

# Women ON THE RUN

FIRST-HAND ACCOUNTS  
OF REFUGEES FROM  
EL SALVADOR,  
GUATEMALA,  
HONDURAS AND  
MEXICO – October 2015



A WOMAN AND HER SON FLEE EL SALVADOR © 2015 COURTESY OF UNHCR/MARKEL REDONDO

**WHAT WE DID** Since 2008, UNHCR has recorded a nearly **fivefold increase** in asylum-seekers arriving to the United States from the Northern Triangle region of **El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras**, and a nearly **thirteenfold** increase of asylum-seekers from the same countries arriving to **Mexico** and other parts of Central America. The most vulnerable, namely women and children, are often the first to flee violence. In 2014, UNHCR released *Children on the Run*, a study on minors in the US who had fled violence in the Northern Triangle and Mexico. In August 2015, UNHCR conducted interviews with **160 women** who arrived in the US since October 2013, totaling 63 women from El Salvador, 30 from Guatemala, 30 from Honduras and 37 from Mexico. Each had been screened by the US Government and had either been granted asylum or found to have a **credible fear of persecution or torture** if returned to her home country.

*Women on the Run* tells their stories in detail, illustrating the growing refugee situation in the region and describing **violence, persecution and lack of government protection** that forced them to flee.

**WHAT WE LEARNED** This is a **looming refugee crisis**. Women and children in Central America and Mexico face alarming rates of **escalating, targeted violence and persecution** from *maras* (criminal armed groups), including murder, disappearance, assault, rape, and recruitment of children. Particular groups of women, such as **police officers, women with children, and transgender women** face disproportionate levels of persecution.

Escalating violence from well-connected, armed, and dangerous criminal groups in the region has **surpassed the governments' capacity to respond**.

When women and children flee, they face **obstacles and additional dangers in countries of asylum and transit**.

**WHAT WE CAN DO** The regional refugee-producing situation requires a regional response, and UNHCR calls on all governments to **provide women and children with desperately needed protection**.

Governments in the region can **Respond to Immediate Humanitarian Needs** by:

Ensuring accordance with principles that prevent the forced return of refugees and asylum-seekers, as well as other fundamental human rights standards; providing safe and legal avenues to asylum; and ensuring every woman has the opportunity to tell her story to qualified asylum adjudicators.

Countries of asylum can **Reinforce Regional and National Capacities to Manage the Current Refugee Situation** by:

Upholding individual screening processes and access to quality asylum systems; avoiding the use of unnecessary detention; and collaborating on durable solutions, including resettlement.

Governments can **Respond to Root Causes of Displacement** by:

Collaborating to formulate political solutions that address violence, insecurity, and other root causes of forced displacement from the Northern Triangle of Central America.

The global refugee crisis is growing in the Americas. **Everyone has to step up and respond**.

## MAJOR FINDINGS:

85%

of women interviewed described living in **neighborhoods controlled by criminal armed groups**

100%

of the women interviewed who reported attacks, sexual assaults, rapes, or threats to the police said that they received **ineffective protection or no protection** at all from the police or other government officials

64%

of women interviewed described **direct threats and attacks by armed criminal groups** as at least one of the primary reasons for their flight

10%

of women interviewed said they were **persecuted by the police** in their home country

58%

of women interviewed from Northern Triangle countries gave accounts of **sexual assault and sexual abuse**