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“I risk everything because I have already lost everything.” Central American female migrants speak out on the migrant trail in Oaxaca, Mexico.

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“I risk everything because I have already lost everything.” Central American female migrants speak out on the migrant trail in Oaxaca, Mexico

Abstract
This article examines Central American women migrants’ decision-making and protective strategies while on the migrant trail. Through feminist research methodologies and social media networks shared by women migrants, this study addresses how physical and economic violence in Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala contributes to women’s decisions to migrate, their migration experiences, and their proactive development of networks while on the migrant trail. In-depth interviews were conducted with female migrants ages 19-46 years old in the migrant shelter ‘Hermanos en el Camino’ in Ixtepec, Oaxaca, and follow-up interviews were conducted in some migrants’ next destinations within Mexico. By including women’s own stories of violence and their formation of migrant networks, this study highlights the lived experiences of women migrants thus making them more visible international actors.

Key words: Central America, female migrants, violence, migrant networks, Mexico

Resumen
Este artículo se enfoca en un análisis de las tomas de decisiones y estrategias protectores de las migrantes centroamericanas durante su migración. Por medio de las metodologías feministas y las redes sociales usados por las mujeres entrevistadas, este estudio se enfoca en cómo la violencia física y económica en Honduras, El Salvador y Guatemala contribuye a las razones para la migración de las mujeres, sus experiencias migratorias y su desarrollo proactivo de redes sociales en el camino migratorio. Entrevistas con mujeres migrantes entre las edades de 19 a 46 fueron elaboradas en Hermanos en el Camino, un alberqüe para migrantes en Ixtepec, Oaxaca y entrevistas de
Introduction

Globally, women and girls are making often-dangerous journeys to flee areas of poverty, violence, and environmental degradation. While on the migrant trail, many women also face high risks of sexual violence and exploitation (Muiznieks 2016). The risks faced by migrants before and while on the migrant trail are gendered, yet to date too little is known about the perspectives of women migrants and the ways they manage these risks. This article focuses on the lived experiences of women migrants before and during their travel on the migrant trail from the Central American countries of Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador to the USA. We examine the migrant networks women form to help protect themselves from multi-faceted violence during a critical stage in the migration process: the migrant trail. Feminist geographer Isabel Dyck’s work, although not referring directly to migration, played an inspirational role in framing this study: “We need [to pay] close attention to the space of everyday life to keep women visible in rapidly changing world conditions, where their activities tend to slip into the shadows of dominant models in the literature” (Dyck 2005: 234).
This study includes women’s stories of their motivations for migrating and their experiences before arriving at the migrant shelter, a point in their migrant journey in which they still had critical decisions to make related to their onward trip. Politicians, police, gangs, cartels, and traffickers rely on the invisibility of migrants because it excludes them from mainstream society, effectively denying them protection of the law, thus making them more vulnerable to exploitation by criminal gangs and corrupt officials (Amnesty International 2014; Boggs 2015; Voces Mesoamericanas 2015). We used translations of women migrants’ words to illuminate their perspectives, to challenge this invisibility, and to help bring their stories to a larger public. In sharing the stories of these women, we demonstrate their agency in shaping better outcomes for themselves in the face of significant adversity. The study also shows how women increase their social capital by utilizing social media to maintain and deepen migrant networks made at the shelter, Hermanos en el Camino, in Ixtepec, Oaxaca, Mexico. We also believe that these stories provide a broader understanding of women’s experiences and strategies that can inform more humane migration policy and social programs better tailored to women’s needs.

Our study captures a liminal stage in migrant women’s lives: geographically they were neither located in their home communities nor in their desired migration destinations. Each group of women from these three different countries in Central America traveled different paths to arrive at the shelter. Furthermore, the shelter was 1143 miles from the Mexico-(Texas) U.S. border which meant that their goals were geographically and psychologically distant.

We first shed light on the context of multifaceted violence that often precipitates women’s migration in Central America (principally El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras). This is followed by a discussion of how we add to migration literature in Latin America through the use of feminist research methodologies. We then present the cases of women interviewed in a migrant shelter in Mexico. Through their voices we hear why they believed they had no other choice than to leave their
communities and family members and attempt to reach the USA. The next section shares particular cases of women who experienced violence on the migrant trail within Mexico. The closing section discusses our case within the context of women’s social capital-related strategies, particularly migrant capital garnered through migrant networks that help create safer conditions on the migrant trail.

**Background**

The migration of children from Central America received global attention in the summer of 2014, the same time period that this research was conducted. Partly in response to the so-called ‘surge’ and to the migration of adults from Central America, the USA began to exert even greater pressure on the Mexican government to extend U.S. border enforcement into southern Mexico (Miller 2014). Mexico announced its *Plan Frontera Sur* (Operation Southern Border) in July of 2014, to deter migrants from continuing their journey. Mexico deported more than 105,000 Central Americans in 2014 (Parish Flannery 2015). While Plan Frontera Sur originally slowed the movement of migrants from Central America, it also funneled migrants into more remote and dangerous channels to avoid Mexican officials (*ibid* 2015). The end of 2015 and beginning of 2016 saw an increase in women and children crossing but instead of entering southern Texas, they started entering southern Arizona to avoid the greater security presence along the Texas-Mexico border. An estimated 80 percent of these migrants had threats made against them and/or their relatives thus had clear reasons for fearing for their security in Central America (Trevizo 2016; MPI 2015) indicating a continuation of trends existing in 2014.

Since 2007, due to an increase in drug trafficking and high levels of organized violence, the three countries of Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala in Central America have had the highest sub-regional homicide rates in the world (26.5 per 100,000) (UNODC 2013). Murder rates have been rising each year in this sub-region of Central America, particularly in El Salvador and Honduras.
where gang violence is prevalent (ibid; Trevizo 2016). El Salvador had 100 murders per 100,000 citizens per in 2016 and Honduras had 60 murders per 100,000 (Watson 2016). In Honduras, femicide rates increased 263% between 2005 and 2013. In El Salvador, the number of femicides increased 140% between 2015 and 2016. Guatemala’s government also reported a marked increase in femicides in 2015 and 2016 (Folkerts, Burgi-Palomino, and Buckhout 2016). These numbers correlated with the increase in women and child migrants who were apprehended in Arizona at the U.S.-Mexico border in 2015 and early 2016 (Trevizo 2016; Swanson and Torres 2016).

The reasons people choose to leave their home countries include high levels of violence and insecurity, but also include the lack of employment opportunities, a desire for a better life, and the disparities between developed and developing nations in areas such as wages and educational opportunities (Massey 1990; Green 2008; Olivera and Furio 2006; Benería et al 2012). Economic liberalization and migration are intertwined; neoliberal policies in the 1980s and 1990s increased the number of people seeking economic opportunity elsewhere, reflected in part in an increase in undocumented migrants crossing U.S. borders (Fernandez-Kelly and Massey 2007). Economic liberalization policies in the 1980s in the three Central American countries led to greater migration flows as employment and government support for basic goods and services plummeted (Martinez 1999). The region’s environmental issues were also closely linked to economic and political conditions, and also contributed to increased migration to the USA (Reuveny 2012). Decades of instability in this sub-region exacerbated the conditions of many vulnerable households when combined with hurricanes, deforestation, and more intense tropical storms linked to climate change (Hanson and Buechler 2015).

Increasing levels of violence and poverty, and deteriorating environmental conditions in the region contributed to increased migration northward. By 2014, more Central Americans from this sub-region than Mexicans (or any other Latin Americans) were detained by the U.S. border patrol;
85% of the half a million migrants from this sub-region in Central America caught at the border were apprehended in South Texas (Root 2016). Despite extensive literature on the complex and often interconnected push/pull factors in this migration, women’s experiences of migration have received relatively scant scholarly attention.

**Gender and Migration**

Much of the migration literature on decision-making processes does not address gender, but rather focuses on either a) decisions migrants make in their country of origin on whether to migrate and which migration destinations to go to, or b) decisions in their destination country related to integration and employment. Earlier studies by, for example, Chant (1992), Hondagneu-Sotelo (1992), Lawson (1998) and Silvey and Lawson (1999) and more recent studies by Hondagneu-Sotelo and Crandford (2006), Datta (2009) and Toma and Vause (2014) have revealed how gender is a factor in such decision-making. Additional bodies of migration literature address relationships between migrant sending communities and migrants in their final migration destination (Abrego 2014; Torres and Carte 2016). Migrants on the migrant trail, however, occupy liminal spaces between their country of origin and destination country, and thereby constitute an invisible and highly vulnerable population in Mexico (Slack et al 2016; Swanson and Torres 2016; Hernández 2015; Vogt 2013; Mountz 2011; Strolling 2009; Coutin 2007, 2005). Increased border security within Mexico has increased migrants’ risk of falling into the hands of organized crime, smugglers, and corrupt Mexican officials. The systematization of kidnapping, smuggling, extortion, and trafficking are the central mechanisms through which vulnerabilities are exacerbated (Swanson and Torres 2016; Vogt 2013; Casillas 2006). Voices from such spaces call attention to and make visible male and female migrants (Kearney 1995). Understanding these spaces, particularly how women and men
interpret these places differently, helps interpret the mobility decisions that are themselves distinctly gendered.

Migration literature on Latin America has lacked a focus on female migration experiences due in part to the widely shared assumption that women and children only migrate to accompany or reunite with husbands or other family members (Mahler and Pessar 2006). More recently, studies have shown that more women are migrating alone, and not necessarily to join their husbands in the United States (Ochoa O’Leary 2008; Cerruti and Massey 2001), but to find their own employment opportunities. The term ‘feminization of migration’ describes the shift in migration patterns as women increasingly join migration flows as labor migrants (Fontes Chammartin 2002). Compared to other regions in the world, women now comprise slightly over half of migrants in Latin America (Pessar 2005; Zlotnik 2003). According to the Women’s Refugee Commission, a large number of recent Central American migrants are female, and are between the ages of five and seventeen (de Silva Iddings 2014). This is an already-vulnerable migrant population due to their young age. Previous studies have shown that women migrants are at greater risk than men of physical and/or sexual violence and death, and that in addition to gender, migrants’ vulnerability on the migrant trail is influenced by age, travel experience, and support networks (Gonzalez Arias and Aikin Araluce 2015; Ochoa O’Leary 2008; 2012; Olivera and Furio 2012). As all migrants in transit in Mexico are especially vulnerable to violence, women migrants are the most vulnerable among the vulnerable (Martinez Pizarro 2003).

As many as 20,000 migrants are kidnapped every year in Mexico earning criminals an estimated $50 million annually, but little is known about the percentage of the kidnapped who are women (Amnesty International 2014). Amnesty International reports that as many as six in ten migrant women are raped on their journey, and that abducted women and girls are more vulnerable to trafficking, including sex trafficking (ibid. 2014). Some women migrants are taking birth control as
a protective strategy, because they expect to be raped in transit through Mexico (Joffe-Block 2014). During transit, the impunity of organized crime and corrupt state officials facilitates the abuse of women (Dimmitt Gnam 2013). To limit these abuses, migrant networks can play an important role amongst migrants during their journey. As our study suggests, women have developed strategies to improve their own physical safety and their economic situation while on the migrant trail.

Beginning in 1980s, migration studies highlighted the important role migrant networks play in migratory processes. Palloni et al (2001: 1262) define migrant networks as “sets of interpersonal ties that connect migrants, former migrants, and nonimmigrants to one another through relations of kinship, friendship, and shared community origin.” These migrant networks were seen as organized upon norms of social solidarity; a gender lens, however, was rarely applied (Mahler and Pessar 2006). Studies of immigrant communities have examined how migrant networks aid newcomers in overcoming obstacles in their final destination (Ochoa O’Leary 2012; Pribilsky 2007). Some studies have revealed that migrant networks grow out of family or migrant community financial needs (Tseng 2007; Viswanathan et al., 2014), assist in obtaining employment (Rees 2007; Castles et al 2014), and help with initial settlement and subsequent community integration (Portes 1995; Strunk 2014). Other research centers on how migrant networks can strengthen and weaken over time once the immigrant population is settled into their final migration destination (Hagen 1998). Most studies on women and migrant networks have focused on women in their countries of destination (Molina 2015). Heering et al (2007) and Heering et al (2005) are among the few who highlighted issues related to women and migrant networks in countries of origin by examining household networks as a major driver for female migration in regions with a strong tradition of male migration. Only a handful of studies have examined how social capital, i.e. the quality of social ties within social networks (Naughton 2014), has the potential to create resources for migrants in the form of useful knowledge and skills when they are en route, making their journey
more efficient and less risky (Tseng 2007; Coutin 2005; De León 2012). This study adds to the gender and migration literature by focusing on women’s decision-making related to migrant networks during their migration journeys from Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala to the U.S.

Research site

The main research site for this study was the migrant shelter Hermanos en el Camino (Brothers on the Road), founded by Father Alejandro Solalinde in 2007. Hermanos en el Camino is located in the city of Ixtepec, Oaxaca (population 24,000). This migrant shelter was selected as a study site because it is a major transit point on the railroad line that starts in Arraiga, Chiapas, near the border with Guatemala and goes through Oaxaca and Veracruz states on the way to Mexico City. Migration flows at this transit point mainly originate in Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala in Central America and are headed toward south Texas, and more recently, to southern Arizona (hermanosenelcamino.org; Miller 2014).

The Hermanos en el Camino shelter in Ixtepec offered humanitarian aid to migrants such as food, water, legal, and medical help. It also provided free wireless internet, which was a service crucial for maintaining contact with other migrants. Most migrants stayed a few nights to rest and recuperate before continuing their journey north. However, many migrants came to the shelter after a physical attack and opted to stay for a few months while in the process of filing a denuncia (a formal, legal complaint with the Public Minister). If a migrant experienced a violation while in transit in Mexico, they had the right to file a denuncia against their attacker. If a migrant filed a denuncia this not only placed the violation on record, it made the migrant eligible to apply for a FM3 humanitarian visa which gives Central Americans the legal right to remain in Mexico (Frank-Vitale 2011). Most migrants who chose this option wished to obtain a way to travel legally through Mexico to get to the U.S. border.
Methods

This study focused on women migrants from this sub-region in Central America who decided to stay for a longer period of time at Hermanos en el Camino shelter following their experiences of physical violence on the migrant trail. This population of women was selected for the study, because as women who experienced violence within Mexico along the migrant trail, their lived experiences represented a sizeable population of all migrant women’s experiences as they migrated through Mexico. While many women decided to continue on their journey after experiencing an attack, this was a specific study of those women who filed formal reports against their attackers. The minimum number of days these women migrants stayed was sixty days; this was the necessary period of time it took to file a denuncia, or formal report, against their attackers. Their stay at the shelter was longer than other migrants (who typically stayed for one to two days), and facilitated a more in-depth interaction between Leigh Anne Schmidt, who conducted the interviews, and the women migrant interviewees. During their time at the shelter, women began to develop migrant networks, which served as a protective strategy once they proceeded onward with their journey.

In-depth interviews, informal conversations, and extensive ethnographic observations were conducted in Spanish by Schmidt between June-August 2014. A total of twenty in-depth interviews were conducted and all were translated from Spanish into English by Schmidt. Follow-up research by Schmidt was conducted with key informants in Monterrey, Mexico in September-October 2014, and consistent communication was maintained through October 2015 with forty percent of the interviewees through the platforms of Facebook and WhatsApp. Using the same social media that the women used to keep in touch with other migrants meant that these research methods were familiar to and accepted by migrants.

Engaged ethnography and feminist research methodologies were utilized for this study. Gangs, cartels, traffickers, and corrupt police relied on the invisibility of migrants. Sharing migrants’
words and perspectives reduced this invisibility. An engaged ethnographic approach served as the basis for how Schmidt spent time at the shelter. Participating in the daily life of the shelter during the first month, Schmidt began doing simple daily tasks: registering incoming migrants, helping distribute food, and going on walks and doing errands with migrants. These methods facilitated her conversations with women and helped the migrants understand her commitment to the study. The prior experience of both authors of living in Honduras and working with very low-income rural and urban populations facilitated cultural understanding of the migrants’ home communities and helped in the study design and fieldwork phases.

The stories of each interviewee were documented in a notebook. As Lawson (2000) describes, drawing on migrants’ own stories and using their words helps share their experiences and facilitates a better understanding of the migration process. To create a space where female voices could be heard, the researcher conducted dinámicas [interactive activities] to integrate participatory action research methods into the study (El Wood 2009; Tolhurst et al., 2012). Interviewees were asked a variety of questions such as reasons for leaving their home country, protective strategies for themselves and their children, who they were traveling with, and their final destination.

Qualitative and feminist research methods facilitated a clearer understanding of these migrant women’s lived experiences. Qualitative and participatory approaches are particularly useful for the analysis of structural power inequalities, by focusing on the subjective ways in which these inequalities shape the lived experiences of the oppressed (Cornish 2004). A feminist method, as feminist geographer Pamela Moss (1993) explained, “builds on experience and accepts subjective experiences as valid forms of existence... [A] feminist conception of social science contends that that which is experienced can be known; and that which can be known, can be changed” (48).
Feminist research methodologies can also assist in creating a context in which interviewee and interviewer/author engage in a conversation through the mutual exchange of information such as biographic information and lived experience (Fontana and Frey 2003; Buechler 2016). Establishing a conversation, particularly around the sharing of life experiences and life choices between researcher and interviewee was a key approach used in this study. Striving for more equitable relationships with interviewees in the research process was beneficial, because it provided an opportunity for Schmidt to be more than merely a social onlooker. McDowell (1992) states that, as women interviewing women, commonalities of experience are recognized and the interview process becomes a natural, mutual exchange of views. Migration scholars Torres and Carte (2014) caution though that even with the use of participatory research methodologies, there will still be vast differences between interviewer and interviewee. The use of feminist research methodologies also does not erase inequalities (Rose 1997). Schmidt was privileged with respect to the migrants especially in terms of her social class, education and citizenship in the Global North.

Upon leaving the shelter, Schmidt kept in touch with these women migrant interviewees via both social media (to bridge physical distance) and via person-to-person communication through a follow-up visit with a group of these women migrants who were living together in Northern Mexico where they stayed with the goal of continuing their journey to the USA. This follow-up research revealed how interactions at the migrant shelter helped form new migrant networks among women and how these networks helped them after they left the shelter in Ixtepec. These follow-up interactions were an important way to deepen the relationship between researcher and interviewee and have been recognized by feminist researchers as important to the development of less hierarchical relationships and to richer interview material (Buechler 2016).

In the following sections, we show that women migrants experienced violence both in their countries of origin and along the migrant trail. By sharing their stories, we present their voices and
viewpoints of why they migrated, the experiences they had along part of the migrant trail and their strategies to overcome adversity. We first present the cases of two women migrants that shed light on the context of violence that often precipitates Central American women’s migration.

**Women’s strategies as a response to violence in their home communities**

Lucinda[^1] was a 24-year old Honduran woman traveling with her younger brother, Roberto. She was a mother of a 3-year-old boy who stayed in Honduras with his grandmother. The father of her child, the love of her life, was brutally murdered by rival gang members near her hometown of Progresso. His death did not go unnoticed. Almost immediately after the murder, gang members were at her door, convinced that Lucinda and her brother were responsible for the murder. After two days of multiple threats against her family and a physical confrontation with her brother, Lucinda and Roberto fled overnight, leaving her son and mother behind.

> No I did not want to leave. But I had no choice. I had to leave because I have to keep my son safe. I couldn’t bring him with me because I have heard about the dangers of this journey. I don’t understand why anybody would want to travel with their kids. He is my son; it’s my job to keep him safe. Every night I sit in my bed and cry, I call my mom when I can just to hear his voice. If I could go back and be with him I would. But I can’t go back. I can never go back. I just have to get to the USA and make money so I can send for my mom and son to join me. Honduras is no longer my home. (Interview with Lucina, July 2, 2014)

Lucinda was suddenly forced to leave her mother and son, but also other important members of her migrant network. Lucinda’s reasons for leaving were similar to many others from Central America migrating to the United States. Structural forms of violence became palpable in
migrants’ narratives in which the fear of the state and the threat of everyday crime and violence were expressed (Vogt 2013). This lack of security created a new violence to emerge in postwar Central America (Benson et al. 2008). Ongoing insecurity and prevalence of organized crime, corruption, and gang violence have been exemplified in Honduras (Schmidt and Buechler 2015; Pérez 2011).

The local newspaper briefly mentioned the murder of Lucinda’s husband. Unfortunately, these incidents were common and after a matter of days his murder was obscured by other murders that occurred throughout Honduras. With the highest murder rate in the world in 2014, a lack of accountability was the norm (Kolb 2012). As Lucinda and other migrants explained, it is uncommon for families to report crimes to officials in Honduras, because police officers often work with gang members. This impunity led many organized crime members to act without fear of the consequences, because they knew they would not be prosecuted. Therefore, there was no other option for many than to flee.

Cynthia was a 46-year old woman from El Salvador traveling with her husband and 2-year-old son. This was her first time migrating to the United States. Similar to Lucinda, Cynthia did not choose to leave her country, she fled from the heavily armed street gang Mara Salvatrucha. Cynthia and her family were able to survive on her husband’s salary as a taxi driver, and her family-owned vegetable stand which was located in a suburb close to San Salvador. In addition, her 20-year-old daughter who was working in Las Vegas, Nevada sent monthly remittances. However, in early 2014 things changed for Cynthia’s business. The Mara Salvatrucha members forced her to pay $35 USD weekly fee or extortion money, and after a few months, paying the fee became nearly impossible. After paying this weekly fee to gang members, Cynthia was left with very little profit to provide for her family. They threatened her, telling her if she missed a payment by only a day, they would go after her and her family. This left her family no choice but to pack up their belongings and flee the country she had called home for forty-six years.
They told me they would first kill my son, then my husband, leaving me alone to bear the pain. If I still didn’t pay, they would rape and kill me. We were able to pay them at first, because we sold our television, our furniture, and most of our belongings. After a few months they decided to raise the rent by $10USD. I knew it would be impossible…. I know the dangers here in Mexico, but we have no choice. It’s better to risk our lives here, because at least we have a chance. But in El Salvador, if we stayed, I knew my son would not live to see his next birthday (interview with Cynthia, June 30, 2014).

In this sub-region, especially in El Salvador and Honduras, gang violence had replaced political violence of earlier years (Massey, Durand, and Pren 2014). Drug-fueled corruption and political instability and the deportation to Central America of criminals with guns from the USA have created an ideal breeding ground for Central American gang members to control neighborhoods, causing many to feel that justice and security could only be found outside their home country (Tuckman 2014; Olson 2015). Gang members began to collect extortion fees called la renta (rent) within many communities. This became a way for gangs to make easy money by charging people rent to keep their businesses. If people didn’t pay, gangs killed or tortured them as a way to send a message to other community members to understand how the process worked (Brenneman 2012).

The formation of criminal groups acting as agents of forced displacement related to these extortions became increasingly common, primarily in urban and suburban zones where gangs operate (Cantor 2014). Families similar to Cynthia’s were usually displaced based on their failure to pay, as attacks and threats were almost always waged against a family member, often as leverage to ensure payment. For many, if payment was impossible, the choice was to flee or die. If they returned
to the neighborhood they fled from, they were likely to be killed within days of their return (ibid 2014).

Residents could not rely on the protection of local police to bring claims against those responsible for the violence. According to the U.S. Department of State (2014), only 5 percent of crimes in El Salvador end in convictions. Both Honduras and El Salvador hosted more members of organized crime than police forces. The cases of Lucinda and Cynthia in which they were fleeing from violence illustrate the phenomenon of forced migration. Both Lucinda and Cynthia mentioned that they were very aware of the dangers in Mexico, but that the risks they faced in Mexico were much less serious than those they faced if they stayed in their home countries.

**Sexual violence along the migrant trail in Mexico**

Lupita is a 19-year-old Honduran woman who left home because she wanted to help her mother and her four siblings escape her abusive father. Although her mother often expressed her desire to leave her husband to keep her and her other children safe from his harm, they were dependent on his weekly earnings. Lupita grew up in a slum near Puerto Lempira and dropped out of school when she was nine years old to help her mother with household responsibilities. Her father found temporary work when it was available; however, sometimes weeks would go by without a job and Lupita’s family would struggle to provide enough food or pay household bills. Lupita’s dream was to “work, work, work, until I give my mom the house she deserves, away from my dad.” Two days later (after leaving home) she arrived in Tapachula, where after crossing the river she was not only robbed of her cell phone and her money, but she severely injured her foot. After walking for six hours, she met a young man who inquired if she needed help and then took her to the nearest pharmacy to buy medicine. Desperate and with no money, she accepted his invitation to stay the night in a nearby hotel. As soon as she entered the room, a gun was put to her head. There
were four other men in the room. They claimed that if she didn’t follow their directions, they would kill her. Lupita was held captive for four days and was repeatedly raped. The men told her it was her payment for the hotel room. After the fourth day, Lupita bravely ran out of the hotel room in the middle of the night when her captors were sleeping. She arrived at the shelter in Ixtepec and remained quiet for a few days because she felt too ashamed of what had transpired.

When I got here I was scared, mostly because of what had happened. It took me a while to tell people what happened to me. The first few days I had a knot in my throat where all my tears were held. I told myself I wouldn’t cry so that I can have the strength to keep going. I am going to keep going and nothing will stop me. I have to continue because I have to, I have to fight for my family. I have to fight for my mom and siblings. I feel shame because of what happened to me. But I need to keep moving forward. (Interview with Lupita July 21, 2014).

The increase in vulnerable populations migrating through Mexico has resulted in a dramatic increase in violence against women during their migration journey (Slack et al., 2013; Slack et al 2016). Estimates indicate that eighty percent of women and girls crossing into the United States through Mexico are raped while in-transit (Goldberg 2014). A study of migrants and staff in migrant shelters across Mexico by a network of sixteen organizations in Mexico that work to defend migrants, REDODEM, revealed that the percentage of crimes categorized as sexual abuse or rape of migrants traveling through Mexico increased by 50% from 2014 to 2015 (REDODEM 2016). Numbers of sexual assaults were often underreported, especially where victims were undocumented migrants who feared deportation if they came forward (Menjivar and Bejarano 2004). Immigrant women crossing borders already experience multiple vulnerabilities due to poverty, racism, sexism
and legal status and often feel they are to blame for sexual assaults because they did not fight back or had no other choice but to consent (Simmons et al 2015). Rape can be perpetrated by guides, fellow migrants, criminals, or governmental officials (Goldberg 2014) and is sometimes used as a form of payment, such as in the case of Lupita. Kidnapping is also an increasingly common threat (Slack 2015). However, these abuses are rarely documented due to the lack of trust of law enforcement officials amongst migrants.

Unfortunately, women and witnesses tend to be reluctant to confide in law enforcement officials, as many victims are merely seen as illegal immigrants who will be quickly processed and deported back to their country of origin. Migrants are often criminalized which also means that the more common means to alleviate trauma such as access to rape crisis centers are rarely provided for these women. Female migrant victims do not receive the services they desperately need, leading to underreporting and consequent inability to prosecute perpetrators (Simmons et al. 2015).

Lupita’s case of reporting her violators was unfortunately an exception, not the norm. Most women sexually assaulted in Mexico chose to continue on their journey because they feared deportation or were in a hurry to continue their journey north. This has left a high number of perpetrators in Mexico free from punishment, and has increased the chances of repeat crime. Between 2008 and 2011, Mexican courts did not make a single conviction or decision related to a migrant rape case (Corcoran 2014). Rapists included organized crime members, local authorities, and ordinary civilians. The use of birth control as a preventative measure against rapists is often the only choice many females have when making the decision to migrate through Mexico.

**Slow violence of poverty leading to economic and physical insecurity and migration**

Rob Nixon developed the term ‘slow violence’, arguing in an interview:
We are accustomed to conceiving of violence as immediate and explosive, as erupting into instant, concentrated visibility. But I wanted to revisit this assumption and consider the relative invisibility of slow violence. By that I mean a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but instead incremental, whose calamitous repercussions are postponed for years or decades or centuries (In Dawson 2011:1).

Nixon was referring to slow processes of climate change, toxic waste spills, and other environmental effects on low-income populations (Nixon 2011). However, slow violence for this study is relevant as seen in women’s experiences of inhumane conditions including inadequate shelter and hunger as well as physical violence in their homes, communities and on the migrant trail.

Anita is a 41-year-old Salvadoran woman from the town of San Vincente traveling alone. For fifteen years she was with an abusive husband who then threw her out on the streets, leaving her and her five children without money or a place to live: “I didn’t want to live. I wanted to die. I had no man, no money, no home. To see your children without anything is nothing any mother should experience. I risk everything because I have lost everything. Without my children, I have nothing” (Interview with Anita, July 23, 2014). Anita lived on the streets for over a year; she mentioned she rented a house for her children but was unable to live there because she did not get along with the landlord. After a year of finding odd jobs, spending a majority of the time on the streets and desperate for a better life for herself and her family, Anita left El Salvador with the dream of working in the United States:

To leave your country is not easy. I don’t know this place; I don’t know what to do. I miss my children but I know that leaving to work is the best decision. However, right now I’m alone and I only have God. (Interview with Anita, July 23, 2014)
An increasing number of women from Central America migrated alone to find work to support themselves economically (Green 2011). The economic reforms implemented in Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador since the 1980s (Cruz 2015) to privatize state companies and introduce more flexibility to labor laws contributed to some fiscal stability and partial economic recovery, but these changes also increased social inequalities. Labor flexibility did not help the large numbers of untrained and younger members of society to secure stable jobs that paid a living wage and the privatization of state-owned companies increased the vulnerability of thousands of skilled workers. This rise in vulnerable populations caused an expansion of street gangs and criminal organization, which transformed the social life within these fragile communities (ibid 2015; Dudley 2011).

Poor economic opportunities and increasing violence are key reasons why Central American women are leaving their homes. Gendered inequalities in the country of origin are a driving force of migration (Kofman and Raghuram 2015). Ninety-two percent of the interviewees in this study had at least one child; many expressed the burden of providing for their families, often going days without eating while on the migrant trail so they could provide for the children migrating with them. Latin American mothers are expected to be responsible for the upbringing of their children and as a result, women migrate partly to fulfill gendered expectations of motherhood (Abrego 2014). Fifty percent of our interviewees were the sole providers for their children, as many either had left their husbands and/or did not have a relationship with their children’s fathers. Unemployment must be seen to be a form of slow violence that, coupled with physical violence, constituted important triggers for female migration. While research often examines economic reasons for migrating as an independent variable, it is becoming increasingly important to understand how these two causes are closely related and difficult to separate.

Maria is a 43-year old Guatemalan woman from Guatemala City traveling alone. This was her fifth trip to the United States. Maria was married to a man when she was 16 years old. Maria
gave birth to three sons during her first marriage, and stayed home to take care of her children while her husband worked as a taxi driver. By the time Maria was 25, her husband became very abusive to her and her children. Finally, after a few years, Maria left her husband and took her sons to live with her mother in a nearby neighborhood. After a year, Maria decided to migrate to the United States to live with a childhood friend in Houston. Maria successfully made it to Houston and met an undocumented Mexican worker. For the next ten years she resided with this man in Houston while working under the table as a homecare assistant. She was deported in 2014 and was living in Tapachula on the Guatemala/Mexico border because she was unable to find work in her home country. Finding a secure job was difficult in this area, especially for women living alone. Maria was desperate to rejoin her boyfriend in Houston. After befriending a few women in the area, Maria learned that the most lucrative employment option for her was to join her new friends and work in the brothel close to her apartment:

These women told me I could make $300 USD a week. I was making $50 a week as a waitress, so I figured I could save up the money I needed for a guide to get back to Houston. The first night I was with a man I cried the entire time. But then while I was working I got used to it. I became numb. But then when I was alone at night I cried. The thought of my family finding out what I was doing made me sick. But I just kept thinking it was what I had to do to get back to the United States so that I could feed my sons back in Guatemala. Then one day my “boss” started taking more wages out of my salary, and after a month I was only making $150 USD a week. I didn’t try to fight him, because I heard about one girl who said something to him and she was out on the streets that night, left with nothing. I heard another story of a girl who refused to pay. Two days later her body was found near the river.”

(Interview with Maria, August 1, 2014)
Maria then escaped from this work and her boss and came to the shelter in Ixtepec on her journey to the U.S.

In the past few years, global scrutiny has led to the closure of many bars that prostitute Central American women and girls (Martinez 2013). Human trafficking and prostitution have reached high levels in Mexico’s southern border region, especially Tapachula in the state of Chiapas near the Mexico-Guatemala border (Ballinas 2007; Melendez 2007). Often, female migrants are tricked and trapped by organized crime and human traffickers, or robbed of documents. Women are often told that the only way to recuperate their missing documents is to pay for them through prostitution (Global Alliance in Traffic Against Women 1999).

Many women who leave their homes in Central America for a better life in the USA do not make it much further than Southern Mexico. Many are either forced into prostitution or autonomously decide to participate in the lucrative sex trade (Logan 2006). Maria’s case illustrates a sense of agency in her decision to work on the border as a prostitute. While she was not forced into this line of work, she was a victim of extortion when her boss demanded a higher percentage of her daily wages and was left with no option but to pay him. Maria also expressed a level of shame in her line of work, and admitted to going months without speaking to her children for fear they would discover her secret and disown her. Unfortunately, in the absence of other viable economic opportunities for women to provide for their families and pay for their onward journey to the U.S., working in the migrant sex trade was often the most lucrative option.

**Migrant networks as a protective strategy to address violence**

The importance of social capital for migrants before, during, and after migration has been widely acknowledged (Massey et al., 1987; Menjivar 1997; Boyd 1989). The set of weak to strong social ties people obtain via current or prior migratory experiences establishes an individual’s
migrant network. The connections within their network offer a valuable source of social capital in-transit. As a result, those with migrant friends or relatives were more likely to migrate than those lacking this social capital (Massey and Aysa-Lastra 2011).

Social capital can provide new immigrants important information for daily needs such as food, transportation, shelter, and potential jobs (Garcia 2005). Once these networks are established, the relationships become stronger and are sustained over time (Rees 2007). Since the potential of these networks to enable migrants to obtain tangible resources is considerable, it is common for newcomers to desire to become part of migrant groups (Garcia 2005). Social capital enables individuals to obtain human capital (skills, experience), which can lead to the acquisition of material capital (property, tools, wealth) (Coleman 1988).

A gendered analysis of social capital and how women use these networks has received far less attention in the migration literature (Ochoa O’Leary 2012). Research has examined how social networks aid women during migration and how these networks spread across space including across international borders, and over extended periods of time (Wilson 2009). However, studies have suggested that migrant women are less likely than men to accumulate social capital via relationships outside their family or neighborhoods (Granberry and Marcelli 2007). While men’s social networks, like women’s, are also kin-mediated, their networks are more likely to include a wider set of networks. Such research asserts that as long as networks are perceived as resources, gendered patterns of discrimination will ensure that women will experience barriers in accessing such resources widely available to men (Silvey and Elmhirst 2003). Despite considerable research that describes the significance of social networks for migrants, very few studies have examined how women utilize social networks during the migration process. These networks extend to include non-kin.
In this study of Central American women migrants in Mexico, we found that migrant networks provided a degree of security for female migrants, particularly in the context of extreme violence within Mexico. Women migrants in this study often congregated together with other women and with women traveling with a husband, as they felt traveling in groups would keep them and their children safer. A significant part of this research entailed research methods that included daily activities such as dinámacas with women in their shelter dormitory. These activities ranged from stress relief and self-esteem techniques, to dance, and group work. Other themes encouraged conversation and discussion amongst women and focused on family, children, loved ones, and loss. The dinámacas not only provided women an opportunity to express their fears and experiences during their migration, it also gave them an opportunity to get to know one another and build relationships so they could feel a sense of belonging and connection. It was during these activities and informal conversations during their free time that stronger bonds formed. Most migrant networks were created at the shelter because women were living and sharing meals together there for consecutive days, and sometimes even weeks. Thirty-eight percent of women interviewed decided to travel onward with other women they had met in the migrant shelter.

Too little is also known about social media use by women within migrant networks. Online communication has been included in the term ‘network capital’, or:

...mobile phones, Internet access points, and so on, [which] organise and orchestrate networks, especially...those ties that live beyond the reach of ...face-to-face relations. This capital makes the world spatially and temporally smaller by affording long bridges and fast connections between geographically dispersed people... (Larsen et al 2006: 263).
In our study, social media, Skype and follow-up interviews as research methods revealed that even among those who did not travel onward together, most women continued to stay in touch with each other after leaving the shelter. Women tried to surmount difficulties related to continuing their journey to the USA through the help of female networks and support. These networks provided women information on safer spaces and employment opportunities within Mexico and the USA. The support they gained was not lost once they reached the U.S; they retained the skills and vital network of support garnered on the migrant trail.

Follow-up interviews revealed concrete ways women maintained and used these contacts. One woman who remained in the shelter kept in contact via Facebook and Whatsapp with a new friend she made in the shelter in Ixtepec who had continued her journey north. The migrants preferred to use this method over cell phone calls because internet access was free and international cell phone calls or texts were relatively expensive and cell phones could be stolen. Due to this online communication, the woman decided to leave the shelter to meet this new friend in Monterrey so the two could travel together. “I keep in contact with her almost every day. She told me there was work in Monterrey and to meet her there so we could live together and save money and cross the border together.” (Interview with Maria, November 15, 2014) Many of these women met in the shelter told them of a family contact in Monterrey who owned a small house. They contacted the family via Whatsapp and not only made arrangements to rent that house but also obtained information on housecleaning and laundry jobs in Monterrey. This case was not unusual. More than sixty percent of the women interviewed at the shelter kept in contact with each other via technology such as WhatsApp or Facebook after leaving the shelter. These contacts also provided women a way to receive information about safer travel methods such as where the most migrant check points were, the least expensive bus lines and safe places to stay. One woman stated that she was grateful for the daily dinámicas in the shelter in Ixtepec: “These dinámicas helped me with my friendships at the shelter
and now because of these daily activities I made a new friend and we plan to travel together to the border” (Interview with Anita, 15 August 2014).

The maintenance of migrant networks initiated at the shelter in Ixtepec was made possible by social media because in the absence of in-person contact, they were still able to communicate with each other. As mentioned above, ninety percent of the participants in this study were in the process of applying for a humanitarian visa in Mexico. Two of these women had met in the shelter and decided to travel to Mexico City together where there were more job prospects. After a few weeks, three other women from the shelter joined these two women living in Mexico City and the five women found a small apartment to rent while they were waiting for their humanitarian visa. In March 2015 three of the women still worked and lived together in Mexico City and the other two women had successfully migrated to the United States; they all continued to keep in touch via social media. These migrant networks were important in the context of insecurity because they replaced women’s long-established social networks in their countries of origin. Many migrant women interviewed claimed they had very little time to plan their trips and thus could not fully reap the benefits from knowledge they had gained from current or previous migrants within their larger social networks. As the cases presented above revealed, this was due to gang violence and insecurity that caused forced and sudden migration, often under the cover of darkness.

**Conclusions**

This study provided a micro-level examination of women’s lived experience of violence (economic or slow violence and physical violence) preceding and during forced migration. A feminist perspective and the use feminist research methods that included the use of the women’s stories captured via interviews, participant observations, informal conversations and online communications shed light on women’s decisions to migrate and their lived experiences on the
migrant trail. The aim of this study was to “keep women visible in rapidly changing world conditions” (Dyck 2005: 234) within the dangerous locus of the migrant trail. Gaining a better understanding of these women’s experiences and strategies was a precursor to facilitating change, or as feminist researcher Pamela Moss (1993) has stated “…that which can be known, can be changed” (48). The migrant trail is a stage in the migratory process that has been understudied in Geography and in migration literature on Latin America in general.

Recent U.S. policies and increased militarization on both the northern and southern borders of Mexico have addressed migration from an enforcement stance, and, as such, largely fail to address many of the root causes of migration for women and men from Central America. These policies also did not offer humanitarian protection. Large numbers of migrants have applied for refugee status in the U.S., but only about 4 percent of asylum claims from Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Salvadorans were granted (Lee 2014), an extremely low percentage for countries with the highest murder rates in the world. Within Mexico, asylum applications for humanitarian visas tripled between 2013 and 2015 and continued to rise dramatically in 2016 (Linthicum 2016).

Interviews in the migrant shelter also provided insight into how women who experienced violence on the migrant trail gained social capital through migrant networks, particularly fellow female migrants. Follow-up research offered insights into how these relationships and networks helped women migrants with their journeys onward through Mexico. By traveling and living together and/or keeping in touch via social media, many study participants claimed that their new relationships with other female migrants gave them vital information to remain as safe as possible and procure housing and employment. Social media was a key component in maintaining women migrants’ social networks with non-kin.

Undocumented migrants have been denied basic human rights primarily because they are criminalized as “illegal” by law enforcement agencies. However, by providing female migrants a
space to voice their unique lived experiences, this study highlighted the women’s agency in their efforts to obtain a more physically and economically secure future for themselves and their families. A focus on women in transit on the migrant trail revealed that women’s strategies were a response to the high levels of violence they faced in their countries of origin and the high levels of physical and economic violence experienced once again during their migration journeys. Through better knowledge of women migrants’ experiences and strategies, local to federal agencies in Central America, Mexico and the USA could work separately and in tandem (reversing the trend in the early days of the Trump administration) to support and augment women’s strategies with the goal of better protecting these international workers and pillars of support for family in Central America.

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[1] Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant.

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[1] The authors resisted using the term ‘Northern Triangle’ that encompasses Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala due to its roots in neoliberal trade agreements and its current use internationally as a derogatory term for this sub-region (Chavez and Avalos 2014).