

A SAFE SPACE ON STAGE

How theatre is helping Central American women cope with the perils of migrating to the United States

POSTED BY ALANNA MITCHELL ON FEBRUARY 28, 2019

It's one of the most inflammatory political issues in North America: the fact that people from Central America are trying to make their way to the United States in search of a better life. Building a wall between that country and Mexico to keep migrants out was a rallying cry of American President Donald Trump before he got elected. Today, his insistence on it is even more impassioned.

That has led to a string of disturbing scenes at the border, including thousands of migrant children being held in government-run immigrant detention centres in the United States, separated from their parents.

But lost among all the tragedies unfolding on the nightly news is a hidden phenomenon. While most of the migrants are male, more and more are female, a trend known as the feminization of migration. And the vast majority of these women — 60 to 70 per cent — experience sexual violence on their journeys north, says Judith Erazo, coordinator of the migration program of Equipo de Estudios Comunitarios y Acción Psicosocial, or ECAP, a human rights research organization in Guatemala City, Guatemala's capital.

The figures come from a groundbreaking \$400,000 [study](#) financed by IDRC and conducted by ECAP and two other human rights organizations in Mexico, Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Matías de Córdova A.C. and Voces Mesoamericanas, Acción con Pueblos Migrantes, Asociación Civil. Completed in the fall of 2018, it's one of the few studies to examine mass migration from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras through the lens of the female experience.

Who is attacking the women, and in what ways? Where and at what point in their journeys are the attacks taking place? And how can the organizations help women understand their rights, cope with the aftermath of the violence and perhaps prevent it? The findings are shocking. Violence and the lack of human rights permeates nearly every phase of the women's lives — from when they leave home, to the journey itself, to where they end up and even back in their villages if they're forced to return. "Gender-based violence is a constant factor in their lives," says Erazo. "There are no safe spaces."

The assailants range from other migrants to the human traffickers known as "coyotes," to police, immigration officers and even bankers who force sex for loans or better interest rates. Others are members of youth gangs who single out girls as young as 13 and force them into sexual relationships with threats. Some women left behind in Central America when their relatives migrate also face violence — not from gangs, traffickers or the authorities but from fellow villagers who are owed money by someone who was desperate to leave.



Women rehearse a play called *Svayich Antsetik* (Women's Dream) in San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico, in 2017. (Photo: Katherine Jaschewski)

In some cases, the women consider their bodies akin to ATMs, forced to trade sexual access for safety, Erazo says. It's sexual extortion. It's knitted into the fabric of society, part of a machismo attitude toward women.

And that means the solutions are complex, Erazo says. They revolve around informing migrating, frightened, traumatized women and girls of their rights. How to do that? One innovative way is to use theatre, a tradition known as theatre of the oppressed, which originated in Brazil in the 1970s under the guidance of theatre director Augusto Boal. The approach has limitations for migrants, because women who are constantly on the move can't take part. Nevertheless, 300 women and girls have so far been in theatrical productions in several parts of Mexico, says Markus Gottsbacher, the IDRC officer overseeing the study.

Because the plays are performed in parks for a wide audience and feature compelling narratives and beautiful set designs, they offer the chance to teach an entire community — including those who are illiterate — about a topic, Erazo says. What's more, she adds, women who have been through sexual violence are finding some solace through writing their own plays for the stage. "The idea is that they recreate what they have been through and how it has affected them. The plays can have a therapeutic effect."

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READING AS THINKING

1. This story covers a sensitive topic. Take a moment to reflect on the information you just read. Write down the feelings you had after reading this story and any questions you were left with:

PERSONAL REFLECTION:	UNANSWERED QUESTIONS:

2. What is the main issue being discussed in this story?

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3. What are some reasons why people migrate?

a. _____

b. _____

c. _____

d. _____

e. _____

4. What is the difference between a migrant and a refugee? Consider how both are perceived or presented in the media and by political organizations.

5. The Trump administration in the United States has adopted an anti-immigration stance, whereas Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's immigration policy is comparatively open in an effort to attract a diversity of people. What are some of the arguments that political parties use to support their anti-immigration or pro-immigration policies?

ARGUMENTS AGAINST OPEN IMMIGRATION POLICIES:	ARGUMENTS FOR OPEN IMMIGRATION POLICIES:
a.	a.
b.	b.
c.	c.
d.	d.
e.	e.

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6. The story explains that women and girls are participating in theatrical productions to inform others about their rights and the dangers they may face during their journeys. This approach has limitations, but it has benefits too. Provide some examples of each below:

LIMITATIONS OF THIS APPROACH:	BENEFITS OF THIS APPROACH:
a.	a.
b.	b.
c.	c.

7. Think about some other approaches that could be used at the local, national and international scale to address the issues raised in the story. What approaches would you want to see being used?

Think-Pair-Share

Think

8. What is the feminization of migration? Why do you think this is happening? What issues/dangers are linked to this?

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Pair

9. Discuss your answer to question 8 with a partner. Discuss the reasons why the two of you think this subject is an important topic and why global efforts should be made to increase awareness. Design an awareness campaign that you feel would be effective. While doing so, consider the following:
 - a. Who: Which demographic would you like to reach? Whose assistance do you need to help make this a successful campaign?
 - b. What: What is the focus of your campaign? What activities/events do you envision taking place? What is your take-away message?
 - c. Where: Where will these events take place? Is this a local, regional or global campaign? Where should you advertise your campaign?
 - d. When: Are there specific dates/weeks/months key to the success of your campaign? When should you advertise your campaign? When do you want to see change taking place?
 - e. Why: How do you plan to explain why this campaign is necessary/important?
 - f. How: What resources will you need to make this campaign a success?

Share

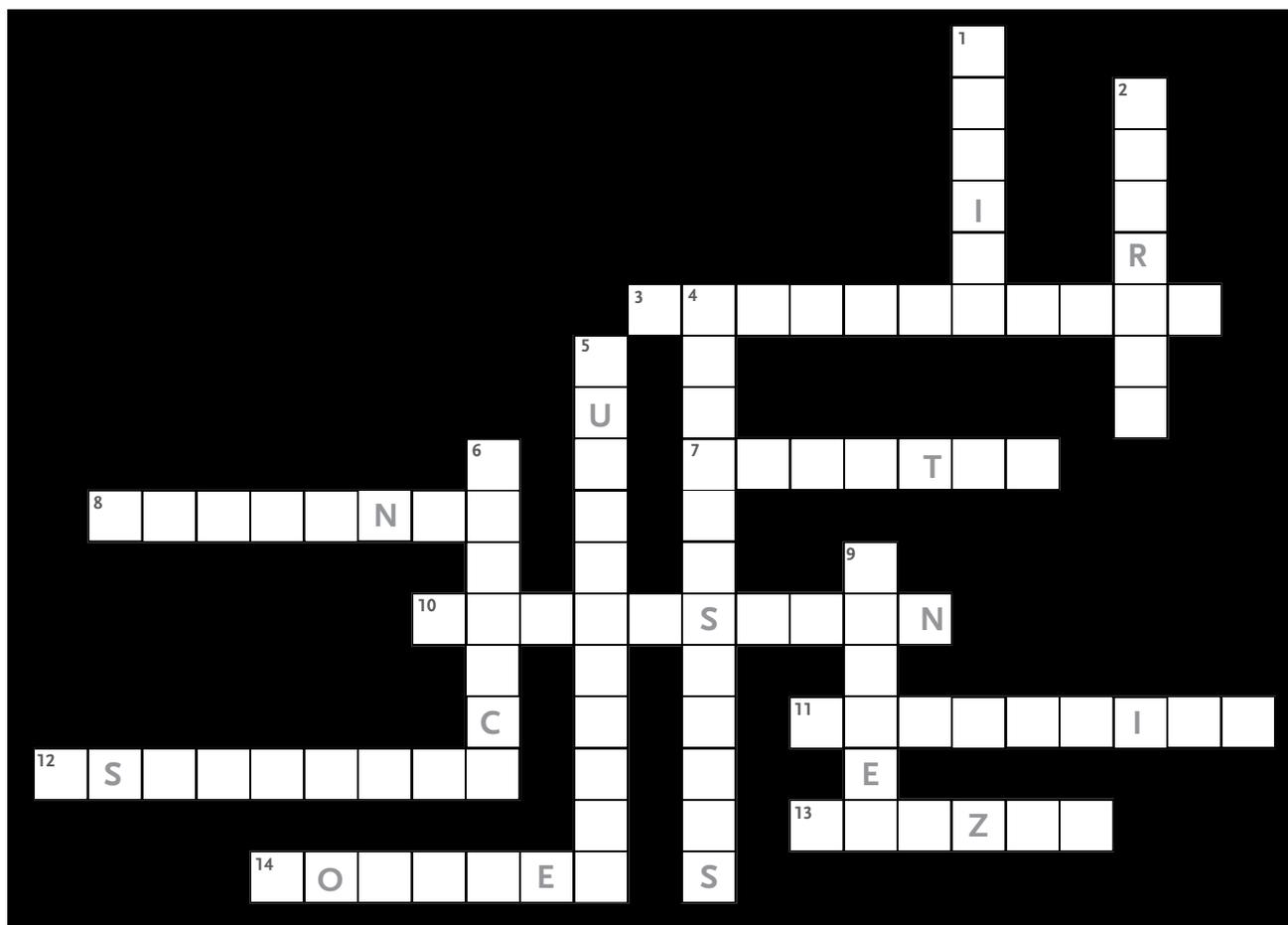
10. Form a sharing circle with your classmates and your teacher. By sitting in a circle, and facing your classmates, you will be establishing a safe space where everyone is connected in a positive way. You should feel comfortable sharing your personal opinions and any questions you may have. Be sure to listen to your classmates with an open mind and heart. Share what you have learned from reading the story, as well as your ideas for an awareness campaign. If you are not comfortable speaking about what you have read, write a journal entry or letter expressing your feelings. Note to teachers: If the class would like to share what they have learned with the rest of the school, encourage them to design a play akin to the ones discussed in the story.

Online

1. [Futures without violence](#)
2. [That's not cool](#)
3. [Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada](#)
4. Migration: [An Empathy Exercise](#)
5. First Nations Pedagogy online – [Talking Circles](#)
6. The [Theatre of the Oppressed](#) as created by Brazilian theatre director Augusto Boal

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CROSSWORD:

Across

3. A Brazilian theatre director and political activist (two words)
7. A general term for acting, producing, directing or writing plays
8. Behaviour intended to hurt someone or damage something
10. When a political regime implements an unjust state of control on society
11. A general process of giving or receiving information
12. A person who physically attacks another
13. The largest South American country
14. Human traffickers are known as this to police in South America

Down

1. A country between the United States and Central America
2. A person who moves from one place to another in search of employment or a better quality of life
4. The country to the immediate south of Canada (two words)
5. Freedoms to which all humans are entitled (two words)
6. Showing regard for a person's feeling, rights or traditions
9. A line separating two political or geographical areas