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Moving targets: The experiences of LGBTIQ+ people on the move across the Americas

About this paper

This paper explores the migration experiences of LGBTIQ+ people on the move towards the United States from Latin America and the Caribbean. It includes analysis and findings on reasons for departure, protection risks, perceptions of dangers en route, and the specific needs of LGBTIQ+ people in transit. The data was gathered in Tijuana, Monterrey and Mexico City (Mexico) through the 4Mi project.¹ This paper was made possible thanks to the individuals and organizations who shared their experiences and knowledge.

Acronyms and key terminology²

SOGIESC: Is an acronym for sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and sex characteristics. "People with diverse SOGIESC" is an umbrella term used to describe all people whose sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics sit outside culturally mainstream categories.³

LGBTIQ+: Is an acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, and other SOGIESC identities other than cisgender heterosexual. The plus represents people with diverse SOGIESC who identify using other terms.⁴

Sexual orientation: Is the way in which a person's physical, romantic and/or emotional desires are directed.⁵ Some sexual orientations include homosexuality, bisexuality, demisexuality, pansexuality, asexuality, heterosexuality, among others.⁶

Gender identity: Is a person's perception of their own gender, i.e., whether they consider themselves a man, woman, non-binary, agender, genderqueer, genderfluid, or a combination of one or more of these definitions. This perception derives from individual experiences and feelings and may or may not correspond with a person's physiology or assigned sex at birth.⁷

Gender expression: Is the outward manifestation of a person's gender, incorporating behaviour and outward appearance, including clothing, hair, make-up, body language, and voice.⁸

Trans/transgender: Is an umbrella term used to refer to people whose gender identity does not match their sex assigned at birth. It encompasses a wide diversity of gender identities, including transgender and transsexual, a term commonly used and preferred by some in the Americas. Trans people can live their lives with or without making changes to their body or dress. They may or may not make changes to their legal status or pursue medical treatment or surgeries.⁹

Non-binary: Is an umbrella term for gender identities that sit within, outside of, across or between the spectrum of the male and female binary. A non-binary person might identify as gender fluid, genderqueer, gender neutral, androgynous, or agender, without a feeling of having any gender or having neutral feelings about gender.¹⁰

Cisgender/cis: A person whose personal identity and gender correspond with their sex assigned at birth.¹¹

LGBTIQ+-phobia: Rejection, repudiation, prejudice, disdain, or discrimination towards people who identify themselves as LGBTIQ+ or towards people associated with them, based upon their SOGIESC.¹²

LGBTIQ+-phobic violence: A hate crime targeted at a person because of their sexual orientation or perceived gender identity. This also includes sexual violence.¹³

- 1 For more information on 4Mi, see: Mixed Migration Centre, MMC (n.d.) [4Mi: in-depth insights on mixed migration dynamics](#).
- 2 For definitions of "sex", "gender", and other concepts related to this text that are not contained in this section, see: World Health Organization, WHO. (n.d.) [Gender and health](#) | Child, Family, Community Australia, CFCA. (2022) [LGBTIQ+ glossary of common terms – CFCA Resource Sheet](#)
- 3 International Organization for Migration, IOM (2021). [Glossary of terms about people with diverse SOGIESC](#) (p. 1)
- 4 IOM (2021). [Op. Cit.](#) (p.1)
- 5 Human Rights Watch, HRW (2020). ["Every Day I Live in Fear" Violence and Discrimination Against LGBT People in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, and Obstacles to Asylum in the United States](#).
- 6 To learn the definitions of these and other sexual orientations, see: IOM (2021). [Op. Cit.](#) (pp.1-3) | CFCA (2022) [Op. Cit.](#)
- 7 CFCA (2022) [Op. Cit.](#) (p.2)
- 8 CFCA (2022) [Op. Cit.](#) (p.2)
- 9 Ríos Infante, V. (2023) [Fugas del cuerpo y del espacio: factores que configuran las migraciones trans* mesoamericanas](#). PERIPLoS. Revista de Investigación sobre Migraciones, 7(1), 144-174. | IOM (2021). [Op. Cit.](#) (p.4)
- 10 CFCA (2022) [Op. Cit.](#) (p.3)
- 11 HRW (2020). [Op. Cit.](#)
- 12 LGBT Foundation (2023) [Hate crime reporting – What is LGBTQ-phobia?](#)
- 13 Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, IACHR (2015) [Violencia contra Personas Lesbianas, Gay, Bisexuales, Trans e Intersex en América](#). | Following the recommendation of the IACHR and the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, UNAIDS, this text does not amplify the locutions "corrective sexual violence" or "corrective rape", as these refer to a need to correct or rectify a SOGIESC. Instead, this text uses the term "LGBTIQ+-phobic sexual violence". See: UNAIDS (2024) [UNAIDS terminology guidelines](#) (p. 5)

Key findings

- LGBTIQ+ individuals often migrate from their home country due to various forms of discrimination and/or violence related to their sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC). These can include hindrances to the free development of personality; direct violence in family, school, work and social environments; discrimination and isolation; and limited access to rights and services such as employment, education, health, or housing.
- Risks and incidents of LGBTIQ+-phobic violence do not end upon leaving the country of origin; they also occur along migration routes. Nearly all LGBTIQ+ individuals surveyed by 4Mi indicated a high or very high level of exposure to risks for those with diverse SOGIESC, and a large majority reported experiencing some form of LGBTIQ+-phobic incident themselves during their migration, mainly in Mexico and Guatemala.
- Surveyed individuals identified potential perpetrators of abuse in the most dangerous places along the migration route. The actors most frequently mentioned by LGBTIQ+ respondents were members of organized crime groups and other migrants.
- Careful planning of journeys and keeping in regular contact with friends and family members were two of the most commonly adopted self-protection strategies among LGBTIQ+ migrants. Just over one third of LGBTIQ+ respondents said that travelling in groups was effective in mitigating risks along the route, compared to over two thirds of the control group respondents.
- Migrants whose diverse SOGIESC are more “visible” tend to face greater discrimination and social and institutional isolation. They also become targets of violence more quickly and frequently.
- Surveyed trans women faced proportionally more situations of social discrimination and harmful comments than other LGBTIQ+ respondents. LGBTIQ+ migrant interviewees and key informants said that attacks against trans women migrants were relatively frequent and sometimes culminated in transfemicide or attempted transfemicide.
- More than 80% of the LGBTIQ+ respondents reported having unmet needs at some point during their migratory journey, and more than 60% reported having such needs at the time they were surveyed. LGBTIQ+ migrant interviewees and key informants stressed that access to safe spaces and shelters is essential for the protection of life and dignity of LGBTIQ+ individuals on the migration route, and that psychological support is a pressing necessity.

Introduction

In Latin America and the Caribbean, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer (LGBTIQ+) individuals often face persecution and violence in their communities of origin due to their sexual orientations, gender identities, gender expressions, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC).¹⁴ This persecution and violence is often a driver of migration. However, once they have departed their country of origin, LGBTIQ+ people also frequently face discrimination, isolation, and abuse while in transit or in destination countries when seeking international protection or asylum.¹⁵

Despite the common experiences of discrimination, isolation and abuse faced by many LGBTIQ+ people during their migration, there is still a limited understanding of these issues both in the region, and globally.¹⁶ The scale of migration among LGBTIQ+ individuals is largely unknown, as specific numbers within broader mixed migration are rarely recorded. Most data collection on migrant populations does not include SOGIESC information.¹⁷ This is due to the widespread dynamics of discrimination, where inquiries into people’s gender identity and sexual orientation can potentially increase protection risks, and many LGBTIQ+ people may feel unsafe to disclose information due to their previous

14 HRW (2020). [Op. Cit.](#) | United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR (2021) [LGBTI people fleeing violence and discrimination must be able to access safe spaces and the protection of their rights](#). | BBC News (2023) [¿En qué países está penalizada la homosexualidad? \(y cuál es la situación en América Latina\)](#). | Chaves García, N. & Ester, B. (2021) [Los derechos LGBTI+ en América Latina](#). Centro Estratégico Latinoamericano de Geopolítica.

15 United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, OHCHR (2022) [Forcibly displaced LGBT persons face major challenges in search of safe haven](#). | UN News (2022) [El colectivo LGBT, entre los migrantes más marginados y vulnerables, afirman expertos](#).

16 General Secretariat of the Organization of American States, OAS (2022) [Desafíos de las personas LGBTI en la movilidad humana](#).

17 Shaw, A. & Verghese, N. (2022) [LGBTIQ+ Refugees and Asylum Seekers. A Review of Research and Data Needs](#). Williams Institute. University of California Los Angeles, UCLA.

experiences of discrimination and abuse. Therefore, data collection with LGBTIQ+ people must be conducted in safe spaces, with adapted protocols and trained personnel, to ensure the protection of those interviewed. Moreover, the resulting data must be treated as sensitive information.¹⁸

The lack of data and consolidated information on LGBTIQ+ populations in transit complicates the development of appropriate responses. Programmatic responses and humanitarian aid rarely include a differentiated focus on SOGIESC diversity because, in many contexts, the specific needs and risks faced by individuals in transit with diverse SOGIESC are not known or recognised.¹⁹

This paper aims to bridge some of these information gaps and improve knowledge about the reasons for departure as well as the migration experiences, dangers, and needs of LGBTIQ+ individuals in transit toward North America. This is intended to strengthen differentiated approaches to diversity in regional humanitarian response programmes, resulting in improved protection and safety for LGBTIQ+ people on the move.

Methodology

This paper is based on quantitative and qualitative data collected by the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) in Mexico, specifically in the cities of Tijuana (Baja California), Monterrey (Nuevo León), and Mexico City. All data collection applied the humanitarian principle of “Do-no-harm”.²⁰ LGBTIQ+ respondents were surveyed in

shelters set up for people with diverse SOGIESC, which they and this paper’s interviewers recognized as safe spaces. Enumerators received specific training to ensure interviews LGBTIQ+ respondents were conducted in a respectful and safe manner.

Quantitative data collection

Quantitative data was gathered through 474 4Mi surveys conducted in person with individuals in transit towards the United States, between September 2023 and March 2024 in Tijuana and Monterrey, two cities in northern Mexico.

Respondents fell into two categories depending on their answer to the survey question, “Do you have a diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or sexual

characteristic?” The primary dataset comprises 131 individuals who answered “Yes” to this question, referred to henceforth as “**LGBTIQ+ respondents**”. This paper also uses a second dataset, drawn from 343 individuals (surveyed in “general” shelters) who responded “No” to the same question so as to draw comparisons between the migration experiences of the two groups. This second set of respondents is referred to as the “**control group**”.²¹

18 Sensitive information and data are those “whose disclosure or unauthorized access is likely to cause harm (such as sanctions, discrimination, repression or stigma) to any person.” See: Protection Information Management, PIM (2019) [Training Resource Pack, 2018 edition](#). Package 5, PIM Sensitives. (p.194)

19 OAS General Secretariat (2022) [Op. Cit.](#)

20 PIM (2017) [PIM Principles](#) | Sphere Association (2018) [Sphere Handbook – Protection Principles](#)

21 While many of those who answered “No” are likely to be cisgender heterosexuals, it cannot be safely assumed that all are.

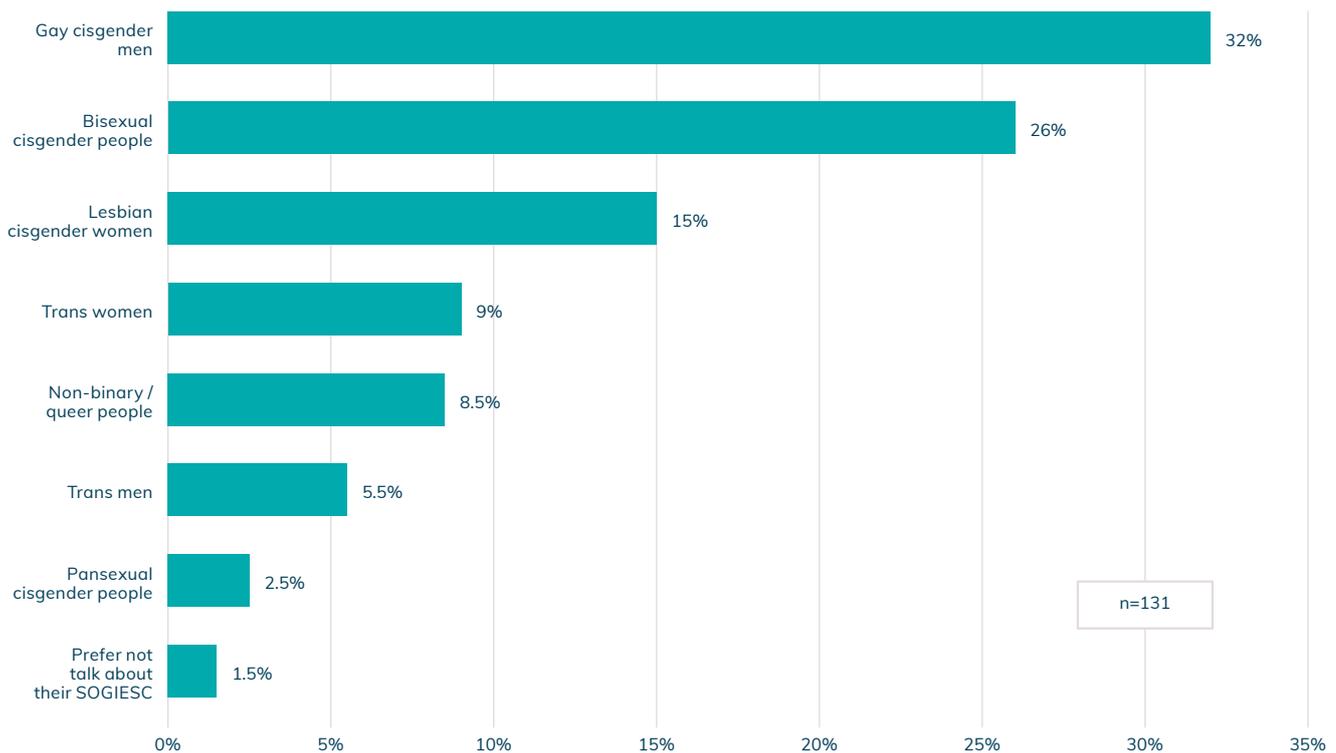
Map 1. Survey locations



Profiles of LGBTIQ+ individuals: LGBTIQ+ respondents included people with a wide range of diverse SOGIESC, counting those who identified as gay men (32%),

cisgender bisexual men and women (26%), cisgender lesbian women (15%), transgender women (9%), and non-binary individuals (8.5%) (see Graph 1).

Graph 1. LGBTIQ+ respondents by SOGIESC



Most (89%) LGBTIQ+ respondents were under the age of 35: 44% were aged 18 to 25, and 45% were between 26 and 35. Only 6% of respondents were aged 36 to 45, and 5% were over 46.

Sixty-two percent of the LGBTIQ+ respondents originated from the northern Central America region (Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras), 5% from other Central American countries (Nicaragua, Panama, and Belize), 24% from South America (Chile, Argentina, Venezuela, Colombia, Bolivia, Peru, and Brazil), 5% from the Caribbean (Haiti, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic), and 3% from other countries (Russia and China).

Profiles of control group respondents: Most (78%) people in the control group were women, with slightly

over one-fifth (22%) being men. This imbalance stems from the fact that the 4Mi team in Monterrey conducted surveys in shelters where women significantly outnumbered men and showed a greater willingness to participate in surveys than men (see Limitations below).

Almost all individuals in the control group were from Central America (57%) or South America (42%), with only 1% originating from Caribbean islands. The average age of this group was slightly higher. Twenty-eight percent were aged 18 to 25, 42% were between 26 and 35, 22% were between 36 and 45, and 8% were older than 46. These differences between the two groups may be explained by the convenience sampling of MMC (see Limitations below).

Collection and analysis of qualitative information

Qualitative information was gathered through:

- In-person semi-structured interviews with eight LGBTIQ+ refugees and migrants temporarily settled in Tijuana as they waited to cross into the United States. Four of these LGBTIQ+ **interviewees** were questioned individually; the other four took part in a group interview (see Table 1).
- Seven in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted in Tijuana and Mexico City with **key informants** from non-governmental and civil society organizations that assist LGBTIQ+ refugees and migrants in Mexico (see Table 2).
- Desk review of relevant literature (see footnotes for sources).

Table 1. Profiles of LGBTIQ+ interviewees

Profile	Country of origin	Age	Type of interview
Cisgender lesbian woman	Cuba	56	Individual
Cisgender bisexual man	Honduras	33	Individual
Transgender woman returned from the U.S.	Mexico	32	Individual
Cisgender lesbian woman	Honduras	32	Individual
Transgender woman	Nicaragua	45	Group
Pansexual cisgender woman	Argentina	24	Group
Transgender man	Mexico	23	Group
Cisgender gay man	El Salvador	22	Group

Key informants interviewed included two staff from temporary shelters for LGBTIQ+ migrants in Tijuana ([Casa Arcoíris Temporary Shelter A.C.](#) and [Jardín de las Mariposas Sanctuary A.C.](#)), one person from an organization that provides LGBTIQ+ rights services ([Centro de Apoyo a las Identidades Trans A.C.](#)) in Mexico City, one person coordinating different civil society

organizations supporting LGBTIQ+ migrants ([Red Nacional de Apoyo a Personas Migrantes y Refugiadas LGBT México](#)) in Mexico City, two staff working in a shelter for families or women and children ([Migrant Space A.C.](#) and [Border Line Crisis Center A.C.](#)) in Tijuana, and one United Nations protection staff member in Mexico City.²²

22 The UN agency requested not to be identified by name.

Key informant interviews were categorised into the following topics using DEEP²³:

- Factors leading to departure, including LGBTIQ+-phobic events in places of origin
- Risks and abuses faced along the migration route

- Types of violence (differentiated by SOGIESC) and primary perpetrators
- Perceived dangerous locations along the migration route
- Self-protection mechanisms and needs

Limitations:

The methodological development of this research entails the following limitations:

- 4Mi uses convenience sampling, which is non-probabilistic.²⁴ Therefore, the quantitative data presented is illustrative and not statistically representative of the overall dynamics of mixed migration or the migration experiences of the LGBTIQ+ population in Latin America and the Caribbean.
- Convenience sampling implied that the 4Mi teams surveyed available and willing people in the shelters visited. In this sense, the distribution of gender identity

or sexual orientation of LGBTIQ+ respondents is purely random. This also explains the high share of women in the control group, as the “general” shelters where they were surveyed are used primarily by women.

- This report analyses very small subsamples of LGBTIQ+ respondents (e.g., trans women, trans men, and cisgender LGBTIQ+ and non-binary migrants). Therefore, the percentages reported for each have limited interpretation and are not necessarily representative of their migration experiences.

Findings

1. LGBTIQ+-phobic discrimination and violence as a driver for migration: “I didn’t want to be there anymore”

“It is not far-fetched to say that, in general, the situation [in places of origin] is complicated, and the LGBTIQ+ population is fleeing, like many others, due to the context of lack of economic opportunities, gang violence... But due to their gender identity and sexual orientation, they face an additional specific risk.”

Key informant, UN agency

LGBTIQ+ people often migrate from their places of origin because of situations related to their SOGIESC. These include denial of basic freedoms and rights; direct violence encountered in their households, schools, work, and social environments; discrimination and isolation; and limited access to employment and services such as education, health, and housing.²⁵

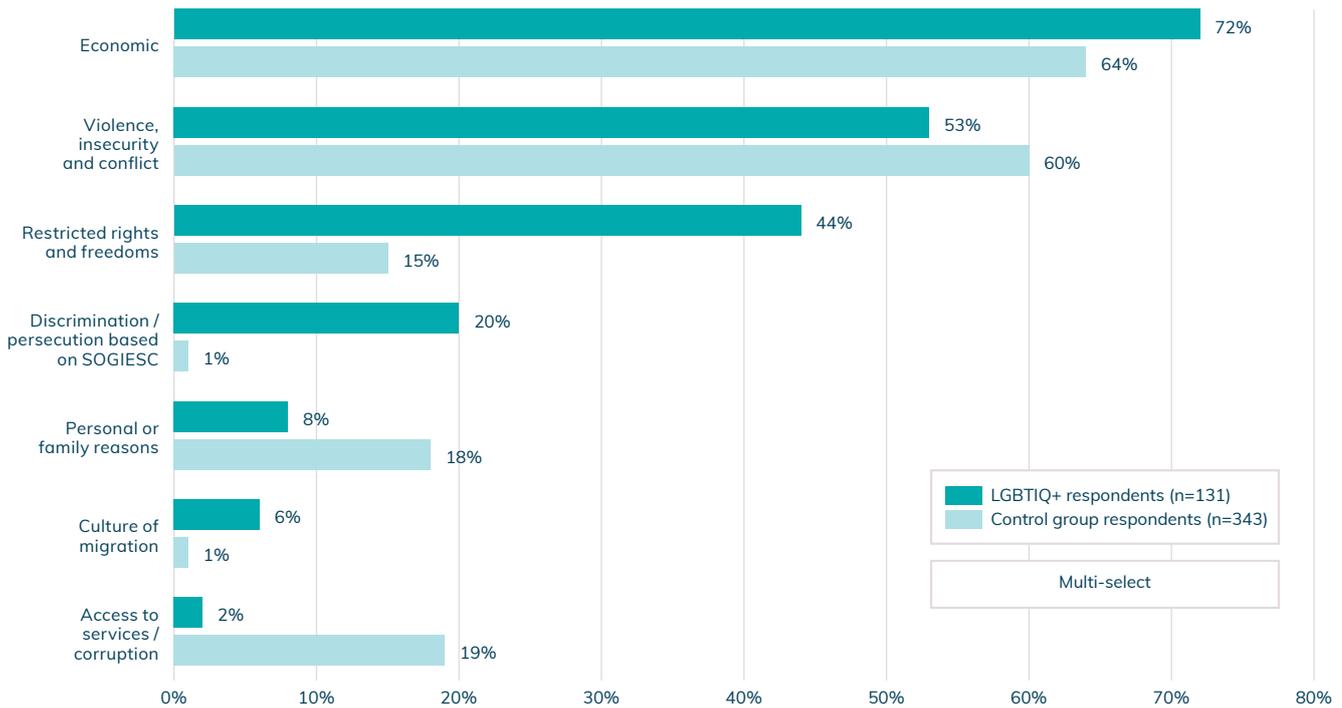
A greater proportion (72%) of LGBTIQ+ respondents than of the control group (64%) cited economic factors as the primary cause of their migration (see Graph 2). Although 89% of LGBTIQ+ respondents reported having earned income in the 12 months before migrating, LGBTIQ+ interviewees variously reported episodes of SOGIESC-related discrimination in work environments, difficulty finding formal employment, inability to speak about or display their SOGIESC in their workplace, and extortion against transgender women engaged in survival sex activities, sexual exploitation, or sex work.

23 DEEP (Data Entry and Exploration Platform) is a free tool for the management, classification, and analysis of qualitative information. See: [DEEP – a collaborative analysis platform for effective aid responses](#).

24 Golzar, J. & Tajik, O. (2022) [Convenience Sampling](#). International Journal of Education & Language Studies. (pp.72-77)

25 Shaw, A. & Verghese, N. (2022) [Op.Cit](#). Williams Institute. UCLA.

Graph 2. Reasons for leaving the country of origin



Restricted rights and freedoms were cited as a driver with a much larger discrepancy between LGBTIQ+ respondents and the control group: 44% vs 15% respectively. Forty-five of the 57 LGBTIQ+ respondents who selected this factor referred to repression and lack of freedom, and 33 to persecution related to their SOGIESC. Six of the eight LGBTIQ+ in-depth interviewees said they wanted to move to another country in order to live freely according to their SOGIESC, something they felt was impossible in their place of origin.

“One seeks to find a place to feel safe. I remember that I have also received hurtful comments from my family [regarding my gender identity]. And that’s another reason why I want to let go a bit, live my life, be farther away... I want to find a place where they support me, where I feel safe.”

Mexican transgender man, 23 years old

“To leave, the two strongest factors were the maras [gangs], the violence in Honduras, and being part of the LGBT community, because in Honduras it’s not very viable... We can’t get married, we can’t show our love on a bus, in a park; everything has to be in private. Because if they saw you... There is gang violence, but also from the government and religion. Everything has to be private.”

Honduran lesbian woman, 32 years old

“What I want is to walk hand-in-hand with a boyfriend I might have. I’ve never had a boyfriend, but in the United States, I would like to have one, and I want it to last forever [laughs]. Seriously, I want to walk freely, without caring. That’s a part [of migrating]. But it’s the main one.”

Salvadoran gay man, 22 years old

One-fifth of LGBTIQ+ respondents stated that SOGIESC-related discrimination or persecution in their place of origin was a direct driver of migration (see Graph 2). This proportion increases for non-binary respondents (4 out of 11 individuals), transgender men (3/7), and transgender women (7/12); but falls to 12% for cisgender respondents (12 out of 100 individuals). Similarly, several interviewees said that LGBTIQ+ people are often victims of brutal attacks of violence in their countries of origin. They explained that episodes of discrimination, persecution, and violence were more extreme when diverse SOGIESC were easily discernible (a phenomenon explored in more detail below).

In some countries of origin, violence against transgender women reaches the level of transfemicide or attempted transfemicide.²⁶ Interviewees explained that transgender women seem migrating as a life-saving endeavour, especially if they have been victims of attempted transfemicide or have witnessed episodes of transfemicide.

“The last time they almost killed me because they hit me and hit me. [...] And from there, I was traumatized; I didn’t want to be there [in Nicaragua] anymore, because three times in a row... it scared me.”

Nicaraguan transgender woman, 45 years old

“Since returning to Mexico [from the U.S.], they have tried to kill me twice.”

Mexican trans woman returned from the U.S., 32 years old

“No one leaves their place of origin if there isn’t a strong reason, a weighty one. And safeguarding your life is the most important reason. **Around 90% of the transgender women who have visited our shelter are survivors of some murder attempt.** Those who weren’t stabbed were shot, or macheted. They come mutilated, without an eye, without a leg. They come from situations where everything is compromised: their mental health, their physical health.”

Key informant, Jardín de las Mariposas Sanctuary A.C.

26 Radi, B. & Sardá-Chandiramani, A. (2016). [Travesticide /transfemicide: Coordinates to think crimes against travestis and trans women in Argentina](#). Acta Académica (p.2) | The term ‘transfemicide’ was coined by activists in Latin America due to the extreme, prevalent violence against transgender women in the region. See: Venis, J. [Fighting transfemicide in the Americas](#). International Bar Association.

Persecution of LGBTIQ+ people by violent actors in areas of generalized violence

“Gangs are deeply misogynistic entities. They reproduce sexism and misogyny, so diverse sexual orientation or gender identity represent a challenge to their very rigid masculinity schema, and there have been situations where several people become a specific target. Any expression of something other than rigid heterosexuality is strongly rejected by gangs, with violence or even immediate murder.”

Key informant, UN agency

Some 53% of LGBTIQ+ respondents stated they had migrated due to the situation of generalized violence in their places of origin (see Graph 2). This proportion

increased to 52 of the 82 respondents from the Northern Triangle of Central America, an area with a systematic presence of conflicts, high levels of violence, and strong territorial and social control by organized crime,²⁷ and to 3 of the 4 for those from Colombia, a country with an active internal armed conflict and a strong presence of organized crime.²⁸

Although LGBTIQ+ respondents did not cite generalized violence as a migration driver to a greater degree than the control group, this study's interviewees and key informants described a common situation in such contexts: organized crime gangs and armed groups see clear manifestations of diverse SOGIESC as a challenge to their authority. The response is often violence against and intimidation of LGBTIQ+ people, hostility that prompts many to migrate.²⁹ From these same sources and the desk review, it is clear that frequent incidents of attempted or actual transfemicide, commercial sexual exploitation of trans women,³⁰ physical violence against gay men, and LGBTIQ+-phobic sexual violence against lesbian women and transgender men by criminal gangs or non-state armed groups lead many LGBTIQ+ people to leave their countries of origin.

Denial of access to services as a form of violence: “In our countries, we are nobody”

“On the reasons for leaving, one is all about the lack of opportunities, which is related to all the violence against our employment or health rights... We shouldn't lose sight that, within Latin American countries, sexually diverse populations suffer stigma and discrimination, and generally have fewer opportunities. And when there is a crisis in these countries,

those few windows we have are closed.”

Key informant, Centro de Apoyo a Identidades Trans A.C.

“In our countries, the government doesn't consider the laws. Generally, it's a struggle that has been going on for years but still hasn't been won. There's no respect. In our countries, we are nobody. There are men, women,

27 Feixa, C. et. al. (2024) *Violencia y militarización en el Triángulo Norte de Centro América. Una mirada desde los derechos humanos y los derechos de género*. HUACAL, SOMOS MEMORIA.

28 International Committee of the Red Cross, ICRC (2024) *Colombia: Humanitarian Report 2024*. | López Zuleta, D. *Colombia es el segundo país del mundo con más organizaciones criminales*. El País.

29 Regional Group on Risks, Emergencies and Disasters for Latin America and the Caribbean, REDLAC (2019) *The impact of violence on LGBTI people in the North of Central America*. (pp. 7-8) | Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición (2022) *Mi cuerpo es la verdad. Experiencias de mujeres y personas LGBTIQ+ en el conflicto armado*. (Section 2: La verdad es arcoíris, pp.349-564)

30 Ríos Infante, V. (2023). *Op. Cit.*

and the nobodies. They don't consider us as they should. We are always below, behind. We are what is not.”

Nicaraguan transgender woman, 45 years old

Although few LGBTIQ+ respondents reported that they had left their country primarily because they had been denied access to employment and basic services due to their diverse SOGIESC, key informants, citing their own interactions with migrants and refugees, stressed that such restrictions often contributed to the decision or necessity of LGBTIQ+ people to leave their countries of origin.

Actions by government institutions aimed at isolating, discriminating against, or denying access to a service or guaranteeing a right, as well as omissions to prevent this access or guarantee, constitute a type of violence that can equally cause harm, damage, or even death.³¹ In the main countries of origin, it has been identified that, as the UN agency key informant stated, the LGBTIQ+ population “is not the subject of public policy”, and measures for their protection and coverage of their basic needs are rarely taken.

Manifestations of such institutional violence include the facts that:

- no Central American country, and few South American countries, recognize non-binary or third-gender options and/or allow transgender people to change their gender in official documents;³²
- cases of expulsion, non-admission, or discrimination in schools against LGBTIQ+ individuals—which can lead to higher dropout rates or educational lags—are common across the region;³³
- LGBTIQ+ people frequently face restricted access to health and justice services, as well as institutional discrimination and violence in service provision³⁴ and discrimination and difficulty in accessing skilled employment;³⁵ and
- individuals with certain diverse SOGIESC are often socially relegated to economic activities linked to the grooming and beautification sector (in the case of gay men and transgender women) or to survival sex work (in the case of trans women).³⁶ The lack of economic options, the most frequently cited push factor among LGBTIQ+ respondents, (see Graph 2), is often rooted in or related to this institutional violence.

2. LGBTIQ+-phobic violence on the migration route

“In the migration route we have identified ongoing persecution. Regarding risks, [LGBTIQ+ people on the move] are victims of organized crime by cartels, in this case in Mexico; and of arbitrary detentions and robberies. They also continue to be targets of acts of discrimination.”

Key informant, Red Nacional de Apoyo a Personas Migrantes y Refugiadas LGBT México

“Because there is organized crime that engages in prostitution, selling organs, kidnapping people for extortion, and many different forms of violence... unfortunately even though LGBT migrants try everything to avoid these dangers, not everyone succeeds. That's another reality. 100% of the people who arrive in Tijuana is not 100% of the people who

31 Quinche Ramírez, M. (2016) [Violence, Omissions and Structures Faced by LGBTIQ Community Individuals](#). Revista Estudios Socio-Jurídicos. ISSN-e 2145-4531. Vol. 18, No. 2, 2016. pp. 49-87. Universidad del Rosario. (pp. 57-71).

32 Wong Sak Hoi, G. (2024) [Which countries have adopted a third gender identity marker?](#) swissinfo.ch | Redacción (2021) [Los países que permiten a las personas transgénero cambiar de estado civil](#). Infobae.

33 Barrientos Delgado, J. et. al. (2021) [Right to education and educational inclusion of LGTB+ youth in Latin America and the Caribbean](#). Revista Archivos analíticos de políticas educativas. ISSN 1068-2341- V. 29, No. 149.

34 IACHR & OAS (2018) [Advances and Challenges towards the Recognition of the Rights of LGBTIQ Persons in the Americas](#).

35 IACHR (2020) [Informe sobre Personas Trans y de Género Diverso y sus derechos económicos, sociales, culturales y ambientales](#) (pp.109-124) | Durand, G. (2021) [Inclusión de personas LGBTIQ+ en la fuerza laboral: un potencial de desarrollo disponible](#). Inter-American Development Bank.

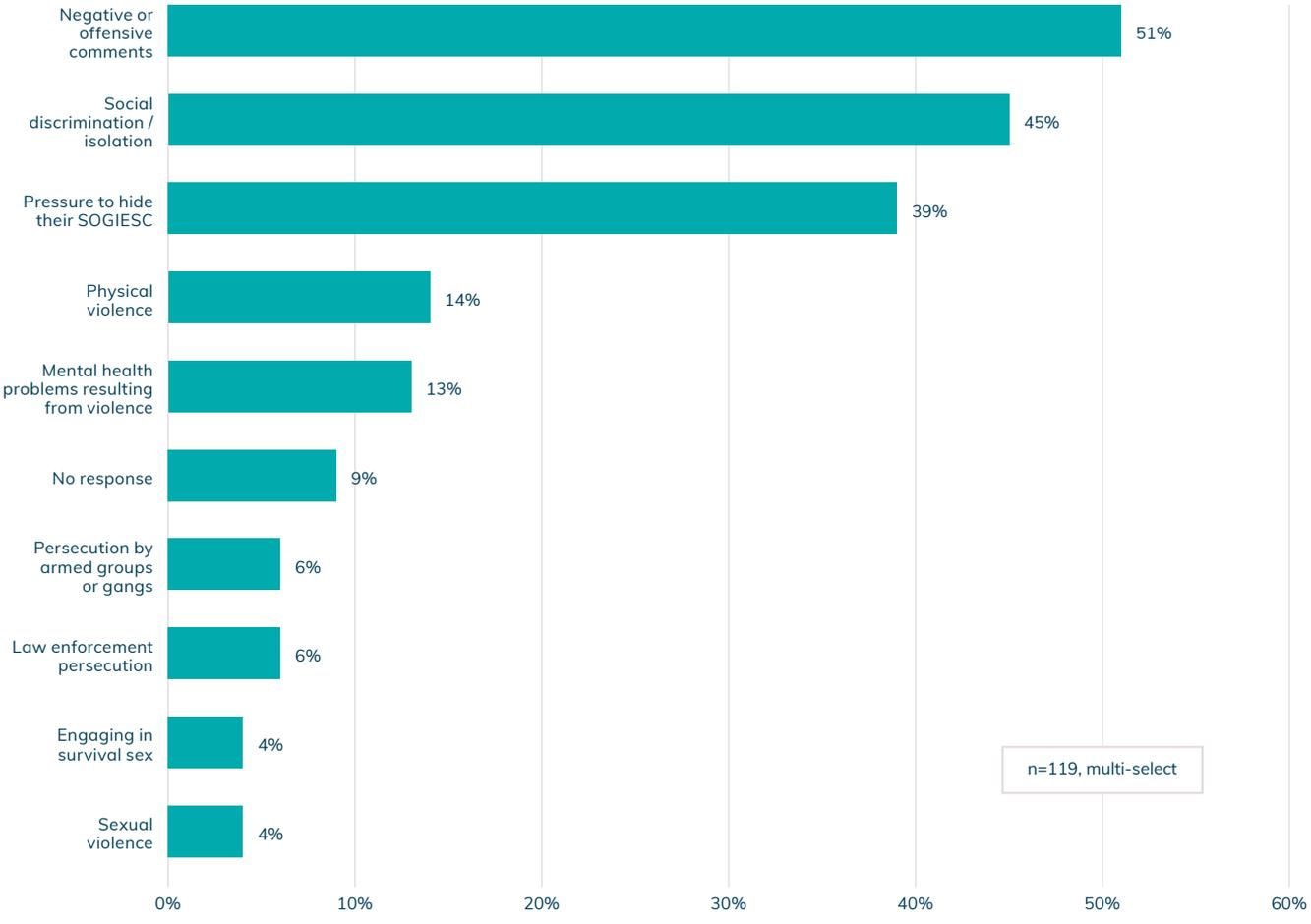
36 Barbosa Foronda, D., et. al. (2021). [Latin American Research on Gender Violence against Trans Women](#). Universidad Cooperativa de Colombia. (pp. 14-15) | IACHR (2020) [Op. Cit.](#) (pp.119-120) | Pérez Álvarez, A. (2013) [Raros... y oficios: diversidad sexual y mundo laboral](#). Chapter 2: Discriminación y exclusión de la población sexo/género diversa en espacios laborales. CLACSO.

set off for Tijuana. Many, many, vanish along the way. They are murdered, kidnapped, disappeared. We have become a niche of more vulnerability because—sorry to put it this way—but not everyone cares when they kill a gay person, not everyone is impacted when they kill a transgender person.”

Key informant Jardín de las Mariposas Sanctuary A.C.

Discrimination and LGBTQ+-phobic violence do not end when leaving countries of origin; they continue on the migration route. Nearly all (98%) LGBTQ+ respondents stated that the level of exposure to threats for LGBTQ+ people in transit was very high or high, and the majority of them (91%, n=119) reported having experienced some incident related to their SOGIESC during their migration journey. The main types of incidents mentioned were derogatory comments (51%), social discrimination or isolation (45%), and pressure to hide their SOGIESC (39%) (see Graph 3).

Graph 3. Incidents related to SOGIESC experienced on the migration route
LGBTIQ+ respondents who reported having experienced at least one of the incidents listed



According to the interviewees, it is common for cisgender lesbian women and transgender men to be frequently victims of LGBTIQ+-phobic sexual violence in the countries along the northbound migration route through the Americas. Homosexual or bisexual cisgender men

often face physical and LGBTIQ+-phobic sexual violence, while transgender women repeatedly experience a mix of types of violence with greater brutality in attacks compared to people with other SOGIESC.

Constant dangers on the route

“You become a very attractive target. The government doesn't care much about what happens to you. So you become more attractive because you are unprotected from all sides. No one will cry for you, no one will look for you, no one will ask about you. Why? Because you are LGBT and for society, you are a dollar worth only 99 cents.”

Key informant, Jardín de las Mariposas Sanctuary A.C.

LGBTIQ+ refugees and migrants also face the same risks of abuse as the wider population of people on the move. Interviewees reported that people travelled in constant fear of threats such as kidnapping, human trafficking for commercial sexual exploitation or organ trafficking, forced recruitment by organized crime in Mexico; homicide by members of organized crime groups, arbitrary detention, and extortion by state agents, including law enforcement officers, in Mexico and Central American countries; and robbery, physical violence and sexual violence by organized crime groups, state agents, other migrants, local communities, or other perpetrators all along the route.

Most dangerous locations and primary perpetrators

“All migrants who have crossed the Darien Jungle say that Mexico is the cement jungle. The Darien is bad because you see many dead, but there's nothing like Mexico: it's worse. We say, 'I'd rather cross the jungle again than have to arrive in Tapachula, Chiapas, and go up', because there's so much suffering. The violence is severe. The Darien is a wonder compared to Mexico.”

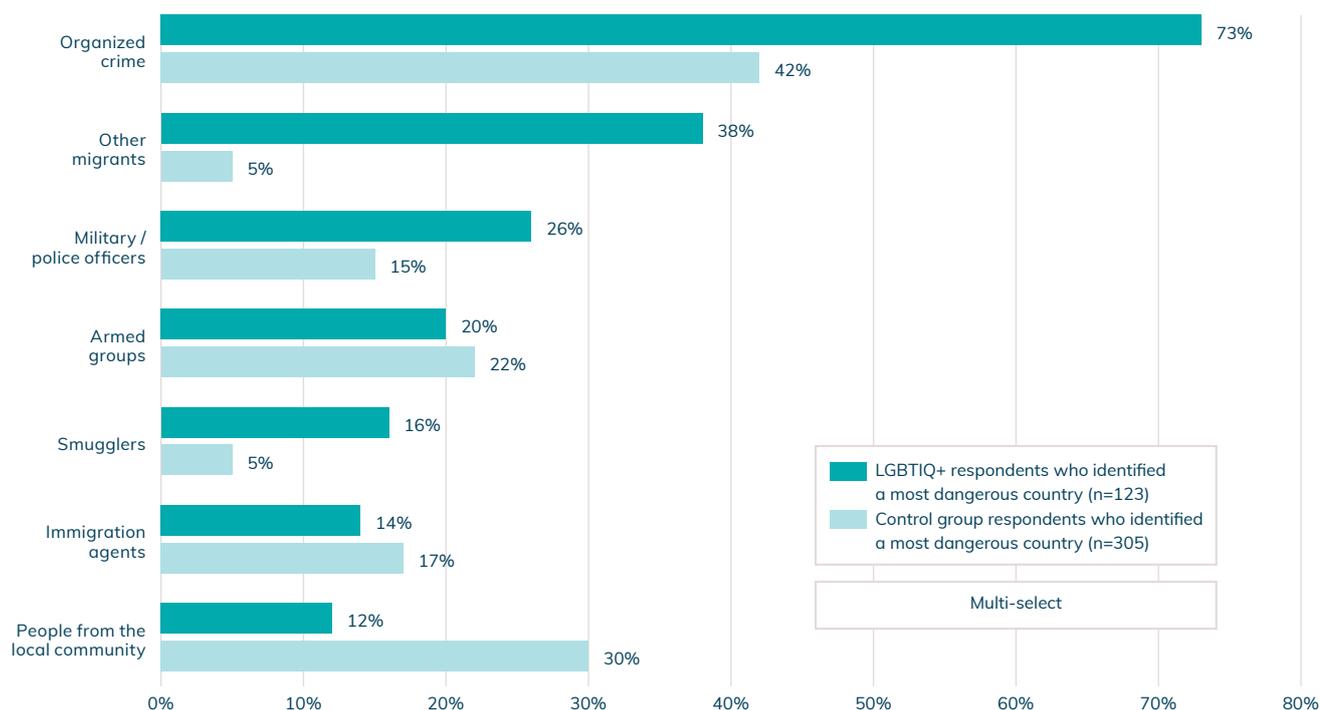
Cuban lesbian woman, 56 years old

In countries where organized crime groups control extensive territory, people in transit are more likely to encounter violent scenarios. In the control group, 59%

of respondents identified Mexico as the most dangerous country on their journey. Similarly, over half (53%) of the LGBTIQ+ respondents also said Mexico was the most dangerous country, with robbery, detention, and kidnapping being the primary threats. Within this latter subset (n=65), members of organized crime groups were cited as the most likely perpetrators of abuse by 72% of respondents, other migrants by 40%, security forces by 20%, and migrant smugglers by 20%. A greater proportion of LGBTIQ+ respondents than control group respondents (23% vs. 12% respectively) identified Guatemala as the most dangerous country on their route. Of these LGBTIQ+ respondents (n=34), members of organized crime groups were seen as the top perpetrators by three-quarters of the respondents, security forces by more than one-third, other migrants by one-third, and armed groups by one-fifth.

Graph 4 displays the perceptions of LGBTIQ+ respondents and control group respondents (who identified a most dangerous country) regarding the primary perpetrators of abuses along the route.

Graph 4. Main actors identified as potential perpetrators in the most dangerous country along the migration route



One striking finding from this data is that LGBTIQ+ respondents identified members of organized crime groups as primary perpetrators of abuse to a far greater extent (73%) than the control group (42%). This echoes the qualitative data cited above about how criminal gangs often target people with visibly diverse SOGIESC.

This disparity between the two sets of respondents was much starker for those who said other migrants were the primary perpetrators, with the proportion of LGBTIQ+ respondents doing so (38%) almost eight times greater than that of control group respondents (5%). This can be explained by the fact that LGBTIQ+-phobia includes social behaviours and attitudes that are present in a wide range of people, including the migrant

population. According to this study's interviewees and key informants, it is very common for LGBTIQ+ people on the move to be subjected to discrimination and violence from other travellers, even within migrant caravans.³⁷

Finally, the third actor identified by more LGBTIQ+ people as possible perpetrators of abuses was the security forces. Members of the police or military institutions in the region may also perpetrate LGBTIQ+-phobic violence based on prejudice and rejection.³⁸ The LGBTIQ+ migrant population interviewed stated that they had been victims or had known repeated episodes of arbitrary detention, bribes, mockery, threats, identity denial, among others, from security forces.

37 See also: Benavides, S. (2018). [Un infierno dentro de otro: la odisea LGTB en la caravana migrante](#). Infobae.

38 HRW (2020). [Op. Cit.](#)

Denial of access to services, institutional discrimination and neglect

“In the migratory procedures that have to be treated at the governmental level, we are also poorly viewed. Several colleagues went to get, for example, the Federal Taxpayers Registry and they were treated disrespectfully. One was called an {offensive slur}. I assume that cisgender people, for example, are not treated the same way my LGBT friends were. They didn’t even attend to me.”

Honduran lesbian woman, 32 years old

LGBTIQ+ interviewees stated that during the migratory journey, other types of more “silent” violence also persist, such as institutional discrimination mainly manifested in the denial of access to justice and health services, mistreatment when services are provided, non-recognition of gender identity, and verbal violence.

Key informants emphasized that in the countries along the route through the region, it is common for governmental institutions to lack the knowledge and policies required to adopt differentiated approaches to migration, and this often leads to human rights violations of LGBTIQ+ people in transit.

On this issue, interviewees and key informants highlighted a need to train and raise awareness among state agents in transit countries about the importance of respecting and guaranteeing the human rights of all migrants, while applying a differentiated focus to people with diverse SOGIESC. They added that in countries with laws designed to protect LGBTIQ+ people, such as Mexico, more should be done to ensure state agents adhere to such legislation.

Another priority raised by the interviewees and key informants was to create safe spaces that protect the dignity of non-binary and trans people residing in shelters or detained in state facilities pending the resolution of their migration status. Interviewees noted that across the region, the dignity of people with diverse SOGIESC was frequently threatened by their being accommodated in the same spaces as people who might inflict LGBTIQ+-phobic violence against them. This might happen when non-binary people or trans women are detained alongside cisgender heterosexual men, for example.

“The migration stations operated by [Mexico’s] National Institute of Migration are not designed to have inclusive or safe spaces for LGBTIQ+ people.³⁹ The solution they offer is to put LGBTIQ+ people in isolation rooms, and you think, ‘Isolation is torture!’ So what they [the authorities] say is, ‘Either they are in the isolation space, or I put trans women with men because cis women don’t want them in the women’s section.’ And these experiences become very rough, really. There are many LGBTIQ+ people who have said, because of this, that these sites and shelters are not safe spaces for them.”

Key informant, UN agency

³⁹ Across Mexico, migrants are detained in state-run migration stations while their immigration status is being processed.

Violence and brutality against trans women

“You start listening to the stories of trans girls, and wow, they’re horrible! It’s violence, it’s not just laughing at them. They beat them, and if they have to kill them, they kill them like they’re a dog, a chicken.”

Cuban lesbian woman, 56 years old

“Trans women are the ones within migrant populations who face the most violence because, within the LGBTIQ+ collective, they are the ones who expose their bodies the most. Gay men and lesbian women can somehow go unnoticed within migrant contingents. But a trans woman, a trans man, we can’t. So, it’s like we’re carrying a label.”

Key informant, Centro de Apoyo a las Identidades Trans A.C.

Because of the greater visibility of their gender expression and the general levels of LGBTIQ+ phobia in the countries along the route, trans women are often more “visible” targets of a range of types of violence inflicted by all categories of perpetrators. The types of abuse mentioned by key informants and trans women interviewees include: physical and verbal violence in all countries along the route; transfemicide and attempted transfemicide, mainly in Central American countries and Mexico; and forced recruitment and trafficking by organized crime gangs, which often entails sexual exploitation such as forced sex work in Mexico. In the latter country, those involved in sex work or survival sex activities are often compelled by criminal gangs to gather “intelligence” from men who pay for sex, and/or to pay a fee, known as “piso”.

Eleven out of 12 trans women surveyed reported experiencing a violent situation relating to their gender

identity. Trans women surveyed reported more commonly facing situations of social discrimination (9/11 compared to 45% of LGBTIQ+ respondents) and negative or offensive comments (8/11 compared to 51% of LGBTIQ+ respondents) during their migratory journey. Further, two of the trans women surveyed reported engaging in survival sex, and that they were subjected to sexual violence, and persecution by armed groups or gangs. Only two people out of all the 474 people surveyed for this study stated that they had been victims of sexual exploitation: a trans woman and a trans man. According to the interviewees and key informants, trans women in transit are often victims of especially brutal and violent hate crimes that may involve lethal force and/or weapons and which appear to be committed with an intention to send a message that the perpetrators will not tolerate the presence of trans people in the territory they control.

“Physical and sexual aggression are combined with psychological aggression [against trans women], because the aggression is very directed, for example, at their hair, their clothes. We have seen that the attacks always carry this extra component of violence of cutting their hair or burning their dress, which obviously has a very deep and painful psychosocial impact, in addition to physical.”

Key informant, UN agency

“When they kill a trans woman, it’s not nice murder. I mean, no murder is nice. But when this happens, you realize the brutality with which they kill them. The mutilation is very marked, the disfigurement.”

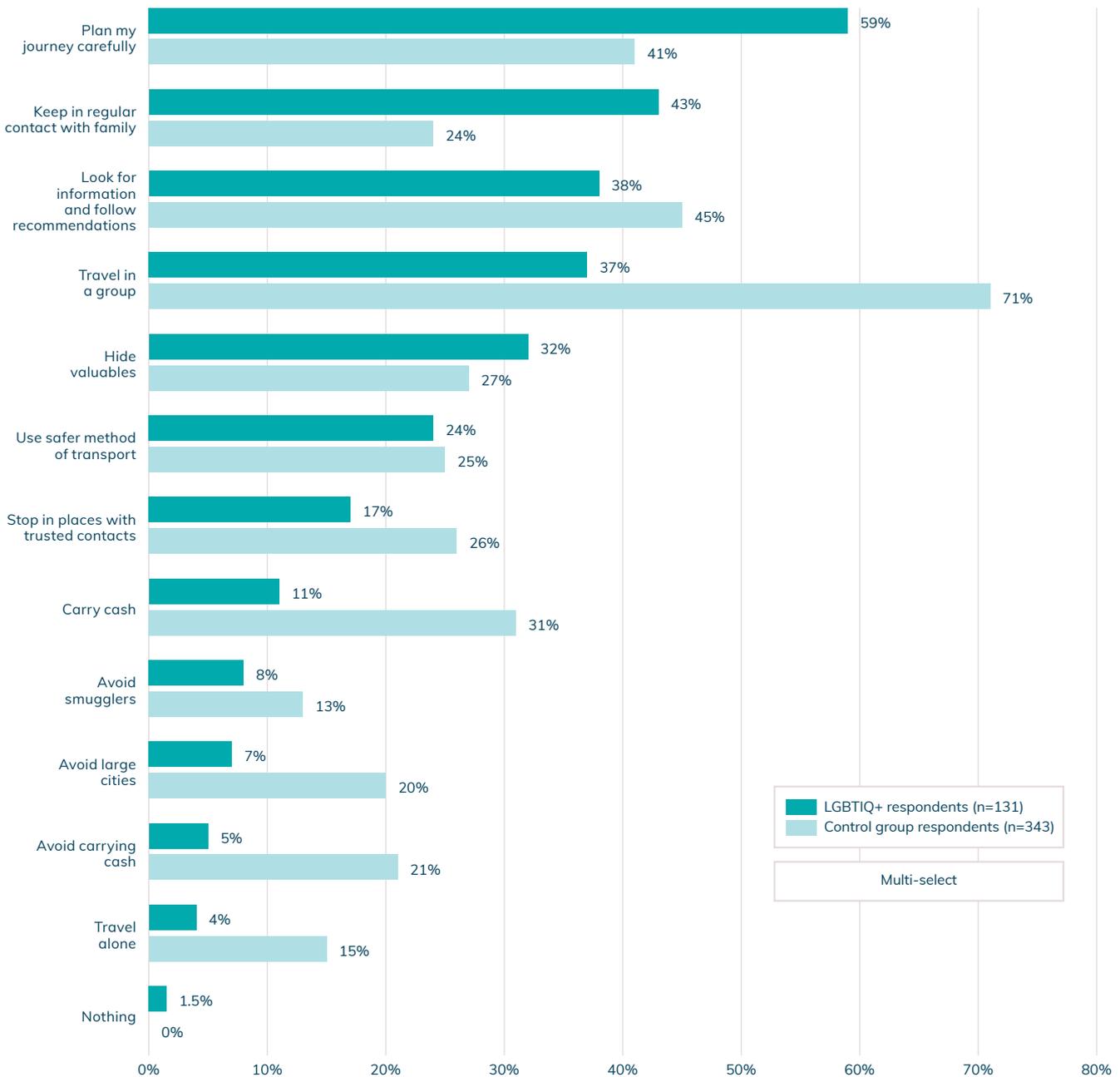
Key informant, Jardín de las Mariposas Sanctuary A.C.

3. Self-protection strategies

Nearly all (98%) LGBTIQ+ respondents reported taking certain steps to try to protect themselves from abuse and feel safer on the migratory route. These included planning journeys in detail (reported by 59% of these respondents), maintaining regular contact with relatives (43%), seeking information and following recommendations (38%),

and travelling in groups (37%). A significantly greater proportion of LGBTIQ+ respondents than control group respondents reported planning journeys and keeping in touch with relatives (see Graph 5).

Graph 5. Self-protection strategies adopted on the migratory route



Echoing these 4Mi survey findings, six out of the eight LGBTIQ+ migrants interviewed in depth said that they had carefully planned their entire journey in advance, especially the transit through Mexico. In fact, five of them mentioned that due to the fear they felt about crossing through Mexico, they preferred to take longer stops to gather money or obtain the necessary documents to travel by air to the US border.

Similarly, interviewees also explained that communication is one of the most common self-protection strategies among the LGBTIQ+ migrant population, not only with their families but also with other close contacts, including, in many cases, other people with diverse SOGIESC, in their home country, other areas along the route, or in the destination country. Several key informants said LGBTIQ+ individuals in transit communicate rapidly through instant messaging platforms such as WhatsApp and Messenger/Facebook to share their location with close contacts who monitor their movements and to receive or send updates about any changes in route dynamics with others in transit. Several interviewees said that they knew people who had already migrated to the United States and that they were following in their footsteps; several of them found LGBTIQ+ shelters in Tijuana based on recommendations from other individuals with diverse SOGIESC who had been there previously. Interviewees also pointed out that following word-of-mouth advice at

each point of the journey is vital for mitigating risk. Key informants from civil society organizations said they strove to be a constant source of protection information for the LGBTIQ+ population in transit while respecting individuals' capacity to make their own decisions.

While 71% of control group respondents reported travelling in groups as a self-protection strategy, only 37% of the LGBTIQ+ respondents did so. This difference echoes the abovementioned findings that LGBTIQ+-phobia exists within travelling groups and that "other migrants" were identified as perpetrators of abuse by more than one in three LGBTIQ+ respondents (see Graph 4). For this reason, many LGBTIQ+ individuals in transit prioritize the company of family members or friends, or groups of people with diverse SOGIESC.⁴⁰ Several key informants described the creation of the first LGBTIQ+ caravan and the arrival of a group of around 85 people in Tijuana in late 2018⁴¹ as a milestone for the consolidation of their organizations and their work, and for Tijuana as a border point offering safe services and protection against LGBTIQ+-phobia.

In addition to the self-protection strategies listed in Graph 5, interviewees mentioned regularizing their migratory status in Mexico as a way to avoid the verbal and psychological violence from state authorities that often takes place during detention and deportation.

Visibility as a key element linked to violence: "It's like we're carrying a label"

“It's a very tough experience because there were many reasons [for people with diverse SOGIESC] to hide their gender expressions and who they were in their home country. And when they start transit, they say, 'Well, emancipation! Now I can openly live my orientation or gender identity.' But no, living this orientation or gender identity openly in transit

implies new risks, new attacks. Many times, people are forced to almost completely hide their gender expression again, to cut their hair, to dress in expected ways... And, speaking of the people I've interviewed, that's very, very hard for them. It's a constant affront and a constant pain.”

Key informant, UN agency

40 Ortiz Cadena, K., Castañeda-Camey, N. & García Sánchez, R. (2020). [LGBT+ migrants in the Central American caravans to the United States: dilemmas and possibilities for building hospitality networks](#). Revista Interdisciplinaria da Mobilidade Humana, REMHU. ISSN-e 2237-9843, Vol. 28, No. 60, 2020.

41 Benavides, S. (2018). [Op. Cit.](#) Infobae. | Santiago, L. (2018) [Primera ola de migrantes de la caravana llega a Tijuana, en la frontera con Estados Unidos](#). CNN.

“As we’re cisgender, it’s easier for us. In my experience, from what I’ve seen, maybe it’s harder for single women, children, and transgender people. Because I don’t want to sound derogatory, but sometimes they are easier to recognize.”

Argentinian pansexual woman, 24 years old

“People who are trans suffer more because they are the most visible focus, or if you walk in a more effeminate manner, they also verbally assault you.”

Honduran bisexual man, 21 years old

As noted above, individuals with more “visible” gender expressions and identities that differ from heteronormative expectations—meaning socially expected behaviour associated with assigned sex at birth—tend to suffer greater discrimination and social and institutional isolation, and become quicker and easier targets for perpetrators of violence. Overt rejection of socially mandated “normative” heterosexuality is often interpreted as a threat or a challenge to the status quo and, as such, elicits censure from society, governmental or religious institutions, and organized crime or armed groups. Trans women and other individuals with physical identifiers of their diverse SOGIESC are often the primary victims of this LGBTIQ+-phobic violence.

Consequently, it is not uncommon for people with diverse SOGIESC to try to “blend in” as a self-protection strategy. As Graph 3 illustrates, 39% of LGBTIQ+ respondents reported hiding their SOGIESC during their migration journey. This in itself can be seen as a form of violence, as hiding an essential part of one’s personal identity affects mental health, and is associated with anxiety, depression, and stress.⁴²

“I’m not shouting to the world that I’m a lesbian, I don’t have to wear it on my forehead. My particular sexual preference is mine, and besides, I’m not a girl, I’m 56 years old, and I’ve seen the scorn. On my way to Tijuana, on every bus, I was the most made-up, I don’t know what, blush, lipstick. If they had asked me if I was a lesbian, I would have said, ‘No, not me.’ And so, you go along and keep them happy, even though inside you’re destroyed because you say, ‘Oh, my God, I wish I could dress the way I want to dress,’ but no. And in that regard, for example, trans women who can’t remove their breasts anymore are very marginalized and stepped on.”

Cuban lesbian woman, 56 years old

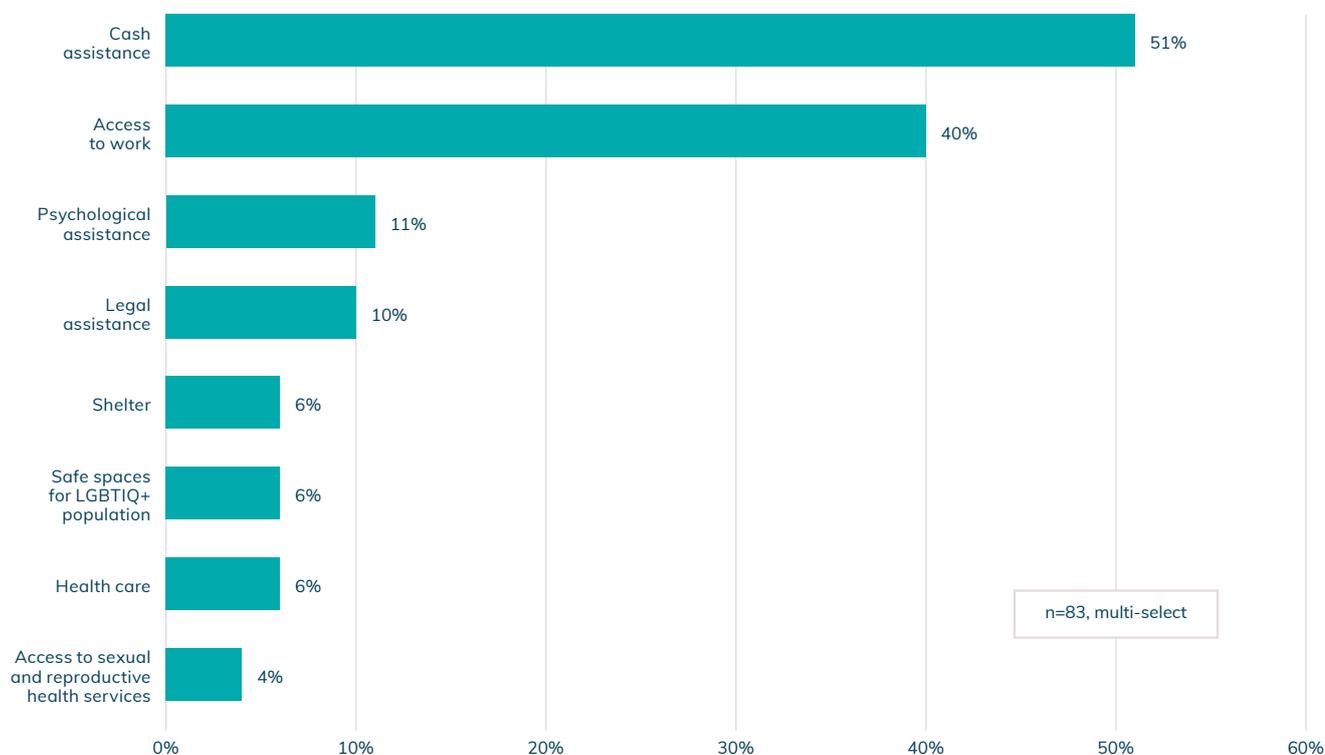
42 Nebot García, J. (2022) [Estrés de las minorías sexuales y su impacto en la salud mental de las personas LGB+.](#) Universitat Jaume I. Programa de Doctorat en Psicologia. (pp. 135-138)

4. Safe spaces and other needs

Almost two-thirds (63%) of the LGBTIQ+ respondents reported having humanitarian and other needs at the time of the survey. These needs included cash assistance

(51% of this subset), employment (40%), psychological support (11%), and legal assistance (10%) (see Graph 6).

Graph 6. Type of assistance needed by LGBTIQ+ respondents
People who reported needing assistance at the time of the survey



Since the surveys were conducted in shelters set up for LGBTIQ+ individuals, few respondents (6%) identified shelter or safe spaces for people with diverse SOGIESC as a need at the time of the survey. However, 106 respondents (81%) of all LGBTIQ+ respondents surveyed said that they had had unmet needs during their migration journey. Of these, 44% indicated the need for shelter. Additionally, interviewees said that safe spaces were a constant necessity along the route for LGBTIQ+ individuals, considering that LGBTIQ+-phobic violence also originates from local communities and other migrants. They referred to situations where staff at some non-specialized shelters mistreat and discriminate against them, sometimes resorting to violence to “correct” their SOGIESC. Interviewees emphasized that taking refuge in these safe spaces, where they do not need to hide their SOGIESC, was crucial to their migration process. The challenges are even greater for unaccompanied LGBTIQ+ minors in transit who, due to the policies of countries along the route, cannot access temporary specialized shelters designed for adults.

“Without this [shelter], we would be on the streets... or dead.”

Nicaraguan trans woman, 45 years old

In addition to the needs identified by respondents and interviewees, key respondents pointed to the importance for LGBTIQ+ people on the move of: health care, especially the diagnosis and treatment of chronic and sexually transmitted infections; access to temporary and dignified employment, which is often out of reach because of discrimination; protection against abuses; recognition of gender identity and the use of chosen names by public institutions in all transit countries; and access to legal information, documentation, and migration regularization processes consistent with individuals' gender identity.

The acute need for mental health care: “Sometimes dreams feel so real”

“With all the psychologists that come [to this shelter], I take the opportunity to talk because I am a person who has been through difficult things. There are times when I don’t even feel hungry, times when I wake up in the early hours stressed out, with a lot of headaches... So much stress accumulated... I wake up in the early hours, feeling like I’m about to be hit again. Sometimes dreams feel so real! I wake up and feel that fear inside me, and it scares me, you know? I’m sick with nerves because I swear there are times I don’t eat; food has no taste. I have a lot of headaches. I only sleep three hours. Does my brain ever rest? Not at all!”

Mexican trans woman returned from the U.S., 32 years old

“Regardless of any orientation or gender identity, forced displacement represents trauma, so psychosocial care is a major issue for all displaced people. But in the specific case of LGBTIQ+ individuals, this need is very strong because both experiences converge: discrimination due to

sexual orientation, gender identity, along with the mourning involved in displacement, in addition to incidents of violence along the route that are highly likely.”

Key informant, UN agency

Sixteen (12%) of the LGBTIQ+ respondents reported suffering from mental health issues as a result of abuses experienced during their migration process. A similar proportion (11%) reported needing psychological support. This percentage may be low because some respondents were already receiving psychological therapy in the shelters where they were staying and because, as in other transit cases, material needs such as economic support and food tend to be prioritized, while mental health issues are often a difficult need to address. Despite this, interviewees and key informants emphasized this need.

In addition to migratory grief⁴³ and losses caused by life changes due to displacement, interviewees shared experiences indicating that there is often a need for psychological care stemming from previous situations of discrimination, family abandonment, violence, and incidents of abuse during the migration route, which are common in the life stories of the LGBTIQ+ population. The need for psychological support is even more pronounced among survivors of LGBTIQ+-phobic sexual violence and homicide attempts, and among those who have witnessed the LGBTIQ+-phobic murder in their places of origin. This latter situation is particularly common among trans women.

Interviewees also discussed the difficulty in accessing psychological support and care. In countries of origin, there is generally very little access to mental health care that might help address situations that people with diverse SOGIESC encounter within families or violent environments. Indeed, this absence is an issue across the Latin America and Caribbean region that affects the general population.⁴⁴ And while people are in transit, they prioritize their journey and spend very little time in each place, which precludes obtaining continuous psychological support.

43 Blanco, C. (2023). [What is migratory grief? Can migrants ever overcome their sense of loss and displacement?](#) SBS. | González Calvo, V. (2005). [El duelo migratorio](#). Revista del Departamento de Trabajo Social No. 7, Universidad Nacional de Colombia (pp. 77-97).

44 Dastis, J. (2023) [El Banco Mundial: América Latina tiene “una deuda” con la salud mental](#). swissinfo.ch

Conclusion

Through quantitative and qualitative data, this paper has demonstrated that LGBTIQ+ who leave their countries of origin in Latin America and the Caribbean to escape persecution, discrimination and violence related to their SOGIESC often find no respite from such mistreatment on the migration route to the United States. Indeed, for some, especially trans women and others whose diverse SOGIESC are easily discernible, threats can even multiply and intensify once on the road. While this is in large part due to the presence of violent actors such as members of criminal gangs or armed groups who are viscerally intolerant of any SOGIESC other than cisgender heterosexual, the perpetrators of such abuses also include people with a responsibility to protect, such as law enforcement officers, security forces and other state agents. Moreover, many LGBTIQ+ respondents to the 4Mi survey on which this study is based, said fellow migrants were often the perpetrators of abuse.

The challenges faced in places of origin, coupled with those experienced along the migration route, mean that migrant LGBTIQ+ individuals often find themselves in situations of extreme vulnerability with complex and numerous needs. In addition to the “general” needs related to the migratory transit, LGBTIQ+ migrants often require protection against LGBTIQ+-phobic violence and discrimination, and legal assistance related to documentation in line with diverse gender identities.

Strengthening the capacities and training of national and local state agents to ensure respect for LGBTIQ+ individuals’ human rights, creating campaigns to dismantle existing prejudices against LGBTIQ+ people in communities and public institutions, and ensuring protection and access to justice for people with diverse SOGIESC would help to reduce the range of risks described in this paper. These measures would allow LGBTIQ+ people migrating through the Americas to the United States to travel more safely.



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