

Anthropology News



Seeking Refuge from Gender-Based Violence

Let's Talk Gender

M. Gabriela Torres

In late 2015, the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) warned of an [impending refugee flow](#) from Central America in large part because of the threat of gender-based violence. In the United States, which has seen a five-fold increase in asylum seekers from the region, stories of the suffering lived by [women and children at the hands of men illustrate the debate](#) on whether such suffering is worthy enough to confer asylum. On his last tour of the [Americas, Pope Francis called attention to the human tragedy](#) of asylum seekers from Central America, noting the dozens of murders of refugee claimants from the U.S. since 2014.



A Path Home. Photo courtesy of M. Gabriela Torres

[Critics of gender-based violence asylum claims](#) argue that women's abuse at the hands of men is too global and all too common a problem for the U.S. to consider asylum. In one sense they are right: women's abuse at the hands of men is a pervasive global problem with clear health and political consequences.

According to a 2013 [report co-authored by the World Health Organization](#), 35% of women world-wide have experienced physical and/or sexual violence. The long-studied impact of physical and sexual violence, particularly at the hands of their partners, is most recently evidenced in a [24 country 2014 European Union survey](#) reporting that women who experience such forms of violence have high rates of depression and anxiety. This is but one way to evidence the social suffering that anthropologist Veena Das notably defined as stemming from the internalization of violence's [poisonous knowledge](#).

Cultural qualms about the legal and moral responsibilities to safeguard the lives of persons in the face of gender-based violence has political, social and cultural consequences. Portraying the suffering of gender-based violence as *too common* has, not surprisingly, been shown to bolster violence. [Peggy Sanday's seminal work on rape](#) demonstrated that violence against women is common because it is enabled by the gendered inequities that contour our culture.

Overlooking our social responsibility in the face of gender-based violence is a practiced oversight with cultural supports. It is a trivialization of the gender-based violence in our midst.

Nonetheless, international law is quite clear on the responsibilities that states and societies bear. The [UNHCR's Guidelines on International Protection](#) affirm that the international community is compelled to consider asylum when a state tolerates gender-based violence and, as a result, victims of such violence find themselves having well founded fears of continued persecution. Despite significant resistance, the [U.S. has recently done just this](#) and has granted some women and their families asylum on gender-based violence claims since federal guidelines were set in the 1990s.

To be sure, our social obligations go beyond simply considering gender-based violence a *good enough* reason to seek asylum. The onus of constructing more equitable societies includes supporting immigration practices that do not compound the problems that are inherent in enduring gender-based violence so well outlined [in the work of anthropologists](#).

The work of social scientists on [gender and migration to the U.S.](#) shows that even without the complication of gender based violence, immigrant women face multiple levels of inequity in the process of re-settlement. Working in interdisciplinary teams, [anthropologists show that building communities where new migrants succeed requires state and institutional responses](#) that take into account pasts with violence and the needs that arise in the settlement process.

As we grapple with managing the very gendered [refugee crisis in the Americas, the U.S. in particular](#) needs to question the unfavorable consequences of the protracted [detention of women and children](#) from Central America who are fleeing gender-based violence, among other horrors. Given their probable past with gender-based violence, what social good can be realized by their detention as they await immigration processing in the US?

When we recoil at the use of gender-based asylum claims or when we return women and children to conditions where their abuse is assured, we should ask what this says about our own society, and whether in doing so, we are reifying our own gender inequities at home.

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