simultaneously note their strengths in the ability to make such risky journeys.

The commitment to political activism and social justice is a key point in ethically conducted feminist informed research (Hesse-Biber & Yaiser, 2004; Buzzanell, 2003). Feminist standpoint analysis of participants' experiences allows exploration of both policy and practice that affect that population (Buzzanell, 2003). As an ethnic minority within a marginalized group,

Central American women face the dual risk of racism and sexism. Birman (2006) notes that, “immigrants who are also racial minorities may experience additional discrimination and prejudice” (p. 157). In the current political environment, undocumented immigrants live in both fear and danger.

According to Castro et. al (2006), research should be conducted with cultural competence, or the capacity to understand, recognize, and work effectively in respect to different forms of cultural diversity. Castro et. al (2006) also note the need for cultural responsiveness within research. Cultural responsiveness refers to both the ability to act in response to major cultural issues and respect for local culture. It should both protect the population and enhance intervention effectiveness.

Through providing a platform for Central American women to tell their stories, I intended to make the political statement that these women’s lives are valuable and their stories are important. Morrow (2005) suggests that one measure by which to review critical theory research is by assessing the consequential validity or the goals of political and social change. This research will form an argument for providing the women with the services that the immigrants themselves deem most important both in their own words and based upon the descriptions of their needs and states upon arrival.

In feminist standpoint theory gender is considered one socially constructed attribute that intersects with other categorizations that combine together to make up one’s standpoint (Hesse-Biber & Yaiser, 2004). Race, class, age, gender, religion, sexual orientation, etc. all contribute to an individual’s world-view and way of being. Accepting that these overlapping factors impact individuals differently and that each experience is also unique prevents the researcher from placing all participants in the same limiting conceptual box. This is particularly important for the

current research population as they are women from different countries within Central America and it should not be assumed that they have had similar experiences on their journeys or in their countries of origin. This can be accomplished not only by allowing space for personal reflection but also through careful analysis of the research results. Through paying particular attention to the uniqueness of responses of women from each country, as well as the uniqueness of individuals, the researcher avoids universalizing or essentializing the population (Foss & Foss, 1994).

In conclusion, Feminist standpoint theory offers an ideal method for research with marginalized populations. It allows the researcher to expose her standpoint and be transparent in her intent. It also encourages participants to be active information givers, thereby empowering them to tell their stories as they see fit. Feminist standpoint theory allows the women to reflect on their experience, focuses on their strength in resilience, and calls on the author to disseminate the information ethically, noting the needs for policy change or activism to support the participants on their healing journey. Research conducted within a critical theory framework asks that the researcher aim to not only uncover injustices but also to work to promote change. The results of this research are necessary to inform development of both treatment and policy.

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

IPA is concerned with the detailed examination of personal lived experience, the meaning of experience to participants and how participants make sense of that experience. (Smith, 2010).

I began my analysis by following the methodological framework of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), analyzing the data through detailed and numerous readings of each interview. IPA assumes that people actively interpret their own lives (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). This assumption, much like FST, recognizes individuals as experts in their own lives. IPA

allows participants stories to be told first to the researcher and then interpreted by the researcher, providing a goodness of fit with FST. The researcher utilizes both the emic perspective, that of the participants, and the etic perspective, which allows for the use of a psychological lens. Through viewing both perspectives the researcher avoids psychiatric reductionism (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012).

IPA combines ideas from the philosophies of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith et. Al, 2009). Phenomenology strives to capture individuals' unique experiences and their perception of events (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). Through using hermeneutics by striving to understand one's attitude and language; "IPA researchers attempt to understand what it is like to stand in the shoes of subject (although recognizing this is never completely possible)" (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012, p. 362). The use of idiography refers to the theoretical orientation that uses a detailed, holistic look at the language, spoken and not, that describes participants' experiences. In other words, it is the comprehensive analysis of individual cases. Pietkiewicz & Smith (2012) summarize IPA in the following manner:

To sum up, IPA synthesizes ideas from phenomenology and hermeneutics resulting in a method which is descriptive because it is concerned with how things appear and letting things speak for themselves, and interpretative because it recognizes there is no such thing as an uninterpreted phenomenon. (p. 363).

Following the IPA framework I first listened to each interview numerous times, acquiring new insight each time. This allows the researcher to begin the process of immersion in the data. Next, I transcribed each interview and reviewed the final product checking for errors and listening for significant findings. Through transcription, I also began categorical analysis, making notes about observations and findings. This included the specific categories I set out looking for such as gendered violence and reasons for immigration as well as emerging categories.

I completed the analysis holistically, by reading each interview thoroughly and viewing each as one woman's experience. I took detailed notes of emerging themes and repeating patterns. During this stage I also identified topics that were recurrent in the research project as a whole, such as experiencing violence in their country-of-origin. I also began to compare and contrast individual's experiences. For example, one woman remained in Mexico for two years. The following table demonstrates my thoughts about that participant's experience in Mexico:

► Table 1

Sample of Notes Taken during IPA Analysis

Original Transcript	Exploratory Comments
<p>Interviewer: (Upon being told that the participant spent two years in Mexico) What were you doing there?</p> <p>Honduran Participant: <i>Trabajaba. Allí me quedaba en Tapachula y una señora me consiguió trabajo en un hotel. Pero eran doce o catorce horas de trabajo. Y me tiraba cloro, cloro en pilotas con la madre de la dueña y se me hinchaban todo, todos los pies, todas las manos. Sufrí mucho. Eran sufrimientos grandes. Y llegaba la migración y me decían, “¿Tu eres de Centroamérica?”. Y yo les decía la verdad, “Si, soy de Honduras”. Voy al norte. Yo quiero ir a los EEUU. Y me decían, “No te preocupes. No te buscamos a ti. No te vamos a llevar. Tu estás trabajando aquí. No te preocupes”. Y me sentía con cansancio me dice; “Te voy a recomendar unas vitaminas hasta que te sientes fuerte”. Ellos mismos.</i></p> <p>(Translation: I was working. I stayed in Tapachula and a woman found work for me in a hotel. But it was 12 or 14 hours of work. I scrubbed with bleach, pods of bleach with the owner's mother and everything swelled up, my feet, my hands. I suffered a lot. It was a lot of suffering. And migration authorities came and they asked, “Are you from Central America?” And I told them the truth, “Yes, I'm from Honduras. I'm going north. I want to go</p>	<p>The participant is both helped by Mexicans who offer her work and taken advantage of by them as she is forced to work long hours cleaning with chemicals.</p> <p>Unlike other participants, she received help from migration authorities. Also, unlike other participants, she spends two whole years in Mexico, making her experience unique.</p>

<p>to the USA.” And they said to me, “Don’t worry. We’re not looking for you. We’re not going to arrest you. You’re working here. Don’t worry.” And I was exhausted. They said, “I’m going to recommend some vitamins to until you feel stronger.” The authorities themselves.</p>	
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As the notes were transformed into emergent themes, I began to categorize them. The reasons participants cited for leaving their countries of origin were both varied and overlapping. Three main categories emerged including escaping violence/seeking safety, reuniting (or remaining united) with loved ones, and economic and other opportunities. I then broke down each category into even smaller categories. For example, two main types of violence emerged. These two types included general violence in the country of origin and violence in the home. Violence in the country of origin could be both in the form of civil war or gang/civilian violence and they were not always distinguishable from one another. Violence in the home was described in the form of childhood abuse (when the actual participants were children) or domestic violence (violence at the hands of a partner of the participant).

Economic and other opportunities emerged as a separate category for their decision to migrate. However, the causes of such problems were varied. For example in one case the cause was attached to a lack of workplace options due to violence in the country. Other reasons were to join loved ones or to remain with a loved one who was immigrating, which also was an overlapping category.

I then assessed and pulled out experiences along the journey including sexual violence and kidnapping, extortion and other human threats, and physical dangers. Again, each category yielded subcategories. Sexual violence was reported by many of the women including those that endured it, those that were threatened by it, and those that witnessed it/heard about it.

I analyzed the women's strengths through their own perceptions and by looking at their methods of survival. Almost all of the women cited faith as a factor that helped them to endure the journey and the unknown. This was a factor about which I did not ask. Caregiving and perseverance as well as cleverness were other factors contributing to their strengths. I then assessed their individual and collective experiences in the United States, which included violence, mental health issues, and poverty. The struggles upon arrival were divided into many of the same struggles faced in their countries of origin. Finally, I included the advice the participants gave to other women considering making the journey. Participants were able to reflect on their own experiences and feelings and use them to help others making such a life-changing decision. Due to the inability to collect identifying information of the women, as stipulated by the IRB, I did not member check with any of the participants. Furthermore, I coded alone, using both previously decided upon categories as well as themes that emerged throughout the process. By coding alone, I risked missing information weaved throughout the interviews.

Research Tool

The women told their own unique stories through semi-structured interviews. With the help of my dissertation committee, I developed a research questionnaire that sought to uncover the participants' immigration experiences. The questionnaire included background questions such as their marital status, ages, whether or not they had children and their country of origin. It also included questions about the women's lives before deciding to make the journey, during immigration, and after their arrival. All three categories were included in order to paint a clearer picture of their reasons for immigration including quality of life in their countries of origin, the motive or motives they cited for immigration, and what they had previously heard about the immigration journey. I included questions about how they prepared for immigration. Making

the comparison to life before and after immigration created the ability to see the differences in the women's lives that occurred after arrival in the United States, both positive and negative. It also allowed for a comparison between participants' experiences.

I was looking specifically at traumatic experiences and strengths during the journey. Traumatic experiences include perceived life threatening or integrity-threatening situations one experiences, witnesses, or about which one hears. The women were asked specifically about traumatic experiences. I asked questions about preparation for the journey, giving and receiving help, and survival techniques, all of which I view as strengths. I also looked at the participants' responses to stressful situations and resourcefulness. Specific questions about the journey included methods of travel, the threat of violence, and abuse of authority in order to assess the levels of threat and potentially traumatic experiences through the women's own interpretations. I asked probing questions when necessary as well, clarifying the specifics of their answers. So, for example, if the women stated yes, they experienced violence during the journey, I asked them to describe it.

The objective of this qualitative research study was to provide the women the opportunity to share their experiences with immigration including preparing for it, the actual journey, and a reflection on how it has affected their lives. The study also gave the opportunity for the women to compare their lives now to those in their countries of origin. I then looked at their perceived traumatic experiences and their strengths. Knowledge about female immigrants' lives before immigration, their experiences during immigration, and their needs upon arrival can be useful in assessing women's unique experiences, avoiding clumping them with male or other-identified Central American immigrants. Many of the questions were intended to elicit narrative, such as

“Describe your life in your country of origin?” Such information, although dense, created a clearer picture of the women’s perceptions as well as their needs upon arrival.

Ethics

Including marginalized populations in research is in and of itself an ethical issue. It is unethical to discount the needs of a vulnerable population due solely to the difficulties of researching the population. This research then, is necessary to inform policy, create culturally appropriate interventions, and to further understand the plight of female Central American immigrants. Exclusion of these groups from research further runs the risk of perpetuating harmful or ineffective practices or policies (Birman, 2006). Furthermore, the ultimate goal of easing human suffering cannot be achieved without sufficient understanding of the women’s plight (Castro et. al, 2006).

In the absence of policies advocating for specific inclusion of refugee and immigrant groups in research samples, it is likely that we will continue to know little about these populations and run the risk of imposing policies and interventions developed for other populations on them without attention to their particular circumstances and needs; however, it can be extremely challenging to identify and include these groups in research (Birman, 2006, p. 160).

Due to their position as undocumented immigrants, any research with the selected population poses the risk of exposing their immigration status. Such a risk is inherently high as exposure could lead to grave consequences. Exposed participants may face job loss, family separation, detention, deportation, or any number of extreme consequences. Therefore, research with this population must be carefully protected. In order to protect individual identities, no information about participants’ names, addresses, or any other identifying information was recorded, leaving no paper or electronic trail identifying participants. Such methodological precautions can prevent malicious or misuse of the information gathered during the research process (Israel &

Hay, 2006). It can also assist in gaining the trust of the research participants. Dissemination of any information has the potential to have adverse consequences for the participants. Therefore the researcher is obliged to gain the trust of all those involved in order to produce the most valid information (Israel & Hay, 2006). Confidentiality, then, in this research, was of utmost importance.

The research population, undocumented Central American women, is what Moore and Miller (2001) refer to as “doubly vulnerable” as “they experience more than one factor that diminishes their autonomy” (p. 1034). Therefore they are at risk for more potential harm than other research populations. Undocumented Central American women living in the United States face multiple barriers throughout their immigration journey. Due to their undocumented status, position as an ethnic minority, and cultural and linguistic disadvantages, they are at higher risk for potential harm.

Central American females who immigrate irregularly are vulnerable for three specific reasons, a.) They arrived in the United States without documentation, b.) They are an ethnic minority and therefore are at risk for discrimination, and c.) They are women who are also at risk for sexism. This population has been repeatedly disempowered and silenced and therefore I strived to avoid continuing that cycle and to assist the population by giving voice to their experiences and concerns through conducting culturally appropriate research.

As a woman trained in trauma informed methodologies, I hoped to prevent re-traumatizing participants, which is a risk of research with vulnerable populations (Covington, 2003). In order to reduce stress on the participants, interviews were conducted in safe areas chosen by the participants including churches, social service agencies, rectories, and participants' homes. Due to the existential nature of IPA studies, interviewers should monitor participants

throughout the interview, which I did for each woman. Counseling skills as well as interviewing skills are important (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). For example, I stopped one woman who became distressed when talking about her history with sexual violence. I stopped recording, allowing her to compose herself. I asked her if she would like to continue and offered her the option to stop. I felt comfortable with this concern as a clinical social worker that practices as a psychotherapist. I am also fluent in Spanish and have extensive experience in Latin America and am therefore, what Birman (2006) considers a “partial insider.”

The women were all voluntary research participants and were informed that they could stop or discontinue at any point with no consequences. Finally, due to the possibility of causing stress, anxiety, or re-traumatization, the researcher gave each participant detailed information and referrals to agencies that can serve participants’ mental health, legal, and health needs.

Study Limitations

Although I believe that an exploratory qualitative investigation and feminist standpoint theory represented the best methods to allow Central American women the opportunity to tell the stories of their immigration journeys, there are some study limitations. The small sample size means that the information gathered cannot be representative of all Central American women that migrate without documentation. Although generalization was not my goal, it also limits the ability to compare data from one country to the next. Other differences between participants included their age at the time of immigration, year of immigration, and amount of duress, for example, under which they traveled. Immigrants also tend to travel to areas where a pre-established community of immigrants from their place of origin lives. As I only interviewed women in the Chicago area, they may have had similar experiences in their countries of origin and chosen similar immigration routes. The study may have missed then, populations from

certain areas of Central America that primarily migrate to other states within the United States, such as New York or Miami. The study also only included women who were successful on their journeys and are now living in the United States. Those that had to return to their countries of origin could not be included. Finally, since only I conducted the analysis, I may have missed prospective themes or excluded potentially helpful information. Despite all of these limitations, I believe the current study is valuable to social workers as well as other mental health and social service workers, who may gain insight into the immigration experiences of a vulnerable population, which we strive to serve ethically and appropriately.

Conclusion

The methods chosen for this research project, the use of a questionnaire in semi-structured interviews with room for individual narratives, and the use of feminist standpoint theory combined with interpretive phenomenological analysis provided the perfect platform for the participants to share their stories as they saw fit. The self-reporting of their personal history, their individual experiences including traumatic ones, and the development of any mental health symptoms gave a clearer picture both of the reasons for immigration and the potential consequences to Central American female immigrants.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to bring to light the realities of immigration for Central American women living in the United States. Through semi-structured, qualitative interviews twelve women from Central America addressed the following questions: 1.) How did participants experience immigration? 2.) What, if any, were their traumatic experiences surrounding immigration? 3.) What strengths did they employ throughout the journey? Participants also disclosed other significant details surrounding their experiences such as the reasons they chose to immigrate, their needs upon arrival, and advice they would give to other Central American women who are planning to make the same journey.

Twelve women from three Central American countries participated in the research including seven women from Guatemala, three women from El Salvador, and two women from Honduras. The interviews were conducted in private locations chosen by the women; either in their home, the researcher's office, a social service organization, or a Church. The interviews lasted between thirty minutes and two hours and thirty minutes. All participants were volunteers and were informed that they could stop the interviews at any time. The participants are introduced in the order in which they were interviewed. Their names have been changed to protect their identity. A randomly chosen first name, their country of origin, the year that they immigrated to the United States, and their age at the time of immigration are used to identify the participants. The women interviewed immigrated between 1962 and 2011. They were between the

ages of 17-38 at the time of immigration. The journey took between one day for those who flew in with a temporary visa and two years for a woman who was trapped in limbo in Mexico. Each of their stories is unique and invaluable. Every woman that participated shared a powerful piece of her history.

The Participants

1. Carmen, Guatemala, 1993, age 29:

No quiero que me violen, no quiero que me peguen el sida, ni que me maten. (Translation: I don't want them to rape me. I don't want them to give me AIDS or to kill me.)

Carmen is a Guatemalan woman who worked for ten years as a primary school teacher. Her father was a journalist and her mother was a housewife. Her seven siblings have all taken up professions of their own. She wanted to come to the United States to “see it” but was denied a visa several times. She believes that she was not given a visa because she was single and the government assumed that she wanted to remain in the United States, which was not her plan at the time. She noted that she was fearful of dying on the journey and didn't want to have to cross the border illegally. However, she wanted to see the country so much that she spoke with her father and they decided to pay the \$3,000 it would take to pay a smuggler to get her to the United States. She left Guatemala in 1993 at the age of twenty-nine.

Carmen had an uncle who lived in Joliet and he always said how beautiful it is in Chicago. Her family's economic situation was also very difficult and she was the only one bringing money home at the time. She decided that she would work for a year and a half in the U.S. in order to make enough money and then would return to Guatemala. At the time, she believed that the economic situation of Guatemala would improve. However, she noted that not only has it not improved but also that the amount you earn in one week working in the United States is

equivalent to what you earn in a month in Guatemala. Carmen also discussed the violence in her country, which had prevented her from becoming a journalist like her father. She noted that she was discouraged by the disappearance of Irma Flaquer, a Guatemalan reporter, psychologist, and human rights activist, in 1980. It is commonly believed that the Guatemalan government was responsible for her murder due to her outspokenness against human rights abuses.

Carmen had to pay half of the money to her *coyote* before leaving. She hid money throughout her person in preparation for departure. She noted that about 20 people left from her town together. She left as a single virgin and was adamant that she wanted to remain that way throughout the journey. Carmen, like other women interviewed, found it disheartening that some Guatemalan men wanted to take advantage of the women traveling, that the threat of rape also came from her own people. “*Pero los hombres venían queriendo violar en el camino, ¡y mi propia raza! Eso sí me dolió.*” (Translation: But the men came wanting to rape on the journey and my own race! That did hurt me).

Carmen met one Mexican man who pretended to be her spouse when they were caught by immigration authorities. They stated they were on their honeymoon. Since he was a citizen of Mexico, they believed them. The Mexican friends she made while traveling helped her throughout the journey. She also traveled with her brother-in-law, a Guatemalan, who was her sister’s boyfriend at the time. Carmen believes God was also guarding her throughout her journey. “*Yo pienso que en todo eso Dios me guardó.*” (Translation: I think that during all of this God guarded me).

Sexual abuse was a threat that Carmen feared throughout her journey. One evening she held her nail clippers, unable to sleep, because she believed her countrymen were going to try to rape the women. At one point she threatened to call the authorities, who would send them all

back to Guatemala, if they didn't leave her alone. Either they had to leave her alone or they were all going to be sent back, she stated. She saw many women who didn't have enough money or whose families couldn't help them and they were stuck in Mexico working; either cleaning or in prostitution.

After traveling by bus to the border, Carmen and her companions were stopped again by the police. She traveled with a pregnant woman who was with her sister and mother. She worried about her throughout the journey. Unlike the men, who went over the mountains or through the river, she traveled through the immigration line, hidden in a trunk. It took her eighteen days in total to arrive. 'They felt like eighteen years though,' she stated. She later discovered that her smugglers were not only moving people but also drugs. They used the same paths and techniques to move both humans and drugs over the border.

After arriving in the United States Carmen had trouble sleeping. She was in constant fear of the police and people in uniform, fearing they could be immigration authorities. Carmen received help from family members and the church. Later, she sought help from a domestic violence program. She married a Guatemalan American, who became abusive. She was reluctant to seek help as she was also in the process of becoming a citizen.

Carmen stated that she would advise other women not to come if they can make it in their country of origin. If they do come they should try to do so with a visa. "*Pero, si hay maneras de sobrevivir en el país, mejor que se queden. Al menos que vengan con una visa.*" (Translation: But if it is possible to make it in their country, it's better for them to stay. At least they should come with a visa.) Finally, she noted, they should strive to have help available upon arrival.

2. Paola, Honduras, 1992-1994, age 29 (upon arrival):

Pues yo les digo que lo piensen mucho y lo piensen bien porque venir por México no es tan fácil. Le digo yo, si yo volvería a estar en Honduras yo lo vuelvo a hacer. Valió la pena tantos años sufriendo y doy gracias que estoy aquí. (Translation: Well, I would tell them to think a lot and to think hard about it [immigration] because coming through Mexico is not so easy. I say that if I were back in Honduras, I would do it again. It was worth it, so many years of suffering, and I thank God that I'm here.)

Paola is a Honduran woman with four daughters. She suffered domestic violence at the hands of the father of her daughters for eleven years. He drank often and would arrive home extremely late. She left Honduras in order to escape escalating domestic violence in 1992. Her partner, who had been verbally and psychologically abusive for some time, became more and more violent. One day, he bit her all over her body. He also began to threaten her with a pistol. “*La vecina siempre me decía, ‘Ya no sufra. Váyase, váyase donde él no te puede encontrar.’ Y pues yo estaba amenazada que me iba a matar.*” (Translation: My neighbor always said to me; ‘Don’t suffer anymore. Go, go somewhere he can’t find you.’ and I was scared he was going to kill me.)

Her neighbor convinced her to leave and offered to help her, citing impending danger and immediate need. At the time, Paola made the heartbreaking decision to leave behind her four daughters: a ten-year-old, eight-year-old twins, and a six-year-old. She couldn’t afford to pay for the journey but her neighbor offered financial as well as moral support. Upon entering Mexico, Paola was swiftly captured and sent back over the border to Guatemala, where she decided to attempt to cross Mexico again. Immigrants who are deported may be sent over one border but not necessarily to their country of origin.

Paola decided to attempt to cross again due to the violence she suffered at home. The neighbor with whom she started the journey decided to return to Honduras. She stated, “*No, ella ya no regresó. Ella no sufría violencia domestica. Ella quería venir*” (Translation: No, she decided not to come back [over the border]. She didn’t suffer domestic violence. She wanted to come

[home].” She traveled with three other Hondurans. She went back to Mexico and had to beg for help in a church. She also received help from an old Honduran friend who lived in Mexico but the help was short lived.

Exhausting the financial help of her neighbor, who returned to Honduras citing poor health, Paola decided to remain and work in Mexico. She began working in a hotel, where she was given free room and board in exchange for twelve-hour workdays. She spent many of those hours cleaning using bleach and other harsh chemicals. Paola recalled an incident during which she received help from immigration authorities who noted her exhaustion and suggested that she begin taking vitamins in order to improve her health.

In a cruel twist of fate, another Honduran woman tried to sell her into prostitution in Puebla and stole what little belongings she had. “*En el mero Centro de Puebla, en donde está la mera catedral. Allí me estuve y me ayudó supuestamente una Hondureña. La Hondureña me robó todo. Y me iba a entregar a un lugar de prostitución.*” (Translation: Right in the center of Puebla, right by the main Cathedral. There I was and a Honduran woman supposedly helped me. She robbed me of everything. She was going to hand me over to a place of prostitution.) The irony of receiving help from immigration authorities and being threatened by a fellow Honduran was not lost on her.

Paola returned to Honduras three times throughout her two-year stay in Mexico to see her children. Each time she felt that she would not survive in Honduras but was unable to fund the entire journey to the United States. In April of 1994, after two years of grueling work in Mexico and feeling completely stuck, she began the journey through Mexico to the United States again. She traveled by bus from the capital to the border.

Finally, at the age of twenty-nine, two years after her journey began, Paola arrived in the United States on May 4th, 1994. She was assisted by a dear friend making the same journey, one to whom she still feels great gratitude. She recalled that her friend stated, “*Yo no te dejo. Tú vas conmigo. Vas a llegar conmigo.*” (Translation: I will not leave you. You’re going with me. You’ll arrive with me.) Paola stated that she believes her friend was an angel sent from God. Upon arriving in the United States and before arriving at their final destination, they stayed with some men who were dealing drugs. The men with whom they were staying threatened to kidnap them by holding them against their will. Paola and her friend were able to prevent that by threatening to contact the police. Crossing the border and finally arriving in the United States, then, does not eliminate the threats that immigrants face, nor guarantee their safety.

Paola received a work visa in the United States in 1999 due to the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch. When asked whether or not she would make the same journey now, she replied ‘yes.’ She noted that despite all of her suffering along the journey, she is grateful to have been able to help her family, to bring them here one by one. She also noted that the assistance of her girlfriend combined with the work she completed in a domestic violence program, including therapy, were extremely helpful upon her arrival.

Paola stated that the social service agency where she received services as a domestic violence survivor as well as the lead clinician at that program helped her ‘a lot.’ When speaking about her experience with receiving services she noted that it took her time to open up. “*He tenido un cambio porque antes pues yo no hablaba, le escuchaba pero no explicaba. Porque digo yo pues, si yo le hablo a la mejor me van a ver mal. Pero ahora pues, yo sé que pues me entienden un poquito.*” (Translation: I have changed because before I wouldn’t speak. I listened but I didn’t

explain. Because I said, if I speak maybe they'll judge me. But now well, I know that they understand me some.)

Paola compared her two-year long immigration journey and the experiences she had during those two years to the suffering of Jesus. She noted that he was enslaved and gave his life on the cross. She also thanks him for her safe arrival and everything she has been able to accomplish since her arrival. She stated, "*Sabe quien sufrió? Nuestro Señor. Él fue esclavizado. Él fue sacrificado en la cruz. Y él pagó todo le digo. Él pagó todo para nosotros. Y yo, he sufrido sangres en México... Si, gracias al Señor ya estoy.*" (Translation: You know who suffered? Our Father. He was enslaved. He was sacrificed on the cross. He paid everything, I say. He paid everything for us. And I, I have suffered with my blood in Mexico... Yes, thank God I am here.)

3. Lucinda, Guatemala, 2011, age 26:

Fue triste despedirme de mis seres queridos, de mi hijo, de mi mamá, de mis hermanos. Fue algo que se me partió el corazón. (Translation: It was difficult to say goodbye to my loved ones, to my son, my mother, my siblings. It was something that broke my heart.)

Lucinda is a Guatemalan woman who married at the age of fourteen. She described her life in Guatemala as "good." She lived in an area with many charming places and tourist attractions. Her husband was hard working and she describes their life together as 'really happy.' They had a son together. When their son was three, her husband was murdered, making her a widow at a young age. She believes gang members who were 'jealous' of him due to his work ethic and family, were responsible for his death. She stated prior to his death her relationship with her first husband was wonderful.

After her husband's murder, Lucinda decided to join her new partner and immigrate to the United States in order to support her young son. She noted that despite working from sun up to sun down in Guatemala, one still could not make ends meet. She made the decision to leave

promptly although her family was opposed to her making the journey to the United States. She was warned about the danger of kidnapping and sexual abuse of women along the journey as it had been all over the news. She is thankful to God for her safe arrival to the United States. She stated “*Gracias a Dios, con la ayuda de Dios.*” (Translation: Thanks to God, with the help of God.)

Lucinda traveled with just two other women and several men. One of the men with whom she was traveling attempted to rape her along the way. She was also offered drugs during the journey, which she refused. She recalled encountering both good and bad people throughout her trip. Mexicans helped her along the way by protecting her and giving her food and water while traveling on the train. Some of her compatriots ignored her due to her being from a different area of Guatemala and what she felt like was prejudice against their own race. When speaking about with whom she traveled she noted the prevalence of internalized racism. She stated that she was traveling with “*otras personas si del mismo pueblo pero hay mucho racismo que uno no reconoce de su propio raíz.*” (Translation: other people from the same village but there is a lot of racism that people do not recognize from their own race.)

Lucinda described the brutal experience of riding the train. Due to safety concerns she was not able to sleep all day/night. She was also exposed to extreme temperatures both sweltering and frigid. Immigration authorities did not detain her during her journey. However, in Mexico she had to pay the police several times in order to continue traveling. Extortion was commonplace and if an immigrant was unable to pay some one in a position of authority, they would be turned in to immigration. Before her journey, Lucinda wasn't thinking of all of the risks. However, she repented during the journey when she discovered that one suffers too much. “*Me olvidé de todo eso por completo y hasta que vi todo lo que estaba pasando, todo lo que uno sufría, si me arrepentí.*” (Translation: I forgot about all of that completely and until I saw what

was happening, everything that one suffers, I repented.) She experienced hunger, thirst, sleeping in the open, facing the mafia, and the knowledge that it is even more risky for women. She recalled sleeping in a dump in the back of the mountains, eating old food, and waiting for the train during her journey. In order to survive the ordeal, she put everything in the hands of God. She stated, “*todo eso le puse en las manos de dios.*” (Translation: All of that I put in the hands of God.)

On October of 2011 after twenty days of traveling, Lucinda arrived in the United States with nothing. Unfortunately, her ordeal did not end there. She arrived at a safe house in Arizona, where the owner of the house threatened to rape her, saying that if she didn't allow him he would give her to the immigration authorities. Her own quick wit along with some helpful travelers saved her. She told the man that she thought of him as an uncle, a father, or some one to whom she looks up. She dissuaded him long enough for the arrival of Mexican immigrants, who stated she was their sister and slept in the same room as her. She then arrived in Tennessee, where she remained for a week and was again threatened with rape. She noted that during that week many of the people with whom she stayed were drinking and using drugs. She didn't want to remain in the United States because she always felt threatened. At that point, she thought that if it were easier, she would return to Guatemala. She stated, “*si fuera fácil regresarme a Guatemala yo me regreso.*” (Translation: if it were easy to return to Guatemala I would return.)

Upon arrival in Chicago, people donated clothing and other items to her. She also eventually received federal assistance in the form of WIC and LINK after becoming pregnant. Currently, she lives with her in-laws, who assist her by providing a roof over her head and the basic necessities. Unfortunately, things went downhill after her arrival and she has not been able to accomplish her original goals. She stated that she wanted to provide financial assistance to her

son in Guatemala so that he could attend school. She also planned to reunite with him in a couple of years. Her second husband (28), the father of her baby, had trouble with the law and he was deported. His deportation took place three weeks before their baby was born. Not only was her husband unable to attend the birth, but her son was also born with disabilities. He had underdeveloped lungs and is missing an ear. At the time of the interview he was just six months old. Lucinda would like to work but is unable to do so due to her son's health problems and special needs. Her other son (10) is hyperactive and she has monthly bills for him, which she has not been able to pay. Her baby's father, now back in Guatemala, has started another family. She spoke with the woman with whom he is in a relationship.

Lucinda stated that she would have already returned to Guatemala if it were not for her infant son with special needs. She is only able to speak with her son in Guatemala once a month because of financial constraints. Her infant will need at least a year of care here, if not more. Lucinda would tell other women not to attempt the journey. She stated that if she goes back to her country, she will not return to the United States. "*Ya no quiero vivir lo que viví, todo lo que pasé. Que quisieron abusar de mi. Me quisieron drogar.*" (Translation: I don't want to live through what I lived through again. That they wanted to rape me. They wanted to drug me.) The American dream, she says, is hard. ("*El sueño americano es duro.*")

4. Oralia, Guatemala, 1976, age 26:

Yo diría que no se vinieron. Es muy arriesgado, muy arriesgado. Mi hermana fue abusada. El coyote se abusó de ella. (Translation: I would tell them not to come. It's very dangerous, very dangerous. My sister was raped. The *coyote* raped her.)

Oralia hales from Guatemala. She described her life in Guatemala and her childhood as extremely difficult. Her mother suffered from depression and mental illness. As a result, Oralia suffered psychological and physical abuse, including burns and beatings, at the hands of her

mother. At the age of five she was sexually abused by a relative and she was blamed. She recalled always having to be “both mother and father” as her mother was often unable to care for her children. At the age of ten, Oralia had to watch her two younger siblings as her mother was hospitalized for three months due to what she believes was a mood disorder after giving birth. Her sisters were only six and new born. During that period she also endured sexual abuse at the hands of her stepfather.

Oralia worked in trade when she met her husband who came to Guatemala for vacation. She attempted to get a visa to come to the United States but was denied. Then, in 1976, she decided to come with her brother-in-law illegally in order to reunite with her husband. In order to prepare herself for the journey she prayed for her safe passage. She walked to Baja California with a mixed group from El Salvador, Mexico, and Guatemala. At one point she hid in a garage with fifteen or more people. The next day a car with a camper came and they hid in the dark, over the tire, four people (two in each space over the tire). *Allí nos colocaron como Drácula digo yo sobre la llanta.* (Translation: There we posed like Dracula over the tires.) They couldn't move and were frightened of being caught as they were hidden in the camper. Oralia noted that she could hear border patrol talking as they checked the camper. After traveling for three days and nights from the border to Tijuana without showering, she went to the airport in California. She arrived on the 11th of May, planning to reunite with her husband and her oldest sister.

Upon arrival, Oralia began a challenging life with her husband, which afforded her little freedom. She lived with his relatives and was expected to complete all of the household chores. Approximately a year and a half after her arrival they moved into their own home and things began to improve in their relationship. Six months after they moved into their own home, her husband was killed during a robbery in their warehouse. In 1978, two years after her arrival in the

United States, her husband died on the way to the hospital. They were both twenty-eight years old.

The trauma of losing her husband did not end after his death. She received threats and had to stop going to the business. She then had to identify his killers. Oralia entered into another abusive relationship. About him she stated; when he was calm he was good, when he wasn't he 'washed the floor with one.' She began having panic attacks and nightmares. Finally, she was diagnosed with PTSD, for which she was prescribed medication.

Oralia stated that she would tell other women not to come to the United States undocumented, as it is so risky. Her sister's *coyote* abused her sister on her journey. She has experienced many trials here in the United States and it is not as easy as one would think.

5. Ana, El Salvador, 1980, age 21:

Yo me liberé del tormento de mi papá. Eh, pero me he puesto a pensar mis tres hermanos son profesionales. (Translation: I freed myself from the torment of my father. But I have thought about the fact that my siblings are all professionals.)

Ana left San Salvador (El Salvador) on the 12th of December in 1980, which was *el día de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe* (the day of Our Lady of Guadalupe). Ana stated that her father was violent, which influenced her decision to remain in the U.S. He drank often and abused Ana as well as her mother. She flew to Mexico with a Mexican visa. From the capital they planned to go to the border town of Juarez. She traveled with three cousins and a friend of her uncle. They traveled with a *coyote*, a female guide, through Mexico. As they had to cross a river, Ana recalled feeling terrified of swimming and not wanting to get into the water. Her male cousin was caught and sent back to El Salvador, where he met his fate, death at the hands of gang members.

Ana and her companions were caught as soon as they arrived in the United States. She gave a false name and stated she was from Guerrero. They were instructed to pretend that they

were Mexican so that if they were deported, it would only be over the Mexican border, making the next attempt much easier. She was put in a room with two other women, her cousin and the *coyota*. The guards asked them how much money they had. Eventually, the immigration authorities took them to the *frontera*, Mexican border, by truck. They intended to return them to Mexico, however Ana and her fellow travelers ran away after pretending to buy an apple. They then hid under a train and narrowly escaped the detection of a dog. Ana recalled running into a restaurant named “Hollywood” and hiding for what felt like a very long time in the bathroom. They were then picked up by their guide’s network and taken to a house in Houston. The next day they went to the airport where they were instructed not to say anything but “hi.” She recalled that she didn’t breathe until the airplane began to move.

Two days after leaving El Salvador and flying into Mexico, she arrived in the United States, where she stayed inside for two weeks. After arriving in Chicago she paid \$20 to get a SSN so that she could work. She began working third shift, which she found difficult. She began dating someone who was verbally abusive and she had a traumatic pregnancy loss. She quickly became pregnant again, after which her partner left her because he didn’t want children. She noted that he stated, “*!Yo no quiero niños!*” (Translation: I don’t want children!) “*Pero tampoco quería que yo tomara anticonceptivos.*” (Translation: But he didn’t want me to take contraceptives either.)

Ana recalled that she spent her pregnancy alone and was fired when her boss began to worry about the impact of the work on her pregnancy. She had placenta previa as well and had to have a Cesarean Section. The baby’s father returned after their son was born despite the fact that he was seeing other women. He became verbally abusive again, reminding Ana of her own father. When the child was four, he left for good and never helped again. She was unable to get child support.

She had to send her son to El Salvador when he was in high school due to his own involvement with gangs. At the time of the interview he was twenty-six and had a newborn daughter. He no longer has gang connections and received help from the organization previously known as Cease Fire, which helped youth leave the gang culture.

Ana recalled that she began to have hallucinations and became anxious. She was hospitalized one time. She sees a psychologist and takes medication as well. She noted that she has given her testimony in the church, to the priest, to her psychologist and doctor. She has also suffered extreme weight gain and arthritis due to side effects of the medication. Her psychologist encouraged her to confront her father about his abuse but she decided not to upset him due to his advanced age.

Ana doesn't believe that other women should make the journey now and is concerned about all of the undocumented children arriving in recent years. (*“Oh, en ésta época, yo no pienso que sea buena idea. Me alarma ver esos niños que están entrando ellos solos.”* (Translation: Oh, in these times I don't think it would be a good idea. It worries me to see the children coming here alone.) She also finds the U.S. to be a lonely place for immigrants. She stated, *“Aquí hay mucha soledad. Hay muchas personas solas.”* (Translation: There is a lot of loneliness here. There are many people alone.) She believes it would be helpful if the government were better equipped to enforce child support laws for single mothers.

6. Esmeralda, Guatemala, 1979, age 24:

Que no se recomienda a nadie es una ventura muy fea. A nadie. A nadie. Que no se arriesguen porque pues uno peligra mucha con esta gente. (Translation: That I don't recommend it to anyone. It is an ugly fate. To nobody, to nobody. That they shouldn't risk it because one risks too much with these people.)

Esmeralda is from Guatemala where she worked as a secretary with lawyers. Although her situation was 'okay,' the economic situation at the time wasn't good. At the age of twenty-four in May of 1979, she decided to come to the United States hoping for more economic freedom. She packed a small bag and a little bit of money and took a bus to Tapachula (a border town on the Mexican side). She had a passport with a visa to Mexico and made a \$250 down payment with the promise to pay the rest in L.A. In Tapachula she was asked if she wanted to go by bus or train. She chose the train due to fearing the bus ride. Esmeralda stated that she was lucky to have Mexican friends and the ability to imitate their accent. "*Gracias a Dios a mi no me fue tan mal porque yo tenía amistades Mexicanos y el acento mío era como Mexicano.*" (Translation: Thank God it wasn't that bad for me because I had Mexican friends and my accent was like a Mexican's.) There were people from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala traveling with her. In Mexico City she went to visit the Virgin de Guadalupe and asked for her companionship on the journey. She believes the Virgin de Guadalupe protected her throughout the journey. "*Ella me protegió mucho.*" (Translation: She protected me a lot.) She flew from Guadalajara to Tijuana.

She was separated from the group and the *coyote* held her against her will for one month during which time she was raped. The woman living in the house, the *comadre* of her abuser, finally sent her with another man to cross the border after she begged for her help. They walked 'for hours and hours.' Her abuser attempted to come back and get her, forcing her to hide in the bottom of the *camioneta*, van. They were left hiding in the desert, listening to snakes and real coyotes, waiting for the next person to pick them up so that they could continue their journey north. Esmeralda described being stuffed tightly in a vehicle "like sausages", until they finally arrived in California. The journey took between one and one and a half months altogether. One

of those months was spent in the house of her capture. The economic cost of her journey was \$500, far less than the social-emotional toll.

Her sister came to get her in California and they flew to Chicago. Her sister helped her with her basic needs including housing upon arrival. Eight years prior to the interview she met her husband. Esmeralda noted that life is more relaxed in her country of origin whereas here life is really stressful and super fast-paced. “*Acá tiene mucho estrés.*” (Translation: There is a lot of stress here.) However, economically she has a lot here. She noted that one works hard here but also has twice as many things. She believes that people get sicker here due to the work habits and all the stress. “*Yo creo que aquí se enferma uno mas que allá.*” (Translation: I believe that people become sick more often here than they do there.) When she became ill herself she saw a psychologist, which gave her the opportunity to talk about the traumas she endured on her immigration journey. She stated that she would not recommend the journey to anybody as it is quite terrible and the risks are too high. “*Hay mucho abuso y ahora está peor todavía. Las secuestran así como el señor hizo conmigo.*” (Translation: There is a lot of abuse and now it’s even worse. They kidnap women like that man did to me.)

7. Viviana, Honduras, 2008, age 38:

Yo, por ejemplo, hablo de mi caso muy particular y de muchas personas que yo conozco. Que somos mujeres que venimos a trabajar, que venimos a luchar para nuestros hijos. Que no somos personas que queremos dañar a nadie. Al contrario queremos servir porque créeme que las personas que yo conozco, muchas de ellas tienen todo el deseo de ayudar. (Translation: For example, speaking about my particular case and those of many people that I know, we are women that came to work to fight for (a better life) for our children. We are not people that want to hurt anyone. On the contrary, we want to serve because, believe me, many of them just want to help.)

Viviana is from Honduras where, before immigrating, she lived with her mother and her two children. As violence mounted against human rights workers, her chosen field, she began to fear

for her life. She had studied rights and began having trouble with a “*sindicato*,” labor union. In 2008 one of her co-workers was attacked and killed, which caused the impetus for her decision to immigrate. She became terrified, as her colleagues in the field were targets. “*Vi que la inseguridad ya era demasiada.*” (Translation: I saw that the insecurity had become too much.) At the age of 38 she made the heartbreaking decision to leave her mother and two children in San Pedro Azul, which, she noted, is ‘one of the most dangerous cities according to the statistics’ (“*una de las ciudades mas peligrosas actualmente según los índices*”). She quit her job and came to the U.S. for what she thought would just be a short period of time. However, her life in the United States was much more complicated than she thought it would be. “*Realmente las cosas no fueron tan fáciles como yo pensaba.*” (Translation: Really it wasn’t very easy here as I thought it would be.)

Viviana came with a tourist visa and began working under the table. She didn’t know any one. She had one friend here when she arrived but her friend already had her life here. She wanted to return to Honduras after arriving but couldn’t leave without anything for her children. “*Aquí decidí seguir luchando.*” (Translation: I decided to remain here and keep trying.) Upon arrival she received help in the form of information about where she could go for food kitchens, free clothes, and medical help. She worked odd jobs in houses, caring for children, and cleaning.

It was really hard for her to bring her daughters here and she was constantly scared for their safety. “*Yo casi no dormía.*” (Translation: I almost didn’t sleep.) Her youngest daughter was only seven and the oldest was fifteen in 2011 when she could finally bring them here. Now she wants to bring her mother, who’s older. She has applied and been denied twice for a visa for her mother. She believes it is due to not having sufficient economic recourse. “*Estamos divididos. Se me hace muy duro.*” (Translation: We are divided. It’s very hard.) She is an only child and sends

her mother money for rent, food, medicine, etc. She has not been able to return to Honduras and talks to her about once a week.

Viviana is now worried for her mother's safety as people who know that she is in the U.S. may think that she has money. She is always scared people will hurt her mother, trying to rob her. She advises her mother not to tell people that she is here. However, in her small town, most people are aware of everyone's whereabouts. She wishes her mother wouldn't leave home because she is so scared for her well being, but such a wish is unrealistic. She asks her mom not to leave stating, "*Mami, no salgas!*" (Translation: Mom, don't go out!)

Not only did Viviana give up her career when she came to the U.S., she also has not had steady work. She lost a house because she couldn't find sufficient work. Now, she helps her husband with gardening and babysits. Losing her career has impacted her greatly. She studied English in her country of origin but doesn't feel confident enough to speak it professionally, making a career in her field impossible. She reported suffering depression due to those losses. "*Me deprimí mucho, mucho, mucho porque yo decía 'Waow, que difícil, que duro!'*" (Translation: I became very, very, very depressed because I said 'wow, how difficult, how challenging!')

Despite such challenges she kept thinking that 'I have to be able to do it' (*tengo que poder.*) She helps her husband to run their small gardening business. She recalled her grandmother telling her that it doesn't matter what you do but to do it well. She also still plans to learn English well enough to speak it.

Viviana recognizes that people in Central American countries are facing many terrible situations. However, there are also so many more opportunities here. There are things here that her children could never have there. She would like women to think about immigration really,

really hard because nothing is easy here. “*Las cosas no son fáciles aquí.*” (Translation: Things are not easy here.) She sees the value in coming here and the risk involved as well.

8. Mariana, Guatemala, 2000 and 2003, age 27:

Si se pueden superar allá esta mejor porque estamos con la familia, estamos en nuestro país, estamos con nuestras costumbres bonitas. (Translation: If they can survive there it is better because we are with the family, we are in our country, and we have our beautiful customs.)

Mariana is a Guatemalan woman who first came to the United States in 2000. She is the youngest of four sisters. She completed secondary school and studied education. At the age of nineteen she moved to the capital in order to pursue a college degree while working. She worked in a clothing store seven days a week and studied Monday through Friday for six months. She then found a more lucrative job with Kellogg’s (cereal) promoting their product and traveling, which lasted a year. She decided to come to the U.S. in order to help her family buy a home. “*Teníamos necesidad en la familia de poder comprar una casa propia.*” (Translation: We had a need in the family to be able to buy our own house.) In 2000 at the age of 27, Mariana came to the U.S. for the first time to work.

Upon arrival she received help from the Guatemalan family with whom she stayed. In 2001 she cleaned houses and worked in a bakery. She had met people and was going to church as well. In 2003 she returned to Guatemala as planned in July. She did not plan to return to the United States until she met her husband in Guatemala. She came back to the U.S. on a tourist visa, which was only six months in duration. She found work cleaning houses and babysitting. After many encounters with the police for driving without a license she finally received citizenship in 2008 and the following year she had her first baby.

Mariana noted that due to the police stopped her for not having a license, she felt uncomfortable. She decided to apply to be able to remain with her American citizen husband. Despite what she reported as a relatively easy immigration process she still advised other women to remain in their country-of-origin if possible. She stated that if they can make it at home, it's better to remain with one's "family, country, and traditions." Of her three siblings, she is the only one here. However, her sisters have been able to visit her.

In 2008 Mariana returned to Guatemala, now able to travel freely, and stated that she felt uncomfortable due to the increase in violence. "*Yo si regrese a mi país en el 2008 a visitar pero verdaderamente ya no me sentí bien por la cantidad de violencia especialmente en mi pueblo.*" (Translation: I returned to my country to visit in 2008 and truly I no longer felt comfortable due to the amount of violence, especially in my town.) She believes there is much more protection here in the United States, specifically laws protecting women. ("*Hay mucha protección a las mujeres*"; translation: There is a lot of protection for women.) She would not want to live there with the looming threat of violence. She noted that her daughters would not be afforded the same protections under the law that they are afforded here.

9. Cynthia, El Salvador, age 17, 1985:

Vemos una mujer embarazada y la primera que hacemos es juzgarla y máximo si está recién llegada a este país. (Translation: We see a pregnant woman and the first thing we do is judge her, especially if she recently arrived to this country.)

As a child Cynthia, who is El Salvadoran and the oldest of six siblings, worked on a farm helping her family. She only studied until the age of twelve, at which time she dropped out of school in order to help her father. She suffered sexual abuse at the hands of 'many different people.' She tried to tell her mother once and her mother blamed her. She then tried to look for a way to defend herself. She was thirteen when she wanted to commit suicide for the first time. She

thought that the life she had was not worth it. She saw her father's pistol and attempted to use it but was unable to do so. She now believes that God didn't want anything to happen to her. She stated, "*Ahora yo sé que no fue tiempo.*" (Translation: Now I know it wasn't time.)

When she was sixteen she decided to leave home in order to escape ongoing complex abuse. She felt that she either had to get married or figure out where to go, which is what she decided to do. "*Tenía opción en casarme o buscar donde irme.*" (Translation: I had the option of getting married or looking for where to go.) At the age of seventeen, she chose to immigrate to the United States.

In order to make the journey, Cynthia had to find the money, convince her parents to allow her, and prepare herself to face everything that would happen. Her father had money but didn't want to lend it to her because he didn't support her decision to immigrate. Her grandmother lent her money without knowing for what exactly she wanted it. Her mother wasn't opposed to the trip but her father was. He was worried about what she would go through, especially as a woman. She convinced an aunt and a cousin to accompany her on the journey.

Six women and a young girl, just one and a half, traveled with Cynthia. At the time she had to pay \$3,000, which was an extraordinary amount in 1985, she stated, 'at that time.' She had to pay half before leaving and the other half upon arrival in Los Angeles. Cynthia traveled to Mexico on a student visa, which allowed her the comfort to fly into Mexico without incident. She dressed well, as an "elegant" traveler and avoided any suspicion.

After arriving in Mexico, the journey became much more difficult. She went to Tijuana for a day and a half, where they had to sleep in the same bed as their coyote. She remembered giving him \$20 and he came back with just a bit of food. The toddler was to be passed as American and was separated from her mother, which was hard for everybody to see. "*Fue un*

cause para todas las mujeres.” (Translation: It was a shock for all of the women.) The group had to be ready at a moment’s notice to travel and was instructed to wear clothes they could run in. Cynthia didn’t listen and instead wore heels. She walked for a long time with her aunt, who had a stomach operation just six months before their departure. She was instructed to jump down to hide and had to take her shoes off in order to do so. Her aunt, who was in her 40’s, was not accustomed to such physical exertion and after she threw herself down, she couldn’t get back up, losing her breath. The *coyote* left with two women. Fearful of losing her guide, she started to leave too, but her conscience got the better of her and she returned to try to help her aunt.

Cynthia noted that at the time she only weighed 90 lbs., her cousin weighed 120lbs, and her Aunt weighed about 170lbs. She considers what happened next to have been a miracle. Her aunt was unable to walk but as soon as her cousin put holy water on their aunt, her condition began to improve. *Fue como un milagro.* (Translation: It was like a miracle.) She began to breathe better. Her Aunt was a single mother and left two children in El Salvador. It would have been devastating to lose her on that journey.

They were able to continue following the *coyote* only by listening for his voice, which they could hear in front of them. They then saw an immigration helicopter and were instructed to lie still, at which point they were bitten all over by what felt like fire ants. The pain was unbearable. Her Aunt and cousin were very religious and began to pray. At the time, she believed that God didn’t exist because if he did, she wouldn’t have had such compelling reasons to come to the U.S. “*Yo decía, ‘Dios no existe.’ Porque si Dios existiera, yo no tenía la necesidad de venir aquí.*” (Translation: I said, “God doesn’t exist. Because if God existed I wouldn’t have the need to come here.)

Following that incident, they all crammed into a car without seats and had to stay completely still. Minutes turned into hours and there was no room for them to move. The passengers in the car included her cousin, who was twenty-four, their friend who was twenty, her aunt and herself. Her Aunt's body began to fall asleep. They began to massage her legs and she was praying. At that point, an official came with a dog. They began speaking in English and realized that the passengers were Central Americans. The *coyote*, who had largely left them to their own devices, told them that somebody would come back for them. The officials thought that her Aunt was the *coyote* because she was the oldest.

At that point the group of women/girls was escorted to a facility for lock-up. Cynthia recalled that there was a man in their cell and that she was petrified. She began to panic and started to cry. She went to the bathroom and saw that there were many, many men locked in the facility, increasing her horror. They were all waiting to be deported. The women began to feel sick with head and stomachaches, as they weren't provided food or water.

The guards separated Cynthia from her aunt. She couldn't sleep that evening. Her cellmates terrorized her. One was cruel and the other stated that she had murdered some one. "*Nos daba terror.*" (Translation: We were terrified.) She called her Uncle who lived in Chicago and was told that she and her companions were going to be there for a year and then the authorities would let them out. He told her not to sign any papers, which would lead to her deportation.

She told the authorities that she didn't want to return to El Salvador for many reasons (At this point in the interview, she was very tearful.). She was honest about her experience as a sexual abuse survivor. After one week of being detained she started a *huelga* (strike) and stopped eating. Besides not wanting to return to her abusers, Cynthia was terrified to return during the civil war

of 1985. "*La guerra estaba horrible.*" (Translation: The war was horrible.) When they left El Salvador all cars and buses were stopped. They traveled to the airport in an ambulance, the only vehicles allowed to carry passengers. Every day a dead body would appear. She told the authorities at the detention center about what she had experienced in El Salvador. Her family no longer had a place to live because they were robbed of everything including their home. "*Nosotros éramos víctimas de la guerra.*" (Translation: We were victims of the war.) Due to that they had to go and live with their maternal uncle, whom she believed probably abused many children in his life.

Cynthia continued her hunger strike for eight days in the detention center. She drank milk in the morning in order to survive. After fourteen days of being detained, an official came and told them to eat because they were going to be released. Throughout her detention she had been adamant that she would not return to El Salvador, no matter what. After seventeen days they were finally released.

They left the detention center with no idea how to get to Chicago. They began walking, eventually encountering someone who said that they had to get to the airport in order to go to Chicago. He told them to take a train to get there. They were stopped again in the train station and showed the document they had recently been given. At the airport they were stopped yet again. They had already been traveling for nineteen days, fourteen of which were spent in jail. Exhausted, they were at their wits end. "*Estábamos frustradas porque el avión nos había dejado!*" (Translation: We were frustrated because the airplane left us.) They forgot to give the employees that stopped them the documentation of their permission to be in the U.S.

Then a female airport employee helped Cynthia to "believe in people again." Cynthia stated that she cried again because that was the only thing she could do. The woman, a Mexican-

American, took Cynthia, her Aunt, and her cousin in her truck but made them hide. They were really scared but she noted that she wasn't scared to die. She always believed that "*muere el perro, muere la rabia*" (translation: the dog dies and the rabies will be gone too). She believed death was preferable to what she had gone through. The woman stated that she chose to help the group "*porque mi mamá hace muchos años pasó lo mismo que ustedes y siempre me inculcado ayudar a la gente*" (translation: because my mother went through the same thing as you many years ago and she always taught me to help people). She called their Uncle who said that he would buy them a ticket in the afternoon because it was cheaper.

Unfortunately, Cynthia's trials continued even after she arrived in Chicago. She stated that she came to Chicago 'to live worse' ("*a vivir peor*"). She stayed with her maternal uncle who treated her well in El Salvador but here he drank often and didn't respect his wife. Three days after her arrival, she witnessed him try to hit his wife who was eight months pregnant. Cynthia was evicted a week later for trying to intervene. She went to another relative's and had a similar experience. Violence seemed to follow her everywhere she went. She then went to work as a live-in babysitter in a woman's house. The woman didn't speak Spanish. When she turned eighteen they gave Cynthia her very first birthday cake. "*Me sorprendió con el primer pastel.*" (Translation: She surprised me with my first cake.) She cried tears of joy. "*Lloraba, lloraba, lloraba.*" (Translation: I cried, and cried, and cried.)

Around that time, Cynthia began drinking, as she saw others doing. A cousin, whom she'd believed had been helping her, drugged her drink. He made her believe they had sex and consequently blackmailed her into telling her parents that she planned to marry him. After she complied, he raped her whenever he wanted. "*Me abusaba cuando quería.*" (Translation: He raped me when he wanted to.) She became pregnant. When she told her uncle he forced her to

live with him. Her cousin held her as a sexual slave (“*esclava sexual*”) for four months. She again contemplated suicide but, despite plans to use a knife, ultimately decided not to due to her three-month pregnancy. Her cousin wanted her to abort and she refused. She took out the knife and threatened her cousin with it saying that he could no longer touch her. He stated that she would die of hunger. She preferred to die of hunger than to be with him again. (“*Yo decidí morirme de hambre.*” Translation: I decided to die of hunger.) A friend taught her how to scavenge food from the garbage, which she continued to do until she was seven months pregnant, at which time she moved in with a relative of her father.

Cynthia believes that pregnant women need the most help upon arrival to the U.S. They require economic, educational, religious, and informational assistance. A pregnant woman has little to no choices or opportunities. She stated that “*Vemos una mujer embarazada y la primera que hacemos es juzgarla y máximo si está recién llegada a este país.*” (Translation: We see a pregnant woman and the first thing we do is judge her, especially if she recently arrived to this country.) She stated that pregnant women are not things but human beings.

She would advise other women planning to make the journey to know exactly where they are going and what they want and not to allow people to take advantage of them. Also, mothers should bring their children. She believes it is better to die with them than to leave them alone. “*No es un sueño Americano. Es difícil.*” (Translation: It’s not the American dream. It’s difficult.) Finally, she would like women to know that despite everything, it is possible to make it.

10. Sara, El Salvador, 1980, age 21:

Era una pesadilla para mí. En mis noches me soñaba de que inmigración me perseguía, que estaba trabajando, que allí llegaban. (Translation: It was a nightmare for me. At night I dreamed that immigration authorities were following me, that I was working and they arrived there.)

Sara finished high school in El Salvador and found a job in an American company. After working for about a year the war began to escalate. “*En eso vino la guerra civil, que duró como doce años.*” (Translation: At that time the civil war had started and lasted about twelve years.) As violence mounted in the civil war (1979-1992), the Salvadorans fear also escalated. Then on March 24th, 1980, Archbishop Romero was murdered while celebrating mass. When her cousin became involved in the war she decided she had to move somewhere safer. She came with the severance money she was given from her job, a rare advantage for undocumented immigrants.

On her first attempt to immigrate, she was returned to El Salvador. She set off again that year, desperate to escape the war. She was once again caught by authorities but managed to escape. At the time, she paid \$2,000 for safe passage to the United States. Her journey took between seven to ten days. She stated that she walked throughout that time, often during the night, and hid during the day.

Sara arrived in Los Angeles with only a telephone number. She began working long hours as a maid and was in a relationship with one of the *coyotes* from her journey, with whom she had a daughter. When their daughter was just ten months old, he was murdered. She then found a job in a bar. She took her daughter to her mother's in El Salvador in order to secure child-care. She had to work to pay her bills, the money that she owed for her safe passage, and money to send home to her mother and daughter. Family separation, then, may continue to impact female immigrants even after arrival, as they have little or no choice for child-care and/or financial support for dependent minors.

Sara stated throughout that time she was comforted by the thought that it wouldn't be forever. She also sought courage from her Christian faith, which helped her to persevere. Sara

noted that the journey for women is much more difficult and that they have to be really careful.

After they arrive, it is also harder to find work and to make a living wage.

11. Sandra, Guatemala, 1980, age 19:

Venían como tres muchachas y ellas dijeron que a ellas los coyotes las habían violado... Y dijeron ellas que las habían dado pastillas conceptivas. Estas personas ya estaban preparadas por las maldades que hacían. (Translation: About three young women came and they said their *coyotes* raped them. They said that they had given them birth control pills. These people were already prepared for the crimes? they were going to commit.) Understanding?

Sandra was the fifth of eleven siblings born to a humble Guatemalan family. They lived in the country and had a meat factory. She noted that they were ‘poor but happy’ (“*pobres pero felices*”) together as a family. She finished her second year of high school and then dropped out. She had a boyfriend for many years. His brother was kidnapped and decapitated due to speaking about politics, to one of the many “ears.” “*Fue una muerte muy triste porque fue degollado o sea decapitado. Fue una muerte muy triste y por esa razón pues no quería que sus otros hijos les sucedieron lo mismo.*” (Translation: It was a very sad death because he was beheaded or decapitated. It was a sad death and for that reason she didn’t want her other children to suffer the same fate.) His murder made his mother really nervous. Consequently, her boyfriend’s oldest brother came to the United States. After she married her boyfriend his mother convinced them to join the brother in order to escape the violence. On September 16th, 1980, at the age of nineteen, she left Guatemala for the United States.

Sandra knew a local *coyota*, a woman who traveled from Guatemala to Los Angeles frequently. They decided to leave with her and traveled with seven others from their town, including three men. Long before departing, they heard about women being raped in the desert. “*Porque ya habíamos escuchado lo que estaba sucediendo en el desierto de que violaban a las*

personas.” (Translation: We heard about what was happening that people were raped in the desert.) They had Mexican visas, which allowed them to drive until they passed Hermosillo, where they continued the journey on foot. They traveled at night in order to avoid immigration authorities and helicopters. When the *coyota* said to walk, they obeyed. When she said to lie down, they also complied. They crossed the *Río Bravo* in their underclothes while holding all their belongings above their heads. Sandra was terrified, as she couldn’t swim. “*Yo no sabía nadar.*” (Translation: I didn’t know how to swim.)

Sandra noted that she received help from her boyfriend and from a safe house. She remembers having to pass a tunnel. They then had to walk for forty minutes while holding hands in the dark tunnel with the smell of rotting animals. Emerging from the tunnel, they arrived in the United States. “*Había mal olor como que habían animales muertos.*” (Translation: There was a bad smell, as if there were dead animals.) They were told not to worry because they had arrived. When asked if she saw violence she noted that she arrived at a place where there were three other women who stated that they were raped and were given contraceptives. They were from El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala. She noted that her journey was easier than others, taking three weeks altogether and paying \$1,800. She flew from L.A. to Chicago, where her brother-in-law was waiting for her and her husband.

For Sandra, the journey was worth it. “*Valió la pena porque aquí estoy.*” (Translation: It was worth it because here I am.) She and her husband had four children together in the United States. She has been a cook in the same place for the last seventeen years. However, the journey was difficult and she left her siblings and mother in Guatemala. Now, she believes, it is even harder and she advises women to think twice before embarking on the trip. “*Que lo pensarán dos veces porque la situación ahora es mas difícil.*” (Translation: That they think about it twice

because the situation now is more difficult.) There are more guards and other people that prey on immigrants. There is help here, in the U.S. but one has to look for it, she noted.

12. Laura, Guatemala, 1973, age 20:

My mother, you know, my mother thought that this was going to be a better life for my daughter and myself.

Laura stated that her life in Guatemala was “nice.” Her mother was a seamstress and had to work often. She spent a lot of her time in her grandmother’s care. Her father was a “lady’s man” and she has three half-siblings from his side. Her mother came first with a new husband and wanted Laura to come as well. She was told to leave her daughter in the care of relatives but decided not to leave her behind. Laura also brought her younger brother, who was eighteen at the time, with her. She stated, “It’s something you don’t really prepare for.” They traveled by bus, taking one to the Mexican border and another to Mexico City. They were able to travel easily in Mexico due to having a visa. In Mexico City they bought tickets to Tijuana. During the journey an officer attempted to get a bribe from her but he accidentally gave it all back as they were rushing to get back on the bus. Since she was traveling with her infant daughter, he wanted to give her change, thinking that was all that she had. The change his co-workers gave him in the rush amounted to the \$100 she paid in the first place.

In Tijuana they had to pay \$250 for each person’s safe passage across the border. She didn’t have it but said she did. She tried to cross the border with false papers with the rest of her group but immigration also wanted the papers for her daughter, whom she noted, is lighter skinned than her. She was sent to the border patrol office. The *coyotes* came up with a new plan to get her across the border with her daughter. They brought a Cadillac car and instructed her to pretend to be the wife of the driver. She went through the car line and showed the two fake green

cards. As her daughter was sound asleep they didn't ask for her identification. Another older lady from San Salvador was passed off as her mother-in-law.

They arrived at a safe house and attempted to collect the money she didn't have. They picked up her brother and went to a friend's, who gave her the money she was short. After three weeks of staying with the friend, the three of them were able to meet up with her mother in Chicago. Laura noted that she received no other help and witnessed extortion but no other violence during her journey.

Today Laura is a citizen and has a good job that she has had for several years. When asked about how her life has changed she noted, "I compare now when I go back. You know they don't have what I have." Guatemala, she says, has gotten worse. She was lucky to come to family members that were already here. She noted that the transition to living in the United States would have been smoother if she had the opportunity to work or the ability to find work upon arrival.

Findings

Reasons for Immigration

The reasons the women decided to leave their countries-of-origin were complicated and varied. Many of the women had several interconnected reasons for their decisions to immigrate. Some of the reasons were also implied and weren't mentioned explicitly. Unfortunately, what the women were seeking to escape including violence, poverty, and lack of opportunity, often plagued them beyond their immigration journeys. The mere act of immigration did not necessarily protect them or eliminate their vulnerabilities. For example, many of the women who faced abuse at the hands of loved ones in their countries-of-origin also faced abuse in the United States. Although there are more opportunities for work and education in the United States,

immigrants are often denied access to such opportunities due to their immigration status, socioeconomic status, and lack of English language abilities. Furthermore, even those who work as professionals in their countries-of-origin may not have the education and/or work experience equivalent necessary to work a comparable position in the United States.

Escaping Violence/Seeking Safety. Nine of the twelve women noted the influence of violence in their countries of origin on their decisions to immigrate. Out of the twelve women interviewed seven of them cited violence in their country of origin as a primary or secondary factor in their decision to immigrate. Political warfare, gang or community violence, or a combination of both, constituted violence in the country of origin. Four women also noted that either domestic violence (1) or child abuse (3) contributed to their decision to come to the United States. Of those four women two of them noted concurrent violence in their home and in their country of origin, implying that they were neither safe inside nor outside of their homes.

Of those four women, three of them disclosed that they have suffered at the hands of two or more abusers. Furthermore, three of them cited childhood sexual violence that occurred over extended periods of time and included multiple perpetrators. For example, Cynthia noted that she suffered ‘sexual abuse at the hand of various people’ (“*abuso sexual de parte de varias personas*”) in her home as a child. After arriving in the United States she describes being treated as a ‘sexual slave’ (“*una esclava sexual*”).

Two of the three women that came from El Salvador, Cynthia (’85) and Sara (80) cited the complete devastation that the civil war was wreaking on the country. Sara recalled, “*fue algo muy, muy terrible porque en la carretera habían muertos tirados.*” (Translation: it was something really, really awful because on the high way bodies were dumped.) Sara stated that her cousin was involved in the war and they had to move to attempt to save his life and those of the rest of the

family. They were all in danger. “*Habían muchos casos de que iban a buscar esa persona. Pues no estaban y mataron todos los demás.*” (Translation: There were many cases where authorities came to look for somebody and if that person wasn’t there they killed the rest of the family.) Cynthia also recalled bodies as well as the inability to travel due to the ban of vehicles on the road.

Several of the research participants cited family members, colleagues, or famous people that were murdered around the time of their departure as mediating factors in their decisions to leave their countries of origin. Two women recalled the inability to work in their chosen fields due to violence. Viviana, for example, stated that she worked in human rights and that one of her co-workers was murdered. She felt that it was no longer safe to work in the human rights field as her co-workers were viewed as whistle blowers. So, despite having an adequate education, her career choice was eliminated due to the violence her colleagues faced. She immigrated to escape from workplace violence. Subsequently, the loss of a career, she stated, was one of the biggest boundaries to a successful life in the United States as well as an indicator of her mental health outcome. She further described feeling depressed due to the loss of a career and inability to find steady work.

Carmen’s father had worked as a journalist and, although she expressed pride in his work, she noted how the profession became more and more dangerous. She recalled the life of Irma Flaquer, a Guatemalan journalist with a background in psychology who was kidnapped and (presumably) murdered in 1980. Irma Flaquer actively criticized the Guatemalan government for their human rights abuses and treatment of the people. The Guatemalan government is believed to be ultimately responsible for her execution. This violence, she noted, limited ones ability to find work in certain fields, especially those who were seen as whistle-blowers, or who cited corruption. Her father discouraged her from entering journalism due to the rising dangers they

faced in Guatemala. As the number of disappeared rose, so did the fear of participating in any activity/job that may have been considered controversial. Fear of violence contributed to the loss of economic opportunity.

Sara also recalled the death of Archbishop Romero, who was assassinated in El Salvador while saying mass in 1980, the same year that Irma Flaquer was killed in Guatemala. Much like Irma Flaquer, Bishop Romero was in an influential position and was an outspoken defender of human rights. Romero's death brought international recognition to the gross human rights abuses occurring in El Salvador, and much of the rest of Central America at the time. His fight for the safety and fair treatment of the El Salvadoran people did not go unnoticed and he is currently the unofficial Saint of the Americas.

Lucinda recalled that her husband was killed in Guatemala by alleged gang members prior to her coming. Two other women noted that their cousins were murdered for alleged gang involvement and/or by gangs. Another woman decided to leave with her partner when his brother was killed for 'saying political things.' Her mother-in-law became really fearful for her other children's lives and convinced them to leave together. Implied with the desire to escape violence then, is the search for safety, a basic human right.

Family Reunification/Unification. Family reunification or unification, staying with a partner or family member, was also an important incentive for immigrating to the United States. Seven of the thirteen women noted family reunification as a motivating factor for immigration. However, the topic was not only a motivating factor for the journey but also for actions taken in the United States as each generation that undertakes the journey, leaves loved ones behind. All of the participants arrived to pre-established immigrant communities. These communities provided

varying degrees of support and consisted of anyone from parents or siblings to extended relatives or friends.

Five women noted that part of their motivation was to join a partner or to remain with a partner (with whom they traveled). Three of the women were joining a partner already in the United States and two of the women traveled with their partners. Two other women, who also cited financial reasons, came to join family members, a mother or a sister. Finally, many of the participants either had family members in the U.S. who assisted them or traveled with family members. Two of the women noted that they traveled with brother-in-laws, who helped them reunite with their husbands in the United States by guarding them on the journey.

Economic Opportunity. Many of the participants came seeking economic opportunity. Frequently they planned, in part, to use any financial gain to help care for one or more relatives, often children or immediate family members. Five of the women cited economic opportunity as a primary need. However, others implied that need as well. For example, Paola, who left her country to escape life-threatening domestic violence entrusted her four children to the care of her mother. She felt that she could not return with nothing due to the need to provide for them. She stated, "*Pues, yo puedo sufrir pero mis hijas no pueden sufrir de hambre.*" (Translation: Well, I can suffer but my daughters can't suffer hunger.)

Of the five women that noted that economic opportunity was one of their main reasons for immigrating, one of them felt it was secondary to joining her husband. Mariana came to the United States twice with a temporary visa. About her first trip to the United States she stated, "*Teníamos necesidad en la familia de poder tener una casa propia. Y mis hermanas, somos cuatro mujeres y yo soy la mas pequeña de la familia.*" (Translation: We had the necessity in the family to be able to have our own house. My sisters, we're four, and I'm the youngest of the family.) The

first time she returned to her family in Guatemala. The second time she came to the United States in order to be with her husband.

Experiences During the Journey

The research participants reported many different experiences throughout their journeys north. Some of the immigration experiences the participants reported were difficult to distinguish from one another. For example a fear of authorities might be associated with a fear of deportation, detention, extortion, and/or other abuses. The women that traveled by land also all had conflicting relationships with their *coyotes*, as many of them were abusive and others were at least partially responsible for the participants' safe arrival. One woman even started a relationship with hers and they had a baby. Due to his relative power in their relationship, the lines of consent were blurred.

Two of the women included were undocumented immigrants who arrived in the United States by plane using temporary visas, respectively in the years 2003 and 2008. They both overstayed their visas. Since many undocumented immigrants arrive on temporary visas, I chose to include them in the research, as their experiences before and after the journey are equally valuable. However, their journeys to the United States differ from the other participants because they faced far less danger in order to arrive. Therefore, their experiences *during* the journey are excluded.

Three other women arrived in Mexico with a temporary Mexican visa, which would supposedly make for easy traveling. Unfortunately, the women; Ana, Esmeralda, and Cynthia, who all traveled between 1979 and 1980 and were either from El Salvador or Guatemala, found that not to be the case. Esmeralda was kidnapped and held against her will for a month. Cynthia was detained by immigration authorities for seventeen days. The experience was so traumatic for

her, that she began a hunger strike. Her fear of returning to the violence in her country and the violence in her home was so great that she stated that she ‘would not go back no matter what.’ Out of all the participants, Cynthia was the youngest at the time of immigration as she was seventeen when she immigrated in 1980.

Sexual Violence. All of the participants stated that they had prior knowledge about the threat of sexual violence that women faced on the immigration journey. One woman stated, “*Luego salen las noticias de que las mujeres resulten muertas, violadas, o se desaparecen.*” (Translation: Then the news comes out that women are murdered, raped, or they disappear.) Six women cited a specific fear of their own personal sexual assault during their journeys. Of those women, one had a sister that was raped on her immigration journey. Another woman met three women who were given contraceptives and raped. She was particularly appalled that their rapists had planned to commit the acts before they happened. The perpetrators’ premeditation and subsequent planning of their crimes demonstrated the acceptance of sexual violence during immigration and the extent to which vulnerable immigrants are seen as prey for rape. One participant noted that she felt the threat of rape in several different locations along her journey. One participant was raped repeatedly and held captive for an entire month. She was not released until a woman living in the home where she was kept helped her to escape.

Several of the women encountered other women that had been raped or were forced into prostitution. Carmen noted that immigrant women that could not pay, “*las dejan botadas.*” (Translation: they leave them, or literally, they throw them out.) She stated that she saw many women who didn’t have enough money or whose families couldn’t help them pay smugglers to continue their journeys north. Those women were stuck in Mexico working; either cleaning or in prostitution. When Paola, a Honduran woman, arrived to the Mexican border, she was told, “No,

solo hay trabajo en las rojas.” (Translation: No, there is only work in the ‘reds.’) When asked to clarify that statement Paola said that it was the “*zona roja*,” the red-light district. Women who are left without the financial recourse necessary to go forward may face forced prostitution; others are sold, tricked, or manipulated into prostitution.

Several of the women noted that their smugglers were also running drugs and/or using drugs where they were supposed to be safe. When talking about her experience with her smugglers Carmen stated, “*Porque movieron grandes cantidades de drogas.*” (Translation: Because they were moving large quantities of drugs.) Human trafficking in many instances appears to go hand in hand with drug trafficking, which was also seen as a threat to the women. A woman who is drugged is much easier to manipulate. In such a compromised position it is impossible to make informed decisions. One of the participants, who consistently felt threatened sexually, recalled, “*me quisieron drogar*” (they wanted to drug me) on more than one occasion.

Four of the women mentioned the threats they faced at the hands of other immigrants. Surprisingly, they felt that people from their own country also acted as perpetrators. Two women from Guatemala felt in danger of sexual violence at the hands of fellow Guatemalans and were shocked that their male compatriots wanted to rape them. One stated, ‘and my own race!’ (“*Y mi propia raza!*”), confused that they would not be more helpful. The second woman noted that there were only two other women travelling in her group and that she perceived sexual violence to be a constant threat. She also noted fellow Guatemalan immigrants ignoring her or refusing to acknowledge her presence while traveling, in what she considered discrimination against one’s own people. Paola was shocked when she encountered a fellow Honduran woman, who not only robbed her of her belongings, but also tried to sell her into a prostitution ring.

The *coyotes* also posed a threat in many cases. It was a *coyote* that held one of the participants as a sexual slave for a month. Another *coyote* abandoned his group when they were unable to keep up and even though they followed his voice for a short while, they were eventually caught without him. Some *coyotes* though, were experienced as helpful. The female *coyota* mentioned in the interviews was portrayed as helpful as she was able to guide her group both across the river and through an underground tunnel successfully. Finally, another immigrant described the many different ways her smugglers were able to both find documents and concoct elaborate stories to tell immigration authorities, allowing the immigrants to cross the border.

Kidnapping was another palpable danger to the women. The (un)safe houses also served as places of rape, alcohol and drug use, and hostage holding, as immigrants' families are petitioned for more money. One woman was kidnapped while several others felt that it was a threat or that it almost happened during their immigration journeys. One woman described being held in a house where the owner threatened to rape her. Her quick wit and the arrival of other immigrants prevented it from happening. She told him that she thought of him 'as an uncle' attempting to appeal to his ethical side. However, the threat frightened her enough to keep the event etched in her memory as a dangerous one. Another woman avoided being held against her will by threatening to call immigration authorities on the whole group. Immigrant women are particularly susceptible to kidnapping as they are traveling outside of the law, or without the guaranteed protections of citizens, often do not know where they are, have limited ability to contact others, including a lack of money, phones, and identification, and are uninformed about local laws. Of the women interviewed, three of them continued to face threats of sexual violence or kidnapping while on their journey but also after arriving in the United States.

Other Human Threats. Eight of the thirteen women mentioned the constant threat of extortion. Immigration authorities, police, gang members, and *coyotes* all could request payment for the price of turning a blind eye. When asked about how many times one immigrant experienced extortion, she stated, “*Eso fue en todo el viaje, hasta llegar acá.*” (Translation: That was during the whole trip, until arriving here.) *Coyotes* and their networks requested an agreed upon fee before the journey. However, they could also request hidden fees or take exorbitant amounts of money in exchange for goods purchased or other ‘necessities.’ One participant paid \$20 for a small amount of food. Most of the women were prepared for such exchanges, whether or not they had very much money. Even during one woman’s detention, authorities did not hesitate to ask her and her fellow travelers how much money they carried on their person. One woman hid money all over herself so that she would never have to take it all out at once. Another woman joked about how the police tried to take part of a \$100 bill. They took pity on her for having a toddler with her and did not want to take all of the money she carried. They rushed to give her change before she had to board her bus, but in the chaos ended up paying it all back by accident.

Physical Dangers. Traveling with the intent of remaining undetected, including with few belongings, forces immigrants to face physical dangers that could have potentially been otherwise avoidable. While on foot and close to the Mexico/United States border, participants stated that they traveled primarily at night in order to avoid the watchful eye of border patrol agents. Nighttime travel creates added stress as travelers face poorer vision, making movement more treacherous, as well as colder weather, nocturnal animals, and physical exhaustion.

In order to escape detection, immigrants are often pressured to complete physically straining tasks to which their bodies are not accustomed. Walking for long hours, jumping, and

crawling may be both challenging and dangerous. Many of the women witnessed other immigrants' who fell, were left behind, or had to return to their countries of origin. One woman had to decide whether or not to leave an injured relative behind. She also described the unbearable pain of being bitten by fire ants all over her body as she was hiding in the desert and instructed to stay still. Two women mentioned crossing the *Río Bravo*, which meant that the women were at risk for drowning. Those that cannot swim, obviously, were at the greatest risk.

Significantly, of the women interviewed only one of them rode the freight train, *el tren del muerte*, as they referred to it. Lucinda, who traveled from Guatemala at the age of 26, described being exposed to extreme temperatures and the inability to sleep due to the danger of falling off. The fact that few women traveled by train may indicate that women avoided the mode of transportation due to the inherent and extreme physical dangers. Lucinda further stated that when they stopped, she scavenged for food at a dump with other travelers. She endured hunger and thirst during the trip. Each leg of her journey presented life-threatening situations. She stated that one sleeps with one eye open, for fear of what may occur. Sandra, one of the Guatemalan participants, followed her group through a dark, damp, underground tunnel. During the forty-minute journey through the tunnel smelling rotting carcasses her group held hands in order to ensure that they all exited together.

Hiding in physically compromising positions while traveling or while waiting, such as inside of freight cars, trunks, or in trailers is a method for avoiding detection that forces immigrants to remain still, sometimes with limited access to air or water. One immigrant stated that she hid in a garage while waiting and then traveled above the tire of a trailer. Another woman was able to give the description of being 'stuffed tightly like sausages' in a package, when her group was put into a van. Another participant described her aunt's limbs falling asleep and

the pain they felt as they waited, crammed into a car. Since her aunt was older and in poor physical health, they worried that she would not be able to endure the compromising position for much longer. They were caught in the vehicle by immigration before any permanent damage was done. Another woman noted that she was in pain throughout the journey in Mexico due to traveling for three days and three nights. “*Yo venía ya adolorida.*” (Translation: I arrived in pain.)

Strengths

Faith

“*Yo puse todo en las manos de Dios.*” (Translation: I put everything in God’s hands.)

All of the participants, save one, mentioned faith as a protective factor during their journeys. Their faith helped them to persevere with the belief that God would protect them. Even the women with the most difficult and longest journeys stated that it was faith, in part, that brought them here to the United States. Most of the women thanked God for their arrival. Specifically, the women mentioned praying, receiving help in churches, in Mexico and the United States, visiting religious sites to ask for assistance, and one participant recalled beginning her immigration journey on a religious holiday. A couple of women referred to those that helped them along the way as ‘angels.’ One participant recalled a suffering traveler who was healed by Holy Water and called the event a miracle. (“*Fue un milagro.*”) Another woman compared her suffering to that of Jesus and took comfort in knowing that He had also suffered for everyone. She stated that her sacrifice in Mexico then, was minor compared to His and allowed her to help her whole family little by little, as Jesus helped the world.

Caregiving

The participants’ desire and ability to care for others is a strength, which was highlighted throughout the interviews. The desire of the women in this research to help loved ones they left

behind or with whom they traveled helped to sustain them throughout the journey. Their caregiving abilities allowed them to assist others along the route in any way they could. One woman returned for a fellow traveller who had fallen and was unable to continue. Despite being terrified to be left behind by the *coyote*, she chose to stay and help, ultimately ensuring the other woman's safe arrival in the United States. Another participant recalled giving her food to a baby that was traveling and all that went through her head when she saw children suffering hunger and thirst;

“Y yo traía comida. Yo les tuve que dar la comida que yo traía. Porque dije no, si yo estuviera en ese situación también con mi bebe... Yo me puse a analizar muchas cosas en ese momento. Yo dije, no, yo como persona que estoy pues ya grande yo me puedo aguantar hambre pero un bebe no. Un niño no sabe. Dije no, yo di lo que yo traía.” (Translation: I brought food and I had to give them the food I brought. I said, no, if I was in that situation with my baby... I analyzed many things in that moment. I said that since I am already an adult I can survive hunger but a baby cannot. A child does not understand. I said no and I gave what (food) I had.)

The women's desire to care for others provided them strength and mutual aid throughout the journey and after arrival. The notion that women can travel across nations in order to care for their loved ones or to provide a better life for them is a testament to the depths of their capabilities and their willingness to compromise their own safety for the lives of the collective, in this case, their families. Family, then, often provides the impetus for women to set out on the immigration journey and to complete it, when in their power. The desire to provide for their loved ones prevented women from quitting or returning to their countries of origin without helping.

Cleverness

Quick wit and cleverness was also a strength the women demonstrated throughout their interviews. Many of the women sought out other women during the journey in order to form protection in numbers. One woman slept with her nail clippers, which was the only tool she had,

in case she needed protection. Women also noted, at times, threatening to inform authorities that they were undocumented, exposing the group, if men did not leave them alone. The women also traveled with Mexican immigrants, who were safer in Mexico due to not needing documentation. Two women passed Mexican men off as husbands as well. As stated above, one woman who was threatened with rape referred to the man as an ‘uncle,’ noting that she looked up to him. She appealed to his humanistic side, hoping that this would deter him. Another woman who was detained by immigration authorities also began a hunger strike to prove her point, eating just enough to sustain. She used that tactic in order to let the authorities know how desperate she was to remain in the United States. The bravery, ingenuity, and quick thinking of these compañeras cannot be discounted as reasons for their safe arrival.

Experiences in the United States

Violence

The prevalence of violence in the participants’ countries of origin and during their immigration journeys was not eliminated upon arrival to the United States. To the contrary, female survivors of violence often entered into different violent relationships. Also, political and gang violence were replaced by crime and gang violence, even though violence in the United States was less severe. It appears that the women were more likely to live or work in vulnerable and poor areas, which put them at higher risk than their U.S. citizen counterparts. Furthermore, the mental health consequences experienced due to the exposure to violence were enduring and, in several cases, required one or more forms of professional treatment.

Two women noted that they were threatened with rape, kidnapping, and/or drug pushing during their immigration journey even after their arrival in the United States while still in transit. They were still traveling with the network of their guides and had not yet been released into the

custody of those receiving them here. Crossing the border then, was not necessarily a protective factor from anybody except, in some cases, immigration authorities, once they were removed from the border.

Four women explicitly stated that they suffered domestic violence while in the United States. Of those four women three of them suffered child abuse in their countries of origin. Two of the three women who suffered child abuse also suffered childhood sexual violence in their countries-of-origin. One of those woman stated that her abuser in the United States, a relative, held her as a sexual slave here. Other women implied some aspect of abuse and/or control. The woman that had a baby with her *coyote*, for example, may have been coerced due to his power at the time. Another woman's husband was drinking often and not helpful during her pregnancy. He was deported just before the birth of their son and has since formed another family in his country-of- origin, leaving the participant to fend for herself here.

Aside from domestic violence, participants cited gang and street violence in the United States. Two women reported that their partners were murdered shortly after arriving in the United States. One of them was a *coyote* and suspected drug trafficker. The other was murdered during a robbery gone wrong. Another woman's son became involved in gangs in the United States. In order to save his life, she sent him to stay with her family in El Salvador, during which time his grandfather, the same father that abused the participant, mistreated him.

Mental Health Concerns

“De mis tres hermanas todos hemos necesitado terapia.” (Translation: Of my three sisters, we have all needed therapy.)

Several participants reported that they sought mental health treatment after arrival in the United States. Mental Health treatment included individual therapy/counseling, group work, and

psychiatry services. Half of the participants, or six women, stated that they accessed mental health services. Since this was not a direct question, that number may be low. Three participants stated that they accessed both therapeutic services as well as medication. One woman specifically noted the loneliness that one experiences in the United States after immigration. The loneliness, then, can contribute to feelings of isolation and ultimately, depression she stated. Another woman pointed to the pace of the United States and noted that 'one works a lot here.' She specifically noted that stress here is high.

Altogether three of the women stated that they had participated in domestic violence programs in the United States. Of those three women, one of them experienced abuse and domestic violence both here and in her country-of-origin. Another woman stated that her family in her country-of-origin was extremely abusive. The third woman, who did not cite any personal history of abuse before leaving her country-of-origin, entered into an abusive relationship after arriving in the United States. Her situation became worse when her husband began the process of petitioning for her green card. Her fear of ruining her case prevented her from seeking help. Her husband used that fear as leverage to threaten her with deportation. Her American-born daughter, made that fear even more palpable. The same woman described an intense fear of authority upon arrival, which caused her to avoid law enforcement officers and anybody else that may be seen as an authority-figure. She suffered sleeplessness for months. The symptoms she described are consistent with the symptoms often seen in posttraumatic stress disorder. Eventually, she entered into a domestic violence program, through which she learned about the many facets of abuse and gained a stronger sense of self.

Undocumented female immigrants remain vulnerable after their arrival in the United States due to their status and subsequent fears, lack of knowledge about services available, and

limited ability to communicate with English speakers. They also may experience a lack of control over their own bodies as they are forced to do any job that will sustain them, have abusive partners, or unplanned pregnancies, or, in one case, a forced abortion.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Throughout the past several decades there has been an increase of immigrants from the global south to the north. Among them, are Central Americans who continue to journey north despite rising costs and danger associated with irregular migration. In their countries of origin, Central Americans face increased poverty as well as escalating violence, a deadly combination that threatens not only their livelihood but also their lives. Despite the knowledge of their struggles, their journeys are under documented. Furthermore, little has been written about the irregular immigration experiences of female Central Americans. In order to address that gap in research and to advance the knowledge of their nuanced needs in the field of social work, I set out to explore Central American Latina's immigration experiences. With the use of semi-structured interviews and through a combination of feminist standpoint theory and interpretive phenomenological analysis, I intended to answer my research questions about Central American females' immigration experiences. The findings presented in the previous chapter, answer the research inquiry as to how the participants experienced immigration. As was intended, it further assesses perceived traumatic experiences along the journey as well as the strengths they drew on to complete the journey.

The women's immigration experiences paint a complex picture of their lives in their countries of origin, their journeys to the United States, and their resulting lives after arrival. The knowledge of what drove the women to embark on such a treacherous journey in the first place

proved necessary to comprehend the complexity of the immigration experiences of Central American women. Their desperation to get to the United States and to get out of their countries of origin provided the impetus to begin the journey as well as the courage to complete it. The women's strength and ingenuity are apparent to the reader as they triumph over the conditions they endure while traveling. Furthermore, their experiences in the United States provide a vital look into both the positive and negative aspects of immigration and its lasting impact. The women's lived experiences offer invaluable insight into their realities, which differ from those of their male counterparts.

Violence in the Northern Triangle

Participants in the current study cited violence, family unification, and economic opportunity as the three most common reasons for immigrating, with violence being cited most often. Nine of the twelve women cited one or more forms of violence that contributed to their decisions to migrate north. The women's experiences of violence are consistent with both the general trend of escalating violence in the Northern Triangle as well as the impunity with which violence against women is met. Since the participants in this project immigrated between 1962 and 2011, violence has only increased in the countries from which the women hail. Honduras is home to one of the most dangerous cities in the world, San Pedro Sula, known as the world's murder capital (Gonzalez-Barrera, Krogstad, & Lopez, 2014). More recently InSight Crime (2017), a non-profit journalism organization, reported that El Salvador had the most murders in 2016. Honduras was the third most murderous country in Latin America and Guatemala came in at fifth (Gagney, 2017). Amnesty International (2016) reported that asylum applications from the Northern Triangle increased 597% from 2010-2015. They went on to estimate that 17,522 people were murdered from the region in 2015 alone. According to one World Health Organization report

(WHO, 2012) Latin America provides disturbing evidence of femicide, purposeful murders of women. Although it is difficult to find statistics on domestic violence due to varying definitions and lack of reporting, violence against women in general in Latin America has been rising throughout the last decade (WHO, 2012).

Recent studies continue to find violence and trauma to be an escalating problem. A study conducted by Keller, Joscelyne, Granski, & Rosenfield (2017) with Central American immigrants on the border found that 83% of their participants from the same countries stated that violence was the reason for immigrating. They noted, “Structured interviews revealed high rates of trauma exposure, often including murdered family members, sexual and physical assault, death threats, extortion, and kidnapping.” (p. 7). In the present study five people recalled relatives or, in one case, a co-worker, that were murdered, increasing their fear of violence. In light of this increasing violence and danger both in the Northern Triangle and against women, it is now more imperative than ever that we address these human rights abuses and fight to protect Central Americans en route to the United States border.

Gender-Based Violence

The women’s experiences are distinct due, in part, to their increased vulnerability to gender-based violence. Violence against women is a global epidemic based on sexism and gender inequality. Central American women’s intersectionality, or identities as minorities, women, immigrants and members of a class, impacts their susceptibility to gender-based violence. The women in this study also struggled with the added identity of being undocumented at the time of their arrival. This lack of documentation increases their vulnerability as they are not afforded the full protection of the law in the United States. The United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (1993) defined gender-based violence as

Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivations of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life (N.P.)

Examples that we have seen in this research include violence against girls and women, intimate partner violence, rape, kidnapping, intimidation and coercion.

Participants in the current study were likely to be survivors or witnesses of one or more forms of violence, abuse, or neglect, which influenced their decisions to migrate to the United States. The fact that they cited escaping violence as the most common reason for immigrating is in contrast to other studies that did not focus on women. For example, Palacios, (2015) who analyzed studies of thirty-five *polleros* (smugglers) and fifty immigrants, found that the combination of extreme poverty and lack of opportunities drove Central Americans to risk more than their Mexican counter-parts. This significant difference further demonstrates the need for more women's voices in immigration research, as their experiences do not mirror those of men.

The women in the current study were painfully aware of the threat of sexual violence during the journey. The likelihood of sexual violence, kidnapping, or forced prostitution added a marked danger to the women's journeys. Given the negative impact of sexual violence on public-health, such information is vital to the improvement of global health policies. The ability to see the gendered differences in the experiences of the participants provides a unique view of their immigration journeys. As noted in the previous chapter, many of the women either endured or narrowly escaped such forms of gendered violence. Those that avoided it likely encountered others who were not so fortunate.

Vulnerability to gender-based violence did not decrease upon arrival to the United States. In fact, the majority of the women that reported violence in their countries of origin also reported violence in the United States. Loss of control over their own bodies was a particularly

disturbing example of GBV that the participants reported. One participant recalled the father of her child trying to control her reproductive rights by not allowing her to use birth control but requesting that she abort their child. One woman was held against her will by a male relative in what she referred to as sexual slavery.

One participant recalled being scared to report her husband's abuse due to the ongoing process of trying to fix her immigration papers. She may have lacked knowledge of laws in place to protect her or she may have remained fearful of retaliation in spite of laws. The participants' experiences imply that their status as undocumented immigrants may continue to prohibit them from seeking safety from violence. They may also further lack faith that authorities will protect them from violence due to their experiences in their countries of origin. In the Northern Triangle very few cases of violence against women are reported to the authorities due to inaction and ineffectiveness (Center for Gender & Refugee Studies, N.D.)

Another participant noted that after the murder of the father of her first child in the United States, she entered into another abusive relationship. This points to the cycle of abuse and the survivor's vulnerability to subsequent abuse. Furthermore, the continued abuse the women faced after arrival is testament to the pervasiveness of gender-based violence, which exists in all countries and classes of the world (United Nations General Assembly, 2011).

Immigrants as Single Mothers

Notably, of the twelve women interviewed all twelve of them cited their role as caregiver either to children, partners, or other family members. All of the women became mothers or stepmothers. Three women had to leave children behind in their countries-of-origin. At the time of the interviews, two of those women were still separated from their children. The continued separation caused feelings of both guilt and powerlessness as they also had children in the United

States. One woman brought her toddler with her on her immigration journey in order to avoid such separation.

The women in the current study often reported being single mothers. Of the twelve women, eight of them were single mothers. Although their reasons for becoming single mothers were different, providing for their children alone contributed to their poverty and lack of employment opportunities. Their lack of income or underemployment also contributed to their inability to bring their children to join them in the United States or, in some cases, to even send them remittances. Furthermore, the two mothers that sent their children to their countries of origin implied that the lack of help with childcare could prevent immigrant women who are also single mothers from parenting as they see fit. Three of the single mothers reported that the fathers of their children were killed, implying that violence impacted every area of their lives. One of those women further noted that the father of her second child was deported just weeks before their son's birth due to trouble with the law. Her position as undocumented then, put her at even greater risk for becoming a single mother. Only one woman explicitly stated that she chose to leave her husband. She did so because she feared for her life due to ongoing domestic violence. Her decision then, was a forced decision, made under duress.

As noted in the literature review, the faces of immigration have changed as Central American female immigrants have become as likely as their male counterparts to immigrate (Ruiz, Zong, & Batalova, 2015). This change signifies that more mothers than ever are now separated from their children. As Falicov (2005) stated, women who have children in the United States and create communities, have jobs, etc. acquire a second home. Separation from children living in their countries of origin leads to increased risk of depression for immigrant Latinas (Miranda et al., 2005).

Single mothers are also more likely to be living in poverty. In 2013, for example, 30% of all single mothers in the United States were living in poverty. Only 21% of immigrant men, who were also single fathers, were in poverty (MPI, 2013). Poverty directly impacts quality of life. This stark difference in poverty levels implies that single motherhood makes immigration that much more difficult. The two participants, for example, who had to send their American born children to their countries of origin, felt that they could not raise their children adequately, while being here alone. They had the added burden of needing child-care in order to work. Finally, children have more difficulty adjusting to an absent mother than an absent father (Dreby, 2007).

Children of immigrants already face risk factors due to their parents' immigration status, low human capital, and being a racial minority (Landale, Thomas, & Van Hook, 2011). Living with a single parent increases those risk factors due, in part, to higher levels of poverty in single parent homes. As suggested in this study, the lack of child support from the non-present parent contributes to the household poverty. The economic impact of being a single mother is just one of the risk factors as there may also be an increase in family stress, less availability to spend time with children, increased transitions, and reduced quality in parenting (Amato, 2005).

Undocumented immigrants are more likely to work unstable and low-paying jobs that lack health insurance (Landale, Thomas, & Van Hook, 2011). Children living in poverty face an increased risk of negative outcomes that can impact their health and well being including: developmental milestones, academic success, and future earnings. Children of immigrant single mothers face a plethora of disadvantages that have the potential to impact all aspects of their lives and can continue to have negative consequences as they reach adulthood and beyond.

Mental Health Outcomes

Immigrants face increased risks throughout the immigration process. Adversity before departure, the migration experience itself, and difficulties adjusting to life after immigrating, all influence the prevalence of mental health symptoms (Kirmayer et al., 2011). Postmigration experiences that help moderate the impact of migration stress include employment and economic stability (Kirmayer et al., 2011). The women in the current study often did not have access to sufficient employment and reported economic instability, increasing their risk for developing negative mental health outcomes.

The findings related to mental health in the current study are of significant importance. All twelve participants spoke about the difficulties of adjusting to life in the United States. Out of the twelve participants, ten of them reported symptoms associated with mental health consequences. Of those ten women six of them were either in treatment at the time of the interviews or had previously been in treatment. Three of the six women who received treatment stated that they had been prescribed psychiatric medication. It is important to note that those numbers may be low as the women were self-reporting and the interviews did not include questions regarding the use of medications or specific questions about their mental health. Participants were responding to questions about their lives in the United States.

The participants reported a variety of mental health concerns and symptoms including those congruent with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, and psychotic disorders. Five women reported symptoms consistent with PTSD. Of those five women two of them stated that they were diagnosed with PTSD. Three woman suffered from nightmares after arrival due to an exasperated fear of authority and of being caught. One woman, whose husband was murdered in front of her, began experiencing symptoms, which included anxiety when

leaving the house and panic attacks. She herself received threats and had to identify the perpetrators. Eventually, she was diagnosed with PTSD and began taking medication. These findings are consistent with previous studies that found that mothers from Central America were most likely to report symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (McClowsky et al., 1995). One woman, who reported repeated sexual violence, also reported a history of suicidality as well as depression.

Five out of the twelve participants reported symptoms associated with depression. One woman stated, “I was very, very, very depressed.” She attributed that, in part to her inability to sustain herself or her family financially. The same woman also left two of her children in her country of origin and described being “constantly worried” about them. Her identity was disrupted in more than one way including as a mother and a career woman. Loss of identity for immigrant women, including the loss of one’s previous career and separation from family, contribute to feelings of worthlessness and role confusion. Identity confusion has previously been shown to contribute to reports of depression and anxiety (Asner-Self & Marotta, 2005). As Asner-Self and Marotta (2005) noted in their study with Central American immigrants, “The more these Central Americans’ sense of identity was in flux, the more likely they were to feel depressed and anxious or to report symptoms related to PTS” (p. 165).

Family separation contributed greatly to mental health outcomes among the participants in the current study. Women also reported loneliness, isolation and/or lack of a support system as a contributing factor to their mental health concerns. Furthermore stress, or as one woman stated, “the fast pace” contributed to feeling ‘sicker.’ The immense pressure to work in order to cover extended living costs and to send money home exacerbates the overwhelming feeling of a ‘fast pace’ of life here (Hurtado-de-Mendoza, Gonzalez, Serrano, & Kaltman, 2014). Social

support benefits both physical and mental health (Berkman, Glass, Brissette, & Seeman, 2000). Isolation, on the other hand, is a risk factor for poor mental health outcomes (Heikkinen & Kauppinen, 2004). Feelings of sadness are often linked to family separation (Hurtado-de-Mendoza et al., 2014). Latina immigrants face increased barriers to establishing and maintaining social support networks including pressure to work, lack of knowledge about opportunities, and isolation (Berkman et al., 2000).

One of the participants in the current study reported both anxiety and symptoms consistent with a psychotic disorder. She stated that she began hearing voices and “hallucinating.” She was able to access treatment and received medication as well. In previous studies on Central American survivors of trauma, participants scored higher than the general population of American citizens on depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress (Asner-Self & Marotta, 2005). They further scored higher on both developmental categories of mistrust and isolation (Asner-Self & Marotta, 2005).

Five participants in this study reported domestic abuse or violence that occurred in the United States. Three women were active in domestic violence programs including group and/or individual counseling. They reported success in the programs, which increased their support systems and gave them a platform to voice their experiences.

Implications for Practice

Studies have previously noted the likelihood that immigrants from Central America experience trauma or violence in their countries of origin. Most recently, Keller et. al (2017) noted that a shocking 90% of the participants in a study of Central Americans crossing the border reported fear of returning to their countries of origin, noting that trauma exposure rates were extremely high. These current findings indicate that the situation in Central America continues to

deteriorate and that newer immigrants face increasing violence. Due to the likelihood of exposure to traumatic events, trauma-informed culturally appropriate programming for Central American women may best address their needs upon arrival.

The women in the current study reported success in attending domestic violence programs. Such programs provided them with support in their native language as well as a platform to discuss the abuse. They also received other mental health services including, in some cases, medication to help alleviate their symptoms. Other avenues that are comfortable for Central Americans, such as churches or other places of worship, may also provide a safe space for such services. These spaces also provide an appropriate avenue for providing psycho-education about GBV, trauma, and mental health. They are also appropriate locations for distributing information about available programs and resources for immigrants. Community partnerships between religious institutions and social service organizations can strengthen relationships with the immigrant community.

Sexual abuse was reported twice in their countries of origin, once during the journey, and twice in the United States. The threat of sexual violence, however, was far more pervasive. The stigma of surviving sexual violence, combined with the other barriers to accessing services may prevent immigrant women from treatment after a sexual assault. However, due to the prevalence of sexual violence, therapy and/or groups for sexual violence survivors that focus on their specific needs and are conducted in Spanish, may best address their symptoms and reduce isolation.

Three of the women noted increased stress and a lack of support during pregnancy. Pregnant women face the added burden of discrimination from potential employers. One woman spoke about eating from the garbage for part of her pregnancy in the United States. Despite the availability of social programs to help women, such as WIC (Women, Infant, and Children, a

program to help with food, nutrition, and health during pregnancy and after giving birth) and the Medical Card (insurance provided to pregnant women in Illinois regardless of immigration status), immigrant women are less likely to know about such programs. They are also more likely to fear accessing governmental programming if they are undocumented (Landale, Thomas, & Van Hook, 2011). The woman that did not have food during her pregnancy would have benefited greatly from existing programs for pregnant women. Furthermore, according to the National Institutes of Health (NIH), pregnant women who do not see a doctor are at higher risk for complications including lower birth weight and premature babies. Therefore, outreach with pregnant Central American women, possibly in non-traditional locations, may help to educate them about mother/infant health and programs from which they can benefit. Finally, programs that offer counseling, such as perinatal mood disorder programs, can help alleviate symptoms of depression, anxiety, isolation, or those associated with PTSD. Such programming may also reduce the likelihood of developing those symptoms after giving birth.

Implications for Policy

Immigration advocacy, which Van Ham (2009) refers to as the humanization of immigrants, is an important step forward in promoting immigrant rights. When we speak in terms of expansion vs. restriction, or allowing immigrants in vs. denying them entry, we are failing to recognize the humanity of immigrants. Immigrants around the globe must be afforded basic human rights regardless of their status, their country of origin, or their current residence. When we see people in binary terms, we are minimizing their lived experiences and separating ourselves from them. By perpetuating the idea that immigrants are “the other”, we dismiss our own empathy and understanding. The women in the current study appear to recognize this dichotomy as well as how the larger society may view them, as criminals due to their status. As one woman from

Honduras stated, she came here “only to work, only to help.” She asked to be seen differently than how she perceives herself to be seen in the United States. She further stated, “We are women that came here to work, that came here to fight for our children.” Her request echoes the needs of the Central American female immigrant community, which is much more complex than reflected in the current political dialogue, referring to immigrants who arrive irregularly as criminals.

It is clear from these interviews that women who immigrate irregularly are more fearful of authorities and therefore, are at higher risk for continued abuse without police intervention. Furthermore, in the Northern Triangle police are viewed as unable or unwilling to assist female survivors of violence and therefore, people are unlikely to report it.

Policies put in place to protect survivors of violence must also explicitly provide for the protection of female immigrants. Due, in part, to their immigration status, lack of language skills, and lack of knowledge, immigrant women are less likely to benefit from current policies. Because of their high exposure to violence and susceptibility to gender-based violence, immigrant women would benefit from policies to protect them from further abuses. For example, in order to reduce the rates of domestic violence among Central American women, as well as other immigrants, I believe it is absolutely imperative to create and enforce clear laws preventing the arbitrary detention of domestic violence survivors on the basis of their immigration status or any charges related to said status. Detentions of immigrant women on the basis of their immigration status will prevent further reporting of domestic violence. The absence of laws protecting survivors may contribute directly to continued domestic abuse and in severe cases, murder, due to survivors’ fear of authorities, deportation, and family separation.

The criminalization of immigrants, or the merging of immigration policies and criminal law, culminates in violence against Central Americans by stripping them of their basic human rights (Menjívar & Abrego, 2012). In order to protect the human rights of immigrants, immigration must be decriminalized, completely separated from the criminal justice system of the United States. Furthermore, immigrants who are facing deportation or other repercussions due to their immigration status must be afforded the full protection of the law of the land. This change would require immigrants to have equal access to lawyers, communication with their families, and just and humane detention, should they be apprehended.

The decriminalization of immigration will allow immigrants to report current illegal activities that are putting human lives in danger. Immigrants will be able to report the serious crimes of human trafficking, sexual violence, abuse of minors, domestic violence, and other violent activity. It may also prevent arbitrary separation of parents and minor children and the resulting public health concerns. Immigrants concerns over trusting authorities are both valid and rational. The New York Post recently published an article about a 31-year-old Honduran immigrant who was hit by a pickup truck while riding his bike in Florida (Miller, 2017). The report noted that, before being offered assistance for his injuries, the young man was questioned about his immigration status. Upon returning to the scene, he was apprehended by border patrol agents. As the news agency noted, “These types of interactions can chip away at public confidence in law enforcement.” Immigrant women are particularly vulnerable to gender-based violence, but without legal protection, they are unlikely to report it, putting them and their families at even higher risk. They are also less likely to attend to their general health concerns, as that young man recently did, without the knowledge that their immigration statuses will not be questioned.

Van Ham (2009) discussed the need to promote immigration advocacy and this research strives to do just that. Through humanizing their experiences and documenting the unjust experiences the participants have faced, I hope to encourage providers as well as lawmakers to advocate for the fair and appropriate treatment of immigrants. Immigrants' continued vulnerability due, in part, to current policies, constitutes human rights abuses as their needs are ignored and they are seen as "criminals."

Study Limitations

The current study has many limitations. The population was difficult to access due their history of irregular immigration. The population was accessed through churches, social service organizations, and by snowball sampling. Participants then, may have been similar in some ways, such as seeking services of domestic violence or identifying as Christian. The original plan was to interview 15 women but that number was revised due to access and time limitations. The participants also immigrated over a span of 49 years from 1962-2011, so the events, political climate, and economic stability in their countries were different from one participant to the next. The interviews were completed saturated with information due to the open-ended format of the questionnaire, making the task of evaluating them both daunting and timely. Finally, only one person coded the interviews. The lack of other coders may have impeded the researcher from addressing all of the themes that emerged.

Directions for Future Research

Participants in the current study who reported violence in their countries-of-origin often reported exposure to similar forms of violence in the United States. That implies that immigrant survivors of violence in their countries of origin, including domestic violence and child abuse are more likely to be victimized again in the future after arrival in their new country. Due to the

overwhelming evidence in this research, future studies focusing on the correlation between violence in one's country of origin and violence in the United States after arrival is necessitated. More detailed research on female immigrants continued exposure to trauma after arrival in the United States would be useful in determining any correlation in such experiences as well as further assessing their needs and the best ways to respond.

The majority of the women noted, in their own words, one or more mental health concerns. Therefore, further research addressing the symptoms of mental health illnesses as well as the impact of programs working with female Central Americans would help providers create appropriate programs. Sexual violence impacted many of the participants in their countries-of-origin, during the journey, and in the United States. Explicit research about sexual violence experiences among female Central American immigrants is necessary to further assess the prevalence of sexual violence as well as methods of prevention and treatment. Sexual violence is a pervasive problem throughout the world. However, immigrants in transit and undocumented immigrants present a particular target as they are trying to evade authority.

One participant, originally from Honduras, recalled her two-year-long stay in Mexico. She was essentially stuck in transit, fearful to go back (to Honduras) and unable to go forward (to the U.S.). As more Central Americans are staying in Mexico, it is important to learn about their living conditions. Carte (2014) wrote about the "Central Americanization" of the southern border of Mexico. She referred to the denial of their rights as "everyday restriction", a term that notes the difficulties in their lives due to the arbitrary denial of legal rights. Her paper included the responses of immigrant women from the same countries as the current study, who were living in Mexico. Women included were at risk of being considered stateless, further reducing their rights and putting the women and their Mexican born children at risk. Further research is needed to

address the needs of Central American women both stuck in transit in Mexico and those that settle there permanently. Finally, as Carte (2014, p. 138) noted in her paper, “it reaffirms the need for feminist studies of migration policy, policy implementation, and the impacts of such policies on often overlooked populations.”

Women often stayed or waited at one or more safe houses, or stop known to their smugglers, during the immigration journey both in Mexico and in the United States. These (un)safe houses were experienced as dangerous and hubs of illegal activity such as drug smuggling and drug use. One participant was held captive at a safe house and imprisoned in sexual servitude. Another one faced the threat of sexual violence at more than one safe house. The women were not at leisure to leave them without permission. These experiences warrant further research as well as investigation on such safe houses where immigrants are kept.

Implications for Global Feminist Social Work

Immigration is a global phenomenon that impacts all corners of the globe. Lack of documentation for any person cannot suffice as an excuse to violate their basic human rights. Feminists, who have successfully recognized the intersectionality of women and minorities and have fought for recognition and justice for these groups have failed to collectively recognize the plight of immigrants and refugees. Immigrants cannot be outside of the law, in that they are not afforded protection from threats to their lives or integrity. Female immigrants, in particular, are at risk for violence and other forms of abuses throughout their journeys. Their lived experiences should be of particular concern to the feminist community of scholars and activists alike.

Conclusion

Central American women face escalating dangers both in their countries of origin and on their immigration journeys. Despite those dangers, women continue to trek north in search of a better

life. They experience increased vulnerability to gender based violence, namely sexual violence, kidnapping, and slavery. Their ability to complete such harrowing journeys to the United States further magnifies the conditions from which they are desperate to escape. Unfortunately, in the United States they continue to face many of the burdens they are fleeing. They report violence, poverty, and symptoms related to deteriorating mental health. Among their concerns is the impact of family separation and isolation. They received relief through the church, other immigrants, and domestic violence programs as well as other mental health services. In order to change the dialogue about Central American women and to complete our mission of protecting human rights, it is essential that we provide for their basic needs. As seen through the use of a feminist lens, Central American women's unique experiences result in their own challenges and special needs upon arrival that require specialized treatment and knowledge of their lived experiences.

APPENDIX

DATA

► Table 2

Thematic coding categories

Thematic Categories	Sub-Themes
I. Reasons for immigration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. Escaping violence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Violence in country of origin <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. War/political unrest b. Gang/other violence 2. Violence in the home <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Child abuse <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Violence (2) Sexual violence b. Domestic violence B. Economic opportunity (fleeing poverty, hoping to help family) C. Family unity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Joining family/partners 2. Traveling to stay with family/partners D. Tourism (to see the country)
II. *Human threats (potentially traumatic and/or life-threatening events during the journey)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. Sexual violence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Experienced 2. Threatened 3. Witnessed/heard about B. Kidnapping <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Forced prostitution 2. Drug trafficking C. Immigration authorities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Extortion 2. Detention 3. Deportation 4. Other abuses D. <i>Coyotes</i> E. Fellow immigrants <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Internalized racism (from fellow countrymen) 2. Sexual/other forms of violence
III. *Physical threats (during the journey)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. Nature/the weather (heat, cold, etc.) B. Physical challenges <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Walking 2. Hunger/thirst

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Exhaustion 4. Swimming 5. Uncomfortable/dangerous hiding spaces/traveling passages <p>C. Animals</p>
IV. Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. Faith B. (Caring for) Family C. Desire to help others D. Resilience E. Cleverness (ability to prevent potentially dangerous situations with unusual tactics)
V. Experiences in the U.S.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. Violence/abuse <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Domestic violence 2. Gang/community violence B. Continued vulnerability due to status C. <i>La soledad</i> (loneliness) D. Work E. Help/assistance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Received 2. Needed F. Experiences of loss of control of one's own body/sexism <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Rape 2. Inability to escape physical labor (due to work availability/status/language) 3. Forced to work due to inability to collect child support 4. Forced abortion
VI. Advice to other women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. Do not come B. There are opportunities C. Mixed

► Table 3

Reasons for immigration

Participant	Escaping violence	Family reunification (unification)	Economic opportunity
1. Carmen			
2. Paola			
3. Lucinda			
4. Oralia			
5. Ana			
6. Esmeralda			
7. Viviana			
8. Mariana			
9. Cynthia			
10. Sara			
11. Sandra			
12. Laura			

Note. One participant stated that she also wanted ‘to see the country’ but this response was not included because when further probed she noted that she wanted to work to help her family.

► Table 4

Gendered experiences

Women's Described Experiences	Country of origin	Journey	U.S.
Child Abuse	3	N/A	N/A
Childhood Sexual Abuse	2	N/A	N/A
Domestic Violence	1	N/A	6
Sexual Violence (Adult)	(None reported)	1	3
Perceived Threat of Sexual Violence	(None reported)	7	2
Caring for Siblings	4	N/A	1
Caring for Children	4	1	12
Loss of a Partner	1	0	2
Abandonment by Partner	2	0	3
Threat from Countrymen	N/A	6	1

Note. The one participant who left her husband did so because he was abusive.

► Table 5

Experiences of violence in country of origin

Participant	Domestic violence	Child abuse	Sexual violence	Violence in country of origin
1. Carmen				
2. Paola				
3. Lucinda				
4. Oralia				
5. Ana				
6. Esmeralda				
7. Viviana				
8. Mariana				
9. Cynthia				
10. Sara				
11. Sandra				
12. Laura				

► Table 6

Questionnaire

1. What country/state/county/city are you from?
2. What is your relationship status?
3. What is your education level?

4. Describe your life before you came to the United States
5. (Family, work, home, community, etc.)
6. What was your childhood like?
7. Can you describe why or how you decided to migrate to the United States
8. What kind of stories did you hear about the migration journey before you left?
9. What did your family/friends say about you traveling to the United States?
10. How did you prepare for the journey?
11. From the time you decided to migrate to the United States to the time you left your country, what kinds of things did you do to get ready? Did anyone help you?
12. How did you feel before leaving?
13. How did you plan to travel?
14. Did anyone help you make the plans?
15. With whom did you decide to travel?
16. Can you describe for me, in as much detail as possible, your journey from your home to the United States?
 - A. Did you experience/ witness violence?
 - B. Did you experience/witness any form of help?
 - C. Did you help others?

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