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Seeking Asylum in the United States: Intersectional Analysis of the Experiences of Transgender Women from the Central American Northern Triangle

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Abstract: The Northern Triangle countries, including El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, are sources of a significant number of asylum seekers in the United States today. This article examines the underlying societal dynamics in these countries and considers the typical profile of transgender immigrant women seeking asylum in the U.S. on the legal grounds of having faced gender-based violence in their countries of origin. It analyzes the relevant international conventions as well as the social determinants of the health and mental health of transgender asylum seekers. It draws from 35 cases of transgender immigrant women subjected to child sexual abuse; sexual assault, including assault by police; and forced sex work; it reviews examples from the academic and gray literature, including a precedent-setting case heard before the Inter-American Court on Human Rights. It discusses the implications for social science professionals, including the role of experts of country conditions. It provides guidance for immigrant service providers and advocates, particularly the importance of gender-affirming policies and healthcare to this population deserving of protection.

Keywords: immigrant transgender women; Northern Triangle asylum seekers; social determinants of health disparities; expert witnessing; affirming care and policies



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1. Introduction

In this article, we discuss how the asylum process in the United States (U.S.) undermines the particular social context and crimes against LGBTQIA+ individuals from the Central American Northern Triangle region. The asylum process is distinct from the refugee system in this top country of destination. According to the U.S. Citizens and Immigration Services (USCIS 2015), “Refugee status or asylum may be granted to people who have been persecuted or fear they will be persecuted on account of race, religion, nationality, and/or membership in a particular social group or political opinion” or those that meet the “legal definition of refugee, see Section 101(a)(42) of the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA)” (par 1). In other words, asylum status is granted to those who meet the refugee criteria, seek admission at a U.S. port of entry, and apply for that status within the U.S. territory (USCIS 2015). The International Rescue Committee (2024) estimates that “Asylum-seekers numbered 6.9 million, with a 26% rise in those waiting for asylum decisions by the end of 2023” (par 7).

The particular social group of study in this article includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (a transgender individual is a person whose gender identity does not correspond with their assigned sex at birth), queer (or those questioning their gender identity or sexual orientation), non-binary and gender non-conforming, intersex, asexual, allies, and other

gender and sexual minorities that are culturally defined. Since context is important in qualitative research, we discuss the reality of the LGBTQIA+ people but focus more on transgender women. Using well-documented cases from the academic and gray literature as well as a composite case example developed from 35 transgender women applying for asylum in the U.S. (hereinafter referred to as transgender asylum seekers or other equivalent terms), the authors (we) analyze the pattern of crimes against both transgender youth and adults, including child sexual abuse, sexual assault, and forced sex work.

To engage in this research, we used human rights and ecological perspectives as well as intersectional analysis. The ecological perspective recognizes that micro-, meso-, and macro-level systems shape the lived experiences of transgender asylum seekers (Ostrander et al. 2017), particularly in countries where impunity allows for gender-based violence (Sanford 2008). We also examine the rights of transgender individuals seeking asylum in the U.S. by using a human rights perspective, which upholds the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (Mapp 2020). Grounded in Black feminism and Critical Race Theory, intersectionality is a framework that examines how various social identities—such as race, gender, class, sexuality, and immigration status—interact to create unique experiences of oppression in the presence of violence against women of color, particularly those from immigrant and socially disadvantaged communities (Crenshaw 1991). When it comes to immigration, intersectionality helps to understand that immigrants do not experience challenges in isolation; their experiences are shaped by their multiple identities. In the case of transgender individuals seeking asylum from the Northern Triangle, the context of societal and familial violence as well as stigma is critically important when considering those multidimensional intersections.

The authors are expert witnesses (or individuals knowledgeable about the conditions of countries of origin of immigrants) who recognize that transgender asylum applicants in the United States make their claims on the grounds of state-sanctioned impunity for gender-based violence, rather than viewing domestic violence merely as an isolated crime or a product of cultural beliefs. For asylum applicants, the asylum process triggers their personal trauma while allowing them to frame these experiences within the broader context of the oppressive systems in their home countries. Ideally, an approach sensitive to oppression can make the asylum-seeker's narrative a powerful tool for survival and recovery (Palattiyil and Sidhva 2021). Furthermore, we explore how immigration functions as both a social determinant of health and a consequence of health disparities shaped by various social factors (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2018). By examining these intersections, we underscore the critical need for asylum frameworks that recognize and respond to the complex, systemic nature of gender-based violence.

In this article, we analyze the context of violence and impunity prevailing in the countries of origin of transgender immigrants. We document the trauma transgender asylum seekers experience to illustrate how social as well as personal persecution must be considered in immigration trials. We also highlight major implications for social science professionals, such as integrating a trauma lens into the delivery of services to asylum seekers.

2. Materials and Methods

This article builds on the authors' experiences providing testimony on the conditions of the countries of origin of asylum seekers before U.S. federal immigration courts. The 35 asylum cases of transgender individuals from the Central Northern Triangle region (El Salvador and Guatemala) constituted a sample that was convenient because the authors provided expert testimony in federal immigration courts on those cases. To illustrate the cultural patterns of impunity and abuse those transgender applicants endured in their countries of origin, a single composite narrative was developed; this theoretical construction also allowed for confidentiality of the applicants' identities. Rigor in qualitative research aims at establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, which are the pillars of trustworthiness, essential components of rigor in qualitative research (Ahmed 2024). While the authors had access to affidavits documenting persecution, the case files of

those asylum seekers were not actually used for the intersectional analysis because that would have required securing informed consent retroactively.

As a result of our extended work as expert witnesses with country condition expertise in the Central Northern Triangle region, we have identified three areas of similarities among the asylum cases informing the discussion presented here: (1) child sexual abuse; (2) sexual assault, including assault by police; and (3) forced sex work. The case of Roberta, mentioned in this article, is the composite narrative of the mentioned 35 asylum cases considered in the research, while Luna is a case found in the gray literature. The case of Roberta was developed with the purpose of protecting the identity of the 35 asylum seekers. The Luna and Roberta cases correspond to each of these three typologies of human rights abuses. These cases illustrate the complexities of the lived experience of LGBTQIA+ people in general; in particular, it exemplifies the daily reality of transgender asylum seekers from the Northern Triangle face in the U.S.

The 35 asylum cases were important to inform the composite presented, but several limitations were experienced in this study. While credibility was achieved through “extended involvement [as expert witnesses], persistent observation [of country conditions], and triangulation [with the literature]” (Ahmed 2024, abstract), saturation (when no new knowledge is obtained in data analysis) was not achieved because the number of cases was limited to those that the expert witnesses had access to. Because these experts did not have direct interaction with the asylum applicants, we did not carry out peer debriefing, member checking, and reflexive journaling, which are commonly used strategies for ensuring confirmability.

The expert witnesses had access to affidavits (legal declarations) of these asylum seekers, which are confidential and were prepared for the asylum proceedings, not for research purposes. These affidavits were not actually analyzed in relation to the three areas of child sexual abuse, sexual assault, and forced sex work. Due to the qualitative nature of this study and how the information was collated, it is neither feasible nor desirable to make generalizations from the study findings, even within the entire Central American region. Access to psychological evaluations informed the case composite; these confidential documents were used in tandem with the country condition reports, both of which were accessed by the authors in their own capacity as country experts. In sum, the authors are qualitative social scientists using their expertise in qualitative research who created the composite cases based on the ethnography of asylum seekers’ lived experiences of gender-based violence.

A composite case was developed for reporting all 35 cases of U.S. asylum seekers from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. The authors also identified documented cases of various transgender individuals available in the academic and gray literature. One of these cases is considered unprecedented because, although it was an asylum seeker, it was a case that was brought to international courts as a victim of transfemicide (killing of trans women because of their gender). Similar documented cases exemplify both the transviolence and impunity prevalent in the 3 Central America Northern Triangle countries under study.

In sum, there are inherent study limitations, but the practice implications must not be dismissed. This article makes an important contribution to the academic literature and professional practice in that it offers critical knowledge necessary to better serve transgender persons during the asylum legal process and as they heal from trauma while seeking safety. Next, we present the results, which are divided into two parts: the first part is a review of the global and regional context in which this study is immersed, and the second part is the result of the intersectional analysis of the 35 cases.

3. Research Context: Literature Review Results

3.1. Global Policy Environment

Asylum seeking is a human right identified in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Mapp 2020). Article 1 states that all people are born free and equal in dignity and rights. The UDHR states that everyone is entitled to the rights and freedoms set forth in

the declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, sex, religion, or other status (United Nations 1948). The Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (United Nations 1951) defines who a refugee is, and it also outlines the rights of refugees and the obligations of states. Furthermore, the non-refoulement principle requires that a refugee cannot be returned to a country where they face serious threats to their life or freedom (Article 33).

These international conventions are particularly relevant to transgender individuals globally given the prevalent violence against this population. For instance, *Trans Murder Monitoring (2023)* registered between 1 October 2022 and 30 September 2023 the killing of 320 trans and gender diverse people, of which 94% were trans women or trans feminine people, and 73% of them were committed in Latin America and the Caribbean. *Trans Murder Monitoring (2023)* found that these murders are the result of the “intersections of misogyny, racism, xenophobia, and whorephobia [whereby the majority] were Black and trans women of colour, and trans sex workers” (par. 4). Because transgender individuals experience transviolence at the interpersonal, institutional, and structural levels in their countries of origin, they deserve protection when seeking asylum or other forms of relief.

3.2. Regional Post-Conflict Environment

Both Guatemala and El Salvador are countries where decades of civil war resulted in a prolonged post-conflict era where impunity for violent crimes remains high due to criminal networks. These countries are marked with a history of militarized community life. In the Northern Triangle, there is a police presence that is not only inadequate, but the environment created is one that is dismissive of reports of violence against women and LGBTQIA+ individuals (Human Rights Watch 2020a). For both countries, the post-conflict era is defined by the presence of gang violence, organized crime, and clandestine armed bodies (Insight Crime 2017; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2019). As these countries attempted to return to elected democracies after internal conflicts, those with economic and military power kept the stronghold in the new era. As a result, these countries are often considered failed states, particularly as narco-trafficking and organized crime are pervasive (Ayuso 2012). These conditions are common to Honduras.

Societal militarization during the civil conflicts created a post-conflict environment where many individuals are apathetic to the use of violence as a tool to achieve end results, whether they be to promote or protect political, criminal, or financial interests (Peacock and Beltrán 2003; United States Department of State 2021a, 2021b). Impunity is defined as the use of violence as a tool to a given end, knowing that there will be no consequences (Sanford 2008). Impunity prevails in the three Northern Triangle countries.

The predominant environment of institutional, community, interpersonal, and domestic violence, as well as violence against specific disenfranchised groups, has created a socio-political culture where impunity for violent crimes, especially violent crimes against those considered to be socially undesirable, has become normalized. Impunity allows those in power to continue to perform their illicit activities without consequence. As a result, society allows for gender-based violence against women, girls, and LGBTQIA+ individuals. Currently, transgender persons live in fear and with the reality of controlled movement in all aspects of their social life and in their communities.

3.3. Gendered Cultural and Social Environment as Root Causes of Transviolence

The patterns of transgender violence are global; for instance, “LGBT people face both generalized and unique vulnerabilities that cause many to leave their country of origin and seek refuge in another. Consensual same-sex conduct remains criminalized in 69 countries, and as many as 11 countries could impose the death penalty if convicted” (Shaw et al. 2021, p. 2). The Human Rights Watch World Report 2023 provides examples of penal codes punishing the sexual orientation and gender identities in many countries, including penalties for “public indecency”, restrictions of freedom of assembly and association, and denial of legal status to LGBT associations (Human Rights Watch 2023). While the global

context is important, this article is focused on transgender individuals from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras who are seeking asylum in the U.S. system.

Gender-based violence and transfemicide (the killing of transgender women because of their gender identity) are prevalent in the Northern Triangle in part because of the state's persistent unwillingness to prevent or prosecute crimes. This is illustrated by the government's local-level disregard for the victims and their families and frequent instances where government officials make statements blaming the victims of gender-based crimes ([United States Department of State 2021a, 2021b](#)). Although there are many forms of gender-based violence, this article focuses on those more prevalent in Latin America and the Central American Northern Triangle countries.

The prevalence of transfemicide is often fueled by the cultural and social environment of homophobia, *machismo*, and misogyny that pervades Latin American societies ([Amnesty International 2017](#); [Fernández Muñoz and Rodríguez Álvarez 2022](#)). *Machismo* is often defined as the cultural construct of male behavior that emphasizes toxic masculinity or excessive virility and the rejection of all that is considered weak (i.e., feminine). *Machismo* may be interpreted in terms of protective behavior towards women, hypersexuality, and extra-relational sex, but that is only a part of the groundwork for widespread gender-based violence ([Sanford 2008](#)).

Conformity of traditional gender roles is an expectation in Northern Triangle countries, and gender non-conforming individuals are frequently persecuted in various ways, as illustrated by Luna and Vicky's cases in this paper. The resulting trauma and associated social problems are particularly oppressive because judicial systems are inadequate. The public institutions lack satisfactory processes to secure the human rights of LGBTQIA+ individuals, especially transgender persons.

3.4. Institutional Impunity for Systemic Transviolence: Examples from the Literature

For LGBTQIA+ and gender non-conforming individuals, societal discrimination is supported by a pattern of police impunity for criminal activity and misconduct and a government that turns a blind eye to discrimination and violence with no commitment to human rights. The [United States Department of State \(2019\)](#) Country Report on Human Rights Practices emphasizes the continued discrimination and persecution of LGBTQIA+ individuals. According to this report, "LGBTI human rights groups stated police officers regularly engaged in extortion and harassed male and transgender individuals whom they alleged to be sex workers. There was general societal discrimination against LGBTI persons in access to education, health care, employment, and housing. The government made minimal efforts to address this discrimination" ([United States Department of State 2019](#), p. 1).

A case from El Salvador illustrates these patterns of police abuse. Camila Diaz Cordoba's experience was documented by [Human Rights Watch \(2020b\)](#). In this particular case, Diaz was deported back to El Salvador after a failed attempt to secure amnesty in the U.S. A human rights report described the deadly scenario in this manner: "Prosecutors allege that on 31 January 2019, the officers forced her [Diaz] into the back of a pickup truck, beat her, and threw her from a moving vehicle. She died several days later. The judge held that the evidence, including the vehicle's GPS tracking, the location where Diaz was found, and Diaz's autopsy report established officers' criminal responsibility. It was the first time that anyone had ever been convicted of killing a transgender person in El Salvador" ([Human Rights Watch 2020b](#), p. 2).

The story of Vicky is another example of transfemicide, which was documented as homicide in Honduras. The case was heard before the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in 2018 ([Fernández Muñoz and Rodríguez Álvarez 2022](#)). In her case, it was found that Honduras was, as a state, responsible for the death of a transgender woman. This was the first time that her case set a precedent whereby a state was held accountable for such a crime. Specifically, Vicky was among a group of transgender women, who engaged in sex work in an urban setting in Honduras, when police attempted to arrest the women. The group scattered by running away from their potential captors, but Vicky was found

dead not long after. While it is not entirely clear, it is suspected that Vicky was killed by the police officers (Fernández Muñoz and Rodríguez Álvarez 2022). While Vicky was not seeking asylum, she would have been a candidate had she migrated north to Mexico or the U.S. and made such a claim. Instead, she stayed in her home country, where she was persecuted and murdered for being a transgender woman.

Another case found in the literature was that of Luna Guzmán, an asylum seeker from Guatemala, and her case was found in the popular press (Kohka and McIntyre 2021). Luna entered the U.S. after multiple attempts to cross the border as an asylum seeker based on her status of being in a protected social group. Luna is a transgender citizen of Guatemala, where she has experienced persecution. In her asylum petition, Luna reported child abuse in her family due to homophobia, *machismo* or male-dominated attitudes, and cultural expectations of male individuals (minors and adults). Then, as time went on, Luna reported being raped and forced into sex work (Kohka and McIntyre 2021). The latter experience was a result of Luna being sold to men who specifically target gender non-conforming boys. Luna is now HIV-positive. Reportedly, Luna experienced long-term detention in the U.S. while awaiting an asylum hearing. After overcoming considerable barriers, she now resides in New York City and is receiving services from an advocacy group. In her asylum declaration to the U.S. immigrant court, Luna expressed feeling like a butterfly with her wings cut off, which serves as a metaphor for the experiences of transgender individuals living in environments that are dangerous for non-conforming gender identity persons (Kohka and McIntyre 2021). Luna's asylum case is supported by the dire consequences for transgender individuals who do not leave their home country, as documented in the literature reviewed here.

3.5. Social Determinants of Health Disparities, Migration, and Trans Asylum Seekers

Worldwide, international migrants with irregular legal status, i.e., are undocumented or confined to specific humanitarian settings. In contrast, three-quarters of the estimated 46.2 million immigrants in the U.S. in 2022 had some type of legal status, i.e., tourist or student visa, asylum, refugee or other temporary statutes, or permanent residency (Migration Policy Institute 2024). Shaw et al. (2021) estimated 11,400 applications for asylum were filed in the United States between FY [fiscal year] 2012 to 2017 by LGBT people. Among these applications were 3899 claims on the basis of LGBT status" (p. 2).

International migrants face many barriers to accessing health care, such as "xenophobia; discrimination; substandard living, housing and working conditions; and inadequate or restricted access to mainstream health services. . . . [; these adverse conditions are] related to the social determinants of health [disparities], such as [limited access to] employment, income, education and housing" (WHO 2022, pp. 19–20). Transgender asylum applicants in the U.S. during transit and at destination face similar barriers. For instance, a review of 11 studies (screened out of 306 studies) examining social factors influencing mental health among refugees and migrants confirmed the influential role of social determinants of health disparities among this population. Influential factors included "age, sex, marital status, employment, race, ethnicity, housing, income, English language proficiency, multi sex, partner, recreational drugs use, social status, social support inside and outside the family, social influence, activities, and physical conditions, length of stay in the destination country, biological conditions and behavior, sense of belonging to the community, time of migration and satisfaction with the place of residence" (Kemmak et al. 2021, p. 8). Thus, the social determinants of health disparities transgender immigrants face are critical to their lived experience while seeking asylum, which is why they are considered here.

Broadly speaking, health outcomes among refugees and asylum seekers are influenced by both pre- and postmigration stressors; systematic factors creating vulnerability in this population upon arrival include "housing and neighborhood, employment and income, education, discrimination, social and family relationships, and access to health services" (Ziersch and Due 2023, abstract). Specifically, transgender immigrants experience multiple health disparities, as documented in a study in Oregon among 25 transgender women

ages 18–39 (Garcia and Crosby 2020). Liu et al. (2024) concluded that the health and mental health among transgender and gender-diverse adults is worsening; for instance, the prevalence of poor or fair health status rose almost by 10% (from 26.6% in 2014 to 35.1% in 2022). Liu et al. (2024) also found that mental health among transgender and gender-diverse adults also worsened; for instance, frequent mental distress more than doubled (from 18.8% to 38.9%) and depression more than doubled (from 19.7% to 51.3%) during the same period.

Because immigration is both a social determinant of health and a consequence of social determinants of health disparities (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2018), it is important to consider the context in which immigrants live and where they come from, particularly among those experiencing intersectional oppressions, such as transgender asylum seekers. Limited availability of gender affirming healthcare makes it difficult for this population to obtain adequate services, even in states, such as Oregon, possessing gender-affirming policy environments (Garcia and Crosby 2020). Thus, health interventions with the immigrant population, including diagnostic tools, must include addressing the multidimensional determinants of health disparities (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2018).

3.6. Results of Case Analysis: The Composite Case of Roberta

Of the 35 cases of asylum applicants considered in this study, we developed a composite case summarizing the experience of transgender women seeking asylum. Again, these cases were conveniently selected by the country experts writing this article. The transgender woman Roberta, as a composite case, is a citizen from a Central American Northern Triangle country. This composite example encapsulates the analyzed cases from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, as they are quite similar in ecological terms—they have similar economic structures related to pervasive extreme poverty and post-conflict and crime-ridden environments, judicial structures characterized by impunity, and dynamics of gender-conforming expectations in an environment that has rigid beliefs for gendered behavior. As previously discussed, the context of violence is pervasive in these Northern Triangle countries, with sexual assault being a common crime, especially against gender non-conforming individuals (Amnesty International 2017).

Prior to her arrival at the U.S.–Mexico border, Roberta lived in a large city in a Northern Triangle country. She was 18 years of age when she sought asylum on grounds of persecution of a protected social group of gender non-conforming individuals. She claimed knowing that she was transgender at a very young age—as early as three years old—even though this idea was not one that she could truly articulate in her childhood and early adolescent years. She reported that she has always felt feminine, even if assigned a boy at birth. She started to secretly wear women’s clothes during her early adolescence. Her mother shamed her and warned her about the men in the family’s beliefs and attitudes regarding such secretive behavior.

In time, Roberta’s behavior, being quite feminine-presenting compared to the boys in her community, led to a number of male family members being aggressive and overbearing (harsh punishment) when disciplining Roberta as a child. For example, she stated remembering at the age of 12 and onwards being beaten by her father, who would simultaneously demand that she act more like a boy. When she was 15 years old, Roberta was raped by her uncle, who demanded obedience and said that he was teaching Roberta an identity lesson. While Roberta’s mother was alarmed and sympathetic, she was essentially powerless to intervene, and she encouraged her adolescent child to act more masculine and “behave” as a son would. After the sexual assault, at the hands of her maternal uncle, Roberta fled to live in the streets of the capital city with other youth.

In this environment of rough living on the streets of this large city, Roberta experienced rape by gang members, and like Luna, she was forced into sex work; this sex work led to further trauma. When she went to the police to report the crime, she was again sexually

assaulted. When Roberta was 18, she fled to the U.S., crossing over the difficult terrain of Mexico and the desert of Arizona for safety as an asylum seeker.

During this journey, Roberta was again raped in Mexico, as men attacked her while she attempted to sleep on the train known as *La Bestia* (The Beast), a train that runs through Mexico and is used by Central American immigrants to reach the Mexico–U.S. border. Once Roberta arrived on the Mexican side of the Arizona border, she found herself trading sex for food—this transaction is another form of sexual assault that exploits the circumstances of migrants attempting to cross the border. This particular form of gendered violence is common for women and men, as well as transgender individuals, who are attempting to make the dangerous crossing of Central America and Mexico into the U.S.

3.7. Discussion: Implications for Social Science

The U.S. Special Rapporteur on violence against women confirmed that worldwide there is a lack of data and a registry of violence based on sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, and sex characteristics (Human Rights Campaign 2022). Yet, the study presented here suggests that violence against transgender individuals, including trans-femicide, is a reality among asylum seekers from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. Together, these Northern Triangle countries are very active sources of migrants from the south entering the U.S., far surpassing Mexican migrants (Center for Strategic and International Studies 2019). In fact, an increased number of transgender individuals from these countries are seeking protection in the U.S. As a result, social science professionals must be prepared to focus specifically on the Northern Triangle experience, with sensitivity to the unique trauma context of the region.

The knowledge related to practice with asylum seekers has expanded, and more educational resources are available (Androff and Mathis 2022; Chammas 2022; Palattiyil and Sidhva 2021; Rosenberg 2019), including materials for working with LGBTQ individuals (Redclay et al. 2019). Yet, limited consideration has been given to the complexity of country conditions that push migrants into the stream north from the global south. This points to the need for broadening research on the psycho-social context of violence in countries of origin of asylum seekers, which has unique features in the Northern Triangle. Social science educators must continue to sharpen their focus on transgender asylum seekers from this region. Thus, continued professional training and community education about the conditions of countries of origin become a critical part of the social science profession.

As people around the world continue to experience displacement within and outside borders, engagement in diverse forms of interventions with immigrants and refugees in the U.S. For instance, expert witnesses are instrumental in documenting general and specific relevance of country conditions to the claims asylum seekers often make to immigration officers (see Costantino et al. 2012). While upholding the international standards contained in the United Nations Refugee Convention (UNHCR 1951), social science professionals can bring credibility to the reasonable fear asylum applicants claim to have upon *refoulement*—the return to the conditions that originally forced transgender individuals to leave their countries and communities of origin in the first place. Ultimately, these efforts can contribute to expanding the advocacy work for greater consideration of country conditions in the U.S. immigration system and specifically in asylum processes.

Understanding the country conditions from an intersectional perspective, the oppressive context of the lived experience, and the environment of impunity transgender individuals face in countries of origin is important. While asylum seekers need assistance with completing necessary paperwork for self-advocacy, trauma treatment in clinical case management interventions is necessary. The utilization of an ecological perspective is essential for the recognition of environmental context (Ostrander et al. 2017). It is empowering for those seeking safety as they give testimony to lived experiences by providing examples of persecution and trauma to anchor their applications for asylum. Helping those seeking asylum to identify the contextual dynamics is part of their healing. Thus, it is critical to take steps to advance rights with advocacy while integrating these environmental dynamics

contributing to the intersectional oppression transgender asylum seekers experience (Witt and Medina-Martinez 2022).

As an interdisciplinary field, expert witnessing must be accompanied by research and education regarding transgender asylum seekers in academic institutions, professional associations, and the larger community of practice. In academic research, the lived experience of transgender people is central to understanding the social determinants of health disparities among trans asylum seekers, particularly those of Northern Triangle countries. Rigorous research, including narrative inquiry, will further support individuals from this region with empirical evidence—documenting the societal dynamics explored in this article—thereby increasing chances of obtaining protection and relief in the U.S.

Social science schools across the U.S. must integrate courses aimed at developing knowledge and skills to engage effectively in serving the immigrant and refugee communities. Undergraduate and graduate courses must include content on the reality of transgender asylum seekers who have very limited access to services due to their gender and sexual identities. Culturally competent curricula must prepare students to ally with transgender asylum seekers who face societal stigma and institutional discrimination upon arrival to the U.S.

For example, in the field of social work, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE)'s Council on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and Expression has produced *Guidelines for Affirming Social Work Education*. These guidelines are complemented with the *Guidelines for Transgender and Gender Nonconforming (TGNC) Inclusive Social Work Education* (Craig et al. 2016). These guidelines enhance the ability of social science professionals to promote institutional equity while enabling gender-affirming care that acknowledges, respects, and promotes the identity of the individuals served.

Denying or minimizing the identities of LGBTQIA+ and gender nonconforming persons and groups can result in institutional discrimination as well as individual-level prejudice and biases. With a sensitive curriculum in this area, social science professionals will be better prepared to affirm the transgender experience and provide case management and other services that are sensitive and culturally appropriate to this population. The resulting best practice would avoid misgendering of people (using incorrect pronouns), recognize trauma associated with transgression, and prevent the denial of services to these individuals because of who they are.

Many social science professionals, especially psychologists and social workers, carry out clinical assessments and corresponding case management regarding the claims of asylum seekers who are members of protected social groups. As discussed earlier, trauma is connected to a variety of dynamics, and particular attention must be paid to police brutality and community violence, a generalized climate of stigma, prejudice, or negative attitudes towards transgender individuals, and social discrimination as a minority group. Relevant to assessment in these cases is the history of trauma for transgression and transviolence and the broad array of hate crimes in their countries of origin. Additionally, in the case of the Northern Triangle, the dynamics of machismo-driven violence are particularly important as an area to consider for trauma assessment and intervention.

As social science professionals, we can support transgender asylum seekers at all levels of practice. One of them is to support them while rendering their testimonies for policy changes within the legislative, judicial, and justice systems. Policy advocacy becomes more important than ever when anti-immigrant sentiments are growing in the U.S., particularly around elections, when immigrants and refugees become political items instead of a population that deserves protection based on the merits of their individual cases, as well as their belonging to a particular social group, such as transgender migrants seeking protection and relief in the U.S. Finally, social science professionals need to engage in programs and campaigns addressing the pervasive health disparities among gender-diverse individuals of all ages and promote gender-affirming policies in all U.S. states.

4. Conclusions

The intersectional exploration of the lived experiences of transgender women from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras who are seeking asylum in the U.S. illustrates how structural violence and impunity is a barrier to justice in their home countries. The Central American Northern Triangle countries are recognized for their near-total impunity for crimes against women, girls, and gender non-conforming individuals (Amnesty International 2017). Upon arrival to the U.S., individuals seeking protection due to fear of being persecuted based on their sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and/or sex characteristics have the right to apply for asylum and other forms of legal relief. The importance of the realities of the countries of origin of trans applicants is often minimized in the U.S. asylum process.

This article suggests examining the social determinants of health disparities among immigrants and transgender asylum seekers in particular. It proposed a culturally sensitive discourse in social science regarding this population, including affirming care. We identified ways in which social science professionals can offer effective support and advocacy for transgender individuals who experienced oppressive environments and facing life-threatening situations in the Northern Triangle, while seeking protection, including asylum. The implications for social science set forth in this article provide new directions for the profession to address the humanitarian crisis at the U.S.–Mexico border while upholding the civil rights of LGBTQIA+ individuals in the U.S.

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Informed Consent Statement: The affidavits (legal declarations) of the 35 transgender asylum seekers are confidential and were prepared for the asylum proceedings, not for research purposes. Although access to psychological evaluations informed the case composite, reported here was a composite of those cases, not the individual cases.

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