“I Would Like to See my Country Heal its Wounds of Violence”

Experiences of Forced Migration from the Northern Triangle of Central America

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The Center for Economic Research and Teaching (CIDE) is a center for research and higher education specialized in the social sciences. The Drug Policy Program (PPD) is one of the first academic spaces in Mexico dedicated to the interdisciplinary study of drug policy, health, violence, and human rights.

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Forced Migration from Central America Project
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Financed by Open Society Foundations.

ISBN: in process
Idioma original: Spanish
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Published in 2020 by the Center for Economic Research and Teaching (CIDE).
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Introduction

The Northern Triangle of Central America has a long history of authoritarianism and exclusion that could not be overcome by peaceful means. After decades of protests that were routinely repressed, political violence (Honduras) and civil wars (Guatemala and El Salvador) ensued. In the early to mid-1990s the three countries transitioned to peace and democracy, but reforms quickly stalled and never produced much-needed structural transformations. The trappings of a democracy mask the fact that poverty and inequality remain persistently high, and public institutions, co-opted by elites and criminal networks, are unable to meet the needs of the majority of the population. Insecurity is pervasive, much of it associated with street gangs that operate mostly in marginal urban neighborhoods, and drug trafficking groups that act more in rural areas, border zones, and transportation hubs. However, violence exercised by security agents of the state also contributes to this insecurity.

Forced migration occurs when people face threats to life or livelihood and have no choice but to leave their communities and countries of origin. While forced migration from Central America is not a recent phenomenon, the violence perpetrated by street gangs and criminal groups is a growing factor for displacement. Analysts have extensively commented on the evolution of street gangs as well as the characteristics and effects of iron-first policies. Nevertheless, relatively little is known about the specific dynamics in migrant-producing communities, including the role of criminal and state violence in uprooting people, often requiring them to seek a life in dignity and safety beyond the confines of their own countries. Mexico and the United States, as countries of transit and destination, have responded to the arrival of forced migrants with deterrence-based policies that prioritize detention and deportation over access to asylum and the expansion of legal migration options.

The Forced Migration from Central America Project (FMCAP) pursued three objectives. First, it sought to collect, through semi-structured interviews with migrants, detailed and contextualized information on the reasons and places of departure. Specifically, it tried to understand how the violence generated by different actors or structures of oppression become factors of displacement. Second, it sought to know the reasons for research participation and its emotional impacts on the interviewees. Third, the research findings aim to sensitize decision makers and society in general about forced migration and influence public policies in Central America, Mexico, and the United States.

Between August and November 2019, FMCAP researchers in Mexico interviewed 134 forced migrants from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. The research showed that forced migration is due to the persistence of deep-seated forms of
violence in the countries of origin. Migration-producing communities typically lack adequate public services and dignified jobs. Precarious and poorly paid work makes it difficult for people to maintain a family and pay their children’s school fees. The absence of the state, manifested in underinvestment and the lack of authority, is exploited by non-state actors, especially street gangs and drug trafficking groups. They seek people’s silence through persuasion or fear, establish alternative forms of governance, and increasingly undermine the already precarious legitimacy of the state.

Inviting forced migrants to participate in the research and share their experiences allowed us to give voice to a population that is often invisible and silenced. Invisible, because migration policies that seek to banish desperate people, regardless of the economic and human cost of doing so, drive them underground. Silenced, because their invisibility makes it difficult to access them. But silenced also, because the oft-stated aim of avoiding the revictimization of vulnerable populations, whether for legitimate or self-interested reasons, may preclude forced migrants from participating in research. While revisiting painful experiences is difficult, preventing people from exercising their right to participate in research excludes them from knowledge production and denies them an opportunity to contribute to policy change on matters concerning them. In the worst case, preventing disenfranchised individuals from participating in research makes them more susceptible to human rights violations.

Making the testimonies in this book available to a broader audience allows, first, us to build empathy as well as foster understanding of forced migration and its impacts on human lives. Second, doing so permits us to shape public and policy narratives on forced migration. Narratives that criminalize and discriminate against forced migrants pave the way for social and institutional violence against them. What is needed, however, is accounts that favor tolerance toward forced migrants and their inclusion in host communities and societies. Third, publishing this collection of testimonies enables us to help transform public policies. The current policies at the nexus of development, security, and migration are like a revolving door: They are wasteful and harmful policies that perpetuate cycles of exclusion and violence by simply expelling people from countries of origin, transit, and destination without sustainably addressing the social problems they are meant to address.

Displacement, itself a violent act but often preceded and followed by more violence, leaves an indelible mark on the affected individuals. Some bear the physical scars of physical or sexual assaults. Many have emotional scars left by violence (real or threatened), the losses of homes and businesses, family separations, and the horrors of migrant detention. They may feel frustrated with new and perhaps unexpected difficulties, such as lengthy refugee status determination processes or access to work, housing, and healthcare, and they may struggle with uncertainty about their future.
Traumatic events impact people’s memory and recall, that is, their ability to store and retrieve information. Traumatic events, such as those experienced by many forced migrants, are recalled and narrated differently than routine, everyday events. Stress and fear can intensify traumatic memories but also create fragmented and poorly contextualized memories. Central elements of a traumatic experience, those that were so overwhelming that they are deeply etched into people’s memories, are more likely to be remembered than those with little or no emotional significance. An armed attack or a rape will be vividly remembered, but not necessarily peripheral details such as dates, locations or the physical appearance of the aggressor. Fragmented memories often result in disorganized and incomplete narratives lacking chronological order and perspective. Trauma-related memory impairments, producing gaps or inconsistencies in the narratives of forced migrants, can be expected and do not impugn the veracity of the accounts (although asylum agencies may seize on such inconsistencies to undermine the credibility of asylum seekers). To the contrary, it is not realistic to expect individuals to recall all aspects of a traumatic experience with detailed accuracy. Readers should also bear in mind that participation in this research was voluntary and interviewees decided what information they felt comfortable sharing with us.

This collection of testimonies complements our book Forced Migration from the Northern Triangle of Central America: Drivers and Experiences. It aims to put a human face to forced migration in the Americas, beyond dry statistics on migration factors, border crossings, detentions, deportations, and asylum applications. It hopes to convey the complexity of migration decisions and experiences, the moral dilemmas people are faced with as well as their survival and protection strategies. What does a life in dignity and safety mean for them? What social and political changes do they hope for? What obstacles do they identify in the struggle for human rights and democracy? We consider this form of storytelling a form of advocacy, a tool to imagine and support transformations of policies, laws, institutions, and ultimately human lives. How different might things be if more stories like the ones presented here were told and heard?

This book is divided into three country sections with a total of 15 testimonies. Part One presents five testimonies from Honduras. Alexis, an ex-soldier and prison guard, faced threats for refusing to smuggle illicit items into juvenile detention centers for gang members. Xenia, a primary school teacher, was mistakenly perceived as a spy for living and working in rival gang territories, while her brother Marlon, a small business owner, got threatened for failing to pay extortion fees for his house and shop. Norma, an agricultural worker, escaped from domestic violence by her partner, a gang member. Sara and her partner Roque, both small business owners, received gang threats for refusing to meet extortion demands and sell drugs out of his shop. Patricia, a food vendor, received threats for opposing her teenage son’s forced recruitment into a gang.
Part Two offers six testimonies from El Salvador. Carlos, head of credit and collection at a bank, was green-lighted (targeted for murder) for trying to collect debt from gang members. Manuel, a public relations professional, faced murder attempts for closing a shortcut across his property that gang members had taken to attack their rivals. Delmi, a street vendor, fled her home after opposing her adult son’s forced recruitment into a gang. María, who escaped with her husband, was kidnapped and almost beaten to death by gang members to prevent her from testifying against a police officer who had raped her. Reina, a high school teacher, faced threats after refusing to give her gang students passing grades without them having studied. Rosa, a small business owner who lost her husband in an accident, ran away with her two young children after refusing to live with her brother-in-law, a gang member.

Part Three includes four testimonies from Guatemala. Englebert, a cook, received threats after refusing to bring food to a gang leader hiding in the mountains. Ana, a food vendor, escaped social harassment after she reported her ex-husband for molesting her youngest daughter and the complaint was leaked to the media. Kennedy, an indigenous Mam whose community opposed the establishment of a gold mine, left his country after suffering a kidnapping. Juan Adolfo, an indigenous Chortí and trained high school teacher, migrated north due to the impossibility of finding work. Without the individuals who generously shared their time and insights with us, this research would not have been possible. We see this book (like Forced Migration) as a way of giving back to the participants and the wider migrant population. We also hope it will enable readers to better understand the plight of migrants and make a contribution, however small, to policy changes in Central America, Mexico, and the United States.
Part One
Honduras
Alexis | 33 years old

I am one of eight siblings. Our parents did not care if we studied. I left the house when I was ten years old and went to live with my grandmother and my aunt. But it was not the same. It was very, very ugly. Since then I have focused on fending for myself. At the age of ten I started working in the fields, under the sun, to be able to buy my shoes, my clothes. It was very difficult.

There are few soldiers in my family. My grandmother had about sixty grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Of those, only I decided to become a soldier. My desire to do military service was born from watching war movies. I wanted to taste what it feels like. Due to family problems, I only had primary education. But I passed the military exams, and in 2008 I joined the army. Everything was going well until 2009, when President Manuel Zelaya was removed from power. At that point, everything became complicated for the military, because they participated in his removal.

Zelaya wanted to be a socialist. He bought a lot of people’s votes. He increased teachers’ salaries, and paid subsidies so that people were in favor of him. He was favoring a lot of people so that later, when what he wanted to happen happened, people were already bought. When Zelaya was deposed, the people he had favored were unhappy. They wanted him to return, and they took the streets to demonstrate. As the army is there for that, the army is the one they sent to fight against the people to defend the Constitution. People were wounded, people died, both on the other side and on the military’s side. For almost a year it was like that, but it was only hard for six months. You did not sleep, there were curfews. There is still the aftermath of that. Now we have a problem with President Juan Orlando Hernández, who got himself re-elected.

When I joined the army, I knew there could be a war. Soldiers get trained for that. Our job is to ensure the sovereignty and integrity of the country. But fighting a war for territory is not the same as a war against my people. How can I kill my people? You cannot, you cannot. That is why I decided to retire with honors after two years of military service. I did not want to be a part of what was happening. Also, people blamed the military for what had happened. Even my grandmother was in favor of Zelaya. If people realized that I was a soldier, they could lynch me. When I got home from the army, people started calling me “coup-monger.”

In January 2011 I came to Mexico, because here there are more opportunities, more freedom. The COMAR [Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance] rejected my case, saying that I needed evidence. But I do not want to wait for my hand or foot to be cut off to have evidence. I kept on the road, but Migration grabbed me and returned me to my country.
Upon returning to Honduras, I worked in the fields, in factories, in whatever came up, until in 2015 I had the opportunity to work as a guard in juvenile detention centers. I passed the exams and worked there for almost three years as the head of a group of guards. The centers are for minors aged 12 to 18, but there were people up to 25 years old, because they had documents that were not theirs. The people in these groups are the children of single mothers or the products of rape, and sometimes they are not registered.

The inmates are divided into groups. First, I was working in areas occupied by the Barrio 18 and other smaller gangs, such as Los Benjamín, El Combo Que No Se Deja, Los Chirizos, and the civilian population. They were all kept separate. Even so, there were deaths, there were riots, there were breakouts, because the facilities are not adequate. In the juvenile offender system, they were killing each other. They buried the victims without anyone noticing that people were missing, until the roll call was done. There was no control. It was a mess, because nobody was interested in the juvenile offenders. During the six months I was there, we had about four clashes between the Chirizos and the Dieciochos. We had casualties, but in the most brutal way. The juveniles are more aggressive and bloodthirsty than adults. They tell you things as if it meant nothing, like how they dismember people. They do not feel anything anymore.

The main problem is the lack of budget, because without a budget there is no infrastructure, there is no security. When I was working in a center for kids in the Barrio 18, we had almost 300 of them. In each shift we were 15 guards. That is too few. But nobody likes to do this work, and less so with juveniles. The salary is good – they pay you about 11,000 lempiras a month, apart from food. But people do not want to do this job, for fear of the gang members’ demands. They have control inside and outside prisons and detention centers.

The guard is for all groups, but it should not be that way. Because if I go to one sector of the detention center and then to another, the gang members say that we are punteros, that is, infiltrators or spies. When you work with juveniles, you need to be a psychologist, you need to be a doctor, everything. Because if you are not, they wrap you around their finger. Juveniles are more of a problem than adults. They think they are very powerful. They do not think, they just act.

The gang members in the center wanted me to do favors for them, to pass them drugs, weapons, even a grenade, to bring them extortion messages. They start with small things, but then they ask for more and more, but they offer you more money too. They are detained, but the gang sends them clothes, shoes, personal hygiene products – it gives them everything. First, they try to persuade people. I was offered 200,000 lempiras to smuggle in a grenade. I could have done it,
because I was head of the group of guards. But I always refused to work for the gang members. As a guard, you either agree to their requests or a family member dies. They are smart. They do not kill the guard, because they need him. They threaten to kill a loved one of yours, so that you will agree to their demands. I endured the threats for a long time without agreeing to their requests, because you cannot do that. If I had agreed, I would be working for them. If you start this, you do not get out of it.

I was transferred to another center, but there they also wanted me to do what they wanted, to smuggle in drugs. The mara had control of its sector of the center. They were like at home. The only thing that we as guards were doing there was making sure that they did not escape, and that they did not fight among themselves. Gang members came looking for me at my house with the complicity of a female colleague. That guard, who was the cousin of a detained juvenile member the Barrio 18, told her cousin where I lived.

I asked for a transfer to another city, but the same thing happened there. It was even harder, because I was transferred to a women’s juvenile detention center. Women are worse than men. They are more aggressive and can be very persuasive. One of the women fell in love with me – that was another reason why I had to get out of there. She wanted to withdraw from the gang to be with me. I told her that it was not possible, but her friends sent a letter to their gang leader and told him I was the problem. From then on, they were watching me – they came looking for me at my house.

So many gang members have been in the detention centers that you bump into them on public transport or on the street. They look at you with hatred in their face. They are treacherous. The country is small, and there are more criminals than good people. Gang members know where the guards live, they know their routes. They keep us under surveillance from the moment we leave the center. It is very complicated. To avoid problems, I decided to resign quickly and leave my country. In 2018, I came to Mexico again. This time I decided to ride the Beast. I was ready to let fate decide if I died there or here. I could only return to my country if these gang youths died, but they are just about 15 years old.

Honduras needs a bigger budget for the security system, so that a police officer can earn enough and not be blackmailed by organized crime. The villages need to have more microenterprises. The health system needs to be improved, because in the hospitals and health centers there are no medicines. The gang problem has already gotten out of hand. As much as you want to, you cannot control it. People must be encouraged not to be afraid, to rise up against the gangs and not to be extorted or manipulated. There are many places where the gangs have not been able to enter because the population has not allowed it. If they go in, they will get killed. The only way to do this is to form community self-defense groups, because there are not enough police in the villages.
In Mexico I have kept studying. My primary school certificate was not valid here, so I had to re-do both primary and secondary school. Now I am studying in high school. I am also working, but for me it is difficult. When I arrived at the migrant shelter in Huehuetoca, I spoke with the priest. I presented my case at the COMAR and one day the priest told me about a factory that needed workers. They paid for a room to live in and 1,500 pesos a week. After six months, the factory started to treat us badly – it did not pay my overtime. We were about 20 people living in one room, all of us working for the company and in an asylum process with the COMAR. After nine months I quit. They did not want to give me my severance pay. They said that I had no right to it. For the nine months I had worked, they only gave me about 900 pesos.

Now I am working in a security company. But things are not going well there either, because I work 12 hours a day as a group leader, but they do not pay me as such. They pay me 3,100 pesos every two weeks for 12 hours of work and I do not have health insurance. I would like it if there were not as much discrimination when you look for a job in Mexico. On the other hand, in November 2018, the COMAR told me that I no longer had to report at their office and sign the logbook, that I just had to wait for them to call me for the last interview. But I have been waiting for a year and nothing has happened.
Xenia | 35 years old
& Marlon | 44 years old

We are sister and brother. We both came to Mexico with our families.

(Xenia) I was a primary school teacher, and I had already worked at a school for five years. I loved my profession. I only had five classes left to finish my Bachelor of Education. But I had to leave it, and it hurts a lot because I spent two years taking classes. It is a great loss that I had to abandon everything from one moment to the next.

Gangs have always existed in Honduras. The only thing is that you never thought that they would mess with the schools. All institutions in Honduras – factories, universities, schools – must have been infiltrated by one or two gang members. They may want to study or work there, but at the same time they extort you. In other words, this will never end, because they have already grouped everything in their favor.

In Honduras there are few teacher positions. It is difficult to get one. When they appoint you, you have to take a risk and go where they send you in order to work and feed your children. A teacher without a degree earns 11,000 lempiras a month. With an academic degree, they earn 21,000 lempiras a month. It is not a living wage, because around 5,000 lempiras is spent on transportation alone. In rural areas there is no way to get there by car. Each teacher needs to find their own means of transportation. Sometimes colleagues need to go on horseback, risking their lives because they do not know who they are going to run into. Teachers who do not get a better position stop working, because they cannot retire until they are 80 years old.

The country fell into chaos, due to what was happening with President Juan Orlando Hernández. The President’s brother was jailed in the United States for drug trafficking. The President is also involved, that is why people want to get him out of office. In addition, the government has privatized the health system and electricity. They are not thinking of the poor. Not all of us have the same economic level. We teachers had already gone three months without wages, without classes, and had taken to the streets risking our lives. The soldiers, who get sent in by our President, were killing teachers for fighting for their rights.

Gang members were your worst enemies. My house was in an area of the Barrio 18, and I worked in an area controlled by the MS. Members of the Barrio 18 chased me to school and discovered that it was in an area controlled by a different antisocial group. In the end, I could not leave the institution without being discovered. I was scared, because outside my school gunfire
began between the gang members of that school area and those from my home area, who came to keep an eye on me. The MS thought that I was watching what was happening in their area and was reporting back to my neighborhood, and the gang in my neighborhood thought the same in reverse. That is why they threatened me. If I had kept working in a place controlled by a gang that did not match the place where I lived, they would have killed me. I had to choose one of two things: my life or my job. I had a permanent position as a teacher, but since I had my family, I had to leave my job and flee.

“I was scared, because outside my school gunfire began between the gang members of that school area and those from my home area, who came to keep an eye on me. The MS thought that I was watching what was happening in their area and was reporting back to my neighborhood, and the gang in my neighborhood thought the same in reverse.”

The schools are filled with students who are the children of gang members. They must pass, even if they do not know anything. Out of fear, teachers give them a pass. The schools are empty of students, because all of the parents have already emigrated out of fear. The atmosphere at the institution was too traumatic. We teachers hired an elderly man as a security guard, but even the security guard did not want to take risks. The gang members gave their children written messages to be handed to the teachers. Not even during the break would we feel fine, for breakfast or for lunch, because even the food did not sit well with us. We were desperate for the hours to pass and to get out. The teachers would meet at a specific point to travel to the school, because if something happened to one of us, it would happen to all of us. If they had to shoot one of us, they had to shoot us all.

The gang members wanted to use my house as a warehouse for weapons and drugs. I had to pretend they were mine. They came to my house and entered the rooms. If the police were to come, I had to say that I had not seen the gang members. All of this traumatized my daughters. Since we had a car, any type of transport that the gang members had to do, they would call my husband so that he did it for them at his own risk.

My nine-year-old daughter watched the gang members walk around the neighborhood carrying guns. She was suffering from psychological trauma. She no longer slept. If she heard gunshots, she would fall to the ground. “Mommy, we are going to die now. I am afraid that I will die mommy,” she said to me. At school, my daughter already had a problematic profile. She had already learnt how to read, but she lost that ability because of the stress caused by the violence. When we came to Mexico from Honduras, she had psychological treatment. It affects us as parents, it affects us greatly. Now that we are here in Mexico, she is calmer.
The most unfortunate thing is the departure from there to here. That is another story that one lives through. When we left Honduras, we abandoned everything. We did not bring anything, neither clothes nor anything else. We had to hide, see how we were going to get food and water, because traveling without money is the worst. We endured rain, hunger, and thirst. We slept under a bridge, with our eight-month-old baby. We tried everything so he would not cry. Here in Mexico, at least we found this refuge. At first we suffered, but we found welcoming people and good care. My brother did electronic work, my husband washed cars. We always keep busy. Whatever work was available, there we were. Similarly, during the trip we lost our passports. Now we want to get replacement passports, but we do not know how to do it. We were advised to approach the COMAR [Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance], because of the legal status especially. That is where we are right now, waiting to see what God says. We hope to get permanent residence, look for a stable job, and keep fighting. We shall see if we can recover and regain our strength.

For Honduras to change, the leaders would have to be changed first, because since this President entered office, things began to change. They renewed the presidency, but he won the elections by lying, by deceiving the citizens. This man is ruining everything. Many people are unemployed in Honduras, from factories, banks, banana plantations. Many people are being fired. Before you got a bonus in June, you got a bonus in December, what you received depended on your seniority. Now they only hire you for three months so that they do not have to pay bonuses or benefits. Honduras would have to return to what it has lost: its Constitution. All the articles that protect citizens are being violated.
(Marlon) I have a high school degree in electrical sciences. I worked as a paint supervisor, but I always wanted something more. I worked as a contractor and had a business. The one who stayed at home with the business was my wife.

In my neighborhood in Honduras there are different gangs. They fired their guns wildly, at any cost, without caring about anything. Once the corner of my house was left in the dark because they blew up all the outdoor light bulbs. I said, “Well, I am going to put a new bulb outside my house so there is more light.” But no, they told me that they did not want this light bulb outside.

When my sister and her family came to visit us, the gang members were trying to figure out why they came and where they were going. You could no longer invite friends to the house, because gang members think that every stranger who comes to one’s home is watching them. Hondurans have already become antisocial.

It is dangerous when the thugs watch your daughters grow up. They begin to follow the girls, and if the girls do not accept becoming their girlfriends, the thugs take the girls by force. It is a big concern. My 15-year-old daughter was already saying, “Daddy, they follow me when I come home from school.” When you work you cannot be aware of everything that is going on, and the strength of a father is not the same as the strength of a mother. I had to choose and say, “Well, I have to protect my daughter more than my work.” Because you could no longer concentrate on your work – you were worrying from the time that your daughter left school, what was going to happen to her? You were no longer happy. You were no longer at peace.

I had already had my business for two years. You start little by little. When you see that you are selling things, you start to offer more products. But when the gang members see that you are growing, they think that you have a lot of money and start asking for more. As extortion, I had to pay 3,500 lempiras a month. They also came and wanted food. If seven arrived, the seven took food and did not pay. I do not even know how much I lost because of this. Then they marked the houses on our block with a sign saying “house under surveillance.” I had to pay 600 lempiras a week because of that sign. I even had to take out my savings to make the payments. There came a time when I had just enough money to feed my family, not to pay electricity, or water bills, or anything else. When I was no longer able to pay the extortion, the threats began. You cannot have a business or anything. If your payment to the gang is one day late, the next day you are dead. Sometimes I would look at my daughters who went to the living room to cry. The last thing that happened, when I had started to close my business, was that one of the gang members drove his car into the wall of my house. It destroyed the wall and I could not say anything.
You could no longer live in peace – from time to time bullets would hit the wall of my house. There was no need for confrontations; they were shooting just to pass the time. The worst thing is that you cannot go and report them because the police let gang members know that someone went to report them. We have noticed that people who reported gang members have been killed. They get taken out of their houses and killed. The police, perhaps because they fear for their lives themselves, collude with the gang members. Another thing is that there are gang members in the police. So, your life is always at risk. We lost two brothers to crime. But what you must do is shut up and say nothing. I saw many deaths near my house, and you could not say anything, just burst into tears, because they are innocent people. There came a time when the bullets hit our window and pierced inside. We could not take this anymore.

“When the gang members see that you are growing, they think that you have a lot of money and start asking for more. As extortion, I had to pay 3,500 lempiras a month. They also came and wanted food. If seven arrived, the seven took food and did not pay.”

Where is the law in our country, if even police officers, if even those who govern, are violating rights? Who can we trust to defend our rights? They can suddenly accuse me, even if I have not done anything. But nobody is going to save me, because in our country there is no law now. No one trusts anyone in Honduras anymore. Because how many deaths have occurred, and the authorities have done absolutely nothing about them? Before, the thief would just say, “Give me your wallet!” They would take out what you had in your wallet and return your documents to you. But now, they kill you and take everything away from you. All respect for life has been lost.

Because of everything that was happening we did not sleep, we were worried. You shed tears just thinking about what you were experiencing. You did not know what end you would have. And to imagine after so many struggles, all the effort you left behind. You feel helplessness, psychological trauma. You had to concentrate to pretend that everything would be okay in front of the children, so that the children did not suffer. Many people have to leave. My neighborhood was already empty, there is no more youth. Our whole family is here in Mexico, because what we most want is a better life for our children – that they can study, that they can succeed, and that they do not grow up in that circle.

Our properties were left abandoned. We could not sell anything, because we got out fast. Due to the threats, we could no longer wait any longer. I did not even tell our mother, because it was going to be more worry for her. We waited until we had already left to tell her, and then we told her that we were fine.
Since we arrived in Mexico, only one person has been rude to us. “What are you doing here? Go to back your country,” they told us. You immediately feel rejected, but we gave them blessings. You need to be optimistic, have high self-esteem. But we feel good. We cannot complain. We have found hospitable people. We only tell Mexico to continue to have patience, because more migrants are coming along the way.

For migration to ease, our country must improve. At some point I came to think that Juan Orlando Hernández was the best President. I believed that because he began to police the entire drug trafficking route. When he began to extradite, to arrest, I said, “Damn, we are good!” But we had not yet realized that he was taking out all the traffickers to keep all the power for himself. We still did not know that he was the biggest drug trafficker. Right now, the country is complicated because of the President’s attitude. There is no security, there is no more respect. From the moment there was electoral fraud, society lost trust. The society does what it wants. The criminal does anything.

Honduras for us was everything. We did not have a dream of migrating. When we left, all we wanted was to safeguard our family and get to Mexico. We do not have the aspiration to reach the United States. If someone from Honduras asked me, “Should I go illegally to Mexico?” I would say, “No,” because of the suffering that we went through. But in the long run, what is happening in our country, the threats, forces people to emigrate.
Norma | 37 years old

I lived in a department bordering Nicaragua, in a livestock and agricultural area. The schools there are very poor. Before, the schools did not ask the parents for much, but now they ask that the children go to school in uniforms and with shoes, that you pay tuition, everything. Now a public school is almost like a private school. If you are poor, you do not have enough money to send your children to school. There is a health center, but medicines are very scarce. The closest hospital is in the department’s capital, but the service is poor. Since I lived near Nicaragua, I went to the clinic on the other side of the border. With my youngest son, I had a high-risk pregnancy. Since the health care was so poor, when I had to give birth to him I was alone in my house. I could no longer bear the pain, but I braced myself and gave birth to him alone. There used to be a stimulus for single mothers, a solidarity payment. I always signed up, but never had the opportunity to receive any support for my children. Most of the country is in this situation. Also, there is no security in Honduras.

“My partner was very aggressive, violent, he hit me. He was abusing me. (...) He is a gang member. When I first met him, he was not like that. But in the gang, he got into alcohol and drugs and became more violent.”

I worked in the field, in tomato, onion, sweet pepper, and jalapeño pepper plantations. There is no stable work in Honduras, only in the harvest season when the farm owners might grow corn or beans. It is hard to work long hours in the sun. We started at 5 in the morning and finished at 4:00 or 5:00 in the afternoon. On one occasion I worked in the melon fields in Choluteca. There I would get up at 1:00 in the morning. At 2:00 in the morning the bus arrived, because we traveled for about two hours to be at work at 5. We worked hourly, cleaning the melon plants. Sometimes we would come back at 6:00 or 7:00 at night. I normally weigh about 120 pounds, but during that time I weighed like 80 pounds. I was skin and bones because Choluteca is very hot.

It is very hot there and working in the fields is not for everyone. I only made 93 lempiras a day, but sometimes necessity forces you to accept things. You could earn 1,800 lempiras a month working as a cleaner in a house. For me, a mother of four children, that was not enough. I knocked on doors, looking for washing and ironing work. I have suffered a lot. I even prostituted myself to feed my children. It is tough, but I did not know what to do anymore. I could only give my children some cooked rice because I had nothing left to give them. In the afternoons I was waiting for them to come home from school and had nothing to give them. I cried. A friend said to me, “Let us go to the border, let us do
this." I had never sold sex before. Since I lived on the Nicaraguan border, I went over to the truck drivers.

I suffered a lot of domestic violence. My partner was very aggressive, violent, he hit me. He was abusing me. When I did not want to sleep with him, he took me by force. He is a gang member. When I first met him, he was not like that. But in the gang, he got into alcohol and drugs and became more violent. Gang members are aggressive, they have no heart. I reported him, but sometimes they took him away one day and the next morning he would be back. Are they waiting for you to get killed? I do not know. On one occasion, he tried to kill me with scissors and I stabbed him with an ice pick, putting it halfway in his hand. I reported him, but they did not listen to me. Instead of taking him away, they locked me up for 24 hours. It is very common that they take the women and not the men away. When I decided to come to Mexico, he wanted to kill me, and he attacked me with a knife. He was very drunk, and I was able to defend myself a little. I still have scars. If I am alive, it is because God is great. So, when this happened, instead of going to the authorities, I decided it was better to leave Honduras. I was going to bring my youngest children, but I could not get them out of the country. They stayed with their grandmother.

It was a quick decision. I came here without money, taking rides, and walking. It is very hard to enter Mexico. Every time I saw a white car, I ran into the woods. I endured hunger and thirst because people in southern Mexico do not give you water. I went to houses to ask for water and they denied it to me. "Out of here!" they told me, like a dog. In El Ceibo, no one lets you board a bus or gives you a ride. I walked 57 kilometers to reach the shelter in Tenosique. This migrant shelter is called La 72, in honor of the migrants who were killed. If you go inside, you will see the names of those who were killed. It hurt my heart to see this. I am grateful to all the shelters, because the people there do not have to take care of us. Thanks to them, there is a place to sleep. It does not matter that the food is awful – the important thing is that you do not starve. Thousands of migrants pass through Tenosique. Some guys from my hometown told me that my ex-partner realized where I am and that he was on his way. So, as desperate and afraid as I was, I grabbed the train. I had never been on a train and sometimes I was the only woman.

On the train journey, I teamed up with a new friend from Guatemala in Lechería. He was a man dressed as a woman. I got along with her very well – sometimes such people are more sincere than a woman. She really liked her drinks, and one night in Lechería I could not find her.

At night I went to look for her at the train tracks to continue to Celaya. I got into the middle of the train station – several carriages were parked there. Suddenly two men got out of the carriages and one of them grabbed me. They wanted to rape me. It was the saddest moment of my life. I was crying. I told them not to hurt me and that I was pregnant so they would not rape me. They were huge. But
when the guards turned on lights, the men released me. Then I found my friend, all drunk. We stayed on the road and reached Celaya, and from Celaya we went to Irapuato, and there they almost killed her. She had a phone and about 250 pesos. Since she is a man, she resisted being robbed. They beat her up and left her almost dead. At night I found her all bruised under a bridge. We were there for about six days, until she recovered. When the train left, she grabbed it, but I did not manage to get on it. The train dragged me for about a hundred meters. I could feel the air of the passing train pull me in. I only had a few bruises from where I fell. It was very hard for me to lose my friend. You grow close to people and then you do not see them anymore.

In Guadalajara I met another couple from Central America with their daughter. I joined them and went up to the border. I first went to Puerto Vallarta. There I met some people from Honduras – they had already worked for the mafia in that city. I was offered work, giving them the heads-up if the navy or the state and federal police were nearby. Out of necessity I accepted, and they took me in for a few days to teach me the ropes. Then I felt a little cagey, I could not stand it, because I could find no way in or out. I was practically living on the street, eating on the street, trying to bathe on the street. It scared me a little too, so I decided I had better get out of there.

I tried to cross the border to the United States, but I saw that it was very difficult. I was afraid for my life, that something would happen to me. I was not so scared that Migration would grab me, but that something else would happen to me. Because at those border points they sometimes kidnap people. On the way to Texas one of my brothers was kidnapped. He tried to make it to the other side without a smuggler or something like that, because we do not have anyone's help, only God's. He flung himself over to the other side of the border and was seized by a group of kidnappers. When they saw that he had no money or relatives in the United States who could pay a ransom, they released him after ten days. They went to leave him in the mountains, his hands and feet tied. They were going to kill him, but they left him alive.

I went to Mexicali, but I never found a job there. I slept on the street. I could not stand the heat or the hunger. Then there was a group on its way back and I decided to go with them to Guadalajara. I travelled on the train, and got to Los Mochis in Sinaloa. Only men were on the train. I tried to stay by myself because I was alone. I was so tired and that was when I got raped. When I arrived in Guadalajara, I was not going to say anything. I was going to keep quiet. I was desperate. I looked for Migration to turn myself in and leave. But that day Migration was closed. So I came to the shelter, and when I was interviewed I could not hold back the tears and had to say that I had been raped. I was taken to the hospital and given treatment to prevent pregnancy and infection. I was also given a rapid HIV test and an antiretroviral. It was very hard.

I do not want to return to Honduras. The country needs jobs and a minimum wage to support your family. In San Pedro Sula there are the maquilas, but you
need to have studied to work there. I barely passed sixth grade and consider myself illiterate. Also, they ask you for many papers. The criminal record certificate alone costs 300 lempiras. Where am I going to get this from? 300 lempiras for me is like gold. I would like the gang violence to stop and the domestic violence to end. Most men in Honduras there are machos, they like hitting women and will not wash a plate. I want all of this to change. We Hondurans call our President “Juan Robando.” If he were not there, the country would not be upside down. There would be no need to leave Honduras and risk your life.

At the beginning, my idea was to go to the United States, but I do not want to anymore. What am I going to do without anyone helping me out? Now that it is so difficult, I will not get asylum there. When I arrived in Tenosique, I was told that I had the possibility to apply for asylum and I did. I waited five months, but was never notified about the decision. When I had to leave Tenosique, I dropped the case and the COMAR [Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance] receipt of application has now expired. But I want to stay in Mexico and bring my family here. I do crafts and would be happy to do that here.

What I would like is for Donald Trump to be removed. There are people who understand, there are others who do not understand. If that man were not like he is, or if Mexican Migration did not hunt us so much, there would be much less risk for migrants. You are fleeing from crime, from everything, and come here with fear that Migration will grab you. If you come on the train and there are checkpoints, you need to jump and run somewhere else. You run and do not know where to run to. You do not know if you will fall into an abyss. You do not know if you are going to be bitten by an animal. You do not know if you will be run over by a car – that means losing your life. I think the United States and Mexico are at fault, because if they were not so hard on the migrants, none of this would happen.

©Sonja Wolf
Sara | 46 years old
& Roque | 51 years old

(Sara) My partner and I are micro-entrepreneurs. For years we were both being extorted, as were other members of my family, because they also had their own businesses. One of my brothers had a laundry service. My sister had a diner in a gang-controlled neighborhood. I helped her, and since she is also a hairdresser, she supported me in my business, which was practically in the same area. Because of the threats they received, my family had to leave everything and come to Mexico first.

My first business was a beauty salon. I opened it in 2005 with the money I had at the time. Back in 2006, 2007 the gangs started extorting me. At the beginning I paid the extortion, but everything was going to the dogs. When I refused to continue paying the fee, I started receiving threats over the phone. They told me that if I did not give them what they asked for, they knew where I lived, where my children studied. I closed the business and they robbed me. I saw the robbery as a sign of the real danger I was in. They were already making good on their threats. I had to get out of there and went to another neighborhood. Out of fear I did not start another business for almost two years. I worked as a secretary, but I lost my job. Since I was on my own, I stayed home with my children. Out of necessity, in 2012 I reopened my business in a new place. It was back then when I also met Roque.

I opened my second business, also a beauty salon, with the benefits from my job. We also opened a small gym. After six months, gang members began to bother us, to ask for 2,500 lempiras a month for the two businesses. If they see that you are doing well, the fee increases. Over time they demanded 4,000 lempiras a month from us. When you cannot pay, you can negotiate and give them home appliances, for example. After three years, we could no longer pay the extortion fee, because we had to pay the rent for the premises, we had two employees to pay, and everything fell apart. After we closed those businesses, we went to another neighborhood and only opened a small gym. I used to give zumba and aerobics classes. But the gang members always found us. This last time, we could no longer pay the extortion. The threats were already getting more serious, because we were constantly on the run. We were lucky, because they usually come and kill people who have fled from them.

I filed three complaints about the extortion and the threats with the CONADEH [National Commissioner for Human Rights], with the DPI [Direction of Police Investigations], and with the Core-7. But they did nothing. I went there, and just like anywhere they made me wait. Then they took the complaint and said, “Well, let us see what we can do.” They gave me a copy of the complaint, but they did
not call me. I did not follow up on the complaints, because I felt it was strange that they did not call me. I was afraid of the gang ties that may have existed there. I thought, “If they do not do anything, it is for a reason. I better avoid problems and just see what happens.” We moved to another neighborhood, always in Tegucigalpa. But after a while, I could not stand the situation anymore. We had to separate, my partner stayed in one place, my children in another, and I came to Mexico. Those are the circumstances we live in. It is sad because you want to fight and get ahead. But sadly, wherever we go, there is always danger. It is difficult when you have to leave your house and everything that you have fought so hard for. Roque is often depressed. It also makes me very sad, but you need to plough through and keep going.

I already have legal residence in Mexico, because of family ties with my sister. She arrived in Mexico two years ago, but she is no longer here. She left Mexico because she had problems here. She applied for asylum in the United States. I spent about a year in Tapachula, working to support my children in Honduras. My youngest son is 21 years old and we are very close. He would say to me, “Mom, I cannot stand being here. I am afraid that they will find me.” That was why Roque made the decision to come to Mexico and the two came here together. We stayed in Tapachula for about two more months.

It was very difficult. Initially, we were welcomed into a shelter while we were looking for work. Unfortunately, there were too many people, there was little food, and we slept on the floor in a room without windows. But we said, “At least we are not on the street. We have a roof over our heads, there is a guard, it is safe.” But my son had to stay behind to look after the suitcases when we would go out to buy a soft drink, some flavored water, or some other food, a sandwich, because the food there was really not very pleasant. It is not that we were making any special requests, but sometimes there was not even food because they had to give preference to the children.

“Over time they demanded 4,000 lempiras a month from us. When you cannot pay, you can negotiate and give them home appliances, for example. After three years, we could no longer pay the extortion fee, because we had to pay the rent for the premises, we had two employees to pay, and everything fell apart.”

It was very difficult to find work. To begin with, you do not have a work permit. The work women normally do there is in bars, in pubs at night, and I was not going to do that. I walked around the center of Tapachula. I went to the stores that had “Staff Wanted” signs. But they said to me, “Are you not from here in Mexico?” “No,” I said, “I am Honduran.” “Oh no, just Mexicans,” they told me. I managed to get a job in a beauty salon. I got paid little, like 100 pesos a day, but it is worse not to work. Roque found work as a painter.
By the time we had raised some money to move to a quieter place with more space, a large number of Cuban and African migrants had arrived. Rents and food prices skyrocketed, apart from the fact that the places that we could rent, which were cheaper, were already occupied. If you found a place to live, it was only for two people, you could not rent for three. Later, Roque was walking through the center of Tapachula when he stumbled across someone from the gang in Honduras. Following that, we were transferred to Mexico City to continue with the asylum process with the COMAR [Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance] from here.

Finding a job in Mexico City has been difficult. Through some friends, I was offered a job in Celaya. But the job ended, and I had to come back here. My son lost his job, and Roque also lost his job again. We have been terribly worried. In some places, we had to have recommendations to rent and if we did not have recommendations, we had to pay three months’ rent upfront. We had no money to pay the deposit or keep up with the rent. In other places, if there were three of us, they would not rent to us – it had to be one or two people. Right now, they are kicking us out of the place where we live for the same reason. So, we are almost back to where we started. After everything that happened to us in Honduras, this is awful. Only God gives you strength. I dream of being at home, of having peace of mind and having a job to pay for my food and bills. What I have always wanted is to have a space where I can start a business, a beauty salon, to be able to support myself and make some money in case I cannot get a job.

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(Roque) In Tegucigalpa there are several gangs, but two predominate: the MS-13 and the Barrio 18. They divide up the territories. There are areas where the gangs do not allow the extortion of businesses, where they do not allow
robberies of product delivery vans, because they make money from drug sales. In other words, the gangs act like the police. For example, if my cell phone gets stolen, I would rather go to the gang than to the police, because I know that the gang is more likely to get my cell phone back, not the police. It is really appalling that in certain areas the population gives gang members legitimacy, because they are the ones who protect the neighborhood. These are exceptions, but the gangs are turning into a power that must be respected.

“Businesses like that are places that people go to and they serve as fronts for the gangs. They wanted me to sell drugs at night, and in the morning they were going to pay me 100 lempiras a day.”

For extortion, the gangs tend to use minors, they call them flags. They put them in strategic places and give them a cell phone or a Walkie-Talkie so they can warn the gang of any movement, be it from the police or another gang or from the person they are going to extort. That is their job. They usually recruit under-18s for that. In my country there are thousands of ninis, youth who neither study nor work. The gang pays them about 1,500 lempiras a week and gives them a gun, so they feel empowered with money, with a gun, with a cell phone. Sometimes the gang sends the minors to leave the extortion message, but the moment one of them leaves you the message, there is another one talking to the gang on the phone. There are adults and minors, but the minors are the cannon fodder, 15-year-olds and younger, because if they get caught, they know that the law protects them. It is easier for minors to get out of jail. On the other hand, if they get caught, they have their code of silence, because if they get caught and put in jail, their families get money from the gangs. They are well organized. Sometimes I think they keep better track of their accounting than we did in our business.

Sometimes they identify themselves by phone or deliver a message to let people know what day they will stop by to collect the payment. The gangs have already reached a level where they are giving scholarships to young people to study law, and when they graduate, they will become the lawyers of gang members. The gangs also recruit people with accounting knowledge to help them with their businesses. They create a profile of you, a business study – so they know roughly how much you can give, and they tell you how much you have to pay and how often. Sometimes it is once a week, sometimes every fortnight, sometimes once a month. And they identify themselves using the name of the gang, because for them it is very important to mark their territory, to let it be known who controls it. The problem is that some neighborhoods are divided between rival gang territories, so you do not get extorted by only one group, but by two. That is when it gets worse.
There are also people who take advantage of the existence of gangs. They pose as gang members to extort money. But when the gangs find out, they kill them. The gangs have what they call “crazy houses.” These are places where they take people to warn them, even to kill them. They have a bat, a wooden stick, they call it *chayán*. Most people already know that *chayán* exists, they do not know where, but they know that it exists. In some neighborhoods there is a community center that the gangs control and where they party on Saturdays. If someone gets drunk and causes trouble, they say, “Do you want to go dancing with *chayán*? No? Then control yourself!” If he does not control himself and starts causing trouble, they take him to dance with *chayán*. “Dancing with a *chayán*” means that they beat him. But they only do this twice. The third time, they kill him. I know this because some of our childhood friends are involved in gangs and word gets around. Sara, for example, had an employee whose brother was killed and whose mother was beheaded because she had a business and agreed to sell drugs. Sometimes the gang kills you because you spend the drug money or you do not hand it all over to the gang. So, through those people, you hear things. It is no secret. Gang members prefer that it is not a secret so that you are more afraid of an attack.

As I said before, if my cell phone gets stolen, I go to a friend who is friends with someone else and that guy is friends with gang members. I tell him, “Look, do me a favor, my cell phone just got stolen.” “What cell phone is it? Where did they assault you? Okay, take it easy.” The gang members go looking for him and if they can find the guy, they take him to the crazy house. They take the cell phone from him, beat him, and return the cell phone to me without charging me a cent. That is what they do in some places. So, they gain strength. But it also depends on what level of relationship you are getting into with the gang members, because the more of a relationship you have with them, the more of a commitment you have with them. That is the problem. For example, right now I am worried about a friend. Back in my country, when the electricity is not paid, the meter gets switched off. When you owe more money, it gets cut at the post and you need to reconnect it. So, the gang members told him, “Plug it in, no need to ask the ENEE [National Electric Power Company] for permission, we authorize you. If they come here, we are here!” Here is the decision: Do I do it through the ENEE as it should be done or do I save money and invest in my business? If I accept the proposal from the gang members, I will be protected, but I will also have an obligation to them.

Why do the police not do something to shut down the crazy houses? Let us start with who the President is. The President’s brother is imprisoned in the United States. The President is the boss of the entire mafia in my country, and the Armed Forces are colluding with him. You rely more on the gangs to report a crime than on the police, because if I go to the police, I am not sure if they are honest or not. The police officer goes and tells the gang straightaway, “Look, a
guy called Roque came to see us, he lives over there, and he filed a complaint against you.” People will say, “He turned up dead, he was such a good person, he did not mess with anyone.” The problem is if you make the complaint in the wrong place.

After Sara left for Mexico, I opened a shop selling second-hand clothes and shoes. Sometimes I also got office jobs, so I combined both things. The business was helping me pay for university, because I was studying local development. At one stage in my life, I fell into the clutches of alcohol. I have been sober for four years now. When you have an alcohol problem, you are desperate for a drink. You try to get one anywhere. At midnight, the places that sell alcohol are not great places, but you do not care if you can calm your anxiety. The place where I used to go to buy alcohol was near a corner where they sell drugs. I tried marijuana a couple of times, but it was not my thing. But some friends said to me, “Buy me a marijuana joint.” So, I got to know some MS-13 members. At some point the gang members sent me an acquaintance, a relative of those who were most involved in selling drugs. They looked for me, because they knew that I had bought alcohol in that area and had a shop selling clothes and shoes. Businesses like that are places that people go to and they serve as fronts for the gangs. They wanted me to sell drugs at night, and in the morning they were going to pay me 100 lempiras a day, that is, 3,000 lempiras a month. With 3,000 lempiras a month, plus any other income that you may have, you can continue to study without problems. But accepting that is a commitment. I told him that I was going to think about it, but Sara had already received threats, so I had no choice but to say no. I thought, “Let us see what they say, if they leave me alone.” But they told me I had to pay protection for the business. I did not want to give them
a single cent, so I thought I had better give away all the clothes and prepare my trip to Mexico.

Now we have some peace of mind. But in Honduras we had our house, with two almond trees, and sometimes squirrels would eat there. It is a magical world that you see there. We slept in a large bed and had a plasma TV. We had those amenities. It is not that we are going to cry because we do not have a television, but why do I have to rent a place if I have a house? Now we have problems with our lease. Sara went to work in Celaya while I stayed in Mexico City with her son. At that time, the three of us were working. But things changed, the three of us had problems. So, the most logical thing is that we all stay in the same place. We want to be together as a family, but it is also for economic reasons. Right now, we are facing many limitations. The owners of the house have asked us to leave, but the problem is that when we try to rent a place, they ask us for two, three months’ rent or for recommendations.

I do not want to be in Mexico anymore. I am a hardworking man, but I have three hernias and three spinal discs. Although I want to work in removals or construction, I cannot. So, I look for office jobs. In one place I was offered a job as an administrative and human resources assistant. First, they asked for 250 pesos for the photo ID. You think, “Why not, I am going to get the money back,” because they offered me 1,500 pesos base salary plus performance bonuses. I mean, they paint such a rosy picture that you fall for it. Then they said, “You are not going to work in sales, but in order for you to demonstrate your problem-solving capacity, we need you to sell two sets of pillows worth 1,500 pesos each.” That is when I handed over the money for our rent, the 3,000 pesos, plus 250 pesos. I was the only foreigner there, but nine Mexicans did the same. Apparently, the pillows were bought in Tepito, but that was not the problem. When I started looking into it, I realized that the company did not exist. It was a fraud. But how do you get your money back? So, I am disappointed. I want to get out of here now.

In Honduras, the first thing that needs to change is the government, but there is also the scourge of corruption. There is no point in changing the government if corruption is not fought. The problem is that corruption is encouraged by the UN [United Nations], by the OAS [Organization of American States], because they endorse governments, because the United States interferes in the OAS. I consider Luis Almagro, the current OAS Secretary General, to be a puppet of the United States. They are the ones who have endorsed the current President of Honduras, which is incredible, since everyone knows that he is the brother of a drug trafficker.

That structure must be changed. Because if that structure of corruption is tied to drug trafficking and to the police, which is the body that should suppress violence and organized crime, then they are all colluding with each other. If you
control corruption, organized crime, and violence, Honduras becomes a safe country, and you can tackle poverty. The Armed Forces need to be dissolved, because they are the ones that support the current President. Clearly this guy either wants to finish his term, or he wants four more years, because while he is in power, he is untouchable. You need to strengthen the police to combat violence, and promote health and education more, create more hospitals and schools. Honduras must be re-founded. The country needs to make a new social pact.

I know Mexico puts a lot of effort to get people to understand that migration is a right – that Mexicans also migrate. But there should be more campaigns to raise awareness among people, among companies. It is companies that hire and that sometimes discriminate out of ignorance. Landlords should also know that they can trust us.
I left Honduras for the first time in 2011. I spent Christmas in Piedras Negras, and from Piedras Negras I moved to Nuevo Laredo. There I started working, I learned a lot doing ironing. That is what I want to have here, a dry cleaning and pressing service. I sent almost all of my salary back to Honduras. After my partner dumped me in Nuevo Laredo, I returned to Honduras. About four months later, I realized that it was too hard to live there. I looked for work but found nothing, not even sweeping the streets. I was unemployed for almost six months.

“*My son was growing up. He fell in love with a girl that lived on the other side of the street. But her uncle was a gang member. He said to me, “Tell your son to back off or I will put a bullet in his head.”*”

In 2015 I left Honduras for the second time. I told my partner that we should not walk, but he said, “No, we have passed through many times, nothing is going to happen.” Nothing happened to him, but I was grabbed by five armed men. We were in the middle of the jungle when it happened. They did not look like assailants to me, but like federal agents. The man who raped me wore a mask, blue pants with pockets, and shoes like the federal agents wear. When I ran away and turned around a bend, I saw a patrol car with the lights on. I started screaming and asked them to help me. But the man who raped me hit me with his gun and the patrol car did not hear my screams. I am very angry with my partner, because I was raped in front of him and he did not even move. I had been raped once before, in Tegucigalpa, and got pregnant. I got on a bus that turned out not to be one, and the wretched driver raped me. I carried the pregnancy to term, but when I gave birth to the baby, the girl came out dead. The man who raped me in 2015 infected me with HIV. In Chiapas I underwent tests and got a humanitarian visa. I said, “This is not going to kill me, I will keep going.” I wanted to forget all of it and took a bus to Nuevo Laredo. I got down to work and did ironing for the Americans who come over from Texas.

When I was there, my partner hit me and yelled at me. For almost two years I endured the kicks and blows. Then I said, “You are leaving, I am not going to stay with you, I am not going to allow you to hit me.” He got up and left. After a year, I also packed my bags. No man has ever been violent with me again, even though I was alone there for so long, in Honduras too. I decided to go back to Honduras and that was when I said, “I am going to stay here with my children and my mom.” My parents need me, because I am the only one who has helped them pay for electricity, food, and my mom’s health.

This is the third time I have left Honduras. We are from the department of Olancho. I really liked it there, because of the cow’s milk. I made milk curd,
cheese. Since my entire family was in Roatán, my mom told me, “Get rid of what you have in Olancho and come to the island.” Roatán seems like a paradise, but it is a paradise for Americans who have many dollars, not for poor people like me. When I started out there, I felt like my hands and feet were tied, because you pay in dollars, you speak English, and I do not know how to speak English. I thought that with time life would get easier, but things got harder.

I had to work so that my daughter could go to a private school, because there was no public school. I had to pay about 3,500 lempiras in tuition a month. But there was also my son. My goal has always been for them to study. It was hard getting up at 3:00 in the morning. I took out a loan and set up a fruit stand. Then I started selling chicken with fried plantains and fries. After two years I already owned the business, and I even had an employee.

During those two years, my son was growing up. He fell in love with a girl that lived on the other side of the street. But her uncle was a gang member. He said to me, “Tell your son to back off or I will put a bullet in his head.” Later, that man wanted to win over my son with weapons, bulletproof vests, bullets, and marijuana. I told the gang member not to mess with my son. That is when things started to get ugly. The gang member followed my daughter around and threatened me. In the end, the threats were too much. He even wanted to kill me. I reported him to the police, and asked them for help. But the police told me that there was nothing they could do, that it was not a good time to arrest him, because they did not have enough evidence. So, I decided to ditch everything. I was not going to wait for him to act.

I have no intention of going to the United States. With that old Orange Head in the White House, why should we go there? If I put my papers in and they told me that Donald Trump was going to give me asylum, I would get down to work. But jump across the river with my children, no. Now that Mexico has given me refugee status, I want the country to help me protect my children, because they cannot return to Honduras. I need them to study, because I know that at any moment I could die. My children do not know that in 2015 in Ocosingo, always fleeing for the same reason, some guys raped me and one of them had HIV. Since I gave birth to the two kids, they are everything to me.

I want my son to study, because he was looking at that gangster's weapons. I want my son to stop thinking about the bullets and bulletproof vests he has in his head. My daughter is 18 years old and she has never had a boyfriend, I have not allowed it. I have slapped her. I said, “First you do your homework, you read your books, you study. Then you can do whatever you want.” Sometimes I get angry and say to my son, “Because of you, because of you I am here.” It is wrong for me to say that to him, that because of him we are here. But sometimes I say it because I am tired. I do not want to carry on anymore. I no longer want to carry on, and I no longer can carry on, and more so with my illness. It scares me. So, I
say, either I get treatment or I go down the drain. But if I go down the drain, I want to make sure my children will be taken care of.

At 16 I got pregnant with my daughter. Her dad was 28 at the time, and he left me. I did not see him again until my daughter was one year old. That was when I forgave him and went back to him. I then got pregnant with my son, and he left me again. I did not see him again until my boy was 15 years old. Now he is acting as my son’s dad, but he is still a wretched guy. When I asked him to help me with my son’s problem, he told me that if I did not want our son to leave the house, I should get him a girl so that he should be with her at home. “The boy is going to smoke marijuana,” I told him. “So what?” he told me. I care, and my partner does too.

I have been living with my partner for like seven, eight years. He has been with me through good times and bad times, but we still have nothing, because he is someone who gets angry and runs off. He abandons me for a year, he abandons me for two years, and I am on my own. He always abandons me and goes away. He knows what those men did to me. What we have, I do not know if it is out of pity or because he really loves me, but he is still here. I told him, “Stay away, I have HIV, you have it too, because you are my partner.” He said to me, “No, old woman. I will never leave you alone.” But yes, when he gets angry, he goes away every so often and I am left alone, yet I stay with him.

My partner does not help out or support me at home. When we need to look for a new house, he does not do it. When we need to hand in papers, he does not do it. When we need to take care of something, he does not do it. I mean, he is not a man who sorts things out by himself. I tell him, “You are like another son for me.” I cannot do this anymore. I think I am too young to carry all this weight, right? But I have put up with it. I find support in my partner, because he says to my son, “Do not get into vice, do not do this.” He is a very healthy man. He does not drink or smoke or go to parties. He has never cheated on me. I think those are the reasons I fell in love with him. He knows about the HIV and he has stayed with me since the day he found out. That is why I think, he does love me.
Part Two

El Salvador
I was head of credit and collection at a bank. My job was to approve or reject credits. I had a good salary and good benefits, had my amenities. When I was doing well financially, I had two cars and a motorbike. The gang members, when they saw me arrive in the neighborhood on my motorbike or in a car, approached me and asked me to lend them the motorbike or the car. I refused on many occasions. Once the gang leader came along and wanted me to lend him my motorbike. I said no, but he told me that he was not asking me, that I had to give it to him. To avoid problems, I had to give him the key to my motorbike. They took it away and returned it two or three days later. If the motorbike had been used in some crime, I might have had to answer for it. But you cannot say anything, because if I had refused, they would have threatened to kill me.

“Her son stepped outside, shirtless, with gang tattoos on his chest. When I asked him to tell his mother to come to the bank to bring her account up to date, he said no, that the money was his and that he did not have to pay anything.”

One December, I had an accident. I fractured my arm. The bank gave me sick leave, and afterwards I was sent to work in another department. In that department they had sacked a colleague. He had spent his whole salary on drugs and had not done his job well. When you need to decide if you can give a credit not, you need to go to the client’s house and check what home appliances they have. There are people who want to take out loans for crops and only bring the deeds to their house. My colleague just looked at the property deeds and approved the credits. He did not know that people perhaps lived in tin shacks; that they slept in hammocks. When people had to repay their loans, they could not pay the debt. Suddenly, the loan portfolio became overloaded with people who could not make their payments.

At the same time some frauds were committed. The policy was not to give credit to people without the right profile, because the bank made loans based on collateral. There were people who applied for credit through a sponsor or a guarantor, who had to provide the collateral. It was prohibited to give credit to gang members. But in El Salvador it is very difficult to know who is or is not a gang member. There were gang members who, perhaps through an aunt, took out loans and then did not pay the debt. Sometimes I would go to houses to collect debt, because people were behind on their payments. One day I went to collect a woman’s debt, but she was not at home. Her son stepped outside, shirtless, with gang tattoos on his chest. When I asked him to tell his mother to
come to the bank to bring her account up to date, he said no, that the money was
his and that he did not have to pay anything. He pulled out a gun and told me to
go or he would shoot me.

I came across more situations like this. In fact, in some cases I had to seize
people’s assets. People were a little resentful of me, because I had taken away
their things. The area where I worked was also the area where I lived. It was
a small town and people knew each other. There were former classmates of
mine who were gang members. So, the people who harbored resentment
towards me knew where I lived. It is very complicated, because when I had to go
see someone in a rival gang neighborhood, I could also be killed. I started
having problems with both gangs. When I could not clean up that loan portfolio,
the bank fired me. But even after I stopped working at the bank, the gang
members continued to follow me around. They had been given the green light to
kill me. A lady who knew me as a little boy, the grandmother of one of the gang
members, told my mom that they wanted to kill me and that I should leave. That
day I did not even go back home.

I did not report what had happened to me, because the authority, the police, is
infiltrated. You do not know who the good guys and the bad guys are. An aunt of
mine had a 17-year-old son. One day some police officers came to her house to
take her son away. My aunt told them, “Let him put his shoes on.” “No, ma’am,”
they said, “where he is going, he is not going to need them.” They collected two
more young men from the neighborhood and took them away in a patrol car.
The next day their families went to the police station to ask about the three
teenagers, but they were missing. Within a week their bodies appeared, already
rotten. One had his organs missing, my aunt’s son was found without a head.
They recognized him only by the clothes in which he had left the house in.

When my problems were happening, my sister and brother also had problems with gang members, and the three of us decided to leave El Salvador. We contacted a coyote who is the brother of my brother-in-law, that is, my sister’s husband. That coyote already had experience getting people into the United States; apparently he was doing it right. He had contacts with a lot of people in Mexico, because you do not get to Mexico with the help of just one person. We gave him a lump of cash and a sports car that I owned, valued at 10,000 dollars. All in all, we paid him 25,000 dollars to take six people to the United States: my sister and her husband, my two nieces, my brother and me.

But the guy stole the money and dumped us in Reynosa. When we arrived in Reynosa, the person that was supposed to take us to the United States told us that he had not been paid anything to take us. My sister’s husband got money for the two of them to cross the border, but my brother and I stayed in Reynosa. We were there for about six months. We had to return to El Salvador, without money, without anything. We do not want problems with anyone, we are not like that. We were not going to try to get the money back from the coyote, because we were family. The other thing is that he is a gang member. If we had gone to his house, they would have killed us. I had to start from scratch. To avoid trouble, I looked for jobs as a mechanic and a truck driver. I earned less than ten dollars a day and had to rent a little room, buy a bed, clothes, shoes, and send money to support my children. The money was not enough, it was quite difficult. I lived alone. I moved about four times, because the gang members always located me. The situation was hard. The last time I went to the mother of my children, but she said to me, “You had better go away, because here they are going to kill you and I am only going to be more upset.” So, because of her, I went to Mexico again.

I left El Salvador with 100 dollars. At the border with Guatemala I changed currency, from dollars to quetzales. In the exchange they stole a lot of money from me, so I had few quetzales. I got to Guatemala City. There I slept in a bus station on some cardboard on the floor. I only ate once a day. I took me more than thirty hours to make it to Mexico. Since I arrived with only 100 pesos, I called an uncle in the United States and he wired me 100 dollars. I was going to Tijuana, but when I left Mexico City, Migration grabbed me at a checkpoint. They put me in the Iztapalapa detention center. There I was detained for about two months, until UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] got me out. Now I have refugee status. I have been working in a carpentry workshop, but I am thinking about starting a business selling tacos or Salvadoran food. I feel calm, but also a little desperate, because I would like to see my family again after such a long time. My wife and four children are in El Salvador. The children are small, that is why I did not want to take them with me. You do not know what you are going to have to deal with on the road, if some cartel is going to grab you. If something happens to you, too bad, but you cannot play around with children. I send them what little money I have. But I do not
have enough to bring over my family to Mexico.

Mexico is a country that helps migrants, but there is a lot of corruption. I think there should be more controls or evaluations of public servants, especially those in higher ranks, because they are the ones who are stealing. In the detention center the officers immediately took away my cell phone and money. They took information from my cell phone and called my mom to tell her that I had been kidnapped. I have an audio recording where they tell her that they are going to cut off my fingers. My mom believed them and sent them 3,000 dollars through Western Union. We filed a complaint with the PGR [Attorney General of the Republic], but nothing was done about it.
Manuel | 33 years old

El Salvador is green and lush, has an excellent climate, gorgeous beaches, and hard-working people. It is not a poor country, but an impoverished one, because it has been plundered so much by our rulers. El Salvador’s biggest problem is violence and crime, specifically the gangs, groups like the MS and the Barrio 18. I would even dare to say that the country is being governed by them, not by our rulers. The gangs are the ones that run the country as they please, and there is no one to stop them.

I lived in one of the most violent municipalities in the country. I was born there and grew up there. At school I had classmates who lived in different parts of the neighborhood. As you grow up, you begin to distinguish between different gang territories. Then you see that your classmates begin to walk differently, speak differently, act differently. However, I was still in touch with all my classmates and always got along very well with everyone. I was not afraid to go to other parts of the neighborhood, or even to nearby neighborhoods, to see my friends. In my innocent head, I thought that since I was not looking for trouble, I was not going to get into trouble. I lived in MS territory, and the church I went to since I was a kid was in Barrio 18 territory. So, they never saw me as a threat, I thought.

When I was about 14 or 15, things started to change, because the gangs’ offers were becoming more evident. Those in the MS said that I had to belong to their gang, because I lived in their territory. Those in the Barrio 18 insisted that I belong to their group, because they were going to take care of me and protect me. But I had other aspirations. I had always rejected the idea of someday having to belong to a gang. I always told them that I had nothing against them, but I was also not in favor of them. Sometimes, because of the degree of trust and closeness I had with some of them, I was very rude to them – told them that they were completely crazy. We grew up together, went to school together, lived in the same neighborhood. It saddened me to see how some of them ended up drug addicts or that they threatened me if I did not join their gang or did not collaborate with them.

I remember that when I was 16 years old, I witnessed a 14-year-old kid, whom I thought was my friend, kill a friend of ours. When I saw him again, I asked him why he had killed our friend. He told me that this is how things were and that I should not get mixed up in things that were none of my business. What he said next stuck in my mind, because later it appeared as graffiti on a wall. He said, “Here you only see, hear, and shut up, if you do not want to get into trouble.” A few days later, opposite the street where I lived, I saw graffiti that read, “See, hear, and shut up.”
One day when I was studying public relations at the university, I got off the bus near my house and was shot at. I was surprised at first. I even thought that I was in the wrong place at the wrong time, that the attack was not meant for me. Because I believed that I had no problems with anyone; that I owed nothing to anyone. I always got along well with the people in my neighborhood, was always very involved in the community organization, in the church, in everything. For many years I was also a volunteer at the telethon and the university.

Then the gang members came looking for me and told me that it had been a warning; that the idea had not been to kill me. But they made it clear that when they found me, that they were not going to think twice about filling me with lead. That is what they told me, in those exact words. A classmate of mine from the third grade told me so. He said, “If we are not friends, we are going to be enemies – because if you are friends with the other guys, you are my enemy.” I remember that after that, he never spoke to me again, and every time I saw him, I felt afraid. I even stopped walking through my neighborhood. Instead I walked around the whole block to grab the bus somewhere else. That was when I began to live in fear. Sometimes I even dreamed that I saw them on the roof of my house. I thought sooner or later they were going to kill me. I even thought that I was going to have to pick a gang.

When I was about to finish university some friends and I had the idea of creating a youth movement called Youth Against Violence. The idea was not to stop the violence in the country, because we always believed that the violence is something that is never going to end, but we did dream of one day working on youth policies and trying to reduce acts of violence in the country. We even received the support of USAID [United States Agency for International Development] and the European Union. Then I decided to withdraw from the movement to focus on my work. I feel like my job in the city hall of my municipality was the final trigger for my problems with the gangs. The city was one of the “Violence-Free Municipalities” that were part of the gang truce during the administration of President Mauricio Funes.

Between 2012 and 2015, I was a public relations officer and managed the mayor’s communications team. I was almost always by the mayor’s side at his public events, taking photographs and videos. When I was not in the field, I was on social media, writing speeches, or sorting out the details of interviews and media reports. That job required me to approach many people. During the truce, I had to talk about that initiative and get in touch with gang leaders. As public relations officer, it was my job to get the population to believe that the truce was a success and that the mayor had brought peace to the municipality. As part of this spectacle, gang leaders and some government officials, including from the central government, were brought together to sign a peace pact. It was great to see rival gang leaders shaking hands, even hugging each other and apologizing for committing crimes. Any citizen would be touched by that and have very high hopes.
I feel that the truce was a political stunt that never worked. The main objective of the truce was to stop the murder of citizens. The gang leaders were given benefits so that no murders would be committed. Yes, there was a very large reduction in homicides, but how many people began to disappear during that truce? Because the homicides no longer meant, “I go, grab the person in the street, put five, six bullets in them, and leave them there.” Instead, the thinking went, “I had better get rid of the person so that nobody knows where they are.” That was not in some public policy, but it is something I became aware of.

There came a time when the truce broke down, and there were many murders between the two gangs, including within the Barrio 18. There were many murders near my house, to the point that it was very common for us neighbors to hear shootings. It was quite normal for us to go to the store to buy some things and see a gang member lying shot in the street. People were also regularly extorted. Robberies were committed in broad daylight. Gang members got on buses and robbed everyone. From my point of view as a citizen, the truce never worked. Although I also have my point of view as a government employee, and the government said the truce was a success. I saw it from both sides, and from my point of view the truce was something that never really bore any fruit.

I was repeatedly threatened by the gangs. I came to feel a kind of hatred for the gang members, because they even came along and violated the tranquility of my house. I lived in a triangle where the borders of the territory of the MS and the territories of the Barrio 18 factions ended, because there was a division within the Barrio 18. To get to work I had to leave the territory of the MS and go through the territories of the two factions of the Barrio 18. Since I lived at the point where the three groups’ territories butted up against one another, my house was sometimes used as a bridge. If the Barrio 18 gang members wanted to go and murder someone in MS territory, they could easily climb on the roof of my house and return that same way to their territory. Sometimes the police came and knocked down the door of my house, because they thought we were covering up gang members.

One time I came home to find the doors knocked down and the house in disarray. I panicked and said to my mom, “What happened?” She said to me, “The police came and turned everything upside down. I want to know if you are mixed up in something, because they took marijuana out of your room and said you were selling marijuana to gang members.” That was a surprise for me, something I could not understand. I think the police officers left the marijuana in my room. Because the gang members carried out their attacks from the roof, but they never broke into my house. And when they did come in, they just stopped for a few minutes to catch their breath, and then they were gone. So that time I went to the police. I did not go to file a complaint. I went to insult the police for what they had done, because I felt very offended by the police.
I really like plants. I had very nice trees in my garden, but since the gang members used them to climb on the roof, I had to cut down everything I had planted in my garden. That caused me problems, because the gang members came and asked me why I was getting in their way, why I had cut down all the trees. But cutting down the trees did not stop them, because they always came up with something else. They had all sorts of tricks to get on the roof and do something illegal. Both members of the MS went over to the territory of the Barrio 18, and members of the Barrio 18 went over to the territory of the MS, over my house. So, both gangs thought that I was collaborating with the other side. The Barrio 18 tried to kill me, because they thought that I collaborated with the MS, and the MS tried to kill me, because they thought that I collaborated with the Barrio 18.

To stop this situation, without knowing anything about construction and brickwork, I bought bricks and built a wall with my own hands. Following that, I was seriously attacked in my home. The kids of the MS came and put a pistol to my head. They said they would give me 24 hours to leave my house, otherwise they were going to kill me and my whole family. I was so scared that I went to the police station that same day and told them what has happening, that I did not know what to do anymore. But the officer said to me, “There is nothing we can do. I cannot send an officer to take care of you, because all the gang would do is turn around and retaliate. Not only are you going to be the victim, but your family and friends will be too. Because the gang members do not act against those they hate, they act against the people close to that person. So what you do is create more conflict. I cannot go and stir things up. If you do not feel safe, go away, find yourself another place to live.” And that was exactly what happened. A patrol car came to the house, and the gang members came and shot at me.

“My house was sometimes used as a bridge. If the Barrio 18 gang members wanted to go and murder someone in MS territory, they could easily climb on the roof of my house and return that same way to their territory.”

I had no choice but to flee my home. I remember that I went to a friend, and he said to me, “You cannot stay here; you already have a long history.” So I went to the house of one of my brothers, and I do not know how the news spread, but they quickly came looking for me, even though I was now in a territory controlled by the Mau-Mau, a rival gang of the MS. If I had felt a little more protected by the police, I would not have left El Salvador. I was expecting a different kind of response. I was expecting to be told that they were going to open an investigation. But the police never even gave me hope that they were going to investigate or that they were going to do something. Actually, I never saw myself living far from my family, from my country. I thought about going
away for a while, getting away from all this, allowing things to settle down, and then returning to my normal life.

I was planning to stay in Guatemala, because I have a brother who lives there. The bus I was on went straight to the border with Mexico. I had to choose between getting off and staying with my brother, or going to Tecún Umán. I remember that halfway through Guatemala I called my brother again and he said, “If the gang members have already tried to kill you, they will look for you until they find you. I do not want you in my house. If you come dragging problems from over there, go and drag them somewhere else.” So, I had no choice but to cross the border into Mexico. In Tapachula I applied for asylum. I was very lucky, because they received me as soon as I got there and made a decision within about a month and a half. Later Migration called me to give me my permanent resident card. Then I went to Tapachula and I realized there are people who have been there for five, six months and have not yet received a decision. When I got asylum, the COMAR [Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance] was not overwhelmed with asylum applications.

I lost all my school reports and everything when my house was ransacked. Because two days after I left my house, gang members vandalized it and turned it into a gang hangout. My mom had already moved, because I was scared and asked her to leave. She got together with a man, one of those farmers who is not afraid of the devil himself. I heard that he went with a machete, ready to cut off the head of whoever was in the house. The man painted and restored the house a little, but nobody in my family has the courage to go and live there. The only thing I managed to recover was a duplicate copy of my high school diploma. But in order to get the diploma accepted in Mexico, I needed documentation that I no longer have. The easiest thing was to go back to study, starting with primary school. After six months, I graduated from primary school, and after another six months I graduated from secondary school. I was hoping that the UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] would help me get through high school, but they told me that they cannot do that. At this point in my life, I am not interested in studying for a new career to make money. Maybe if I studied for a degree in psychology or physiotherapy, I could help someone. I would like to help people who have been through things that I have been through, because for me they have been very traumatic things.

Now I am just grateful that I have food and a place to live, and that I can walk safely through the streets. Ever since I had a gun pointed at my head, life has had little value for me. I am always thinking how, from one moment to the next, anyone can rob me of my last moments of life. I have been in Mexico for five years and to this day, I have not stopped being afraid. To this day, my skin bristles when a migrant approaches the window of my car to ask me for money. To this day, I am scared when I need to stop and watch the train go by with graffiti on its wagons or when I see the train go by with migrants hanging on its
sides. I think they are gang members. I have come to have nightmares. I feel that everything is a threat. If I suddenly see someone on the corner who may be waiting for someone, I think he is a gang member. In El Salvador we call them posteadores. I mean, I think this person is there to watch me, to snoop on me. I do not know. You do not stop living with that feeling, with that fear. When you see a person with tattoos up to the neck, you do not stop getting goose bumps and thinking very negative things, because in El Salvador, if someone is covered in tattoos, it is not because they like the art of tattoos.

I have no intention of returning to my country. On the contrary, I would like to bring my mom over here and have her here with me, which has been very difficult for me to do. I have tried three times, and my requests have been denied. I would like to see El Salvador heal the wounds of its violence and become a country where you can walk safely through the streets without breathing in so much tension; a country where you can feel protected by the police, and do not worry that the police themselves are afraid of gang members; a country where the army does not have to take care of the schools, because that creates terror in people. I feel that the Armed Forces are there to defend the nation in a war. El Salvador is in a silent war. But I feel that violence begets violence. I think governments should sit down to develop more effective policies to try to reduce violence, not continue failed iron-fist policies. I would like the mayors, the congressmen, the Presidents of the Republic, all the rulers to start by changing their way of thinking, that everyone works to promote peace in the country.
If I could picture a change in Mexico, I would emphasize improved accessibility to public services. It does not strike me that education is very accessible here, nor that health services are of good quality. If we do not have social security, we need to pay for health services, even if they are public. If I could ask for a change in Mexico, it would be a policy aimed at the equality of nationality, so to speak. I have noticed that many people come here with every intention of getting ahead in this country. But there are places, especially at the southern border, where nobody gives migrants work, even if they have all the required documentation. And if you get work, you get paid very little and receive no benefits. During the three years that I lived in Tapachula, I had jobs where my Mexican colleagues earned 600 pesos a week, but I, as a Central American, earned only 300 pesos a week, and my work was the same or even harder than that of the Mexicans. I never received any benefits or social security or anything like that. Mexicans complain when Americans mistreat migrants over there, but Mexicans over here treat us worse. Companies think it is wrong to hire Central Americans. So I think Mexico should do more to make the population aware of the rights of migrants.
When I was little, I had a cousin in a child sponsorship program. A person in the United States sent my grandmother money to pay for his food, shoes, and studies. There were eleven of us, and since the support was plentiful, we all ate. Little by little, everyone studied, because our granny pressured us. The only one who did not study was me. Three times I was enrolled and went to school the first few days. But since I was raised only by my grandmother, every time someone wanted to take a colored pencil or something from me, I would hit them hard. I do not know why I was like this, but I was someone who wanted to fix everything with blows. So, as I could not go to school, I did not learn. I liked it better when I was sent to sell things. I grew up in the market in downtown San Salvador, because my whole family was working there.

El Salvador is beautiful, its people are very hard-working. But the country is small and full of bad people who are hurting us all. We live like prisoners in our own country, because the violence does not let us be free. The gang members want young men to belong to their criminal structures, and females to live with them. If you have a business, the gangs demand money from you, and with these fees they become stronger. With that money they buy weapons and bribe the authorities, although not all of the authorities are corrupt. Business is no longer what it used to be, because people are afraid to go shopping at the market. You live an isolated life. If you want to visit family or friends in another neighborhood, you must first know which criminal structure controls the area,
because if the gang in that area is not the one that rules your neighborhood, your life is in danger. If you want to build a wall in your house or do some plumbing, you cannot hire someone from outside the neighborhood, because if they are from a rival gang neighborhood, they are going to get killed. And when someone files a complaint, they are a snitch and need to flee.

I was a small-scale vendor, selling underwear and flip-flops. I lived with my son in one of the municipalities near the capital, in an area controlled by a faction of the Barrio 18. Everyone who entered or left the neighborhood was asked for money. If a taxi driver came to drop people off, he had to give them two dollars to get out. So, then the taxis only went as far as they could without having to pay. When I came home from the market, I would take the last bus, then I would walk about twenty blocks. I would get my house between 10:30 and 11:00 at night. I always saw gang members in the dark, at the corners, because at this time of night the police are gone. There they drank and smoked marijuana. When they saw you, they said, “Psst, lady, are you going to collaborate with us?” They want you to give them a dollar, and you have to give it to them, you cannot say no. Once they asked me for five dollars. I said no, because I had not sold anything that day. In my bag I only had the money that I was going to give my son for transport and food. One of them started tugging at my bag, another one kicked me. I did not let them take it and ran away. But it is dangerous. If they are on drugs, if they are out of their minds, they can hurt you.

There is no age limit for the gangs. They can use anyone who lives in their neighborhoods. They asked me if I had seen a patrol car outside. At the beginning when they asked me, I said, “I do not know.” I was angry that they asked me, because maybe they wanted to hurt someone. Later when they asked me, I said, “I was not paying attention,” because if you collaborate with them, you become an accomplice to evil. How can you complain about them if you get involved in evil yourself? That is why I have always disciplined my son, because if children do not get disciplined, they easily fall into the hands of the gangs. I did not want to see my son in prison, or buried by a gang member, or in a wheelchair because I was a lenient mother. So, I was tough on my son. I am a single mother, but when it was necessary to punish him, I punished him. I beat him when necessary, so that he understood, so that his mind was not twisted.

Gang members start off as friends; they want to lure young people in. They invite them to play video games, to chat with them, and they give them things. When the kids least realize it, they have already become part of their “family”. I worked hard, bought my son what he needed, paid for his studies. But it is in the poor neighborhoods where there is no help for single mothers and young
people, where the gangs grow. That is the root of the problem. There are
mothers who are overwhelmed, so they leave their children at home and the
eldest child needs to take care of them. I took my daughter and my son to the
market to help me look after the merchandise. I gave them toys, balls. But if you
send your kids to sell elsewhere, to peddle products, they are in danger. Either
the authorities do not let them work or the gangs sweet-talk and snatch them.
This happens because the moms have many kids and do not have the means to
raise them. What are these children going to do? At the age of eight or nine they
already transport weapons. They are already participating in evil, because the
gangs give them a plate of food, a pair of shoes. The gangs have taken over the
market in downtown San Salvador, because that is where they make a profit.
Eight-year-old kids there tell the gangs what they hear and see. They base their
extortions on how much a person sells.

My son was not approached when he was younger, but when he was older. What
happened is that the police arrested many gang members. So, since they no
longer had many people to look after the neighborhood, they wanted to recruit
all the young people there. My son was 26 years old when the problems started.
He was working in a supermarket, but he was given time to study at university.
On Sundays, my son would go to a soccer field to play. Two of the gang members
had been my son’s classmates at school. Because of that connection, they always
asked him for three dollars, five dollars, and he gave them the money to avoid
reprisals. To avoid paying every time he went walking, my son started taking a
tuk-tuk that would drop him off in another part of the neighborhood. There, he
quickly entered the alleyway. When the gang members saw what he was doing,
they started going to the soccer field where he played on Sundays and asked
him to lend them 25 dollars. Then they wanted my son to join their group. At
first, he took it as a joke, to get along with them in peace. But they do not ask –
they give orders.

One day they came to our house and brazenly told my son that he had to form
part of their group. My son refused and they said, "You know what is going
happen to you." And you know they can beat you or kill you. When they came
back, I was at a religious service. I was not in the house at the time. Like animals,
they entered our house through the roof. They went out to the patio where our
dog had his hut and shot him dead. My son had to run away. We escaped with
just the clothes on our backs and never went back to the house. The gang
members kept it; their relatives live there now. We stayed with some nephews in
San Salvador. I hardly went to sell at the market, because I was afraid that the
gang members would come looking for me. Later, when I thought it was not as
dangerous, I started selling again. People who have not lived there, and who
have not experienced such a situation, do not understand what it is like. The
gang members are young, but they carry big weapons. They do not talk to you,
they come and shoot.

My son filed a complaint with the police, but it was useless. Then he left for
Mexico. I did not go with him at that time, because I did not want to leave my grandchildren. I went to the Attorney General’s Office to get a copy of the complaint, so that my son could give it to the COMAR [Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance]. About a week later, I got a call. I was afraid to answer the phone, because I did not recognize the number. The man said he was a police officer, but I do not know if that was true. He told me that he was calling about the house, that I had gotten into trouble for reporting what had happened. I understood the call as an attempt to intimidate me. I was afraid. In the end, I also decided to leave El Salvador, because the gang members had already gotten close to the area where I was selling. I walked around freely in the market, because it was an MS-controlled area. I thought the rival gang was not going to go there. But the gangs are expanding. They are capturing the neighborhoods of their rivals. One of them recognized me. He told me I was an old snitch and pulled out a gun. I ran the other way. I could not sell in the streets anymore, and I could not work in another market. I would like a complaint to mean something in my country, for the information that you share with the police not to reach the gang members.

God brought me safely to Mexico. From the southern border to here, throughout the journey, there is great danger. People can be kidnapped, beaten, abused, raped. That is where the real problem for migrants lies. In El Salvador tattoos are not well received. Back there it is almost only criminals who are tattooed. The first few days I was in Mexico, I was terrified when I saw people with tattoos. But then I realized that they were artistic drawings. “This is normal here,” my son told me. I stay in Mexico, because my son is here, and as an older person I cannot live by myself. I want to have a place to live, to earn a living, to be able to pay for medicine if I ever need it. I want to do cleaning or help the elderly, but I still do not have a job. When my son came to Mexico, he was working for an electric company. They paid him 12,000 pesos a month. But he tells me that the work here is poorly paid, and that there are employers who do not pay you what they owe you. Because he was accompanying me to the COMAR, he no longer has a steady job. My son and I go to the traffic lights to sell snacks and bottled water. We make enough money to buy food, but when it rains, you do not earn a single cent.
Due to a case of mistaken identity, one day in March the police arrested me and took me to the police station. There an officer told me to take off my shirt, to take off my bra, to take off my pants, to take off my underwear for a supposed medical checkup that they were going to do. But the officer tried to rape me. He was detained, and his hearing was going to be on a Thursday in the month of July.

I never had problems with people like that, with gang members. I lived in the same place for 28 years, and nothing bad had ever happened to me. About a week before the hearing, a car started following me. The Monday before the hearing, when I was coming from the market, some gang members abducted me at around 9:00 in the morning. Two blocks from the police station they picked me up to kill me, because they did not want me to attend the hearing. Some acquaintances alerted the police, and about half an hour later I was rescued. They were caught in the act. I was covered in blood.

Six gang members were detained. The police brought me to the health unit, then from the health unit to the hospital, and from the hospital to Forensic Medicine. I was unrecognizable and almost unconscious. My finger was screwed up, my nose was broken, my knee was fractured. I also had internal injuries, and my left rib was fractured. From the hospital I was taken back to my house. That same day, relatives of the detained gang members arrived and asked to see me, but my husband went out and told them that I did not want to speak to them or to anyone. I could not see anyone, because I had been beaten up so badly.

They offered us a lot of money so I would not say anything, so that I would not attend the hearing. We both had to leave, my husband and I. We only took about two changes of clothes from our house and went on our way, we left everything else behind. The Office for the Defense of Women’s Rights picked us up to take us to a shelter. We stayed there for almost two months, but the director of the shelter was afraid to have us there, because those who wanted to harm us said that they would find us anywhere. I would like to go far, far away, because even here in southern Mexico we have already met people we know. We saw a woman from the same area in El Salvador that we are from, who was associated with gangs. It is easy to locate you. Remember that no walls can stop these gangs.

I would like it if in El Salvador there were not as much crime and mistreatment towards us women. There the husband kills his wife out of jealousy, for anything. I want that violence to end, that the gangs do not harm poor,
hard-working people, because the gangs harm people who are just trying to survive and to put food on the table. The gang members come to hurt us. They kill us because of what we have, and they kill us because of what we do not have. In other words, there is no way for you to be alright in El Salvador.

There is no work there either. At least for us women there is work, but they exploit us. You get paid five dollars a day. The work is really exhausting, and with five dollars you cannot buy anything. There were only two of us in the house, my husband and I, because we have only been married for two years. We paid 30 dollars rent, with electricity and water it was 50 dollars. Only my husband worked as a day laborer. I was a housewife, but since I raised little chickens, we hardly ever bought food – just the corn to make tortillas. I had enough chickens. We ate chickens and eggs. We bought beans. So, we did not have many expenses, because with two people who have what they need, you do not spend much. But the big families, what do the children get involved in? They steal because they do not have a job or because they cannot get a job. What I would like to see change here in Mexico is that the authorities do not mistreat the migrants, because we are human beings who have rights.
Reina | 55 years old

In El Salvador we had a civil war. My father was a soldier, and in my childhood I was very protected. I had to walk with someone by my side, because it was very dangerous. Young people were kidnapped, taken away to join either the guerrilla or the Armed Forces. It was a dreadful war that lasted for 12 years. All the bridges that connected the west with the east of the country were blown up. As best he could, my father gave me an education. Back then, there were few degrees to choose from. The first one I chose was law. When I was in my first year of study, the guerrilla attacked the university. Fortunately, I managed to save myself, but then my father pulled me out of university. Because of the violence, we left the east and went to live in the capital, San Salvador. When things calmed down, I went back to university and switched from studying law to studying psychology. Then the Peace Accords were signed, the war ended, and the reconstruction of the cities began. After leaving university, I got married and focused on raising my children. I did not work for a while, but later I started working as a teacher and did so for over 15 years. I loved my profession very much.

“The war was over, but suddenly we became aware of the gang phenomenon. Deep down I think that they have always existed, but that they did not make themselves known. We began to become aware of things in the schools, including primary schools. I did not see the gangs as a criminal problem, but as an antisocial phenomenon, one of family degradation. Because of the war, many people migrated to the United States, many parents died, the children were abandoned. I even went into communities as a voluntary social educator to help the youth that were left behind. I have always been a supporter of communitarianism, never of any political party. All previous governments, both ARENA [the Nationalist Republican Alliance] and the Front are connected to the gangs. There is reliable evidence of this wherever you look. That is why people voted for Nayib Bukele, because he has nothing to do with either one of these parties. We managed to get these parties out of the presidency, but in El Salvador we are now dealing with the aftermath of all this – the aftermath of 20 years of government malpractice.

I do not like politics. I just focused on my career. I was teaching secondary and high school students, kids aged 12, 13 years old to 18, 19 years old. The government requires all schools to give a life orientation class. We were given curricula, but I also included my own subjects. Because you are the one dealing

I do not like politics. I just focused on my career. I was teaching secondary and high school students, kids aged 12, 13 years old to 18, 19 years old. The government requires all schools to give a life orientation class. We were given curricula, but I also included my own subjects. Because you are the one dealing
with the students, you are also the one who knows their strengths and weaknesses. I opened my WhatsApp, I opened everything so that my students could communicate with me. But what I did not know is that among them were youths, aged 15 years old and older, who were trying to do high school, because their parents asked them to. The parents paid the school directors massive amounts of money so that the kids would study, whether they were tattooed or not. Now gang members no longer get tattoos, but when the gang phenomenon began in El Salvador, they were known for their tattoos and hand signs. I always asked my students, why they had got tattoos, why they had piercings, why they were already parents at the age of 13. They said to me, “Oh, old woman, what is wrong with you?” I never kept quiet. I always insisted on morality, on social aspects, on education. I insisted on everything.

People do not know what is happening in El Salvador, but we educators, we teachers do know what is happening, because we are the ones who are out there, and the kids tell us things. I have had students who were children of judges and also happened to be gang members. I had a student whose father was a lawyer. This lawyer tried to bribe me after his son engaged in misconduct. I told him that I did not accept bribes, and that he should go see the director and sort it out with him, but that I was not going to lift the sanction that I had given the young man, because he had hit another student in front of me in class. Because of that, the school directors started to disapprove of me. They said to me, “Do not get involved in those things. What do you care?” I said to them, “I am an educator. You cannot stop me from trying to fix things. That is why we are teachers. You are not the one who is going to deal with this generation. It is my children and my grandchildren who are going to have to deal with all this evil and all this bullshit. What is the matter with you?” I am a social educator, and I think this is not going to change, now or ever. I will always see to it that the kids study, that they learn, that they quit their vices, that they leave this bullshit, and live in an environment where they are not a burden on society or on the government. Because the government does not have to support bums; that is what I have always told them. I have always been a woman with a strong character, but very wise, very charismatic. If you are a marera, if I can give you advice and you listen to me, I will take on your case and help you. If you are a marera and I give you advice and you push me away, I let you carry on.

In the last few months of my classes, some gang members were starting to revolt. When I handed back their exams, some kids began to threaten me, because they wanted me to give them a pass, even though they had not studied. Some of the parents even tried to bribe me, but I never accepted the bribes. When these youngsters started throwing their exam papers at me, I grabbed the exam papers and took them to the director. He laughed out loud and said, “Do not worry, teacher. Just give these sons of bitches a pass.” That day I cried with rage. “How can he talk like that? Does he not realize that my life is in danger?” And the director told me, “Your life is in danger if you do not do what they want.”
So, I grabbed the sheets and drew a zero on the page and then put “+2”. In El Salvador you cannot give anybody a zero. The minimum grade is two. In other words, I put a zero and “+2” so that legally they could not harass me. Actually, I was being sarcastic. When I gave them their grades, I told them, “This is what you have earned. If you want to improve your grade, you are going to have to read that book, from this page to that page. When you have filled out another questionnaire, I will improve your grade. That is my last word. And if you are going to kill me, just get on with it.”

That day they did not say anything. They just sent someone to kill me. A kid came to me and said, “Teacher, go away. I cannot hurt someone who has done so much for me. Do not be a bigmouth. I know what I am talking about. They know where you live, and there are two guys watching your house. You need to get out of there or they will kill you, the order has already been given. What is more, they are already keeping tabs on your children.” When I got home, I saw it was true, because there were two young men in the neighborhood I had never seen before. I was never afraid of my students, and that was one of the reasons that made me put my life at risk. I left the country, because my children were in danger. That is how they got to me. That was the reason why I gave up my teaching profession. This is vile crap! El Salvador is crap, it is garbage! You cannot work as a teacher, because everyone is bought. In El Salvador if some
teachers are working right now, it is out of necessity. But they know that their
days are counted, because of the gang members.

I felt very bad about leaving the school, but what could I do? I could not do
anything! In fact, the school director blamed me for being victimized. He told
me that I was very harsh with young people; that I should not care what they did
or did not do; that the government had to figure out what to do with them. I did
not go to the police to report the threats, because they are mixed up with the
gangs. I would not dream of making a complaint, because those hypocrites are
mixed up with the gangs! They quickly go and tell them, “Look, that woman
came to snitch on you.” I also said to my children, “Do not even think of saying
anything, because you are going to get killed!”

I closed all my social networks, left my place, took my children out of there, and
had to leave my father in a care home. Every day I send my dad videos of Pedro
Infante, Julio Jaramillo, and a lot of old artists that he loves, so that he does not
feel like I have abandoned him. How can a human being’s life just change
overnight? Gee, I am really mad at El Salvador! I do not want to go back. I really
do not want to go back. I do not want to go back to El Salvador! I am mad at El
Salvador, because this is allowed to happen! I lived through the whole war. I
know what that means, so how can we not live in peace? Why can you not get
ahead? Why can you not get old and see your grandchildren and
great-grandchildren? What is happening in El Salvador is unheard of!

First, I thought about going to Costa Rica. I know the country. If you go and
apply for asylum, you can get it. But in Costa Rica there is no work, there is no
way that you can get ahead economically. Guatemala and Honduras are no
different, so I said, “What do I do? Where do I go?” I was desperately trying to
figure out what to do, where to go. The moment I found out that Mexico was
giving asylum to people who had received threats, I left immediately. I did not
think twice about it.

We have faith in President Bukele. Right now, he is getting help from the United
States to liberate gang-controlled territories with an armed contingent, because
in El Salvador there is no freedom of movement. There are areas where gang
members ask to see your DUI [Unique Identity Card], and if you are from a rival
gang area, you get killed. I am never going to approve of a young man grabbing
a gun and taking it out on society, because of something that happened to him
when he was ten years old. You cannot blame society for something that your
parents allowed to happen to you. Often the parents are really the ones to blame
when young people turn out wrong. As a social educator, I would like parents to
take more responsibility for their children, to dedicate more time to them. The
young men must be given decent therapy so that they can be reinserted into
society and be productive. El Salvador can still be cured, if it gains awareness
and educates parents, and we as educators educate young people. Out of the
blue, with a good amount of money and good education, our young people can
change, and Salvadoran society will be able to recover. That is my hope.
Rosa | 25 years old

El Salvador is a very beautiful country, with its beaches and tourist places. But there is little employment, a lot of corruption, and a lot of crime. You cannot go to a gang-controlled neighborhood, because they check your ID. If they see that you are not from there, you may not be able to leave the neighborhood. We lived in a municipality with a strong gang presence. You go out in fear every day, always entrusting God and hoping that nothing will happen to you. But things always happened, even innocent people were killed by stray bullets. The same fear makes people leave the country, because throughout El Salvador there is a plague of gang members. From the moment you enter a neighborhood, you know what gang controls it, because of the graffiti, the tattoos they have, the small groups that hang around at night. When something happens, the first thing the police do is honk from a distance to drive them away, to let them escape.

My husband was a farmer and rancher, he bought and sold cattle. Since we had two children, it was difficult for me to work. I stayed in the house, but I had a pupusería and a small business where I sold fruits and vegetables. But the gangs see that you are doing well and want your profit, so it is difficult to get ahead. If you do not pay them, they take your life. For five years, my husband was paying an extortion fee, 50 dollars a fortnight. He said we had to pay them so that they would not hurt us.

“He started telling me that he was in love with me, that he wanted to be with me, and that he was going to take over my husband’s business. I told him that it was not possible; that I held him in high esteem, but only as a brother-in-law. That is when he began to tell me that if I would not be with him, he was going to kill me; that he could not be with anyone else.”

Two years ago, my husband died in an accident. I kept the cattle, but it is not the same for a woman. I thought about keeping only my business, I had enough clients. The gang members wanted to extort me, they told me that if I did not pay them, they were going to hit me where it hurt the most. But I was not going to agree to pay. Also, I had been with my husband for ten years and it was not easy that he was gone. The first three months after he died, I did not feel well. I got depressed. I had insomnia. I tried to take my own life and woke up in the hospital. By the mercy of God, I am alive today. My mom took me to a psychologist, and I started getting better. At first my mother-in-law and my brothers-in-law came to comfort me, to support me. One of my brothers-in-law was a member of the Barrio 18. He stopped by with dinner and asked me if I needed anything.
But then he started telling me that he was in love with me, that he wanted to be with me, and that he was going to take over my husband’s business. I told him that it was not possible; that I held him in high esteem, but only as a brother-in-law. That is when he began to tell me that if I would not be with him, he was going to kill me; that he could not be with anyone else. With that problem, I stopped seeing people. I stopped talking to people. I could not even stay in my house, because he knew where I lived. I decided to sell the cattle and close the store. I abandoned the house and secretly came here with my two children. I did not take anything with me. At six in the morning we left and took buses to Tapachula. We spent three days on the road, because we did not know Guatemala. In Tecún Umán we crossed by raft and slept on the street to be there when the COMAR [Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance] opened, because they only received about twelve people every day.

I spent eight months in Tapachula to arrange my papers. The process was slow, more so because the migrant caravans arrived. I was making pupusas to sell with coffee, because in Tapachula you get paid very little for the work you do, no more than 100 pesos a day, and it is exhausting. It was also difficult for me, because I could not find someone to leave the children with. I do not trust other people very much, because I had an incident with a Salvadoran. After my husband’s death, I was on my own. I met another man in Tapachula. He was my partner, but he abused me, and I got pregnant. It is not easy, because I had not planned this. I just wanted to be with my two children. At first, I thought that I did not want to have the child, but it helped me a lot to talk to a psychologist. The child is not to blame, so I accepted having it.

In Mexico I have already been recognized as a refugee, but I do not want to be here. I trust God that someday I will make it to the United States. In El Salvador we earn in dollars and you do not get used to the Mexican peso. I also feel that Mexico is just as dangerous as my country. In El Salvador there are gangs, here there are cartels. You think of your children, that kidnappers can take them from you. It scares me just to hear these things. I want to hand myself in to the US immigration authorities and see what God says. If they deport me, well, I will have to go back to Mexico, because here I have my refugee papers. But I will not return to El Salvador, because the problems follow you everywhere. I do not want to live through the same stuff again.

In El Salvador there needs to be more work, more security, less corruption. All Presidents talk about changes, but they fall behind. Some have negotiated with the gangs so that there are fewer deaths on the street, but you cannot negotiate with the gangs. With President Mauricio Funes, the gang members had to hand in their weapons. But you cannot bury your head in the sand. A gang member is not going to say, “I am not going to commit any more crimes. Take my weapons!” How will they make a living if they do not work? They live off the people they extort, steal from, and kill every day, because if you do not give them what they want...
want, they will kill you. Where do they get so many weapons, so many bulletproof vests, so many bombs if only police and soldiers can get that? There is corruption. That is why gang members have all kinds of weapons.

President Nayib Bukele’s government has started well. In the prisons, gang members can no longer have cell phones; they are cut off from everyone, even their relatives. I think it is alright, because those on the inside do a lot of harm to those on the outside. It is good that a cleanup gets done, because most of the people who leave El Salvador come here because of threats. I doubt that gang members can get work, because companies do not accept people with tattoos or a criminal record. Gang members must be met with an iron fist. I like many things that Nayib Bukele has been doing. You do not lose hope that he will do something good for the country. We shall see what happens. You need to trust in God.

Sometimes people come here to cause trouble. But I think that the United States should take pity on people who want to work; people who live in the countryside and cannot get ahead; people who have a goal, like buying a house for their mom; people who need money for a relative’s surgery. Give them some time, maybe five years, to make the money they need. They would not necessarily
need to be given asylum in the United States. I feel like we all deserve a chance. Look at the story, the dreams, and the needs of each person.

I can also say that we are transiting Mexico, we just come to go to the other side. But there have been many injustices that, I do not know, touched me. Marco Tulio, a Honduran who passed through with his daughter, a very pretty white girl with blond hair, they were very excited when they left here with other migrants. I greatly admired the courage of the father. When the migrants returned to the shelter that night, I saw his daughter crying. We learned that Marco had been shot to death by police officers. It is sad, because they only came looking for a dream, a dream that every migrant has.
Part Three

Guatemala
Englebert | 23 years old

The situation in Guatemala is very bad, in terms of work and crime. Honestly, we can endure poverty, but not crime. The gang members are young men who grew up with you, but they say that they rule and are willing to do anything. They are not afraid of death or prison. If the police catch them, they have WhatsApp and Facebook in prison. So, you cannot even go to the police. It is better to leave the country.

There are children who have it in them from a young age. The father is at fault for buying his son a toy gun, because when he grows up, the child will want a real one. I am an evangelical Christian, and when I went with other brothers to preach the gospel at school, we saw small groups of eight, nine children. A gang member tells his eight or ten-year-old cousin to brainwash the other children, and that he will protect him because he is the boss. Then that child brainwashes that little group and they send them to assault people. The children like the easy money. Later they are no longer assailants, but become hired killers. Sometimes entire families come here because they do not want their sons to become killers. It is the same with the girls. If a gang member likes a girl, he goes to the house and says, “I have come to take your daughter because I like her.” And the father has to hand her over in good faith, because otherwise, he gets killed and the girl is taken away. That is why there are entire families that leave the country, so that their teenage daughter is not used by a gang member.

“Once they tried to force me to bring food to the gang leader who was hiding in the mountains. When they take refuge in the mountains, because the army is looking for them, they want you to leave food for them. They do not care that you are starving.”

Evangelism has made me trust and surrender more at the feet of God. It helps save me from all the evil, to walk straight before the Lord, and ignore everything that gang members do and destroy. I have studied at secondary school and worked as a cook. The gangs want you to give them money, because they want to drink beer and smoke marijuana. I cannot work and give money to them, but not to my mother. Today you can no longer be anything. Even if you have a boli, a small business, no matter how small, you have to pay a weekly fee to the gang members. If you do not pay, they will kill you.

Once they tried to force me to bring food to the gang leader who was hiding in the mountains. When they take refuge in the mountains, because the army is looking for them, they want you to leave food for them. They do not care that you are starving. If you do not do as they ask, they say, “He did not do us the favor, let us finish him.” I received threats several times, but I did not give them
much importance. The last time I refused to carry a backpack with food, I was hit with the end of a gun. One of them said to me, “Everyone here has to do what we say. We will give you 24 hours to think about it, and if not, we will go to your house and we will finish you off.” I saw how my brother-in-law ended up, and I said to myself, “Okay, that is it.” In those 24 hours that they gave me, I left the country.

My brother-in-law, my sister’s husband, was murdered because he did not want to join a gang. He went to the football field to watch a home game. But he did not make it to the football field. On the way they picked him up. We went looking for him, and the next day we found him dismembered. They had cut off his feet and hands with a machete. They had removed his tongue and teeth. His tongue was in the pocket of his pants. They left a sign on him, “Look what happens to snitches. Do you want to continue dying? Then report us!” The police said they were going to investigate, but that is where they left things. I only saw my brother-in-law when they took him away, I did not go to the funeral. I left at once. I did not think of going to another city in Guatemala, because the gangs have contacts throughout the country, in El Salvador, in Honduras. Everything is a mess. I asked my mother for 100 quetzales and told her that I was going to Mexico. When I arrived here, I heard about the COMAR [Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance] and started the asylum process. I brought evidence of my brother-in-law’s death and a video that shows how they left him. I am not lying.
I was on the train to Coatzacoalcos, Veracruz, when I had an accident. There are Mexicans who carry out assaults, but our own countrymen also get on the train to assault migrants. They took my money, my backpack, everything. But I did not want to go barefoot. When one of them asked me for my shoes, I said, “Brother, I am sorry, but that is enough, carnalito. Accept it. I do not want to go barefoot. Where am I going to go buy shoes?” He told me to shut up and kicked me, knocking me off the train. Doctors Without Borders picked me up on the train tracks. I still have not recovered. My legs are fine, but my right hip needs to be operated. I do not want to be in a wheelchair anymore. My mom does not know what happened. I just tell her I am fine. I do not want her to worry.

I want to start a new life in Mexico. I want to continue studying and bring over my three sisters and my mother. But my process with the COMAR has been slow. I am still waiting for the notification of the decision. Guatemala should give gang members life sentences. They are well organized, even the police alert them. The police are the most corrupt of all. Only the army does not sell itself in Guatemala.
Ana | 51 years old

We lived about 35 kilometers from the border with Mexico. There are many migrants there, but it is also a very violent area. I worked as an office clerk, but when I fell in love and started living with the father of my children, I no longer worked in my profession. Then I separated from my partner. My son stayed with his dad, while my two daughters stayed with me. When I tried to start working in a company again, I could not do it; no one would give me an opportunity. So, I started selling food and washing other people's clothes. Our economic situation was very difficult, but I never rested on my laurels. During the day I went to the laundry booths to see if there were clothes to wash. People gave me three quetzales per piece. If they gave me 100 pieces to wash, I could earn 300 quetzales.

“*My ex liked to take our younger daughter with him. When she started secondary school, she fell apart. I started to investigate, and she told me that her dad touched her.*”

At 6:00 in the morning I was already at the market, buying meat, beans, everything I was going to prepare. At night I would take out my table and sell food on the street. I lived in an area with a lot of bars, places where sex workers were providing their services. I sold grilled beef, chicken sandwiches, chorizo sausage, marinated meat, and beans. I sold by order, ten quetzales, five quetzales. Selling food is a blessing, because you sell and you eat. The work was exhausting, but with a lot of food and laundry, I paid for my daughters' studies. I would not have left Guatemala, because I would not have put my daughters at risk. With all the things you hear, no. I always said, “I will not put them at risk. I prefer to eat tortilla with beans in my own country.”

My youngest daughter, when she was about nine years old, started doing poorly in her studies; she no longer got the same results. My older daughter, when she grew up, did not want to see her dad anymore, but my ex liked to take our younger daughter with him. When she started secondary school, she fell apart. I started to investigate, and she told me that her dad touched her. So I reported him. I went to the PGN [Procurator General] and to the Attorney General to defend my daughter. But the Guatemalan authorities betrayed her. It was all published in the news: her name, her address, a photo of the school where she studied.

Very ugly social harassment began. I could not even walk to the corner without being asked what had happened to my daughter. It was harassment that punished me. And my daughter no longer wanted to go to school. At school, gang members told her, “If your dad touches you, we will touch you too.” She fell
to pieces and did not want to leave the house anymore. I went to the Attorney General. I protested. I wanted to withdraw the complaint, but it was not possible. I lived three years with that. “No,” I said, “this will not be solved.” The closest place was Tapachula. It hurt a lot to leave my country. We left everything. We came with three bags of clothes, nothing more. I crossed the river with my daughters on foot, because there was not much water.

In Tapachula I was living on the street with my daughters. Since I am a single mother, no one would rent to me. It took a lot of effort to rent a room. I could not sell food anymore, because I did not have a stove or pots. I did cleaning jobs on a daily or hourly basis. I got paid 50 pesos a day, with an hour for lunch. I worked in exchange for practically nothing. My daughters wanted to continue studying. The youngest finished secondary school, and the other one worked in a poultry shop to help pay the rent. In a talk I heard about the COMAR [Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance]. I looked it up and turned in all the papers. Within about a year we got our permanent residence. Many people said to me, “You already have your papers, go to the United States. What are you doing here?” But I could not risk my daughters’ lives. We were in Tapachula for almost two and a half years.

In Guatemala, my oldest daughter was going to go to university. She said she wanted to continue studying in Mexico. For a year she tried to get her diplomas accepted, but the revalidation process was very expensive. We went to UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] and when they saw her interest, they told her that there was an opportunity in Mexico City. She did her exams and, God bless, she passed all of them. She did not want to go by herself, so the UNHCR moved us all. I was very sad, because in Tapachula I was still able to see my son. He is very happy in Guatemala, where he has his wife and two children. I came to Mexico City for my daughters, but I had a hard time adapting.

I believe only in God. I said, “Lord, open a door for me where I can work.” As it turns out, at the PCR [the Refugee House Program] they took us to a workshop, and I was told to send my CV to a cafeteria at the Ibero University. It is a cooperative; they gave me the opportunity to work as an operator selling food. In other places it was hard to get a foot in the door. We spent a month living in a shelter, as I could not find a place to live. In Tapachula we paid 1,200 pesos for a room. In Mexico City I was gutted, because the rents here are very expensive. They rented an apartment to us about ten minutes from the Ibero. We paid 3,300 pesos for two rooms and a kitchen. At the beginning the landlady was very decent. She lent us some furniture, and we only bought the gas. We were happy, because we had a place to sleep and a stove. We bought tortillas; we bought cheese, because that is Guatemalan food. We were able to survive like this. The PRAMI [Migration Affairs Program] of the Ibero gave us winter clothing, because we were dressed very lightly when we came here. Yes, it was very difficult, because the people where I live do not speak to me.
Right now, I am looking for a new place to live, because three weeks ago the landlady asked us to move down to the second floor. I am very sad, because she did not tell me “I am going to raise the rent.” She said, “I am going to remodel the apartment and give it to you later.” But she just asked us to move downstairs and then rented it to someone else. The landlady has not shown her face so I can protest. She did not even collect the rent; she sent another person. Where I am right now, there is no space to hang clothes. I open the window and there in the window I hang all the clothes. I am very uncomfortable. But the rents are very expensive. I went to look around and saw a place for 4,000 pesos, but I would have to pay two, three bus fares. That does not work for me. Another place was available for 7,000 pesos, plus the deposit, coming to almost 15,000 pesos. I am very sad.

Migration gives us a permanent residence permit, but the Mexican authorities do not value it. My oldest daughter has already studied. She has gone to several establishments to ask for work, but they always told her that they did not want migrants. My youngest daughter is also working in the cafeteria, but the bank does not want to give her a debit card. She does not even have a passport, because when she was a minor the passport application required her father's signature. And her migration card does not have her signature on it, because I signed it. So, what is the card for that Migration issues? Also, her permanent
residence permit will expire, because she was a minor when it was given to her. But it turns out that to reapply for that you need to pay almost 5,000 pesos.

One year we suffered because my oldest daughter was turned away at the IMSS [Mexican Social Security Institute]. We got food poisoning from eating seafood. The Ibero had given her social security with the IMSS, because she had also worked in the cafeteria for a year. But she was not registered in the social security system, because she spent all her time at the university. At 5:00 in the morning she left the house, worked until 2:00 in the afternoon, then stayed in the library doing homework. She would get home at 11:00 at night. She lived at the Ibero. She did not have time to sign up for social security, that was the problem. I got to the IMSS with my ill daughter. She was in a very serious condition, but they did not want to receive us. They were going to charge me 500 pesos for the visit.

I was crying outside the IMSS. I did not know what to do. I took her to the General Hospital in Mexico City, riding bus after bus. When we arrived, it turned out that the hospital provided only limited service because it was Easter. We had to pay 120 pesos for the visit, and we had to pay for the tests. They did receive us, but we had to travel more than three hours to find help. It is very sad to see that upon leaving the hospital there is a funeral home and there is a private clinic. Because if you have money, you go to the clinic; if not, you go to the funeral home, dead. It is sad, because health is not a game. Yes, you are discriminated against because you are not from here. Maybe we are not Mexicans, but we are children of the same God, we are human beings.

Thank God Mexico has opened its doors to us. Institutions like PCR support us, without them we could not manage here. It makes me sad though, because sometimes Mexicans look at us over their shoulders: they look at us with contempt, with racism. While I felt sad in Tapachula, which was close to my country, here I started to feel sadder, because I cannot see my son. But I also feel happy, because my daughters are succeeding. My youngest daughter also wants to study at the Ibero, and if she is given that opportunity I am going to feel like a very fortunate mother. I tell them to fight, to do their bit, so that they can get ahead and continue being someone in another country. These are the life changes which one sometimes does not expect, but they occur, and we need to face them, fight, and move on.
Kennedy | 20 years old

In Guatemala there was a civil war. An uncle of mine was killed after 1983, and my grandfather fled to Mexico for a while. The war ended, but the violence in the country never ended. Many weapons from the armed conflict were left there. And since there is no work, many young people make bad decisions. They steal or sell drugs to make some money. In Guatemala violence reigns and attacks young people the most. There are many criminal groups made up of young people. One well-known group, the Barrio 18, threatens young people to join them. If you refuse, they may kill you. Another group is called Los Quichelenses, because they are from the Quiché department, but they are robbing gas stations and all that in different parts of the country.

I am from a village in San Miguel Ixtahuacán, a municipality in the department of San Marcos. We are indigenous Mayans. We speak Spanish with Ladino people, but in my house we speak Mam. It is the language I speak the most. In my village you can study up to the sixth grade. There is also a high school, but you need to work hard to pay the tuition. Those who can, study, those who cannot, marry and look for work. But there is not much work. Before there were only limited public services, but at some point, a priest from Belgium came and helped us a lot. Today we have clean water, but we have no electricity. The municipal government gives little support. What it does is go to the village and steal. To get to a hospital, you need to go to the department’s capital. You go with the hope that you will be cured, but there is not much medicine. If anyone raises their voice to complain, the government orders the murder of our community leaders. There was a CICIG [International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala] that investigated criminals and uncovered acts of corruption. It arrested several mayors, but the government wanted to remove the Commission from the country. It is no longer operating.

Before there was hardly anything to eat, but there was a little more tranquility in the municipality. When I came home from school, I would graze my grandmother’s cows and burn wood. But in 2005 a gold mine opened and brought a lot of violence with it. The government set up the “Marlin Mine” without consulting us. The bad thing is that the gold mine polluted the river, but we used the river for our animals. Many cows died, many sheep, many horses. It was very sad for our families, because our livelihood depends on the river.

“"The bad thing is that the gold mine polluted the river, but we used the river for our animals. Many cows died, many sheep, many horses. It was very sad for our families, because our livelihood depends on the river."
kidnapped and murdered. They were dumped in the woods where, days later, their bodies were found. My father was a community leader. He is gone. I do not know anything about what happened to him.

I went to live with an uncle, who was a priest and offered my dad guidance. My uncle had influence, but he was poisoned. It hurt a lot, what they did to him. Unfortunately, justice was not done, because the Attorney General never investigated it. Since my uncle had received threats, when he died I decided to leave the department of San Marcos and go to work in the capital city. Sometime later my grandfather died. He had also been a community leader, and insisted that the mayor help the people in my village. But the government did not like that the people were rising up to ask for help. They killed him. At that moment I started planning to go to the United States, because I was traumatized. I felt bad.

I was working in a maquila in Guatemala City. I would send my mom some money, but keep the rest in a bank account. In the capital city, there is a bit of work, but you cannot walk on the streets in peace. I was assaulted four times and once I was kidnapped. I rented a room in a hotel and just went to work. I started at 8:00 in the morning and left at 4:30 in the afternoon. That day, a Sunday, was my day off. When I got out of my hostel, a dark car pulled up, and I was grabbed in a kidnapping. They threatened me with pistols and told me to get in the car. I was scared and thought my time had come. They took me to a place far from the capital city, and there they took my money, my phone, my clothes, my shoes, everything. Then they left me lying on the street.

There are smugglers that charge a lot of money. But on Facebook I found a friend who told me that he was a coyote and could help take me to the United States. I only had 10,000 quetzales, but he took me in a group with other Guatemalans and people from El Salvador. Some buses came for us and we went to the border with Mexico. There we took boats to cross the river. Then we were taken to a forest where we bathed and had dinner. They gave us passwords and formed us into groups. We continued to travel by bus. Near Mazatlán some federal agents boarded the bus and asked me for my ticket, but I had no ticket. They made us all get off the bus, and I said I was from Chiapas. The officer said to me, “Do not lie to me, you are from Guatemala.” And he hit me in the chest. We begged them not to return us to Guatemala, and they said, “Well, pay us 1,000 pesos per head.” We did not have any more money, not even for food. But I still had 200 pesos and another lady gave them 100 pesos, and with that they let us go. We continued to El Paso, but there it ended.

We were going to cross at night. It was pure desert. They gave us camouflaged clothes and backpacks. The suitcase was very heavy. We went down a path and spent the whole night walking. When it was dawn, we reached some hills that were all dry. We passed a highway, something like an alarm sounded, and I said, “What the hell is that?” The guide said, “Run!” And we ran, but the Border Patrol was already waiting for us. I surrendered, knelt, and put my hands behind my back. Another guy wanted to resist, and they were pointing a gun at him. The
Border Patrol officers told us, “Did you think you were going to cross, assholes?” They took our suitcases from us and threw them away. They frisked us thoroughly, but with blows. They took us away as if we had killed someone. They detained me for two weeks, then gave me a date for a court hearing and returned me to Mexico. When I was in immigration detention, they hit me very hard. My stomach hurt, and I asked them for a painkiller. They asked me, “Do you know how to pray?” I said yes and they said, “Well, pray!” And they started laughing. They no longer have a soul. Now I want to get papers here in Mexico. I want to work here. We shall see what comes up.
Juan Adolfo | 25 years old

In Guatemala there are 22 languages, apart from Spanish. I come from Guaraquiche Jocotán, a village in the department of Chiquimula. In my town we speak Chortí. There is electricity and drinking water, but no street lighting or paving. Medicine is very scarce, so you need to go to another part of the department to go to a hospital. The main economic activity is the cultivation of corn and beans, but due to the hot climate nothing is growing anymore. You can also work in sales, but the problem is the economy. When you want to sell something, no one can buy anything from you, because people only have enough money for the day.

The COCODE [Community Development Council] is in charge of looking after the welfare of the community. It manages food projects for daily consumption, such as beans, corn, bottles of oil. Sometimes it just talks, and nothing happens, but whenever there is a project, it benefits the whole community. You can see that the projects are helping the community. But among more powerful people you can see corruption. Sometimes the leaders have big projects and then it turns out that there was money laundering or that they overvalued a small project. The money does not reach the community, because the leaders keep it.

“Parents cannot pay for everyone’s studies. I studied two years to be a high school teacher, but I did not find a job in the profession I trained for.”

In my family we are seven brothers. Because of the economic situation, many barely make it through secondary school. You might want to get a high school diploma or go to university, but it is very expensive. Parents cannot pay for everyone’s studies. I studied two years to be a high school teacher, but I did not find a job in the profession I trained for. I was looking and looking, and since there were no other jobs in my village, I went to Guatemala City. There they paid me about 70 quetzales a day, although sometimes they do not pay you on payday. I only earned enough for the day-to-day necessities, beans, sugar, and tortillas. They do not give you employment benefits either. In addition, in the capital there are areas where you get assaulted on the buses. You are always walking around with fear that someone will steal what little you have in your bag.

I left with my cousin. We caught a bus to the Guatemala-Mexico border. In Palenque we took the train to Coatzacoalcos. We spent two days there, because there were many migration agents and they did not want anyone to get on the train. I even got hurt from trying to grab the train further ahead. When we got to
Lechería, some assailants were looting the train. They did not do anything to us, because they just wanted to rob the train. In Celaya, the train security guards hit us with their clubs. The third time I was going to get off, but they took pity on us and let us continue north. In Guadalajara we went to the migrant shelter. They looked after us well, gave us food and clothes. We caught the train to Mexicali and then we came to Tijuana. We spent five days on the train carriages. We no longer had any money. Other migrants came along and gave us some food. We endured hunger, cold, rain. It is scary to take the train, because you feel like you are going to fall off. We were very tired when we got here, because we did not sleep along the way. Now I want to work in Mexico and help my family with the money that I am going to make with some job. Guatemala needs to create more educational and employment opportunities so that people do not migrate, because there are even unemployed college graduates. If you have a lower educational level, you do not find work.
Notes


4 The interviews were recorded whenever permitted and transcribed. The names of some of migrants were changed to protect their identity. The testimonies reproduced here have been edited for length and clarity.


7 “Migration” is shorthand for the immigration authorities.

8 The Barrio 18 is a gang that is also known by its Spanish name Calle 18 (in English: Eighteenth Street Gang). Its members may be colloquially known as Dieciochos.

9 Mara refers to the Mara Salvatrucha (or MS-13), a rival gang of the Barrio 18.

10 “The Beast” is a colloquial term used for the freight trains that migrants catch to traverse Mexico.

11 The MS or MS-13 is a gang that is also known as Mara Salvatrucha. The Barrio 18 is a gang that is also known by its Spanish name Calle 18 (in English: Eighteenth Street Gang).

12 The term “department” refers to an administrative unit akin to a state in the United States or a county in the United Kingdom.

13 “Migration” is shorthand for the immigration authorities.

14 Maquilas or maquiladoras are export-oriented factories.

15 The MS-13 is a gang that is also known as Mara Salvatrucha. The Barrio 18 is a gang that is also known by its Spanish name Calle 18 (in English: Eighteenth Street Gang).

16 Tepito is a neighborhood in Mexico City well-known for selling counterfeit products.

17 The term “department” refers to an administrative unit akin to a state in the United States or a county in the United Kingdom.

18 Coyote is the Spanish term for a people smuggler.

19 “Migration” is shorthand for the immigration authorities.

20 The MS or MS-13 is a gang that is also known as Mara Salvatrucha. The Barrio 18 is a gang that is also known by its Spanish name Calle 18 (in English: Eighteenth Street Gang).

21 “Migration” is shorthand for the immigration authorities.
22 *Posteadores* is a Salvadoran term for lookouts who get paid to alert gangs or criminal groups about the operations of the security forces.

23 The Barrio 18 is a gang that is also known by its Spanish name Calle 18 (in English: Eighteenth Street Gang).

24 The MS or MS-13 is a gang that is also known as Mara Salvatrucha.

25 *Marera* is a colloquial term for a female gang member.

26 *Pupusas* are small, round corncakes, similar to pancakes, that are filled with ingredients such as cheese, refried beans or pork rinds and are considered the national dish of El Salvador. A *pupusería* is a place that sells *pupusas*.

27 The Barrio 18 is a gang that is also known by its Spanish name Calle 18 (in English: Eighteenth Street Gang).

28 A *boli* is a coffeeshop.

29 *Carnalito* is a Spanish term for “bro” or “mate”.

30 “Migration” is shorthand for the immigration authorities.

31 The Barrio 18 is a gang that is also known by its Spanish name Calle 18 (in English: Eighteenth Street Gang).

32 The term “department” refers to an administrative unit akin to a state in the United States or a county in the United Kingdom.

33 *Ladinos* is a term used in Guatemala to refer to non-indigenous Guatemalans.

34 *Maquilas* or *maquiladoras* are export-oriented factories.

35 *Coyote* is the Spanish term for a people smuggler.

36 The term “department” refers to an administrative unit akin to a state in the United States or a county in the United Kingdom.
Violences in Central America have increasingly fueled forced internal and external migration. However, the governments of the Northern Triangle (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras) have been reluctant to recognize the existence of this phenomenon. Mexico and the United States, the countries of transit and destination, have responded to the arrival of forced migrants with deterrence-based policies, hindering or denying people access to human rights, basic services, and asylum. In the absence of systematic and reliable data on forced migration from Central America, there is little understanding of the ways in which these violences destroy the lives of individuals and families and sometimes entire communities. Instead of receiving assistance and protection, the victims often suffer further human rights violations and the consequences of mistaken public policies.

This book brings together a selection of 15 testimonies of forced migrants from the Northern Triangle of Central America and interviewed in Mexico. Their heartbreaking but hopeful stories reflect the complexity of uprooting while putting a human face on forced migration in the Americas. They speak of pain, but also of people’s resilience in the face of great adversity, their dreams of a life in dignity, and their expectations for genuine social, economic, and political change. These pages show that the absence of the state in many Central American communities is exploited by non-state actors, especially street gangs and drug trafficking groups. They seek people’s silence through persuasion or fear, establish alternative forms of governance, and increasingly undermine the already precarious legitimacy of the state. These testimonies, both poignant and necessary, highlight the pressing need for comprehensive and sustainable development and security policies in Central America as well as more humane and effective migration and asylum policies in Mexico and the United States.

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