

**Lives on the line - Dozens of times, this Roger Williams University professor has testified for people seeking asylum in the US. She knows why they can't go 'home'**

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"It makes me sad that they're turning people away instead of letting the law do its job."

Autumn Quezada-Grant Professor of Latin American history at Roger Williams University

BRISTOL – Televised daily, the images of migrants converging on the U.S. border only to be turned back or expelled are wrenching for Autumn Quezada-Grant, a professor of Latin American history at Roger Williams University.

"It makes me sad that they're turning people away instead of letting the law do its job," she said this week.

Since 2017, Quezada-Grant has been using her expertise in the treatment of women, LGBTQ populations and indigenous people and their intersection with gangs, drug cartels and organized crime in Latin America to help write "country conditions" reports. She uses the information they supply and her knowledge of how life plays out on the ground to help build cases for people seeking asylum in the United States because of fears they will face persecution, violence and perhaps even death should they return. Her knowledge is informed by 20 years of research in Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico and Peru.

"There is really complete dysfunction in the governments they are coming from. No one wants to leave their home. No one wants to leave their family. It takes dire conditions," she said.

Quezada-Grant has produced 150 reports contextualizing for immigration judges across the nation what's happening on the streets, what the asylum seekers have endured individually and why they are seeking protection in the United States.

To receive asylum, the seeker must prove there is a threat to their life in their home country.

Thousands seek protection each year because they claim to have suffered persecution or to fear future persecution based on their race, religion, nationality, political opinion or status in a particular social group. To prove their case requires testimony from the asylum seekers, their friends, relatives and other sources familiar with the situation in their home country. That's where Quezada-Grant comes in.

Fleeing 'for their lives'

Take the case of a native of Mexico who is a transgender woman, has lived in the United States since 2007 and is now facing deportation.

In a report this month supporting her request for asylum and relief under the United Nations Convention Against Torture, Quezada-Grant detailed the woman's past and prospective future if she returned to Mexico.

Beginning at age 7, she was taunted as a "maricón," an antigay slur, for presenting as an effeminate boy. She faced violence and aggression from her family. The woman, whose name is blocked out to protect her identity, later experienced domestic violence at the hands of a partner.

According to Quezada-Grant's report, the woman decided to come to America, where she could be more free to be herself. She identifies as "100% female."

The report goes on to document the climate of gangland shootings in Mexico and escalating murder rate as well as targeted violence against transgender women. She asserts that many incidents are not investigated properly, if at all.

In recommending that the woman remain in the United States, Quezada-Grant wrote: "What we see with people who are transgender is that they are rejected by day-time society and are pushed into an unsafe world, perhaps of prostitution or prey of cartel members. I have worked on cases where transgender women were forced by cartel members into prostitution and sex trafficking."

"There are no real protections for [the woman] in Mexico today. In conclusion, based on my expertise and experience, [she] is more than likely to suffer rejection from society, rejection from participation in day-to-day life ... she carries a heightened risk of being the victim of sexual-based violence and hate crimes. The government of Mexico is unable to adequately protect her. In fact, they may even act against her."

"What they are fleeing for is their lives," Quezada-Grant said in an interview this week. "Oftentimes the police are connected to the gangs."

According to the Migration Policy Institute, nationals from three Central American countries — El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala — made up more than 16% of the 46,500 people granted asylum in the United States in 2019.

Quezada-Grant said the three most dangerous things to be in Latin America are an environmentalist, a journalist and a woman.

"The rates of femicide are so high, they are some of the highest in the world," she said. It is a culture, she said, that is fueled by machismo that views women as property.

"There are few laws in these countries that protect women."

Quezada-Grant credited President Biden's administration for reinstating a policy, struck under the prior administration, that allows women to seek asylum based on domestic-violence claims.

She attributed the increasing numbers of unaccompanied children at the border to laws barring them from being expelled, though Biden has been exercising a Trump-era public-health order enacted early in the pandemic that allows officials to quickly expel migrants without giving them a chance to apply for asylum.

This policy has recently been seen in action with a flood of Haitians at the border. More than a thousand have been returned to Haiti.

"Parents are willing to sacrifice their own lives to save their children's lives," she said.

'You feel like you hold these people's lives in your hands'

Quezada-Grant is one of only a few hundred professors nationwide who are doing country conditions reports, an effort that is time-consuming and takes an emotional toll.

"You feel like you hold these people's lives in your hands. ... I do it because I believe in social justice," she said.

She has testified about 40 times and was gripped by anxiety and panic attacks during each. Lawyers for the government work to poke holes in her account.

"It's scary because you don't want to mess up. You don't want to be called biased," she said.

Country conditions reports can be critical in corroborating a client's account, according to Joseph Molina Flynn, an immigration lawyer who serves as a municipal court judge in Central Falls.

"Every asylum case should have a country conditions report prior to trial," Molina Flynn said.

Like Quezada-Grant, Molina Flynn acknowledges experiencing secondary trauma due to the persecution and terror the individuals are experiencing.

"I often find myself crying and not being able to sleep because you are carrying these people's lives in your hands," he said.

"It makes me sad that they're turning people away instead of letting the law do its job."

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