

Survival Migration: A Study of Central American Transwomen's Decision to Flee

Cristina de Nicolás Izquierdo*

MA in Refugee Protection and Forced Migration Studies
cristinadenicolas@gmail.com

February 2022

Abstract

Systematic research on transgender migration is limited and mostly focused on the 'during' and 'post' stages of displacement. Little attention has been paid to the decision-making process and pre-migration phase.

In Central America, transwomen face severe discrimination, marginalization and abuses based on their gender identity and are exposed to constant physical and sexual violence. Despite limited data, reports show that they are part of the new wave of international displacement affecting the region. Analysing why they flee and the factors contributing to their decision is essential to understand the multiple facets of displacement and this often-invisible phenomenon.

This study uses life-stories to deepen the knowledge of transwomen's decision-making to flee across borders, often following multiple life experiences of internal displacement. It uses the concept of 'survival migration' to describe movements that literally save their lives, situations of flight that result from the deprivation of basic rights and from persecution, exploring how the broad range of factors affecting the decision interrelate.

The findings suggest that although seeking a safe place in which it would be possible to build a better life is important, their life experiences, and the decisions they make are complex. The changing circumstances in which their reactive or preventive movements occur will determine the nature of their decision to flee across borders. Often for them, migration does not necessarily mean freedom, but a limited strategy to survive.

The objective of this study is to provide a new insight into the complexity of transwomen's decisions to flee. In doing so, it contributes to the knowledge about this community, and the urgent need to listen to them in order to understand the multitude of interconnected reasons underpinning their decisions to migrate.

Keywords Transwomen, Central America, violence, survival, migration

** I am extremely grateful to the participants in this study, whose lives and experiences are the heart of the project. Their strength, courage and determination are, to say the least, inspirational and a life lesson. Thank you for volunteering your time to generously share your stories.*

Contents

1.	Introduction	4
1.1	Background and research questions	4
1.2	Significance of the study	5
1.3	Note on Terminology	5
2.	Conceptual Framework & Literature Review	7
2.1	Drivers of Migration	7
2.2	Structure and Agency in Migration Decision-Making	9
2.3	Mobility vs. Immobility	10
3.	Methodology	11
3.1	Study Design	11
3.2	Participant recruitment and selection criteria	11
3.3	Data Collection and Analysis	12
3.3.1	Oral history: a narrative method	12
3.3.2	Collection & analysis of life stories	13
3.3.3	Key informant Interviews	14
3.4	Limitations	14
3.5	Ethical considerations	15
3.5.1	Information and Informed Consent	15
3.5.2	Anonymity and Confidentiality	15
3.5.3	Safety and wellbeing	15
3.5.4	Researcher's position	16
4.	Findings & Discussion	17
4.1	Influence of personal environment	18
4.1.1	Figures of attachment & protection vs. rejection and violence	18
4.1.2	The decision to leave home	19
4.2	Influence of social environment	20
4.2.1	School and interest in learning	20
4.2.2	Sex work, violence, and displacement	21
4.2.3	Bonds of solidarity	23
4.3	The decision to flee the country	25
4.3.1	Factors prompting the decision to flee & opportunities	25
4.3.2	Support and influence in the decision to flee	27
4.3.3	Discussion	28
5.	Conclusion	30

List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

ACNUR	Alto Comisionado de las Naciones Unidas para los Refugiados (<i>United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees</i>)
AECID	Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional para el Desarrollo (<i>Spanish International Cooperation Agency</i>)
CIDAI	Centre for Information, Documentation and Research Support
CIDH	Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos (<i>Inter-American Commission on Human Rights</i>)
CNDH	Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos (<i>National Commission for Human Rights, Mexico</i>)
COMCAVIS TRANS	Asociación Comunicando y Capacitando a Mujeres Trans con VIH (<i>Association Communicating and Training Transwomen with HIV</i>)
ECOSUR	El Colegio de La Frontera Sur (<i>College of the Southern Border</i>)
IACHR	Inter-American Commission on Human Rights
ICCO	Inter-church organisation for development cooperation
IDMC	Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre
LGBTI	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex
NCTE	National Centre for Transgender Equality
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
REDLACTRANS	Red Latinoamericana y del Caribe de Personas Trans (<i>Latin American and Caribbean Network of Trans People</i>)
RLI	Refugee Law Initiative
SICA	Sistema de la Integración Centroamericana (<i>Central American Integration System</i>)
UCR	Universidad de Costa Rica (<i>University of Costa Rica</i>)
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
US	United States (of America)

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and research questions

The issues affecting sexual and gender minorities are interlinked with larger societal historical conflicts that since last century have convulsed Central America.¹² The rule of law is weak³ in the region, and minorities that are subject to persecution have little or no recourse to the state for protection, particularly when state actors share the same or greater prejudices as the society at large⁴. Human rights abuses against gender minorities occur within contexts of conflict and spread of poverty that have deeply polarized their societies. In turn, these have created the perception that any challenge to the social order or patriarchal gender norms should be seen as a political threat.⁵ Trans people challenge deeply felt assumptions by many others about the proper gender roles of men and women and, in doing so, they have always been considered a threat to the stability of their societies. Consequently, transwomen face severe discrimination, marginalization and abuses based on their gender identity and are exposed to constant and invisible physical and sexual violence.⁶ Moreover, they are inadequately treated or denied access to health and psychological care and other social services and, in some instances, arbitrarily detained.⁷

Human rights organizations have long been advocating for a change in data collection of population categories affected by forced displacement (internal and cross-borders) based on an inclusive gender identity, not limited to the man/woman or male/female binomial, which prevents evaluation of the impact of forced migration on trans people, and hence renders their movement invisible.⁸

Despite a lack of precise data, several reports and studies show that transwomen are part of the new wave of international displacement affecting Central America,⁹ increasingly fleeing to other countries in the Americas or Europe.¹⁰ However, little is known about their lived experiences, their strategies, resources, and their agency in migration decision-making.

Although violence in its multiple forms and the lack of institutional protection mechanisms ap-

1 'Central America' is used in this study according to the Royal Spanish Academy in reference to the set of countries located in the Central American isthmus: Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama.

2 Guzmán Contreras, 'Centroamérica: región de desplazamientos forzados' in Nayar López Castellanos (coord), *Procesos migratorios en la Centroamérica del Siglo XXI* (La Biblioteca 2018) 107; Ailsa Winton, 'Grupos violentos en Centroamérica: la institucionalización de la violencia' (2011) 37 *Desacatos* 111, 113; CIDAI, *How Homosexuality is seen in El Salvador*, (July 1998)

3 REDLACTRANS, 'The night is another country: impunity and violence against transgender women human rights defenders in Latin America' (2012) 4.

4 IACHR, 'Situation of Human Rights in Honduras' (2019) 120; IACHR, 'IACHR presents its preliminary observations following its in loco visit to El Salvador' (2019); REDLACTRANS, 'Human Rights Violations of Trans Women in Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Panama' (2015); ICCO Cooperation, 'Evaluación de actitudes hacia las personas LGTBI por parte de las fuerzas policiales El Salvador' (2014).

5 IDMC, RLI, 'An Atomised Crisis: Reframing Displacement Caused by Crime and Violence In El Salvador' (2018) 16; OHCHR, personal communication, 19 October 2018; Wilets, 'El Salvador, Honduras, Panama' in Chuck Stewart (ed.) *The Greenwood encyclopedia of LGBT issues worldwide* (Greenwood Press 2010), 117.

6 UNHCR, *Salvadoran transgender activist takes stand against violence* (2016).

7 Michele Lanham and others, 'We're going to Leave You for Last, Because of How You Are: Transgender Women's Experiences of Gender-Based Violence in Healthcare, Education, and Police Encounters in Latin America and the Caribbean', *Violence and Gender* 6(1) (2019) 38.

8 COMCAVIS TRANS, 'El desplazamiento forzado interno de la población LGTBI en El Salvador' (2019) 5; OHCHR, personal communication I, 18 October 2018; OHCHR, personal communication II, 18 October 2018.

9 UNHCR, 'Emergencies, Displacement in Central America' (unhcr.org) <<https://www.unhcr.org/displacement-in-central-america.html>> [accessed 5 June 2020]; Ailsa Winton, 'I've got to go somewhere': *Queer Displacement in Northern Central America and Southern Mexico* in Arzu Güler, Maryna Shevtsova and Denise Venturi (eds.), *LGBTI Asylum Seekers and Refugees from a Legal and Political Perspective* Persecution, Asylum and Integration (Springer 2019), 96.

10 Amnesty International, 'No Safe Place' Salvadorans, Guatemalans and Hondurans Seeking Asylum In Mexico Based On Their Sexual Orientation And / Or Gender Identity', (2017) 4; UNHCR, *Regional Response to the Northern Triangle of Central America Situation* (2016) 6; UNHCR, 'Call to Action: Protection Needs in the Northern Triangle of Central America' (2016) 5; ACNUR, 'Entre Fronteras; Un estudio exploratorio sobre diversidad sexual y movilidad en la Frontera Sur de México' (2016) 1; IACHR, 'Violence Against LGBTI Persons' (2015) 180; IDMC, RLI (n3) 16; UNCHR, 'Forced Displacement And Protection Needs Produced By New Forms Of Violence And Criminality In Central America' (2012) 27-30;

appears to be the main cause of forced migration,¹¹ we know little about other factors that contribute to their decision-making to flee across an international border, following a life of permanent displacement¹² within their countries.¹³

Based on field work conducted during the autumn of 2018 in four European cities, this study explores why Central American transwomen fled their country of origin. Three research questions guided the investigation:

1. What factors contributed to their decision to flee?
2. How did these factors influence their decision?
3. To what extent were these factors determined or aggravated by a gender non conforming identity¹⁴?

1.2 Significance of the study

Conducting this research into the lives of transwomen is particularly important given the social and political contexts where their lives unfold, and the limited systematic research on transgender migration. Additionally, it will hopefully contribute to the academic research on the topic for the following reasons:

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

1.3 Note on Terminology

Transwoman and Transgender woman

Somewhat as result of a "lack of sufficient vocabulary to describe the diversity of gender expression, especially the experiences of transpeople who do not identify as exclusively male or female"¹⁵, the definition around trans identity is often a source of debate. Thus, the term *transgender* (also

¹¹ COMCAVIS TRANS, 'Huir y Sobrevivir: una mirada a la situación en El Salvador de las personas LGBTI desplazadas internas y los riesgos que enfrentan' (2020) 10; AECID, 'La situación de las personas LGBTI del norte de Centroamérica con necesidades de protección internacional en Guatemala y México' (2018) 15.

¹² Ailsa Winton has extensively explored this idea of permanent mobility (movilidad perpetua in Spanish) result of crises and ruptures because of living in high-risk environments from an early age.

¹³ ACNUR (n10) 14.

¹⁴ Adjective used by people who do not subscribe to societal expectations of typical gender expressions or roles (see LGBTQIA+ Resource Center at <https://lgbtqia.ucdavis.edu/educated/glossary>).

¹⁵ Brett Beemyn, 'Serving the needs of transgender college students', (2003) (1)1 Journal of Gay and Lesbian Issues in Education 33.

*trans** or *trans*) is a broad term that can be used to describe people whose gender identity and/or expression is different from the one assigned to them at birth.¹⁶

For the purpose of this study, I use the term *transgender woman* or *transwoman* indistinctly to incorporate the broadest possible range of gender identities and expressions, including individuals who have transitioned from male to female, individuals who have not transitioned but do not identify with a male assigned gender at birth, and those whose gender identity does not conform to binary societal norms.

Survival Migration

In the absence of a conceptual language to clearly identify “individuals who should have the right not to be returned to their country of origin on human rights grounds”, Betts adopted the term ‘survival migrants’¹⁷. The term, he suggests, may be used “to identify people who are outside their country of origin because of an existential threat for which they have no access to a domestic remedy or resolution, whether as a result of persecution, conflict or environmental degradation”. In this study, this term usefully encapsulates the experience of transwomen migrants, their personal journey of decision-making, and migration as the only option to survive.

16 NCTE, ‘Understanding Transgender People: The Basics’ (2016) https://transequality.org/sites/default/files/docs/resources/Understanding-Trans-Short-July-2016_0.pdf [accessed 13 March 2020].

17 Alexander Betts, ‘Survival Migration: Failed Governance and the Crisis of Displacement’ (Cornell University Press 2013) 5.

2. Conceptual Framework & Literature Review

Substantial literature is available on internal, regional, and extra-regional Central American migration, either regarding the armed conflicts during the 1980s, or more recently as result of poverty exacerbated by widespread violence, and persecution by armed criminal actors.¹⁸ However, research on migration in the region through the lens of gender identity is still incipient and has been addressed primarily from a human rights perspective.¹⁹

As indicated in the Introduction, this dissertation focuses on the stories that transwomen tell about their lives, examining what particular factors existed and how these contributed to their decision to migrate, as they appear in their narratives. The objective was to understand and analyse those questions, which required working with a series of concepts useful to identify and draw out the common threads within the participants' narratives, as well as to support the findings.

The conceptual approach comprises the notion of drivers of migration and the role of agency in the context of trans migration decision-making, both central to this research. In addition, I briefly engage with the concepts of mobility and immobility as survival strategies, where appropriate.

2.1 Drivers of Migration

Migration is a complex and diverse process. Throughout history, different models have been developed to help understand individual decision-making in migration. However, the decisions made by people who migrate are the result of a multiplicity of unpredictable drivers, as well as desires and aspirations that are neither static nor mutually exclusive.²⁰

From the initial push & pull model of migration²¹ to Kunz's Kinetic model²² (1973) that differentiated between voluntary and forced decision-making and found that the level of choice of migrants depends on the perceived danger or immediacy of the threat. Kunz understood refugee flight as two types of movement: anticipatory and acute. Carling & Collins considered that in exploring the motives that produce and inhibit migration, it is important to avoid simplistic or unique explanations.²³ Migration theory must study the multiplicity of its components -drivers, aspirations and desires-, avoid frictions among them, and use their relationship to explain why people migrate, and how they experience and represent migration. While 'aspirations and desires' result from perceptions and emotions of the person that experiences the move, 'drivers of migration' is an analytical category that reveals an external analysis and understanding of the world.²⁴ At the same time, aspirations and desires, both relate to the future, and bring hope to the individual in the imagined

18 ACNUR (n10) 1; Vickie Knox, 'Factors influencing decision making by people fleeing Central America' (2017) 56 *Forced Migration Review* 18; Rodolfo Casillas, 'Entre la política deseada, la practicada y los flujos migratorios emergentes: respuestas en construcción y desafíos duraderos' (2016) Documentos de trabajo No.4; Centro de Estudios de Guatemala, 'La migración centroamericana' (2016); Carlos Sandoval García, 'No más muros. Exclusión y migración forzada en Centroamérica' (1st edn, Editorial UCR 2015) 4; David Cantor, 'The New Wave: Forced Displacement Caused by Organized Crime in Central America and Mexico' (2014) (33)3 *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 35; Ailsa Winton (n2) 112.

19 See the work conducted by the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights on the subject, i.e., IACHR (n10).

20 Francesco Castelli, 'Drivers of migration: why do people move?' (2018) 25(1) *Journal of Travel Medicine*; Stephen Castles, Hein de Haas and Mark J. Miller, *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World* (3rd ed. Basingstoke 2003) 19; P. Neal Ritchey, 'Explanations of Migration' (1976) 2 *Annual Review of Sociology*.

21 Ernst Georg Ravenstein, 'The Laws of Migration' (1885) 52 *Journal of the Statistical Society of London*; Lee, 'A theory of migration' (1966) *Demography* 3.

22 Egon F. Kunz, 'The refugee in flight: kinetic models and forms of displacement' (1973) 7(2) *International Migration Review* 125.

23 Jørgen Carling and Francis Collins, 'Aspiration, desire and drivers of migration' (2017) 44(6), *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 911.

24 *Ibid.*, 913.

idea of what could be the migratory experience.

While some scholars classify drivers thematically²⁵, others propose a model which identifies disposing factors, structural constraints, precipitating events and enabling circumstances²⁶, an approach later modified by Van Hear²⁷ to propose that predisposing, proximate, precipitating and intervening factors shaped what he called 'migration orders'.

Based on this distinction, Van Hear, Bakewell and Long²⁸ developed an analytical framework called *push-pull plus*, that takes what they call drivers or activated factors – as conditions that may form migration – influencing people's decision to migrate, and explored the relationship between them, taking into consideration that these drivers can change overtime and affect people in different ways. Thus, drivers of migration are "structural elements that enable and constrain the exercise of agency by social actors" and range from root causes to immediate triggers, which force people to finally start their journeys or, alternatively, remain. In doing so, Van Hear, Bakewell and Long reserve the term 'driver' for external forces that affect movement, thus separating it from aspirations, desires, and the individual's agency. They elaborate what they see as predisposing, proximate, precipitating, and mediating drivers.²⁹ In summary, in the country of origin *predisposing drivers* contribute to the creation of a context in which migration is more likely, and are generally the result of broader processes, such as globalization; *proximate drivers* are more directly related to migration and result from predisposing or structural characteristic, such as a serious deterioration in security or human rights situation; *precipitating drivers* are the ones that trigger the departure, connected to a specific event or series of events, persecution, for example; finally, *mediating drivers* enable, facilitate or impede migration. For instance, the existence of networks or contacts that either help to leave the country of origin or facilitate the choice and departure to country of destination.

Migration flows from and within Central America is an example where a *push-pull plus* framework could be applied, where combined predisposing, proximate, precipitating and mediating drivers shape the conditions, circumstances and environment within which people choose to move or stay, ultimately affecting their decision. These causes and their combination, importantly, have changed overtime.

According to a study conducted in Mexico in 2013, the first reason stated was poverty, followed by the search for better opportunities, family reunification and lastly, violence.³⁰ On the other hand, a baseline assessment conducted by the Central American Integration System (SICA) in 2019 found that increased insecurity, political causes, and high unemployment rates, in this order, have increased Central American emigration. Many people, especially from the north of Central America, have emigrated from their countries because they have suffered direct attacks, threats, or extortion by criminal gangs.³¹ The problem is that these reports limit the classification of the population to the men/women binomial, excluding other gender identities and therefore, preventing trans persons to see their realities captured.³² Filling this gap is essential to understand how violence exceptionally affects transwomen in cultural contexts with strong gender stereotypes and general

25 Distinguishing between economic, political, social, demographic, and environmental drivers. See Richard Black and others, 'The effect of environmental change on human migration' (2011) 21(1) *Global Environmental Change* 56.

26 Anthony H. Richmond, 'Reactive Migration: Sociological Perspectives on Refugee Movements' (1993) 6(1) *Journal of Refugee Studies* 12.

27 Nicholas Van Hear, *New Diasporas: The Mass Exodus, Dispersal and Regrouping of Migrant Communities* (1st ed. University of Washington Press 1998) 14-16.

28 Nicholas Van Hear, Oliver Bakewell and Katy Long, 'Push-pull Plus: Reconsidering the Drivers of Migration' (2018) 44(6) *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 929, 936, 937.

29 *Ibid.*, 931.

30 Sin Fronteras, 'La ruta del Encierro. Situación de las personas en detención en estaciones migratorias y estancias provisionales' (2013) 23-25.

31 SICA, 'Hallazgos del estudio de línea de base sobre migración y desplazamiento en la región del SICA' (2019) 63-64.

32 COMCAVIS TRANS (n8) 5; OHCHR, personal communication, 19 October 2018.

discriminatory legislation towards gender minorities.³³ Similarly, other studies point to the presence of increasingly consolidated structures in the societies of the region and insecurity, as the main driver influencing people's decision to flee.³⁴

In any one migration flow, several driver complexes may interconnect to shape the eventual direction and nature of movement. The challenge is to establish when and why some drivers are more important than others, which combinations are more potent than others, and which are more susceptible to change through external intervention.

Regarding the research area of this study, a small but emerging body of literature has begun to focus on contributing factors influencing trans people's decision to flee Central America. As studied by Van Hear, Bakewell and Long, various driver complexes interconnect to form the eventual nature of these women's movement; the question arises: how do the drivers interconnect with each other, and which ones are more important? Studies show that these are multiple and interconnected, a combination of violence - imminent or immediate risks, hate crimes in particular, and structural factors,³⁵ but also motivational factors and aspirations beyond the immediate need to move as a survival strategy.³⁶

Although conceived to understand migration flows, I am interested in exploring how the *push-pull plus* framework that combines proximate, precipitating, and mediating drivers, mostly in country of origin, can be useful in understanding these experiences of migration.

2.2 Structure and Agency in Migration Decision-Making

The analysis of the structure and agency in migration processes consists of exploring the relationships and tensions that occur between the migrant and the social, economic, cultural, and institutional processes with which they interact, both at origin and in destination.³⁷ In Central American societies, structural constraints are factors that explain the departure of LGBTI individuals to other countries on the continent or, to a lesser extent, to Europe.

According to Brettell,³⁸ structure refers to barriers existing in both sending and receiving societies, which condition the lives of migrants, while agency refers to the individual's decisions in the face of these constraints. De Haas³⁹ argues that migration is intimately connected with processes of social and economic change that alter opportunity structures and mobility patterns. Here, individuals have agency and own the decision to migrate (or to stay).⁴⁰ However, structural constraints always stand in their way, limiting the degree to which they can exercise agency.

33 Identidad de Género, e Igualdad y no Discriminación a Parejas del Mismo Sexo OC-24/17 (2017) (Advisory Opinion) CIDH < https://www.corteidh.or.cr/docs/opiniones/seriea_24_esp.pdf > [accessed 11 July 2018]

34 Vickie Knox (n18) 18; Vickie Knox, 'Gang violence, GBV and hate crime in Central America: State response versus State responsibility' (2019) 62 *Forced Migration Review* 79, 80; David Cantor (n18) 35; Ailsa Winton, 'Desplazamiento por violencia en el Norte de Centroamérica: historias de supervivencia' (2018) 4 *ECOSUR*; Ailsa Winton, 'Cuerpos disidentes en movimiento: miradas sobre movilidad transgénero desde la frontera sur de México' (2017) *El Cotidiano* 202, 115.

35 Vickie Knox (n18) 20, 21; Vickie Knox (n34).

36 Ailsa Winton 2017 (n 34) 123.

37 Oliver Bakewell, 'Some Reflections on Structure and Agency in Migration Theory' (2010) 36(10) *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 1689.

38 Caroline B. Brettell, 'The Individual/Agent and Culture/Structure in the History of the Social Sciences' (2002) 26(3) *Social Science History* 431.

39 Hein de Haas, 'Mobility and Human Development' (2009) UNDP Human Development Reports, Research Paper 2.

40 Norman Long, *Development Sociology. Actor Perspectives* (6th ed, Routledge 2001) 16.

Winton,⁴¹ who has researched LGBTI mobility in Central America and Mexico, explains that both migration and internal displacement of trans persons can be understood through their narratives, where they describe how all their actions are inevitably conditioned by their position in society. Life for them is an act of constant mobility (leave, flee, arrive, stay, wait...) accompanied by questions (when, where, how, should I...) that ultimately turn into decisions, but decisions that are limited and, often, risky and harmful. Van Hear, Bakewell and Long⁴² note that agency is still enabled and restricted by structural conditions that are beyond the scope of any individual's social relations, even more so for LGBTI persons whose moves take place in spaces, as Winton⁴³ describes, made for others.

In this study, I am interested in exploring Winton's notion of constant decision-making to move for survival and to satisfy basic needs, but in a universe of complex individual circumstances that somehow affects the participants' agency in the decision to leave their country.

2.3 Mobility vs. Immobility

As a means of escaping violence, mobility is an important strategy for trans people, although it does not represent a movement from oppression to freedom. Mobility is merely an enabler to reorganize opportunities, problems, and injustices.⁴⁴ Jordan & Morrissey⁴⁵ found that forcibly displaced persons that have survived violence due to their gender identity, often attempt multiple relocations within their own country or region, living for years in precarious circumstances, before fleeing across borders. However, mobility is not always possible or the most appropriate strategy, especially in contexts of violence.

Schewel⁴⁶ explains that the focus on the forces that lead to the initiation of migration -drivers- should not overlook the analysis of other structural and personal forces that restrict or resist it. Cresswell⁴⁷ goes further noting that mobility gains meaning in connection with social narratives inside frameworks of power which allow certain modes of mobility, and prohibit, regulate, and prevent others.

To understand why some transwomen at some point cross a border, we need to understand why in other circumstances they move internally or just do not move. Immobility can be the undesired outcome of restrictions on movement, the realisation of the desire to stay, or something in between.⁴⁸ Whilst I do not intend to examine immobility per se, I consider it to be relevant paying special attention to participants' experiences around Schewel's flexible interpretation of the concept.

41 Ailsa Winton, 'La lucha por quedarse: migrantes LGBT+ en el sur de México' in Ricardo Hernández Forcada and Ailsa Winton (coord), *Diversidad Sexual, Discriminación y Violencia: Desafíos para los Derechos humanos en México* (CNDH México 2018).

42 Nicholas Van Hear, Oliver Bakewell and Katy Long (n28) 7.

43 Ailsa Winton (n 41) 117.

44 *Ibid.*, 117.

45 Sharalyn R. Jordan and Chris Morrissey, "'On what grounds?'" LGBT asylum claims in Canada' (2013) 42 *Forced Migration Review* 13.

46 Kerilyn Schewel, 'Understanding Immobility: Moving Beyond the Mobility Bias in Migration Studies' (2019) 54 *International Migration Review* 328.

47 Tim Cresswell, 'The Right to Mobility: The Production of Mobility in the Courtroom' (2006) 38(4) *Antipode* 735.

48 Kerilyn Schewel (n46) 346.

3. Methodology

3.1 Study Design

This is a qualitative study that uses a narrative approach to explore the processes leading Central American transwomen to decide to permanently leave their home country.

A qualitative method was chosen for three reasons:

- » It captures both depth and meaning in how these transwomen make sense of their own lives.⁴⁹
- » It is appropriate for exploring a rather unknown reality and it provides an opportunity for the participants to freely express their individual experiences, reflections, and feelings.⁵⁰
- » It helps to explore the key research question: why transwomen flee.

The study was submitted and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the School of Advanced Study (University of London).

3.2 Participant recruitment and selection criteria

This study included five self-identified transwomen participants. Table 1 shows participants' demographic information. Being the objective to explore participants' subjective understanding and interpretation of their experiences of displacement and flight through a textual interpretation of their stories, saturation has been reached when, as Powles suggests, data collected allowed for in-depth analysis and depth of concepts related to the study aims to ensure the research questions could be answered.⁵¹

Table 1 Participant Demographic Information

Id #	Country of origin	Occupation	Country of flight	Current Immigration Status
1	El Salvador	Human Rights Defender	El Salvador	Asylum seeker
2	Honduras	Human Rights Activist	Honduras	Refugee
3	Honduras	Activist, Technical Advisor on the Promotion and Defence of Human Rights	Honduras	Refugee
4	El Salvador	Human Rights Activist	El Salvador	Asylum seeker

49 Heidi M. Levitt and Maria R. Ippolito, 'Being Transgender: The Experience of Transgender Identity Development' (2014) 61(12) *Journal of Homosexuality* 1727.

50 Klaus Krippendorff, 'Reliability in Content Analysis: Some Common Misconceptions and Recommendations' (2004) 30(3) *Human Communication Research* 411.

51 Julia Powles, 'Life history and personal narrative: theoretical and methodological issues relevant to research and evaluation in refugee contexts' (2004) UNHCR New Issues in Refugee Research Working Paper No. 106 <<https://www.unhcr.org/en-au/research/working/4147fe764/life-history-personal-narrative-theoretical-methodological-issues-relevant.html>> accessed 18 November 2018.

5	Panama	Project Director and Social Mobilizer	Panama	Refugee
---	--------	---------------------------------------	--------	---------

The recruitment of participants was done through snowball sampling along the following criteria: being at least 18 years old, self-identified as a transwoman, from Central America, and having fled their country of origin.

Snowball sampling is a method of non-probability and purpose sampling particularly useful in identifying hard-to-reach and hidden populations. Moreover, it is an appropriate method when the research topic is sensitive.⁵²

To find respondents, I initially approached colleagues in trans human rights organizations in the region with whom I have worked in the past. Once the first person that fitted the criteria and expressed interest in participating was identified, she recommended others, until five persons confirmed potential interest in participating in the study. Following an initial contact with each one of them via email and WhatsApp, I started building rapport in form of formal and informal communication via WhatsApp, email, and Skype. The exchange included, from sharing details about the study or listening to possible concerns and answering their questions, to defining together when we could meet in person, or simply sharing, at a more personal level, about our daily lives. The fact that all the exchange was in Spanish, their native language as well as mine, helped in building trust.⁵³

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

3.3.1 Oral history: a narrative method

When I started this project, I wanted to understand what led to transwomen taking the decision to leave their country after years of resistance and continued exposure to multiple forms of violence. Why at a particular time was the definitive move across borders made?

Beyond the curiosity in exploring experiences of forced migration of transwomen, an area relatively little researched in the context of Central America,⁵⁴ personal interest in the topic arose due to many distressing conversations with trans friends and colleagues during which the question of whether to leave or not, and how much their survival would depend on this decision constantly emerged.

Oral history was chosen as a method that would facilitate investigation of how these transwomen experienced their changing environments, and at the same time, document their lives in their own words, from their own perspective, deciding what is most important to them, and helping others to gain a deeper understanding of their lived experience of flight.

In recent years, oral history has become a method commonly used in qualitative research with refugees and displaced persons as a way for them to preserve their stories⁵⁵ and focus on the mean-

⁵² Jean Faugier and Mary Sargeant, 'Sampling hard to reach populations' (1997) 26(4) *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 792.

⁵³ Amy Ellard-Gray and others, 'Finding the Hidden Participant: Solutions for Recruiting Hidden, Hard-to-Reach, and Vulnerable Populations' (2015) 14(5) *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 2. ⁵⁴ See Chapter II for additional details.

⁵⁴ Darryl B. Hill, 'A method for the margins: A trans feminist oral history' in William Meezan and James I. Martin (eds.), *Research Methods with Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered Populations* (Routledge 2008) 334.

⁵⁵ Katherine Fobear, 'I thought we had no rights-challenges in listening, storytelling, and representation of LGBT refugees' (2015) 9(1) *Studies in Social Justice* 110. ⁵⁷ Susan E. Chase, 'Narrative Enquiry: Multiple lenses, approaches, voices' in Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln

ings that events hold for those with the lived experience of displacement. Oral history would also allow me to incorporate the voices of human beings often ignored and made invisible.⁵⁶

In the study, the focus on individual stories would somehow become the space of collective stories typical of the societies and cultures in which they live.⁵⁷

3.3.2 Collection & analysis of life stories

Following a plan developed with the participants, life stories interviews were conducted in October-November 2018. During that period, I travelled to the various European countries where participants reside. We met in person, spent some social time together before consent to be interviewed was finalised. We then agreed upon a suitable time and place to conduct the interviews. I made myself entirely available to when and where participants wanted to meet. Two of the interviews took place in my accommodation, which gave us the opportunity, without haste, to prepare the space and the session in a way to make them feel comfortable and prepare and share a meal once we were finished. Two interviews took place in the homes of the participants. Interviews conducted in their own homes are possibly the best arrangement allowing for comfort and privacy.⁵⁸ One of them introduced me to her roommate, showed me her space where the interview took place; the other had her own apartment, which also gave her the opportunity to decide the setup for the interview. The fifth took place in a semi-private area of the office where the participant works. Although it was not entirely private, it allowed her at times to incorporate colleagues to her narration and story. This was part of her choice.

Before interviews began, we read together the research information sheet in Spanish that they had previously received, obtained oral consent for participating and audiotaping, responded any questions, and administered a brief biographical questionnaire.

Life story interviews were conducted in Spanish, and all except one were done in one session. The shortest interview was 2 hours and 17 minutes; the longest 4 hours and 30 minutes.

As Atkinson suggests,⁵⁹ I decided to approach these life stories scientifically but carrying them as an art. In doing so, I avoid using interview protocols and, instead, to help participants recount their life story, I followed Slim et al's⁶⁰ suggestion to divide topics into two broad sections, "personal environment" (family and early life), and "social environment" (community, school, street) and within these, a number of possible themes derived inductively from the life stories.⁶¹ Participants narrated their lives in such a way, that only at times have I decided to ask open questions to elaborate more on a particular event or to gain clarification. On other occasions, I focused on listening.

Although not ideal, due to time and resource limitations, the process of transcribing and translating the stories (from Spanish into English) took place simultaneously. To get familiar with the content, I previously listened to each story various times, and reviewed field notes taken immediately after each interview to ensure that these provided an accurate reflection of the interaction. As a first step in the thematic analysis, I developed a keyword coding system, where I manually coded a summary of each story with key terms such as 'Threats' or 'peer solidarity'. To facilitate my access

(eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed. Sage Publication 2005) 652.

56 Darryl B. Hill (n54) 335; Tammi Sharpe and Elias Schneider, 'Telling it like it is' (2016) 52 *Forced Migration Review* 54.

57 Barbara A. Bogart, *From Memory to History: Using Oral Sources in Local Historical Research* (1st Ed. University of California Press 1981) 153.

58 Darryl B. Hill (n 54) 339.

59 Robert Atkinson, 'The life story interview' in Jaber F. Gubrium and others (eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Interview Research: The Complexity of the Craft* (2nd ed. SAGE Publications 2012).

60 Hugo Slim and others, *Listening for a change: oral testimony and community development* (New Society Publishers 1995) 77.

61 Robert Atkinson (n 59) 132.

to the data and familiarise myself with the themes of each story and the common themes across all interviews, I entered these into an analysis matrix table created with Microsoft Excel. As Wengraf suggests, listening to the audio recordings and revisiting notes allowed me to gain an understanding, not only of what the participants said, but of the deeper meaning behind their words, and identify representative quotes from each theme with which to demonstrate the meaning of those from the participants' perspectives.⁶² The translation of direct quotes aimed to be as accurate as possible, maintaining a balance between communicating the original meaning in Spanish and its readability in the English translation.⁶³

At first, the analysis of the data was done simultaneously with the coding of keywords and identifying whether these ones corresponded to overarching themes. Then, the data analysis was refined by grouping the summary of the narratives of each participant and the descriptive quotes around each subtopic and comparing them between stories.

3.3.3 Key informant Interviews

To help frame the study, I conducted five interviews with key informants selected for their first-hand knowledge about forced displacement and flight of LGBTI⁶⁴ people in Latin America, transwomen in particular, or the impact of their displacement and flight while in country of refuge/asylum. Three interviews were conducted in English, one in French, and one in Spanish. Four interviews took place in Geneva, one on the phone, three in person, and the interview with ECOSUR was conducted via Skype.

These interviews were lightly structured around a list of issues to discuss. To ensure accuracy, notes were taken and developed immediately after each interview.⁶⁵

3.4 Limitations

The main limitations of the study are related to the qualitative design and the challenges of exploring the reality of an under-researched population group. First, as an exploratory study, it is not designed to be representative to the larger population of Latin American transwomen due to the small sample size (5 participants), and the fact that non-probability sampling techniques were used. The objective of this study was to explore an under-researched facet of migration and contribute to our understanding about forced migration experiences of transwomen globally. Second, the recruitment of participants through snowballing resulted in a sample where participants represented only three -of the seven- countries in Central America. Third, by taking participants' stories and placing them in a broader narrative, I am imposing meaning on their lived experience, and therefore, interpreting their experiences.⁶⁶ This required accepting that I am not neutral, and constantly needed to differentiate between the assumptions I made about their lives, and the lives they chose to share.

62 Tom Wengraf, *Qualitative research interviewing: biographical narrative and semi-structured methods* (1st ed. Thousand Oaks 2001) 269.

63 Julia Powles (n 51) 15.

64 The acronym LGBTI is a broad term meaning Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex identities, used by UNHCR to be inclusive towards a wide range of individuals fearing persecution for reasons of their sexual orientation and gender identity.

65 Paul J. Lavrakas, *Encyclopedia of Survey Research Methods* (2008) vol 0 407.

66 Jill S. Bell, 'Narrative Inquiry: More Than Just Telling Stories' (2002) 36(2) TESOL Quarterly 210.

3.5 Ethical considerations

Ethical conduct in the research relationships undertaken in this study was essential from the beginning. Researchers bring ethical orientations to their work that manifest in decision-making around the conceptualization and conduct of research, making this one either an oppressive or emancipatory practice.⁶⁷ To make of this study a rather free experience, the areas of (a) informed consent, (b) anonymity and confidentiality, (c) safety and wellbeing, and (d) researcher's position needed to be addressed.

3.5.1 Information and Informed Consent

All participants were provided with an information sheet outlining the objectives of the study, the method of data collection, confidentiality, voluntary participation (no monetary compensation was provided), information on possible risks, various contact details in case they wished to discuss the interview at a later stage, had questions or wanted to make a complaint (in which case the contact in the Ethics Committee of University of London was provided), and contact details of a member of the trans community known to them.

To avoid the possibility of putting at risk participants with the existence of paper records should there be a breach of privacy, I opted for an oral consent process consisting in providing information orally in advance of the interview, followed by a discussion with each one of them before giving consent orally on the day that the interview was conducted and documented in an electronic form. This allowed participants to gain a better understanding of the research and give a real meaning to the informed consent process. I provided them with my contact details and made myself available to respond to questions at any time. To me, informed consent in a verbal form was a continuum, reconsidered by each participant as needed throughout the study.

3.5.2 Anonymity and Confidentiality

To ensure anonymity, participants were given the opportunity to choose a pseudonym to be used in transcriptions and in all other documents. Three agreed to this option, while two requested that I keep their real name as an identifier of their story. In this case, only the first name is used. Although information regarding locations and names included in their narratives were de-identified, I am aware that using life stories as a data collection tool, no matter how much I clean the data and remove personal identifiers such as names, the contextual identifiers in individuals' life stories will remain.⁶⁸ In this case, I carefully considered whether specific quotations and examples used could lead participants to be identified via deductive disclosure, and conversely, focus on other moments of the narrative still valid and informative around a specific subtheme.

To guarantee confidentiality, all records were secured with a password protected drive. In addition, prior to requesting oral informed consent, participants were informed about the data protection act, the type of data I would be gathering, and how this one would be stored. Data recorded linked participant responses with identifying information via codes only known to me as the researcher.

3.5.3 Safety and wellbeing

In collecting life stories, Barnard, Gerber and McCosker⁶⁹ insist on the importance of considering

67 Gaile Cannella and Yoniln Lincoln, 'Ethics, research regulations, and critical social science' in Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (4th ed. SAGE Publications 2011) 81.

68 Karen Kaiser, 'Protecting respondent confidentiality in qualitative research' (2009) 19(11) *Qualitative health research* 3.

69 Heather McCosker, Alan Barnard and Rod Gerber, 'Undertaking Sensitive Research: Issues and Strategies for Meeting the Safety Needs of All Participants' (2001) 2(1) *Forum Qualitative Social Research* 11.

the potential psychological impact that participating in sensitive research may have on individuals (e.g., recollecting traumatic events). To address this risk, before starting the interview, I asked participants whether there were any restricted topics and invited them to feel free to exclude them from their narrative.⁷⁰ Whilst there was no issue in this respect, most participants experienced certain level of distress. It is in the nature of sensitive research that no matter how many procedures and protocols have been envisaged in preparatory stages to minimize the risk of safety, each researcher may need to find their own strategies to deal with issues as they arise. In this case, we stopped the interview, and I offered the possibility to postpone it, while looking for external support. A break, at times with silence, and a temporary change of activity seemed enough at that time to continue.

Another important dimension was my own safety as an interviewer and ultimately, single researcher in this study. Despite having given this subject much thought during the preparation of the ethics application, it would not be until conducting the interviews and later analysing the data, that I realized the enormous psychological and emotional impact this process was having on me as a researcher. Having the opportunity to debrief and trying to separate myself from their stories was paramount in the process.

3.5.4 Researcher's position

Levy⁷¹ reflects about the importance of considering issues of positionality, power, and representation in designing a study with population groups as an outsider, particularly groups that are at risk of being exploited and abused as result of their participation in research. Dwyer & Buckle⁷² argue that the idea that challenges in conducting this type of research vary depending on whether we are part of the community researched is overly simplistic. In this case, while many questions came to mind in thinking about investigating the lives of transwomen who had experienced displacement and flight (What ethical dilemmas will I face? How can I be sensitive to their needs? What if I misrepresent their stories?), the approach was to reflect, at every stage, on my own subjectivity and share it with the participants.

70 Hugo Slim and Paul Thompson, 1993. *Listening for a change: oral testimony and development*. Philadelphia, PA, New Society Publishers (1st ed. New Society Publishers 1993) 152.

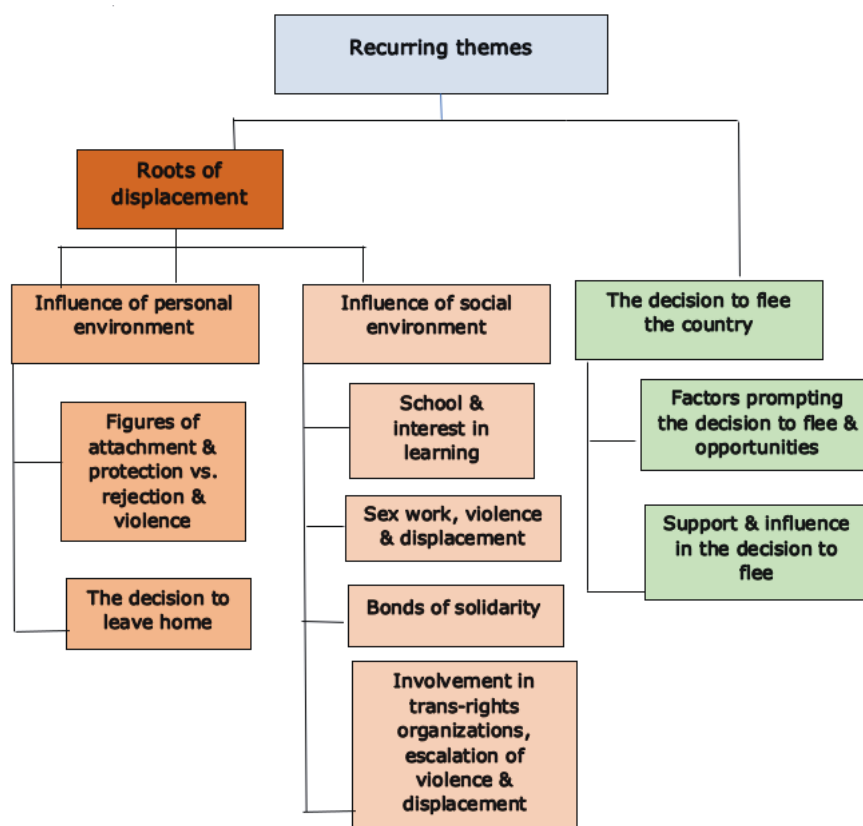
71 Denise L. Levy, 'On the Outside Looking In? The Experience of Being a Straight, Cisgender Qualitative Researcher' (2013) 25(2) *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services* 199.

72 Sonya C. Dwyer and Jennifer L. Buckle, 'The Space Between: On Being an Insider-Outsider in Qualitative Research' (2009) 8(1) *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 60.

4. Findings & Discussion

The findings that appear from the participants' stories are presented in detail below, organized around common themes and related subthemes (Fig. 1) that naturally follow a certain chronological order. However, it is important to note that, while the themes emphasize similar patterns among individual stories, each narrative is personal and different to the other. For instance, although rejection in one way or another is present in the immediate environment of all of them, it does not always result in the ejection of the family. Thus, the results presented in this section are neither intended to hide the richness of individual narratives, nor to generalize about the lives of other transwomen in this or another context, but rather identify the elements of a collective history of forced displacement intrinsically connected to being a trans woman in Central America.

Figure 1 Recurring themes and associated sub-themes



Each narrative of these five transwomen tells a personal story of forced mobility and the continuous decisions related to it. They share that their mobility is not an isolated event with a single cause but rather, a process where distinct factors force them to move, from the family home first, then from one neighbourhood to another, from one city to another, with stops and ruptures along the way, and ultimately, crossing a border. Although in any displacement there are structural factors that determine the need, the ability and type of move, in these stories the common thread is a mobility marked by discriminatory and unequal social and structural conditions. At some point, these conditions become intolerable and endanger their lives to the point where they must flee, or the opportunity to flee presents itself, or both at the same time.

The themes of personal and social environments help us to understand the roots of their displacement. The situations of exclusion and violence – experienced in the family, school, or community–, pushed them to make often drastic decisions, either to avoid and stop harm, or simply to save

their lives.

4.1 Influence of personal environment

4.1.1 Figures of attachment & protection vs. rejection and violence

The family space, often considered as one of safety, of acceptance and non-violence for its members, can become a space of constant tension for transwomen.⁷³ But as it emerges in four of the five stories, the family can also be a crucial source of emotional protection and support in the most adverse circumstances and in the process of discovering their gender identity. The figures of the mother and grandmother (or great-grandmother in one of the stories) are relevant and key, as we will see later in this chapter, when the time came to make decisions regarding their flight.

“My mom was the first to tell me that she already knew, and that she expected me to tell her. At 17 I told her, Mom, I’m sorry, but this body is not mine, and I want to be who I am. She told me I had her support (...) That is what helped me form the character I wanted to be. I will never forget those words, because they have helped me to be the trans that I am now” (Shirley)

“When I was 15, I told my mother -Mom, you know what? I feel different. I need to talk to you. She said -me too, I want to talk with you. I heard they saw you dressed as a woman – (and she began to cry. I never liked seeing my mother cry). My mom continued -regardless of whether it is true or not, you will always be my son, always, always” (Melissa)

“With my great-grandmother I did not feel neither a girl nor a boy; with her I was just a person (...) On one occasion, during a family reunion (...) I played the female singer. This was one of the experiences of my childhood that affected me the most because people started laughing (...) My great-grandmother, who was my shield, my protector, told them to stop” (Muñeca)

At the same time, as Shirley and Melissa recount, their family relationships were strained by a clash between that incipient nonconforming gender identity and social rules and norms governed by patriarchy, frequently influenced by religion.

“(...) I grew up in a very conservative family, with religious fundamentalism quite stigmatizing and discriminatory towards other ways of thinking (...) What they instilled in me as a child were the fears of everything different from “the normal” (...) My family is what I love the most, but it also represents the beginning of one of the traumas that I had to overcome later” (Shirley)

“When I was young, I used to go to church because I belong to a very Christian family (...) There, I use to hear bad things about homosexuality -back then I still did not know what I was- and think: but I don’t like women (...) I used to ask myself, will I be able to change and feel attracted to women as it should be?... I always felt something different but remained silent” (Melissa)

In these contexts, it is common that transwomen begin early to suffer abuse from family members, from physical, verbal, and sexual assault to murder.⁷⁴ In two of the five stories, this abuse was done secretly from that protective figure and was accompanied by threats to escalate should they decide to expose them to the rest of the family.

⁷³ REDLACTRANS (n4) 25.

⁷⁴ Ulises Borgogno, ‘La Transfobia en América Latina y el Caribe: Un estudio en el marco de REDLACTRANS’ (2009) REDLACTRANS 40 <http://redlactrans.org.ar/site/wpcontent/uploads/2013/05/La-Transfobia-en-America-Latina-y-el-Caribe.pdf> [accessed 24 August 2018].

"I never told my grandmother. In front of her they didn't do it (...) I was scared to tell her in case, far from supporting, that she would also attack me. That's why I kept quiet (...) Three cousins raped me (...) A cousin who just returned from the US, came to visit, but my grandmother was not there. He hit me (...), dragged me out of the house, and shot me 4 times in the feet while shouting that in his family there were only men, no fags. I was 9 years old" (Karla)

Karla's fear of family and social rejection is also present in other stories. This fear further complicates an already difficult and risky process of discovering, accepting, and revealing their identity, and the consequences, as Gab's reveals, can even be worse.

"At home I was always scared (to talk about myself). Every time my parents caught me playing with dolls, they beat me, especially my father (...) I lived in fear of being discovered" (Gab's)

However, the narratives show that in the continuous search of their self-, there comes a time when they take ownership of their identity and start externalizing the problem, understanding that the issue is not them, but the society.

"At the age of 6 or 7 I began to realize that I did not like having my hair short, I did not like wearing men's clothes, or playing with boy's toys. Stereotypes are traumatic. You hear: you have to wear blue because you are a man, or pink because you are a woman (...) When (at about 13) I discovered that my way of being, my body, my mind, my feelings... were contradictory, I then started rebelling against what society thought I had to be" (Shirley)

This externalisation is crucial because it will shape their future agency in seeking spaces where to fight for their rights, be who they are, and fight so that others can do it too (see involvement in trans-rights organisations). On a personal level it was also vital because it allowed them to develop emotional strategies to deal with the discrimination and intolerance they would face in their lives.

4.1.2 The decision to leave home

Although there is no official data on the number of Central American trans girls and adolescents who leave or are expelled from their homes because of family discrimination and violence,⁷⁵ Winton⁷⁶ found that associated with violence specifically, mobility is an important strategy for transwomen. It enables them to escape an imminent or immediate danger, or adjust aspects of their life, as it appears in the following testimonies:

"(...) He told me that I had to do what my family said and if I didn't (...) he was going to kill me. That night I remember I went to bed and... I cried, I didn't say anything to my grandmother, I cried in silence. The next day I got up at 3 in the morning, and I went... to catch the first bus (...) I was scared, but it was also a great need. If I didn't leave, I knew worse things were going to happen" (Karla, 9 when she left)

"At one point, a circus came to the neighbourhood. Its people had an interest in trans people as an attraction and an object of ridicule (...) I decided to bring together my family and tell them that I was leaving home because I didn't feel well, and that I wanted to be the person that I felt I was (...) I could not continue living with my father. He was sick and easily became irascible. I was worried that because of me he would die (...) The circus people welcomed me". (Gab's, 14 when she left)

"The fight with my dad was tough because he never accepted that I was a transgender person

⁷⁵ REDLACTRANS (n4).

⁷⁶ Ailsa Winton (n41).

(...) He tried to turn my siblings against me (...) A moment came (at 17) that I could not bear the situation anymore and felt that I had to leave home" (Shirley)

However, in other cases, it was someone else who forced them to leave home, provoking a mobility that would entail making other substantial decisions. Here, leaving the family home transformed but did not eliminate their situation of insecurity and vulnerability.

"(...) When I got home, my mother kicked me out of the house. She said: I gave birth to a man, not a woman. As of today, to me you're dead (...) I found myself in the street" (Muñeca)

Whether dramatic or strategic, leaving home represents the first rupture that will characterize a life of forced displacement with often drastic changes of circumstances requiring from them quick decisions to be able to continue.

4.2 Influence of social environment

4.2.1 School and interest in learning

Outside their homes, environments were highly discriminatory and hostile. The school is no exception. Their stories tell experiences of marginalisation and abuse, particularly during their primary education.

"Some teachers, when giving us the grades, didn't even look at me. (...) On one occasion, a teacher "touched me." But he did not say anything, neither did I. But it was discovered. It was a scandal. I tried to protect the teacher in some way so that it did not affect me. However, I received a lot of criticism and was forced to change schools" (Melissa)

At the same time, four of the stories show how their response to the situation changed significantly in secondary school, when they began to show their identity and use emotional strategies to deal with situations of intolerance and discrimination, as previously described.

"(...) In high school it was different. I started building up my courage and the first thing I said when I introduced myself was my name is such, I like to be called this (...) and I am trans. The colleagues used to say, how brave you are (...)" (Shirley)

Nevertheless, in all five experiences, their education finished abruptly, either by paternal decision, being expelled by the school, or, as in Karla's case, being on the street and having to find a way to survive.

"At 14 I went to school for the first time dressed as a girl and made my transition as a transvestite (...) My parents found out through people's gossip, and my father hit me (...) From that moment on, he stopped supporting me. I had to leave my studies and look for work" (Gab's)

"(...) Two teachers told me that I had to cut my hair if I wanted to complete my studies. A few days later an orientation teacher said, listen, the director does not want you to return to school (...) stop coming because there will be people waiting outside impeding you to enter. And that is what happened... I was never again allowed in the school" (Muñeca)

However, despite the barriers to pursuing their education, their desire for learning and complete

formal education emerges in every story, not only during the school years, but later in life, when the time comes to get involved in peer support work and the defence of human rights, as shown later in this section. Melissa explained it this way:

"(...) for me, a priority was to be able to dress as a woman, with my heels, and feel pretty and free, but always keeping in mind the importance of completing my studies" (Melissa)

4.2.2 Sex work, violence, and displacement

The interrelated exclusion from school and family had a direct impact on these transwomen, who overnight found themselves without protection or source of income, compelled to do anything to survive.

"Back then I beg. I got on buses, asked for money and sang ... people used to give me 5 cents that I collected (...) I raised enough to buy a 24 pack of sodas (...) Then, I bought a bowl, ice, and I started selling Coca-Cola at a local market" (Karla)

However, at one point or another they were left with no alternative but to engage in sex work, an activity that in their minds was a temporary solution to their situation.

"(At 17) I had to accept what our societies impose on trans people, which is sex work, something traumatic in my life because, to be honest, it is a way to survive, but I feel that it is not for me (...) At one point I thought, I do not know how far I will get, but I won't stay here" (Shirley)

"When the circus temporarily closed, I stayed for six months with my mother, it was difficult because I could not find another job. I then had to engage in sex work. I didn't do it because I liked it, but to survive" (Gab's)

Initially, in some of the stories, sex work is described as an opportunity to get out of a situation of absolute precarity, as was the case of Karla, after almost two years living in the street.

"(...) that night went very well. I made money. Going from having nothing, no food, no bed, no clothes... nothing, to suddenly being able to pay for my own room, to me it was, let's say, finding the biggest treasure (...) I started buying clothes and continued sex work" (Karla)

Despite its momentary benefit, sex work would expose them to several types of violence, associated to this activity and aggravated by their transgression of socially established gender norms, in a wider context of endemic violence perpetrated with impunity by State actors and gang members.

"On one occasion, I was in the street (...) I was with a new girl. Suddenly, I hear her arguing with a client in a car. I went to see what was happening and discreetly got her out of the situation. Later, I saw that the man was pointing at me with a gun. He shot me in the leg (...) I started to feel that things were changing" (Melissa)

"(...) I was barely 18 years old, he threatened me for more than two hours at gunpoint, a pistol with the engraving Criminal Investigation Directorate of (country). I knew he was a detective (...) I remember he said: I'm going to give you the opportunity to live but you have to run down the ravine. I had to run, and he started shooting" (Shirley)

"It was the case that, among the clients, we had men involved in drug trafficking. When they had to pay debts, if they didn't have the money, they used to assault the girls (transwomen) at gun-

point to rob us (...) Later, the 'mareros' (gang members) arrived. One of their intentions was to kidnap trans girls to force us to sell drugs" (Gab's)

From the stories it emerges that street violence is only an expression of the problem that will soon be exacerbated by constant extortion and threats received when firmly opposed to pay. While not new to the region, the wave of hate crimes, especially against transwomen, will certainly reach other levels,⁷⁷ as recounted below.

"From (year), things started to get worse with the 'mareros' (gang members). They started asking us for money. We continued to hear stories of attacks: one who was shot in the back, another whose fingers were cut off ... I no longer knew whether men were coming to kill me, or to pay me ...It was a horrible fear, in all streets. For a year, they looked for me tirelessly. I tried to find a way that no one would recognize me" (Melissa)

"It was in (year) when the 'pandilleros' (gang members) started extorting us (...) they arrived in a yellow car, like a taxi. Three individuals started talking to us: you will be protected; nobody will touch you (...) They gave us two days (...) Finally, the girls (transwomen) started paying the rent (extortion). In my case, I never paid, I never did what they wanted me to do" (Karla)

"In (year), after the coup, the murders (of transwomen) began. Human rights violations were constant, more than ever. Despite the curfew, transwomen, without choice, continued to go out to parks at night, where the military themselves raped and murdered us (...) In that context I got scared and wanted to quit the sex work" (Gab's)

Gab's reflects on how, in this risky context, it was impossible not to be directly affected by the gangs' struggles for territorial control, and the consequent tensions and violence within the community of sex workers.

"In this context, there is an internalized transphobia between the trans themselves, and an envy between us. (...) There was a trans who was the one who imposed respect there (...) She used to pass near us to collect "the rent" telling us: if you don't pay, you know what can happen to you. I asked her why I had to pay her. Since I was not afraid of them and stood up, I was not well received. They threatened me that the next day they would burn me" (Gab's)

Karla's story shows how, attempting to abandon sex work by setting up her own business, extortion became a serious problem, generating displacement.

"(...) The 'pandilleros' (gangs) discovered that I had started a business, and extortion began. One day a boy came to buy something. He said, I want two cokes ... And when I was preparing the bill, he told me, look, here, they speak to you (giving me his phone) ... who, I asked? (...) They were the gang members. Since I didn't want to answer the phone, two days later, they put a letter under my door. They wanted \$250 a week. (...) I did not pay. One night, a couple arrived, pretending to be clients. Once in, they pointed a gun at me, they tied me up, and they stole everything (...) Hence, I had to move houses because they threatened to attack my mother" (Karla)

Often, the decision not to pay made the need to move urgent. Here, moving serves as a temporary relief, a breath before facing another situation of danger, with new threats that will bring new decisions and new displacement.

"Sometimes I made the decision patiently because there was more time. When they give you an

ultimatum, it is something else, you have to run (...) For example, the last time I moved, they gave me 72 hours. They told me I could not open the business elsewhere, and if I did, they would know about it, and I would be in trouble. At that very moment, I decided to move, because having come once, they would come again. It was an indirect threat, but I took it very seriously (...) I then moved to (neighbourhood). But you know, in (country), wherever you go there are 'mareros' (gangs)" (Karla)

Sometimes, the move was intentional (although limited by structural conditions), as in the case of Muñeca, who saw it as a strategy to move away from sex work; at other times, as Karla recalls, the move was forced, and had a significant impact, not only emotionally, but also financially. Having achieved some stability, she suddenly lost everything and needed to move, but moving this time, without support, was not possible.

"(...) I met this Cuban woman (...) She wanted me to look after her children and I did for a year. Then, she went to Cuba (...) She used to send money so I could look after the children. It was a good option since I could no longer pay the rent at the other people's place" (Muñeca)

"(...) To move you need resources: rent, bond (...) I gave up the guesthouse business (...) although I lost a lot of money. I had invested a lot to get the permits to have the business (...) When I realized that the situation was so serious, that same day, I called my mother: mom, this has happened, I do not have money, please, can I borrow? I need to leave urgently" (Karla)

However, as we will see later, insecurity eventually becomes an essential aspect of displacement. Thus, instead of ending, insecurity and vulnerability are transformed with movement.

4.2.3 Bonds of solidarity

Another aspect that the narratives show is that, despite the tensions related to sex work and contexts of structural violence, in the absence of a social network of family and friends, the trans community becomes an essential source of protection and survival, particularly in situations of displacement.

"(Between transwomen) There are always rivalries due to different ways of thinking (...) But the moment we find ourselves in situations of danger, situations where we were attacked, somehow we create an atmosphere to help each other (...) The people who support us (in situations of displacement) are the trans community" (Shirley)

"When I left home at the age of 18, I moved to live with other transwomen that I met close to my house. We used to live, eat, and work together. We did everything together. We were good friends" (Melissa)

Practical and emotional support among transwomen is essential because their networks are limited. As we will see in the third theme, sometimes these ties continued for life and would be particularly relevant in their final decision to flee the country.

4.2.4 Involvement in trans-rights organizations, escalation of violence & displacement

Sex work, activism in the response to HIV, and the defence of human rights are intimately linked

in the case of transwomen in Latin America.⁷⁸ This clearly emerges in the five stories. Getting involved in peer support work and trans rights movements was a natural way for them to denounce their situation and offer certain protection to others, no matter how much suffering and risks this activism brings to their lives. Karla explains how her own experience led her to establish an organization through which she could denounce violations of the rights of trans people and create a space for improvement. Shirley tells how in a short time, from her role as legal advisor in an organization, she became a public figure who openly denounced the perpetrators of violence. Gab's, Melissa and Muñeca also got involved in trans associations that supported them while engaged in sex work.

"In (year), despite not having yet legal personality, we began to publicize the organization, to demand spaces for decision-making (...) I began to denounce (the situation in prison)" (Karla)

"In (year) we founded the organization (name) (...) We worked on human rights, on the legal recognition of gender identity in (country), and comprehensive health. When we decided to create this association, I was hired as a legal advisor because of my experience and track record in following on reports (of trans human rights violations) and in accompanying individuals whose rights had been violated" (Shirley)

"In (organization) I started feeling empowered. They asked me, do you want to become a human rights defender? (...) I formalized a group for transwomen within the organization. Faced with so many murders of transwomen, we decided to organize ourselves" (Gab's)

"When I started working with (name), I quit sex work. My first job with (name) consisted of visiting people living with HIV who had abandoned the treatment, convince them to resume, and accompany them in their continuation (of treatment). I was happy (...) For us, every time one person accepted to resume treatment it was a great joy" (Melissa)

"(...) three months into the project, I was managing the Association, and became the national coordinator of the project for trans persons in (country) (...) I was very engaged! As part of my work, I often visited police stations, looking for colleagues involved in sex work illegally detained" (Muñeca)

In all five stories, it becomes clear that their activism and work in support of the LGBTI community, particularly of transwomen was a point of no return. Whilst exposure as human rights defenders can potentially protect them, it can also put them at risk.⁷⁹ Hereinafter, the threats occur more frequently, and change from being threats of violence to death threats. However, they want to stay and continue their work. Hence, they have no choice but to move again, leaving their home, town, sometimes even temporarily crossing a border to get to safety. In their displacement, they now try living alone or ensure that measures are taken to avoid endangering others.

"I would decide to move when receiving direct threats (...) In the last two years, I moved houses seven times. The last time I moved with hardly anything. There came a time when I hardly trusted anyone, that's why when I moved, I preferred to do it alone and try as much as possible to protect the address where I lived not inviting anyone. Even my mother can tell you. Nor even her I invited (...) One time I was outside, and a man asked me, you live around here, right? I said, yes. Look, I have seen you on tv. We want you to do us some favours. Then, they came to ask me to bring drugs to prison. When I refused, they said I could pay with the most precious thing... they did not say directly that they were going to kill me or my mother, but indirectly they said they would kill

78 REDLACTRANS (n3); OHCHR, personal communication, 18 October 2018).

79 OHCHR, personal communication, 19 October 2018.

what I love the most, which is my mother (...)" (Karla)

"At one point, I was considered a public figure, a human rights defender. I started to appear in the media (...) I received threats from a military man. I don't know how he got my Facebook but he wrote saying that he was going to eradicate prostitutes like me, that persons like me should not exist (...) He had a lot of information about me. That scared me. I decided to report it. Eventually he stopped threatening me (...) However, as result of these threats and that he knew where I lived, I moved to another city outside the capital" (Gab's)

"(...) Then, the most horrible persecution began. Three months later, military police came to my office and said, we have an arrest warrant. Strangely enough, these men's faces were covered, no badge nor name (...) Suddenly, they tried to take me by force and all my colleagues jumped on them. They said, we know where you live (...) Then, the coordinator of the organization said, it is time that you take your personal case very seriously so look where to go to save your life (...) From the moment I felt persecuted (...) I distanced myself from my home. I moved again to (place) and started living alone because I wanted to safeguard my family's life" (Shirley)

"The deaths began to happen almost every month, and each time, worse (...) Every time I heard cats on my roof, I thought they were coming for me, for my family. I took security measures: I moved houses, changed mobile number, and my mother's landline. I asked my mother to be very careful, and say, if asked, that she did not know me, that she did not have a son ... for safety (...) I hid and reduced the time I was out, and if I did, I used to cover my head and dress more as a man" (Melissa)

"Moves were sudden, I just left! I searched a new place in internet. I never said I was trans (...) Three times I had to move (...) I was so stressed thinking they would come again for me and put me in jail (...) I then moved with a friend. She told me; you can stay here for a month. She made sure I could work from her place, to avoid going to the office (...) she had a car, so could me take me to places if needed" (Muñeca)

However, there comes a point where, although internal displacement avoids imminent danger and immobility serves as a fragile protection strategy, threats and attacks begin to reach their closest environment, their loved ones. This is again, a turning point in their lives.

4.3 The decision to flee the country

The following theme covers the factors and related events that lead to a crisis point in which they made the decision to flee, either because adverse conditions became intolerable, opportunities to flee arose, or a combination of both.

4.3.1 Factors prompting the decision to flee & opportunities

Following their narratives regarding the last period of their lives in their home countries, I asked them to identify and categorize in order of relevance – primary and secondary – the factors that prompt their cross-border migration.

Although some provided more detail than others in their description of the motives, the following were the ones they identified:

Primary factors

1. Death threats and violence to family members
2. Personal death threats
3. Witness of hate crime
4. Persecution & violence for reasons of gender identity
5. Lack of protection for human rights defenders
6. Discrimination based on gender identity
7. Lack of freedom to be myself

Secondary factors

1. Search of employment
2. Access to general and specific health services
3. Improved living conditions

However, in the narration of the last stage of their lives in their countries, despite identifying factors in a scale of importance, these are mixed and interrelated. For instance, violence or death threats appear closely related to other underlying motives that, when making the decision to leave the country, become more important. A good example is the connection Melissa makes between safety and freedom; the latter understood as the absence of the threat that caused the departure.

"I had to leave, first leave to be calm, free and safe. The rest could be planned. But first, the priority was to leave" (Melissa)

As it arises from the five stories, violence in its many forms was key in prompting the decision to flee their country, even more so when it translates into threats and attacks on their families.

"When my mother was attacked, I started assessing things differently (...) Somehow, I could try to protect myself, move again... but (the protection of) my mother was out of my hands. If the authorities themselves could not guarantee her protection nor mine, the only remaining solution was to seek protection outside. It was at that moment when I thought it was time to leave (...) The trigger was the fear of death (...) Even my mother, without such a serious reason as the risk of death, she would not have left" (Karla)

"(What put an end to my life in -country- was) a threat received in my house. They called my family, my mother specifically, telling her that they were going to kill me because I knew many things (...) When my friend was killed, I was the only witness, and I declared. I told myself, Melissa, or you leave, or they will kill you" (Melissa)

The immediate need to leave due to a direct or very close threat, and the desire to do so, are then followed by an assessment of the options they have, and preparing the departure, including the possibility to use networks in the process, as we see in the stories of Melissa and Muñeca. In other cases, identified the need to flee, the opportunity to leave comes unexpectedly, connected to

other purpose, but the decision not to return is made later, once outside the country and under appropriate conditions, as in Karla and Gab's' stories.

"I started looking for money. I was not sure whether everything would be fine in (country of destination) and did not want to leave my family like this (in reference to borrowing money from them). By then, my father, sick with diabetes, was almost blind, depended on my mother (...) the pressure on her was enormous, also worried about me and the risk that I could be killed for being trans, her suffering was unbearable (...) That also helped me to actively raise my own money (...) I wanted to avoid going to the US and experience same things that I had experienced in (home country) (...) In (name of country) I have my sister. I can ask her to help me" (Melissa)

"That night I didn't sleep. I spent it thinking what to do. I thought about Sweden and Iceland (...) I had previously read about those two countries and thought they were good places to be a woman (...) Maybe there I can build something, because my fear was also the solitude (...) Unfortunately, the tickets from (country) to Sweden were very expensive (...) That year, the airline (name) had opened a flight via (another country) and it was much cheaper, (...) I prepared everything and left a month later" (Muñeca)

"It was the first time I left (country). The trip was meant to be one month (...) While in (country), the situation at home deteriorated very quickly. I started to think that I should probably consider seeking asylum (...) I thought I should not return and thought of starting the process in Spain, where I had two trans colleagues. But I stayed here" (Gab's)

"(...) We were in the process, when the opportunity, the invitation to travel connected to the human rights award ceremony came up (...) Travelling to (country) for that purpose changed everything. When I found out I would travel to (country) for the award ceremony, I never planned to stay. If I had made plans to stay, I would have brought all the required documentation. Besides, I was confident that the request for resettlement in (country) would be successful. It was not my ambition to go to (country) (...) I did not choose (country), I think (country) chose me" (Karla)

Although the immediate need to escape the potential consequences of the threat is a priority, as Karla reflects, the weighing analysis of the options and preparing the conditions to do so overlap with the cause of departure.

"The despair to leave is so huge, that you don't even think what might happen along the way, if it will go well, or it will go bad. The priority at that moment is to get out of the situation you are in (...)" (Karla)

"(...) A human rights organization helped me. The idea was to find a country that I could enter with my passport. Spain was put to me as an option, easy, they said with the language (...) In (country) I had a colleague, and I knew that at some point she would help me (...) and that was the case. She was from (same country as her) and had many contacts here. That's what helped me decide where to go" (Shirley)

4.3.2 Support and influence in the decision to flee

All participants refer to the support of other actors in making the decision to flee, primarily the mother and colleagues or friends connected to their involvement in civil society organisations.

"My work colleagues were among those who supported me (in making the decision to leave), and the other was my mom (...) Having worked in so many corners of the country allowed me to meet many people that in the end, helped me" (Shirley)

" (...) She (mother) then said: you know, I sense they are going to kill you... I also sense that, mom. So, either I leave the country or they'll kill me. You must go. I prefer you far, but alive, she said" (Melissa)

"My friend (name), who had followed all my moves, said, if you do not flee, they'll kill you, and she added, what is the use if they kill you? Things will not change... She said, get out of here, leave (country) If you don't leave, there is nothing we can do (...) tonight I want you to think about it (...) That night I made the decision to leave" (Muñeca)

In Karla's case, the support of external actors – a human rights organisation – was also relevant, first to create the opportunity to leave and, later, to facilitate her decision not to return to her country of origin.

Relevant key informant interview findings

The interviews with key informants were particularly relevant in supporting two elements that emerged from the life stories. The first observation is that being a transwoman in contexts as violent as Central America, is an affront to the patriarchal, cultural and religious system, even more so if the trans person assumes the work of defending human rights in a system infected by violence and repression.⁸⁰ The second remark is that the lack of categorisation of trans people, generally portrayed by the system as 'men dressed as women', makes them invisible, which in turn hinders monitoring human rights abuses against this population. However, despite the limited specific information regarding trans people, there are more reports available regarding abuses against trans rights defenders from Central America than other regions in the world. This could potentially be explained by the noticeable proven organizational capacity of Latin American civil society organizations.⁸¹

4.3.3 Discussion

Delving into the personal and social dimensions of these five transwomen's lives has confirmed that forced displacement and migration are not isolated events, with a single cause, but a process that culminates in multiple forms of displacement, including a definitive move across-border.⁸² The combination of various structural forces conditions not only the need to move, but also their ability to do it, and the way it is possible to move.⁸³ Their stories illustrate a generalized situation of insecurity and violence in their countries that affected them directly, aggravated by harassment and direct threats resulted from an intolerance of their gender identity and expression.

The narratives show that, although in the assessment that the participants in the study identify themselves as a secondary factor, the fact that there is a high probability of migration is directly related to the national contexts of violence and insecurity in which Gab's, Shirley, Melissa, Karla and Muñeca live. At the same time, Central American transwomen experience violence, discrimination, and persecution from an early age by various actors, starting in the family circle and other immediate environments, like the school or the community initially, and later, by institutional and criminal actors.⁸⁴ While, as it emerges from their life stories, these circumstances are specific to their position in society and should not be considered predisposing drivers of migration, they cer-

⁸⁰ OHCHR, personal communication, 19 October 2018.

⁸¹ OHCHR, personal communication, 18 October 2018.

⁸² ACNUR (n10, 2016); Ailsa Winton, 'I've got to go somewhere': Queer Displacement in Northern Central America and Southern Mexico' in Arzu Guler, Maryna Shevtsova and Denise Venturi (eds), *LGBTI Asylum Seekers and Refugees from a Legal and Political Perspective Persecution, Asylum and Integration* (Springer 2019)

⁸³ Nicholas Van Hear, Oliver Bakewell and Katy Long (n28); Stephen Castles, Hein de Haas and Mark J. Miller (n20); P. Neal Ritchie (n20); Francesco Castelli (n20).a

⁸⁴ Vickie Knox (n 34).

tainly function as such in their situation whereby a direct relationship can be established between marginality, precarity, and forced displacement, both absolutely relevant in their future migration decisions.

It appears in the stories, that proximate drivers such as the worsening of the security situation connected to the increasing influence and activity of the gangs (called *maras* or *pandillas*), had a particularly violent impact in the lives of these transwomen⁸⁵ with both, repressive and coercive forms of violence. Besides, this violence is also perpetrated by the same institutions responsible to protect against it, with the consequence that, not only their public denunciation will not bring results, but, as we have seen, it provoked additional risks and eventually led to displacement.⁸⁶

Although at times decisions to move internally are a strategy to survive, others are an exercise of their limited freedom to challenge a context that pushes them to leave.⁸⁷ The stories show that, while the combination of various push factors created the structural conditions within which they made the decision to migrate, alone they do not explain their migration. It is certain, as Long⁸⁸ and Bakewell⁸⁹ noted, that the decisions and actions of these transwomen, their agency to process their social experience and develop strategies to cope with life even under the most extreme forms of coercion, was key in their decision to migrate.

The findings of the study are in line with Van Hear and others⁹⁰ analysis in that the critical point of the migration across-borders is an immediate need to leave, triggered by one or various simultaneous forms of violence (precipitating driver), accompanied by an assessment of the viability to migrate, and the existence of mediating drivers enabling migration (e.g., a relative or friend in another country). Together, all these factors created the conditions allowing these transwomen to flee.

While the *push pull plus* framework developed by Van Hear and others⁹¹ combines the pull and push side of each migration driver, both in the country of origin and in the country of destination, in the stories of these five transwomen, pull factors are mostly secondary at the time of making their decisions to migrate. Mediating drivers in country of destination are relevant once the decision to leave is made, in assessing the options to make the move, but they do not determine the decision to flee, as we saw in the stories of Melissa and Shirley. Their migration is reactive, an adaptive solution⁹² to a life-threatening situation where there is not much room for considering what is at the other end, as Karla expressed in her story. Here, the decision to move is primarily determined by precipitating drivers, and the decisions attached (how, when, and where to leave) were influenced by mediating drivers such as contacts outside the country, or an opportunity arising to participate in events elsewhere.⁹³ Both combined, will determine their migration.

On the other hand, aspirations and desires, fundamental components in the analysis of migration⁹⁴ are in this case mostly limited to the aspiration to scape. When it comes to making the decision to flee their countries, their stories do not contemplate the desire of freedom to express one's gender identity or look for an opportunity to improve living conditions.

85 COMCAVIS TRANS (n 11).

86 Ailsa Winton (n83).

87 Ailsa Winton (n41).

88 Norman Long (n40).

89 Oliver Bakewell (n37).

90 Nicholas Van Hear, Oliver Bakewell and Katy Long (n28).

91 *ibid.*

92 Anthony H. Richmond (n26).

93 Nicholas Van Hear, Oliver Bakewell and Katy Long (n28).

94 Jørgen Carling and Francis Collins (n23).

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to understand why five Central American transwomen fled their countries. I was particularly interested in exploring the factors that influenced their decision, and the extent to which their non-conforming gender identity determined or exacerbated those factors. The use of oral history has allowed to delve deeper into their lives, where forced displacement and migration appeared as a survival strategy amid constant struggle, displays of strength, and agency in decision-making in extremely harsh and violent circumstances.

In analysing the relationship between proximate, precipitating, and mediating drivers of migration we see that the experience of forced migration of these transwomen is, in fact, extremely complex, where all these coexist and intertwine. However, precipitating drivers in the security and political sphere, involving extreme violence and hate crimes of trans rights activists, combined with mediating drivers that enabled or facilitated their departure, were crucial in explaining their decision and action to migrate. In their stories, marked by discrimination and inequalities, a definitive flight across-border is, in a way, the ultimate act to preserve their lives following experiences of internal displacement which are no longer a viable option to avoid the risks and harm.

While spread violence by non-state actors affects the general population, causing considerable displacement and forced migration, there seems to be a direct relationship between criminal violence, gender-conforming resistance and forced migration. At the same time, the stories of Gab's, Karla, Melissa, Shirley and Muñeca indicate that having an urgent need to leave is not enough to migrate: departing depends on other conditions and opportunities. Meanwhile, the limited strategy continues to consist of internal moves and temporary stops with multiples ruptures in between.

This study supports the crucial need for further research to explore the specificity, complexity and magnitude of transwomen migration to understand the multitude of interconnected reasons underpinning their decisions to migrate for survival.