

Without Identity Recognition, There Is No Integration: Experiences of Nicaraguan Trans-Women Refugees in Costa Rica

A Reflection on Integration from Refugees in Towns
San Jose, Costa Rica

Camila Cuevas Barberousse & Michelle Vargas



Activists of Mesart LGBTQI Chapter Costa Rica, posing with banners: #We do not take the streets but we create the networks, #SOSNicaragua, #Freedom for Celia Cruz. Photo provided by the Mesart LGBTQI Chapter.

Refugees in Towns is a project of the Feinstein International Center. More information on the project, including more case study reports, is available at <https://www.refugeesintowns.org/>

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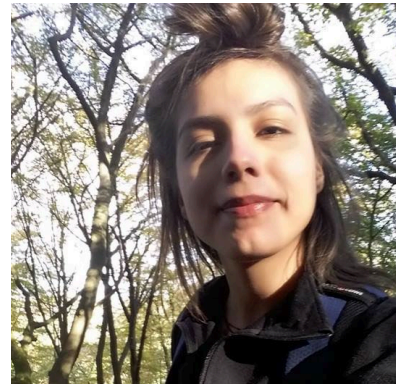
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About the Authors



Camila has a BA in Sociology from the University of Costa Rica. She began to participate in LGBTQ+ social movements since 2012. She did her thesis on access to public health services and gender identity. She currently has a scholarship from the Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degree LAGLOBE, with a project on migrations of trans-populations in Uruguay.



Michelle holds a BA in Sociology from the University of Costa Rica. She began working with migrants in 2015 in a border community between Costa Rica and Nicaragua and volunteered with unaccompanied refugee minors in Germany. She is currently working on her Licenciatura thesis focused on migrant intention while volunteering with the Rumbo Seguro Collective refugee project.

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Location

Costa Rica's Greater Metropolitan Area (GMA) is composed of the cantons and main districts of the provinces of San José, Heredia, Alajuela, and Cartago. Most government offices are in this area, especially in the capital, San José. The Nicaraguan Embassy is also here. Therefore, most refugees come to the heart of the capital before searching for work and housing. San Jose is both a transit hub for migrants *en route* to North America, and a destination for transit to the South for those fleeing insecurity in the "Northern Triangle" of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador.¹

These migratory movements have been recorded since colonial times. However, between 1990 and 2000, there was a significant increase in the number of Nicaraguan immigrants and refugees in Costa Rica. Another influx occurred in 2018. Both movements coincided with political and economic events in Nicaragua, mainly related to conflict, political repression, and gang violence.²

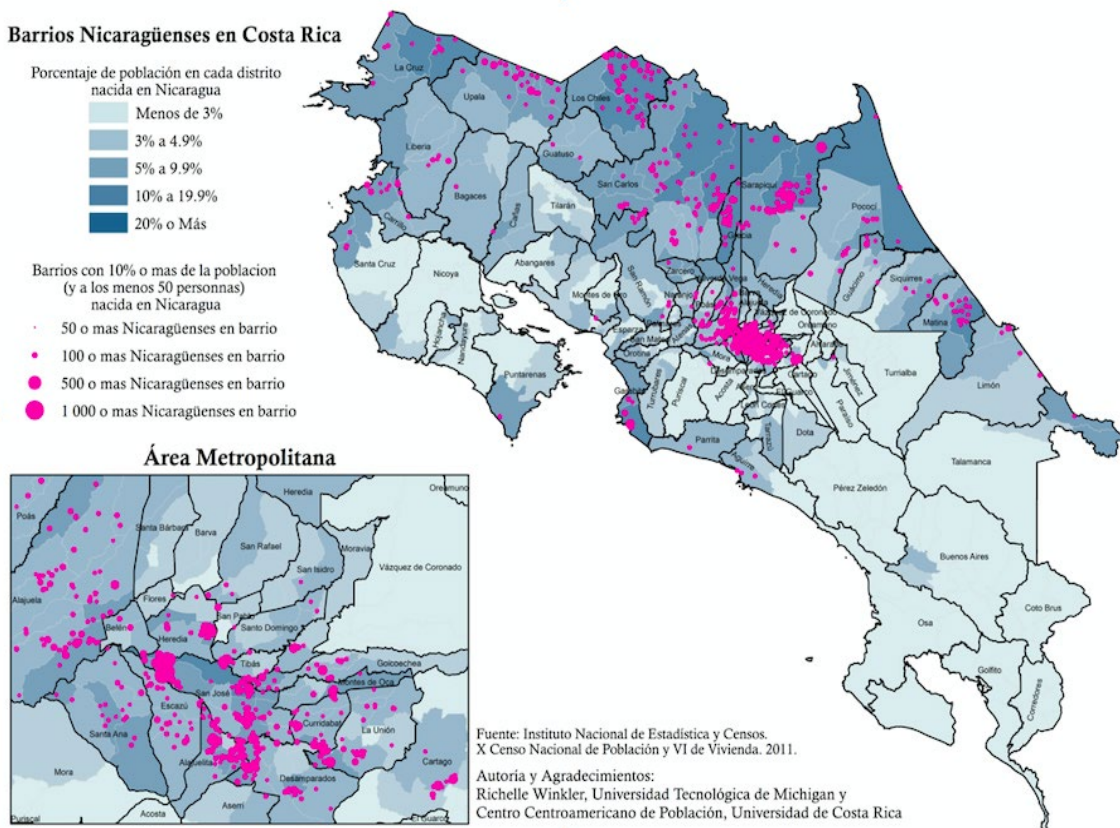


Figure 1. This map shows the spatial and geographic distributions of the neighborhoods and diasporas of people of Nicaraguan nationality in Costa Rica. Map from https://ccp.ucr.ac.cr/observa/MapasMigracion/img/nico_neighborhood4.jpg

¹ Click [here](#) to learn more about the route, and to read more RIT cases from the region.

² To access more information on trans-activist organizations, see Appendix A. To read a poem written by a trans-refugee, see Appendix B.

Introduction

The arrival of LGBTQ+ Nicaraguan refugees in Costa Rica is not a new development. On the contrary, it has occurred for decades, changing over time due to migrants' different security, employment, and educational needs—which went unmet in Nicaragua. There are two main categories of Nicaraguan migrants: those who migrate seeking better working conditions or jobs and, more recently, those exiled for political reasons (such as university students exiled for engaging in anti-government protests).

Nicaraguan immigration to Costa Rica has long been accompanied by xenophobia amongst locals. This xenophobia stems, in part, from Costa Rican nationalism and sense of exceptionalism. Costa Rican exceptionalism comes partly from the peace, democracy, and social justice that it enjoys compared to other countries in Central America. This exceptionalism persists regardless of the inequality and growing unsatisfied basic needs of the Costa Rican poor, along with pervasive social norms that prioritize white bodies and heterosexuality. In response to xenophobia and the rising inequality in Costa Rica, activists have mobilized into non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society groups to support migrants and refugees.

While Costa Rica continues to be the Central American country with the greatest advances in the field of human rights, the gaps between the legal system, political practices, and the social environment in Costa Rica are widening. Advances in human rights include the recognition of gender for trans-people on the Costa Rican identity card, the approval of same-sex marriage, and public healthcare coverage for hormonal treatment for trans-people. However, these advances have been attacked by religious institutions and conservative sectors of society. The social and political reality does not reflect the legal frameworks in Costa Rica on LGBTQ+ issues.

Despite its rather progressive laws related to LGBTQ+ rights, Costa Rica is a largely homophobic and transphobic³ country. Traditional models of identity and family in Costa Rica are often linked to conservative political and ecclesiastical norms. Without exception, daily male-centrism is present in both public and private spaces. This contributes to discrimination and violence against women, as well as feminized bodies such as those of trans-women. Therefore, social problems related to domestic violence, street harassment, labor discrimination based on gender (or gender identity), and the sex trade, among others, are rampant. The conditions of the trans-population stand out as particularly negative, due to institutions and social norms rooted in the male-female binary. Across Costa Rican society, LGBTQ+ populations are widely considered second class.

³ Homophobia and transphobia are understood as hatred, rejection and fear towards people identified as LGBTQ+. They can involve acts of violence, persecution, discrimination at the individual, collective, institutional, cultural or symbolic level.

This reflection therefore focuses on the contrasts between the ideas of the activist organizations mobilized in support of migrants and refugees and the wider Costa Rican host population. We highlight the plurality of voices and experiences that are built around refugee groups, focusing especially on the experiences of transgender (“trans-“) Nicaraguan refugees and the organizations that work to support them. We also present the characteristics of belonging to LGBTQ+ populations in the Central American region, focusing on trans-refugee women specifically.

A Note on Terminology

In Costa Rica, the language used to refer to LGBTQ+ populations is often loaded with negative connotations. However, over the years, some of these terms have been incorporated into the language of resistance. By “reclaiming” these slurs through identification, use, and pride, the individuals whom they are meant to offend reclaim their own power. For example, self-referral by people belonging to LGBTQ+ populations under terms such as “loca” or “tortillera” is now often considered empowering.

On the other hand, some of these terms have been incorporated into daily speech of some Costa Ricans, without necessarily intending to refer to LGBTQ+ populations in a conscious way. The words would be used as a means to offend the other, regardless of their gender or sexual identity. This suggests an intrinsic cultural discrimination against LGBTQ+ folks in the Costa Rican use of the Spanish language.

Some common terms for trans-folks include:

- “Trans” – Prefix that includes any person not in accordance with the sex and/or gender assigned at birth.
- “Putá”, “travesti” – Reference to trans-sex workers. In Costa Rica there are two main types of sex trade. One located in its capital, in the so-called *Zona roja* (Red zone), the other in tourist centers, especially in the province of Puntarenas, on the coast of the Pacific Ocean.
- “Maricón”, “playo”, “gay”, “yigüirro”, “culiolo”, “joto”, “banano” – Reference to gay cis⁴ men. It is also used as qualifying adjectives synonymous with “coward” or “sentimental”.
- “Loca”, “amanerado”, “pájaro”, “chuchinga”, “bicolo” – Reference to cis homosexual men with feminized gender expression⁵. It can also be used to identify masculinized bodies with sexual roles classified as passive or receptive.
- “Tortillera”, “torta”, “lencha” – Reference to cis lesbian.

⁴ Cis-gender is the term used to describe people who feel comfortable and identify with the sex that was assigned to them at birth.

⁵ For further specifications of the terms "sexual orientation", "gender identity" and "gender expression", go to the end of this section.

- “Marimacha”, “camionera” – Reference to cis lesbian with masculinized gender expression.
- “Diversa”, “de la comunidad” – Expressions that communicate belonging to LGBTQ+ populations. Used especially by Nicaraguan refugees.
- “Cochón” – A Nicaraguan pejorative expression for gay people.

On the other hand, the everyday language used to refer to migrants in Costa Rica separates migrants by desirability, creating a collective social imagining of “in” and “out” groups. For example, Costa Ricans tend to see Nicaraguans as dirty, illegal, and low-income, a burden to Costa Rican economy. On the other hand, Costa Ricans welcome people from the U.S. and Europe as contributors to economic development and national growth.

For the migrant population:

- “Foreign” – Any person not born in Costa Rica, regardless of their origin or transit situation. Recurring use reinforces the image of “otherness.”
- “Nica,” “paisa” – Nicaraguan national. It can also designate any migrant person with physical or economic characteristics attributed to the Nicaraguan population. Often used in derogatory, racist ways.
- “Illegal” – Migrants with an irregular migratory status or in bureaucratic processes still without resolution.
- “Gringo,” “macho” – Reference to foreign people identified, through physical stereotypes and language, as coming from “the first world.” It is associated with tourism and the entry of money.

Brief delimitation of terms used by the authors:

- Sexual orientation: Refers to the sexual, emotional and affective attraction that an individual feels for another person. The main categories are: homosexual, bisexual, asexual and heterosexual.
- Gender identity: Personal experience of the perceived gender. It may or may not agree with the sex assigned at birth. Categories include: cisgender, transgender, non-binary.
- Gender expression: Social expression of gender, conforms to cultural patterns of gender performativity and “passing” in appearance based on social conceptions of gender and bodily presentation. Categories include: feminized, masculinized, or androgenous.

In Costa Rica, the difference and knowledge between sexual orientation, gender identity and genitality is not generally understood.

- LGBTQ+: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans-and Queer populations. The “ + “ refers to all those sexual orientations and gender identities that are not identified in any of these categories.

The Authors' Positions in San José:

The authors, Camila Barberousse and Michelle Vargas, chose to work together to present a new perspective on LGTBQ+ integration in San José. Camila is a second-generation migrant and committed activist in the national LGTBQ+ movement, and Michelle has been actively involved in migrant collectives in San José. We aim to share not just our own experiences on this issue but also our friends', colleagues', and other peoples' stories and views. We consider that this type of storytelling as fundamental to starting a conversation about LGBTQ+ refugee and migrant movements in Costa Rica.

Camila: I was born in the capital of Costa Rica, in a family fragmented by civil wars and Latin American dictatorships. I grew up hearing stories of political persecutions, kidnappings, and deaths orchestrated in state administrative halls. This complex past is what ignites my interest in addressing issues related to migration and integration processes.

My paternal family is of Guatemalan origin. In the 1980s, in the heart of the Guatemalan capital, members of my family were kidnapped and later killed by paramilitary forces. As a result of this event and the systematic and violent persecution of the opposition to the regime, my family became fragmented in exile. Some settled in Mexico, others in England and Romania. At the same time, my mother's family, of Uruguayan origin, were clandestine activists against the dictatorial regime. The regime issued an arrest warrant for them. An anonymous call warned them hours before their arrest, and they immediately sought refuge in Venezuela.

Growing up in a middle-class family, in a city neighborhood of Costa Rican university professors while attending an international French school, allowed me to experience different types and levels of integration. This experience wasn't a choice because my family could never fit in or follow any formal model of integration in Costa Rica. My parents worked hard and constantly, and knew that academic achievement was a matter of survival for us. Multiple traditions came together in my home. According to the family tradition, I finished my degree in Sociology at the University of Costa Rica and began a master's degree abroad. It was my turn then to become a migrant to Europe.

I identify myself as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. My expression is feminine, my gender identity is non-binary, and I identify as a lesbian. Since I was 15, I have participated in and contributed to various activist political spaces. For the past three years

I work with trans- and non-binary people on issues related to health, identity, and public policy.

Michelle: I write from the comfort of being a “host,” but one who is committed to questioning the role of the Costa Rican state with respect to the integration experiences of transgender migrants. I began working on the LGBTQI+ issues in part due to my contacts with different migrant groups such as “Rumbo Seguro” in 2019 as well as by taking part in public debates about refugees and migrant integration during the last three years.

In 2016 I went to Germany for a year to learn German and to work as a volunteer while living with refugee minors. This experience changed my entire understanding of what it means to be a refugee, or in my own case, what it is to be a migrant. Although my migration was absolutely different than that of the refugee teenagers I lived with, I came closer to feeling what it was to face structural violence of assimilatory policies and experiences of micro-violence and micro-aggressions. As a person of non-binary sexual orientation with activist and migration experience, I feel comfortable and called to speak about integration issues as well as about the LGBTQ+ movement in Costa Rica.

A Note on Methods

This report is a qualitative study based on semi structured interviews and participant observation. We conducted three types of interviews ranging in formality with the following groups:

1. Second generation migrants involved in activism or study of the integration and LGBTQ+ issues or young people who are in the process of seeking refuge;
2. Key informants from the “Las Volcanicas” collective, “TransVida,” and “Casa Abierta”, NGOs who have shared with us experiences from their daily work with migrants and refugees, especially those in the LGBTQ+ community. We also contacted activists of Nicaraguan and Salvadoran nationality who work on asylum application processes with members of trans-populations.
3. Trans-Nicaraguan women who do not belong to any formal group or organization and who are outside of our personal networks.

There are no statistics on the number of trans-people and even less on the number of trans-migrants available in Costa Rica. There is widespread lack of political will to collect this data, which may be motivated by Costa Rica's tense official relationship with the Nicaraguan President, Ortega-Murillo's, regime over the last decade.⁶

⁶ There are tensions on the border of Costa Rica and Nicaragua, especially with respect to the border limits and the use of the San Juan River. These frictions have been characterized by discussions of an ideological nature and as Costa Rican populisms that respond to xenophobia and pressure from social groups that point to Nicaraguan migrations to Costa Rica as a social problem.

Seeking Refuge from Nicaragua

The history of Nicaraguan migration in Costa Rica is extensive but three stages have been distinguished. The first stage dates back to the 1972 Managua earthquake, the second is related to the intensification of the armed struggle of the Frente Nacional Sandinista (FLSN) against the Somoza regime and the third in the 1990s, while the third came with the economic crisis and reduction of the State in Nicaragua. To these three stages we can add the current one, which started on April 18th 2018, with the brutal state repression of anti-government protests. An important characteristic of this last stage of migration is a large number of young migrants and refugees and a greater number of individuals belonging to LGBTQ+ populations.

On April 18, 2018, Nicaraguans took to the streets and protested against their government for its long history of oppression and failure to address the basic needs of its population. It is estimated that during the demonstrations, military forces killed at least 500 people – mostly students. Hundreds of students sought refuge in Costa Rica, some by plane, others through official and unofficial land border crossings. Trans-women tended to prefer to enter through blind spots of the borders, avoiding formal border procedures notorious for violence committed by Costa Rican border officials born out of transphobia, homophobia, and fear of poor and indigent people at the border checkpoints.

The LGBTQ+ migrants came with generally high levels of education and an acute sense of their politics. They quickly became well organized, creating collectives in defense of LGBTQ+ migrant rights, which was uncommon in past generations of migrants. However, a large number of trans-Nicaraguan refugees do not have an educational degree accepted in Costa Rica or a fixed income. The COVID-19 pandemic made cultural, economic, and educational integration an even greater challenge for any migrant, but for “dissident” bodies outside of the bounds of heteronormativity, this challenge was further accentuated. Organizing into collectives and self-help groups became even more important.

Many trans-women carry with them a lifetime of social, economic and political difficulties. The trans-women we interviewed are very active in collectives and social movements and strongly present in public political discourse. It is through their movements that Costa Rican activist organizations began to form alliances with Nicaraguan migrants on specific LGBTQ+ issues. Civil society organizations, NGOs, and international foundations have since mobilized to create legal and care spaces for trans-women.

These institutional and collective support networks play a key role in integration of LGBTQ+ refugees. Geography is key in the integration process, not only in economic terms and opportunities, but also because human rights organizations are concentrated primarily in urban areas. All of the individuals interviewed as part of this study share that it has been through meetings with non-governmental organizations that they have found

the support to overcome the initial adaptation challenges. These support networks allowed them to find psychological and sometimes economic support as well. An interesting observations we made in these activist collective and spaces is that they are heterogeneous – there is no segregation based on gender identity or sexual orientation. All LGBTQ+ community members converge together and respect plurality, united by the experience of exile.

Patriarchy Follows Us Wherever We Go

Trans-woman we talked with had one thing in common: wherever they go, they experience violence. They have traveled from Nicaragua to Costa Rica experiencing a journey from expulsion to exclusion. As one trans-person said, "as a woman and as a transgender person, the patriarchy follows us wherever we go."

Many of the stories of the trans-women we spoke with focused on a profoundly hetero-patriarchal aspect Nicaragua. They described the Nicaraguan society as exclusionary and violent. "Not only is the state violent but so are the people," said one trans-woman. Arriving in a foreign country in search of safety a challenge in itself, but it is ever more challenging after experiencing war time rape. And if that wasn't enough, this arrival comes with being called "Nica" in a xenophobic, religiously conservative country where people typically avoid or are afraid of the poor. Organizations such as Casa Abierta shared with us that for many trans-people, applying for political asylum has required difficult psychological work to address traumas, and to be able to think of themselves as deserving of respect and protection.

In interviews, trans-folks seeking refuge told us that NGOs and international organizations work tirelessly to help asylum seekers navigate legal procedures. They also provide them economic resources, lodging, and food when asylum seekers cannot find work, most often due to discrimination. However, the situation is volatile and support is not guaranteed. In some cases, organizations had to cancel economic support to trans-asylum seekers even before the asylum process was completed, due to budget cuts. This exposes the LGBTQ+ populations to more instability and risk.

Trans-women experience violence of patriarchy in everyday life. One refugee Nicaraguan trans-student shared with us that not being bullied by her classmates was considered a huge achievement. She was grateful for the safe spaces on her university campus, pointing that the feminist and diversity movements on campus amongst led by young Nicaraguan migrants had welcomed her. That this was her crowning achievement speaks volumes to how difficult daily life is for trans-Nicaraguan migrant women.

This experience contrasts sharply with that of another Nicaraguan trans-woman, who had been persecuted in her homeland for being an activist and a member of a political group opposed to the ruling government. She does not have a university degree and tells us

that being accepted by her neighbors in San José has presented a great challenge. She experienced harassment and ridicule especially by men in her community. Her daily fears of being attacked or violated affect her living and health conditions.

Other trans-women we spoke to slept in hospitality NGOs and state migrant camps. Here, trans-women mix with other migrants. Some trans-women report men imposing gender roles on them when they were sharing a living space, such as forcing them to clean and cook. The dominant patriarchal system does not question the definitions of sex or gender. Undoubtedly, income, education, and social networks, as well as gender identity and expression, impact how trans-folks fare in the asylum system, and their possibilities for long-term integration in Costa Rica.

Obstacles to Integration for Transgender Women

Bureaucratic Barriers

State bureaucratic processes continue to pose obstacles to migrant integration, especially for refugees. The waiting time is excessive, the process is complex, and the amount of paperwork is overwhelming. There are no clear rules with asylum procedures, and a lack of coordination among public officials is acute.

Many migrants also do not arrive with documentation. It is very risky to request papers from Nicaragua's government since it signals their desire to leave the country, according to our observations. It is especially difficult for trans-women, given the non-recognition of their gender identity in their homeland. This hinders the identification and validation processes for their asylum in Costa Rica. Only a small minority of Costa Rican officials have training in gender issues, and a vast majority tend not to be prepared to deal with LGBTQ+ cases. Perhaps for this reason, regardless of their possible needs, trans-women prefer to avoid any contact with bureaucratic state institutions due to their mistreatment as diverse persons. Every trans-woman we have been in contact with does not have a recognized refugee status. This makes it difficult to apply for state subsidies and other types of social support.

Employment

While waiting for official paperwork to be processed, migrants are unable to work in Costa Rica. Therefore, they also often lack access to work-based housing contracts and non-emergency healthcare.⁷ Refugees often turn to informal and unregulated work as their only option. However, trans-refugees face legal obstacles to joining the formal workforce, as well as blatant discrimination by employers which makes their situation even more difficult. As one migrant commented, "if you are a trans-woman with an operation and a

⁷ Costa Rica has universal, free and compulsory public health security. It is based on a remuneration principle, in which salaried persons pay 10% of their salary to the Costa Rican Social Security Fund, which covers all persons in the national territory. In case of emergency, any person, regardless of their nationality, status or insurance condition, is attended free and promptly.

female voice, maybe it's a little better." Therefore presenting in the gender binary in a readable and predictable body helps trans-women integrate faster. The performativity of gender identity can determine the success or failure in getting a good deal with public institutions or in applications to jobs. The difficulty of finding work as a trans-migrant woman often leads them to irregular jobs, with sex work⁸ being the main occupation.

As a result of discrimination and lack of proper support and opportunities, it is not strange to hear cases of acute stress, conditions related to high levels of anxiety and –notably and on the rise – the use of excessive alcohol. This is especially true in younger trans-migrant communities. Job instability and struggles integrating exacerbate this stress, especially in the first years of displacement. Migrants feel pressure to advance in their careers and build stable lives but are hampered by limited possibilities in their immediate situation. Therefore, access to work for trans-migrant women is more than an economic need—it is a means of achieving emotional stability and safety.

Education

There is no standardization between educational levels between Nicaragua and Costa Rica, forcing people who were attending college in Nicaragua to return to high school upon arrival in Costa Rica—essentially starting from zero. Many trans-migrants were working towards their academic degrees before being expelled from universities and receiving death threats from the Nicaraguan state. Many cannot obtain documents to prove their academic achievements. As a result, Nicaraguan migrants fall behind.

It is important to note that in Costa Rica, public universities, along with other public companies that provide basic services, are autonomous entities. This means that their leadership is not controlled by the State, but consists of internal leadership, such as a board. At an administrative level, this means that universities and public companies do not share unified procedures and standards for handling refugees, such as coordinating paperwork or setting processing times. Registering at a correct grade level and with the correct name and pronouns can be additionally challenging.

A Nicaraguan trans-woman colleague we met in a LGBTQ+ activism group processed her papers at the University of Costa Rica, which, unlike other public universities, welcomed Nicaraguan migrants who came after the 2018 crisis by awarding them full scholarships. Although these admission initiatives are greatly welcome and have brought attention to the refugee integration, the public universities have been overwhelmed by the complexity and number of cases for admission.

⁸ Respecting the terms used by trans-women, we have rescued the term "sexual work." However, as authors we associate ourselves with a connotation of "sexual exploitation," given the illegal nature of the activity, women do not have any social guarantee, health insurance or labor rights, so they are at the mercy of smuggling and benefit of third parties.

Cost of Living

The high cost of living in Costa Rica is a barrier for refugees to access basic needs in San Jose. The cost of living in Costa Rica is among the highest in the region, creating a double obstacle: the obstacle of affording rent, and of not being able to send remittances to relatives in Nicaragua.

“We live day by day—there is no other option,” said one transgender woman. Most of the people we interviewed or spoke to are supporting themselves without any state help, mostly through informal or “freelance” work. As one person noted, “as transgender people, our economic possibilities are so limited that we even find ourselves selling water in streets.” The few people we talked to that have formal work are aware of labor exploitation they experience, but still prefer their situation to one of everyday uncertainty.

Conclusion

Political and administrative systems in Costa Rica do not conform to the identities of Nicaraguan trans women who face many difficulties living in a transphobic and patriarchal environment. Long waits for bureaucratic procedures, lack of safe formal employment, barriers to educational attainment, and the high cost of living all present obstacles to their integration. While Costa Rica has enjoyed major advances in human rights on paper, especially in the area of LGBTQ+ rights, it is lagging in their practical implementation. There has nonetheless been a growth in support from NGOs and social movements targeting these migrant communities, and Costa Rica continues to be an attractive host country due to its social and political stability that contrasts the notoriously dangerous countries of the Northern Triangle.

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Appendix A

Further information about the support networks for LGTBQ+ population in Costa Rica:

- (1) El Instituto sobre Migración y Refugio LGBTIQ para Centroamérica,⁹ (IRCA CASABIERTA)

"We are a non-profit organization that generates political advocacy, research, training and comprehensive psychosocial assistance aimed at improving the quality of life and development opportunities for LGBTIQ populations that are in forced migration and in search of refuge within the Central American area" (Casa Abierta, s. f.).

This organization, a pioneer in LGTBQ migrant issues in Costa Rica and Central America, began as a collective in 2013 and was formalized as an association in 2018. Among the co-founders of this organization is the activist Dennis Castillo, a Honduran political refugee (context of the Honduran coup d'état 2009). Castillo, with a low budget and together with other migrants, began the task of making the rights of LGTBQ migrants visible in Costa Rica and later in Central America, under the premise that, as Castillos states it "what is not mentioned does not exist."

Location: 50 meters west Simón Bolívar Botanical Park, neighborhood Amón San José 164, 1000.

Contact number: (+506) 4701 8754

Web: <https://ircacasabierta.org/>

- (2) Mesa de Articulación LGBTIQ+ en el Exilio, Capítulo Costa Rica¹⁰ (MESART LGBTIQ+)

"We are a collective with the objective of identifying and making visible the needs of lgbtiq+ Nicaraguans in terms of management and demand in inclusion processes to access humanitarian attention services and achieve a legal migratory status" (MESART LGTBQ+ Capítulo en Costa Rica, 2020).

This group arose in January 2019 as a result of the need to make visible the LGTBQ+ migrant needs in Costa Rica. This collective is characterized by being a network of NGOs and independent collectives that are focused on issues of migrant rights. It is through these links that the same collective manages to provide support to more people in the LGTBQ+ community. A trans -woman member of the Mesart collective, Yassuri stated that the "networks have allowed us to give more support to people in the community, and refer people to a safe house." She also added that "we are in the fight for survival, we do activism in the love of art, for the love of solidarity."

As many other initiatives or collectives in Costa Rica they are depending on crowdfunding to provide information on rights and protections and offer psychological support.

Contact number: (+506) 6479 7005

⁹ LGBTIQ Migration and Refugee Institute for Central America.

¹⁰ Table of LGBTIQ + Articulation in Exile, Costa Rica Chapter

Web: <https://www.facebook.com/MESARTLGBTIQ/>

(3) Volcánicas

“Volcánicas is a Central American feminist collective made up of women activists, human rights defenders, exiles and migrants organized from Costa Rica” (Vólcanicas, 2020).

The collective developed in the context of the arrival of refugees in 2018, at the University of Costa Rica, organized by a group of teachers, students and activists who formed the "university collective initiative for Nicaragua." Fabiola Bernal, a Columbian migrant, sociologist, and a popular educator was also one of the members of this group. As a result, Bernal seeks to promote a gender equality by advocating for diversity and inclusion through the current collective “Volcanicas.” In an interview with the authors, a transgender woman stated: “We decided to call ourselves “Vólcanicas”, because in Nicaragua there is always a Volcano - it became a metaphor for us.” This collective is a transforming and healing volcanic eruption with 13 active members who work hard to make the plight of migrant women visible in Costa Rican society.

Web: linktr.ee/volcanicas

(4) La Asociación TransVida¹¹

TransVida is a Costa Rican association created by and for trans-people. It now has more than 300 members. Its lines of action focus on the training, educational, labor and social integration of trans-people. It ranges from managing projects with sex workers, to teaching classes at their facilities to promote the graduation of their members.

It also receives migrants and refugees from all over Central and South America, providing legal advice, psychological care and training programs.

Location: 250 meters east of Carit Maternity, Plaza Víquez, San José, Costa Rica

Contact number: (+506) 2221 7971

Web: <https://transvidacr.org/>

(5) Hombres trans-Costa Rica¹²

Organization made up of trans-men and non-binary people. They provide legal, medical, social and employment support. They also participate in activities and mobilizations to make trans-identity visible.

Web: <https://www.facebook.com/HombresTransCR/>

(6) Síwo Alâr Hombres Trans-Costa Rica

“We are an organization of and for trans-men in the country. We seek as a collective to fight for the recognition and full exercise of our human rights. We focus on political, educational and accompaniment objectives” (Síwo Alâr Hombres Trans-Costa Rica, 2020).

¹¹ The TransVida Association.

¹² Trans-men Costa Rica

This ONG began in 2015, organized by trans-men who sought safe spaces after experiences of transitions. A member of the group shared with the writers of this report that “ the time was to form a peer group and start fighting publicly for the recognition of our human rights.”

Web: <https://www.facebook.com/SiwoAlar/>

(7) Colective Morfosis

A heterogeneous collective, organized by trans-people who work for the visibility of trans-people as well as provide humanitarian assistance.

Web: <https://www.facebook.com/ColectiveMorfosisCR/>

Appendix B: Poem written by a trans-refugee in Costa Rica

Carolina.

Carolina, mujer valiente y fuerte dice tu nombre, y se queda corto en describirte.

Hoy te alzaste al cielo como un ave, y en tu vuelo vas goteando libertades...

Olvidada fuiste por muchos que hoy se llenan la boca pronunciando pero no sé qué, porque ni siquiera dicen tu nombre.

Carolina

Que tu nombre no se olvide, que tu nombre se recuerde, que en cada grito, cada lágrima y en cada paso que demos, hagamos eco de tu voz... Carolina ¡Dispara! Quizás le dijiste al guardia, pero sin miedo...

Triunfando, quizás hambrienta en una celda, te enfrentaste a más que una cárcel y nos dejaste boquiabiertos...

Carolina

Nos muestras sin siquiera esperar hacerlo, que las chicas trans-para la sociedad igual que los indigentes, tienen que aprender a desarrollar armas déspotas y horrorosas para gritar y en el último caso para sobrevivir... ¡Ay! Carolina. Arlen.

¡HASTA SIEMPRE QUERIDA CAROLINA!

-Colectiva Volcánicas

About the RIT Project

The Refugees in Towns (RIT) project promotes understanding of the migrant/refugee experience in urban settings. Our goal is to understand and promote refugee integration by drawing on the knowledge and perspective of refugees and locals to develop a deeper understanding of the towns in which they live. The project was conceived and is led by Karen Jacobsen. It is based at the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University and funded by the Henry J. Leir Foundation.

Our goals are twofold

Our first long-term goal is to build a theory of integration from the ground up by compiling a global database of case studies and reports to help us analyze and understand the process of immigrant/refugee integration. These cases provide a range of local insights about the many different factors that enable or obstruct integration, and the ways in which migrants and hosts co-exist, adapt, and struggle in urban spaces. We draw our cases from towns in resettlement countries, transit countries, and countries of first asylum around the world.

Our second more immediate goal is to support community leaders, aid organizations, and local governments in shaping policy, practice, and interventions. We engage policymakers and community leaders through town visits, workshops, conferences, and participatory research that identifies needs in their communities, encourages dialogue on integration, and shares good practices and lessons learned.

For more on RIT

On our website, there are many more case studies and reports from other towns and urban neighborhoods around the world, and we regularly release more reports as our project develops.