



'I Knew I Had to Get Out to Survive'—Violence Drives LGBT Central Americans North

Linda Farthing | Monday, May 13, 2019

The desperation of daily life in Honduras is driving thousands of people to join other Central American migrants in their long march northward toward what they hope is asylum and safety in the United States. Yet the situation is especially grave for those who are LGBT, in particular gender non-conforming men and minors. Perhaps that was why the first people to reach the U.S. border in the widely publicized migrant caravan last November were 85 LGBT people.



Gabriela Hernandez, executive director of the nonprofit New Mexico Dream Team, holds up an image of Roxana Hernandez, a Honduran transgender woman who died in U.S. custody, Albuquerque, N.M., June 6, 2018 (AP photo by Mary Hudetz).

"LGBT people band together to protect each other," says Aaron Morris, the executive director of Immigration Equality, which advocates for LGBT immigrants to the United States. A caravan that left Honduras' second-largest city, San Pedro Sula, in mid-January included LGBT people escaping the rampant homophobia in a country that Amnesty International, in a 2017 report, characterized as a "circle of constant violence."

At least 300 LGBT people have died violently over the past decade in Honduras, according to Cattrachas, a human rights monitoring network in the country, and the Honduran State Human Rights Commission, Conadeh. Half were gay men and almost a third were transgender people. Honduras, with a population of just over 9 million people, ranks among the world's seven most dangerous countries to be LGBT.

Zuleyka Flores fled when she was 22 years old, "because of the violence and discrimination that I faced as a trans woman," she said in a phone interview from her home in New York. "I am completely convinced that making this move was the best thing I could have done given the circumstances I faced," she added.

"They kill us all differently," the coordinator of Cattrachas, Indyra Mendoza, told me matter-of-factly in a recent interview. "Transgender people are usually killed in the street with firearms. Gay men are usually murdered brutally in their homes or workplaces. Most lesbians are shot in the street, usually by gangs who kill the woman, her partner, and their children if there are any."

If this persecution were not bad enough, there is also widespread impunity. Only 30 cases of 141 murders of LGBT people between 2010 and 2014 were brought to trial in Honduras, according to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

Many human rights advocates say that the trouble escalated for LGBT people after democratically elected President Manuel Zelaya was ousted during a constitutional crisis in 2009, destabilizing the government. Honduran LGBT organizations joined public protests to demand a return to democracy. "We were very much in evidence in the streets," said Mendoza. What followed was relentless scrutiny, persecution, arbitrary arrests, attacks, robberies and sexual assault of LGBT activists. At the same time, the LGBT murder rate spiked from an average of two a year to 31 murders annually.

One of those murdered was Rene Martinez Izaguirre, the president of the Comunidad Gay Sampredrana, or the Gay Community of Sampredrana, a group that advocated for LGBT rights throughout northern Honduras. In June 2016, Martinez was strangled to death after unknown assailants forced him into a car on his way home from work. "Rene was a brilliant LGBT political leader and a promising future political candidate," Luis Abolafia Anguita, the director of international programs at the Gay and Lesbian Victory Institute, a Washington-based organization that works to elect LGBT people to office, said after his death.

"There is no state capacity or will to prevent violence against LGBT people. People complain to the authorities, but nothing happens."

In November 2017, LGBT activists took to the streets again when President Juan Orlando Hernandez violated the Honduran constitution by running for a second term, in an election that the Organization of American States deemed so irregular that it called for re-run. In the protests against Hernandez's inauguration, at least 22 people were killed by the military. Despite condemnation by four U.S. senators and 28 congressional Democrats, the United States recognized the Hernandez victory as legitimate and has continued U.S. funding of his government, including the police and security forces.

The astounding levels of violence in Honduras, exacerbated by gangs and impunity for abuses by the state, are key in driving migration northward. A 2017 study by the United Nations High Commission on Human Rights found that 88 percent of LGBT asylum-seekers and refugees from Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua have been subjected to sexual and gender-based violence in their home country.

"About three and a half years ago, I was living in a neighborhood I could afford, but it was pretty

dangerous,” Jose Cortes, who now lives in San Diego, told me recently. “Then the gangs found out that I am gay and started threatening me, so I moved, but they found me again. I complained to the authorities, but nothing was ever done. In that neighborhood in a couple of years, four transgender people and three gay men were murdered, so I knew I had to get out to survive.”

It isn't necessarily better once Honduran LGBT refugees arrive in the United States, though. Roxana Hernandez, a 33-year-old transgender woman, died while in the custody of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement in May 2018 in New Mexico. “We've seen a lot of abuse in U.S. detention centers of gender nonconforming, gay men, minors, and people living with HIV,” says Morris of Immigration Equality. “They are the most vulnerable, but sometimes also the most resilient.”

That resilience is evident among the LGBT people in Honduras who have run for public office. None have won to date. But that hasn't stopped Rihanna Ferrera Sanchez, an activist in the Cozumel Trans Association, who ran for national deputy in the 2017 elections, and is already planning to run again. “I want people to vote for me because of my capacity as a person, not my sexual orientation,” she said in a phone interview.

Despite the determination of LGBT activists in Honduras, most don't have much hope that the situation will improve any time soon. Honduras is the second-poorest country in the Americas after Haiti, and its long history of military rule, corruption and crime has made its government unstable and ineffective. “There is no state capacity or will to prevent violence against LGBT people,” Indrya Mendoza told me. “People complain to the authorities, but nothing happens, so they see little choice but to flee.”

Linda Farthing is a writer based in Bolivia. She is the co-author of three books about Bolivia, most recently “Evo's Bolivia: Continuity and Change.” She has also written for The Guardian, Ms. Magazine, Jacobin, Al Jazeera and The Nation.