

Road fraught with danger for female migrants, student research finds

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Sarah Corning investigated the plight of migrant women leaving Central America. Credit: Dan Addison, University Communications

Each year, women flee Central America seeking a better life. Many want a better life in the United States, some settle in Mexico and others do not

have a plan. In this journey, these migrants face a series of hazards, from getting their money stolen to being physically and sexually assaulted to having their children endangered.

Despite the dangers, this wave of migrants will continue, according to University of Virginia third-year political and social thought major Sarah Corning, who spent last summer in Tapachula, Mexico, researching the experience of [women](#) who cross the border into Mexico. Corning received a Harrison Undergraduate Research Award to fund her work.

"People are migrating because they need to and the process of trying to resettle somewhere includes dangers, challenges and obstacles that many Americans do not understand or realize," Corning said.

With much of the current focus on the immigration problems at the U.S. southern border, Corning went to Mexico's southern border, to see what the border experience was like there. She said that once in Mexico it could take these women from Central America months, possibly years, to cross Mexico in their journey northward. Corning carried with her questions of what that journey entailed.

"I became really interested in the transit period which is less reported on when we talk about migration," Corning said. "I had a lot of questions about what the transit period was like for women – what challenges do they face, what is the nature of the general violence, sexual violence, how can they find protection, how are they protected, how are they not and what is that time like for them when they are trying to migrate to the U.S.?"

To answer her questions, Corning, who has traveled extensively during her life and is fluent in Spanish, went to Tapachula, a small city, low and sprawling, in the Chiapas province, a half hour inside Mexico from the Guatemalan border. Tapachula is the first stop inside Mexico for many

migrants, a transit city. Corning worked with the United Nations, which has a small office in Tapachula, promising to share her findings with the UN.

Women face many hazards as they migrate, Corning found, such as being exploited by temporary employers and smugglers, running out of money, and physical and [sexual violence](#). And violence is what put many of them on the road in the first place.

In her report, Corning said the threats of violence are severe for women in El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua, the "Northern Triangle" of Central America, citing a report by the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees.

"Of the women interviewed, 85 percent reported that they lived in neighborhoods under control of the 'maras' (criminal armed groups) or local gangs, and 64 percent reported that they had been targets of direct threats or attacks," Corning wrote in her report, citing the UN Commissioner. "Women are threatened with the murder or forced disappearance of loved ones. Many people have to pay a 'cuota,' a tax to the gangs for living in a certain neighborhood or when commuting to certain areas. The maras have a significant impact on the daily lives of women in these countries, and many women will spend most of their time at home to avoid gun fights and direct threats."

While avoiding violence outside the home, women can also face domestic abuse, from which there is little recourse. Corning said the police often treat domestic abuse as a private matter and will not investigate. There are few mechanisms in place for women to escape retaliation for having reported an incident, she said. One event can be the impetus for women leaving, and other times it is the escalation of violence that becomes intolerable, to the point where the women flee.

"Migration is a last resort," Corning said. "There is a report that 60 percent of women try to migrate within their country before they migrate internationally. Then they make this decision knowing they could get stuck in Mexico, they could die, they could get hurt, they could be assaulted and their children could get hurt. It is not a decision that is taken lightly."

While the U.S. is usually the goal, Mexico itself is a barrier.

"The Mexican southern border is comparatively small and from my conversations getting across is not the hardest part," Corning said. "The journey through Mexico is more of 'the wall,' more of the obstacle than the border itself."

To get through Mexico, many migrants rely on smugglers, who may abuse and exploit them, as well as simply steal their money and abandon them. Human smuggling and trafficking is a billion-dollar business annually and among the top concerns for governments and aid organizations.

"Migrants are susceptible to deception by traffickers because they are in need of help, and usually would not know if a trafficker is lying because of how complex immigration policy can be," Corning said in her report. "Migrant women, especially minority women, are particularly vulnerable and are targeted by traffickers. People working on the margins of legality are easier targets of lies, violence and coercion. Often times, migrants have little access to legal aid services, which can result in their unjust deportation or treatment that violates their basic rights, documented or undocumented."

While the migrants are in Mexico, many of them need money, Corning said, which means trying to get jobs, which Mexican business owners are reluctant to give them because they don't know how long the migrants

will remain there and some hold racial and ethnic prejudices. Government agencies and aid organizations are trying to improve business owners' views of migrants, but even so, most of the jobs go to men, limiting women's opportunities largely to domestic help, restaurant work and sex work, all of which pose risks.

"Being undocumented, you don't have much legal recourse and you don't have a lot of power over your employment," Corning said. "This was the biggest issue and a lot of my conversations were around women working as maids in a house and having no recourse if they are overworked, underpaid or they are not paid at all. Some were abused by the families in some way."

Some of the women have formed support groups to exchange information and not feel isolated, she said. Especially among the isolated are the sex workers, according to Corning, some of whom are trafficked into the trade and others who join voluntarily. Many of them do not receive good sexual health information or treatment, and are treated with derision by many levels of society.

"One of the most impactful conversations for me was talking to a woman who educates [migrant](#) women on sexual health, their rights and options because sexual health is rarely taught well," Corning said. "A lot of women don't have the right information to begin with and when they are intentionally given the wrong information, it makes them more vulnerable and with fewer options."

Although Tapachula is a [human trafficking](#) hub, it was difficult to research the sex trade, Corning said, because whether the women entered it voluntarily or were trafficked, it was mostly an underground business.

For the women who do find work, Corning said child care becomes a major issue. Some of the shelters set up for migrants offer child care,

but this is very limited.

Even though Mexico has softened its stance towards migrants over the past 50 years, and they are entitled to receive medical care in any public hospital, health care can still be an issue. Public health insurance covers some hospital costs but only for 90 days.

"However, many doctors and nurses are prejudiced against migrants and do not want to use their time treating them," Corning wrote in a summary of her research. "For migrant women who work as sex workers, the discrimination is severe."

Denise Walsh, associate professor in the Woodrow Wilson Department of Politics and in the Department of Women, Gender & Sexuality, has been Corning's mentor for the migration research. Walsh, who is also a founding co-director of the Power, Violence and Inequality Collective in the College of Arts & Sciences, praised Corning for having an impressive record and talent for an undergraduate.

"Sarah was able to undertake this project because she had forged strong relationships with several organizations, most notably the United Nations," Walsh said. "The National Center for Civil and Human Rights is interested in including some of her findings in their public information campaigns. For a second-year undergraduate to have conceived of this research project, developed these extensive contacts and successfully conducted this research, is in my experience unprecedented."

Corning wants to frame the debate differently because the people who are reaching the U.S. southern border are only a small fraction of the people seeking a safer life for themselves and their families.

"People need to accept that no unilateral governmental action is going to stop immigration – in the history of our country, nothing has completely

stopped immigration," she said. "I would like to see new legislation on workers' visas and an improvement to how we process asylum cases. We have been breaking from international law by not letting asylees cross our border – detention is not one of our actual immigration avenues. Unfortunately, the conversation around the 'border wall,' which I will say for the record is proven not to be effective in stopping or decreasing immigration, distracts us from what we could actually do."

Corning thinks "immigration fear-mongering" prevents a productive discussion of the migration situation.

"My biggest question is now, how can we roll back detention and the border wall and work on humane immigration policy?" Corning said. "There needs to be an overhaul of immigration and asylum policy in the U.S. and many other countries, especially in regards to how women are treated."

"This project will really never be over. Unfortunately, I think migration will only increase before the world starts changing in attitude and policy."

Corning's research is already destined for several places. The United Nations International Organization for Migration, out of whose office Corning worked in the summer, is getting a copy. Neesa Medina, an activist and sociologist working for the Center for Women's Rights in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, whom Corning interviewed, has requested a copy.

Corning thinks her work might help fill in some of the gaps in how various agencies and nongovernmental organizations in the aid industry are working with migrants.

"I in no way think my research is going to revolutionize the migrant

situation in Tapachula," Corning said. "There is no way that my research is going to make a doctor treat Central American women better in a hospital, but I do think there are aspects of how these agencies are interacting with each other that can be more effective and productive, and I think the main problem that could be met in that city is information. Just flat out information."

Provided by University of Virginia

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