

Migrant Narrative

UC Davis Global Migration Center

Migration in the Face of Homophobic and Transphobic Violence

By Robert McKee Irwin

Problem

Migrants who are victims of homophobia or transphobia might have an easier time than other contemporary migrants in justifying an asylum claim as many can show that they have been threatened, attacked and persecuted for belonging to a well-defined social group. Nonetheless, this does not mean their migration processes are painless. Moreover, as the United States continues to implement policies aimed at deterring asylum seekers from setting out for the US, or preventing them from crossing the US-Mexico border, migration has become an increasingly hazardous undertaking. LGBT+ people who are fleeing for their lives may face dangers just as grave all along the migrant trail.

Observations

A number of digital stories from the Humanizing Deportation archive offer insights regarding the difficulties faced by LGBT+ migrants hoping to reach the United States.

José Manuel Irias grew up being sexually abused and bullied in Choluteca, Honduras. After graduating college, he began a career as a police officer. However, he ended up getting harassed and eventually fired because he was gay. Later he was attacked by maras: “First they grabbed me by the arms, and one began to hit me. They cut my forehead, and other parts of my body too, like my calf, and my long hair. There were five of them. Well, they raped me. At one moment [...] they shot me. A bullet grazed my hip. After that, I ran, I fled.” Afterwards, they continued to threaten his life. He had hitchhike to Mexico because he was afraid the gangs would find him if he took a bus.

Penniless, he arrived in Chiapas where he had to sleep on the street. Eventually an organization helped him rent an apartment, and he later moved to Aguascalientes with the support of his brother. However, this help didn’t last, and he ended up homeless again. Some police officers offered to help him. He recalls: “I trusted them and went with them, when in reality they did not take me to any station, but rather to a wasteland where again they hit me, they raped me, and also they shaved my head, and they tried to hang me, to strangle me by the neck. I pretended I was dead. They left me lying there.” Without any money, he was forced to work as a sex worker to raise funds to get to the border.

When he got to Tijuana, the border was closed due to covid19 and all the LGBT+ shelters were full. He decided to head to Coahuila, where he tried to cross the Río Grande at Ciudad Acuña. He describes his experience: “I crossed it. I was there for like five days. I was only able to eat for the first days, like a day or two. After that I was left without water. I had to drink urine, water with cow urine.” He was picked up by border patrol agents who “took me to a station. I told them about everything I’d suffered, and they made fun of me. They didn’t want to help me.

They told me I didn’t have a chance, that they weren’t granting asylum.” They simply sent him back to Acuña.



Honduran migrant José Manuel Irias

From there he went back to Tijuana, where he managed to get admitted to a shelter, where he waited for Title 42 to be lifted, or for a humanitarian organization to help him get across the border to apply for asylum. He concludes: "I don't feel safe here where I am. I don't like to interact too much with people, to walk in the street. When I see the police [...], I feel very afraid. So I hope I make it to the United States soon."

Stories of LGBT+ migrants often include multiple incidents of harrowing brutality. A trans woman, whose digital story is titled [Pure Perseverance](#) was forced to leave her home town of El Progreso, Honduras, due to harassment by criminal gangs. She resettled in Siguatepeque, which was more peaceful, but was able to find work only by dressing as a man, ending up cleaning bathrooms.

She opted to migrate with a group of friends. However, as soon as they crossed the border into Guatemala they were assaulted by Guatemalan police. They had to hitchhike from town to town, begging for food along the way. When they crossed the border into Mexico, they were again robbed in Tenosique, Tabasco, this time by Mexican federal police. She tried to apply for asylum with her partner, but their application was rejected: "We were discriminated against - they denied our case due to being two people of the same sex. We appealed, we were denied again" and sent back to Honduras.

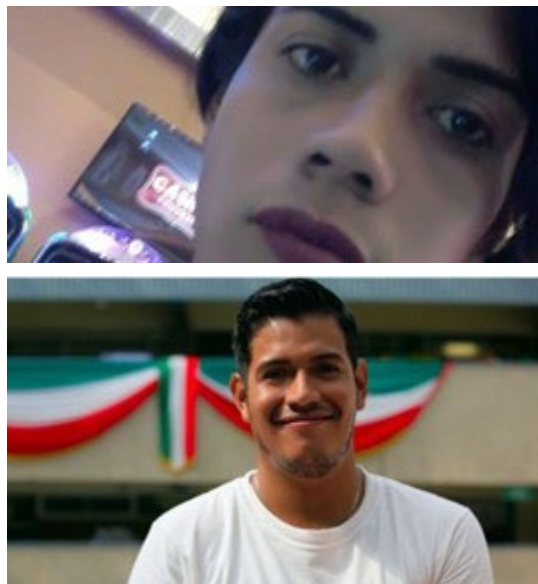
She soon returned to Mexico, this time entering via the state of Chiapas. She risked traveling by freight train (la Bestia) as far as Guadalajara, where she lived on the streets for three months. From there she was transported with other migrants in a hidden compartment of a truck, ending up in Saltillo, where she again was homeless. Upon trying to apply to remain legally in Mexico, she was detained and sent to Monterrey, where she was sexually abused by members of the National Guard. She eventually ended up getting deported back to Honduras.

She persisted, returning again to Mexico, where she was assaulted two more times. This time she managed to obtain refugee status in Mexico, but couldn't find work due to discrimination. She recorded her migration story, which stretches over three full years,

from Tijuana, where she was staying in a LGBT+ shelter, hoping to be granted admission to the US to apply for asylum.

Other LGBT+ migrants are forced to take radical measures. Transgender woman [Daiiana Rosales](#), for example, feels obliged to present herself as a man in order to migrate safely. Daiiana abandoned both her home and her identity in hopes of finding safe refuge in the US.

Homophobia and transphobia continue to be motivate people to leave their homelands in hopes of finding safety and security somewhere else. Unfortunately, they often encounter the same forms of discrimination, violence and persecution that they have fled while on the migrant trail, or even while in custody of immigration agents. While many may indeed be eligible for asylum in the US, where they can likely find the protections they seek, border and migration policies implemented to deter migration have subjected migrants to lengthy wait times and treacherous conditions that may put LGBT+ migrants at heightened risk of violence.



Daiiana Rosales, before and after fleeing for her life

About Our Center

The UC Davis Global Migration Center studies immigration with a multi-disciplinary approach to better understand the immigration and integration of vulnerable migrants, including undocumented immigrants, temporary migrants and more.

For more information, visit us online at:
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