**Volunteer Reflections at a Family Detention Center operated by GeoGroup, Inc.**

**It is an incredible opportunity to volunteer for a just cause. But it is also sobering and emotionally challenging at times. It’s a good thing we are not alone before and after we meet the detained women, most with children at the detention center who are going to be interviewed by an asylum officer and will have to pass the credible fear interview in order to qualify for temporary legal residence in the U.S. Later I can talk to another volunteer, share my thoughts, feelings, worries for a petitioner whose case seems very difficult. Or hope for someone who has such an obvious need for protection. And we wonder. Will they pass? If not for that support from another volunteer I’m left with my own grief as I recall how a petitioner’s having to re-tell the story of why she fled her country made her break out into sobbing tears.**

**Today I was able to train a new volunteer. Susan and I will be doing an intake: getting basic information about where an asylum seeker came from, if she has children with her, how many days were spent in the border patrol holding cells known as “hieleras” (icelockers). Called so because after they’re arrested by Customs and Border Patrol, migrants get placed in rooms where the AC is kept at frigid temperatures and the lights are never turned off. People sleep on the floor. They’re not supposed to spend more than three days in the hieleras. But some do, so we mark the number of days on the intake form. Sometimes they are moved to a “perrera,” basically a warehouse that gets its name because it structurally resembles a dog kennel. There they’ll get a thin mattress and the daily sandwich and water. The holding cells at the border are uniformly hated. At some point the recently arrested will board a bus, often in handcuffs, and be moved to an immigration detention center managed by the for-profit prison company known as Geo-Group, Inc.**

**After intake we’ll talk about the woman’s upcoming Credible Fear Interview. Our introduction is important. We need to show them respect. Tell them we’re not the government and we’re volunteers strictly showing up to help them for what will be an intimidating encounter with an asylum officer sent by the DOJ in Washington. They do understand “Washington,” as the center of the U.S. government. We remind them we’re not the government and please sign here on this form so that we can follow your case through the system and later on help you get a pro bono attorney if you lose at the first stage and have to appear before an immigration judge.**

**The CFI is a vulnerable experience for those who have to re-tell stories of violence, rape, extortion, beatings and murders they have witnessed. So we have to be especially sensitive when take them through the various questions they’ll get from the asylum officer.**

**Today’s client is in her 40s and a single mother.  The basis for her asylum request is, unfortunately, not unique.  She’s a small business owner who opened up shop earlier in the year. Female. Single mother. Self-supporting. Like many of the working poor, a story of someone who was just trying to make a slightly better living. Her lack of education and poverty destined her for maid, janitorial or agricultural labor in her country. She got help in opening up a tiny food stand. And then it happened. Gang extortion. Death threats. Her little business folded after 4 months because she was terrorized and had no one, not even the police to turn to.**

**I had a similar case a few weeks backs. Another young single mother. The father had abandoned the family years back. A few months into the start of the new venture she was approached by members of a sophisticated gang that preys upon the most vulnerable. Women who already don’t have much, who are heads of household, and who have no one to turn to, not even the government, when the extortionists demand large sums of money and threats to kidnap her children or kill her if she doesn’t deliver.**

**One client a few weeks back had been watched as she left work every day, a job as a maid in a big house. When she walked through an empty alley the three men jumped her, gang raped her and before leaving her demanded payment the next time she left her job. If she didn’t do that she would be killed. She fled as soon as she could, begging for money all the way to afford bus fares that got her to the northern border. She went many days without eating.**

**Why not go to the authorities? Here are some typical answers: “They don’t help.” “If they see me go to the police I’ll be killed or beaten.” “The buy their way out of jail.“ They know everything about me, my family.” They tell us, “we will get you where it hurts, we’ll hurt your family.” They will kill my children.” “They beat up and killed that young man who opened up a small barber shop and he refused to pay the extortion.” “The police themselves are afraid.”**

**There it is – the widespread patterns of domestic terrorism in "failed state" Central American governments that explain the droves of migrants arriving at our border seeking asylum.**

**Why are they persecuted? Many of the typical petitioners are fleeing histories of domestic/gendered violence. Raping that began at tender ages, relationships with men who became abusers once they were married or in a live-in relationship. Female, single mothers, in an environment laden with the male dominant values of a patriarchal society. “My own mother didn’t protect me when he began abusing me.” “He’s on heavy drugs and he’s connected to violent drug gangs.” “They said it was my fault that he did this to me.” The most vulnerable will be the working poor who are in the wrong place at the wrong time. Like the young woman who happened to walk by on her way home from visiting family and witnessed a homicidal domestic dispute. The husband, a known thug in the area, shot his wife right in front of the house. When our client’s little boy was almost run down by the assailant’s car a few days later she got the message. Get out.**

**Of course they often lack money, power, education or alternative safety networks.  X, for example, was abandoned by her male partner several years ago when the youngest turned one. As her children got older and got jobs they supported their mother while she raised the baby and took care of the house. As her children got older they helped her raise the funds to start a little market stand in the square. Soon she became the next perfect target for a crime network that sends groups of men, often heavily tattooed, armed, in their 30s, making demands for large amounts of cash, or “we’ll kill you.” Another pattern – because the person has been observed for months prior to the "visit" they now know where she lives, whether she has children, where the kids go to school, if she is married or not.  The perfect vulnerable morsel for the criminal bite.**

**No it’s not easy hearing them recount these unimaginable facts forced someone to literally run for their lives, to into hiding, often at night, and leave everyone they love behind -- run, run, run, knowing only that if they stay their lives are at risk. No, they don’t go to the police because the government is often non-functioning. There is no citizen defense. There is no official defense. There is chaos and a kind of odd semi-anarchy of a society that functions on power, money and widespread corruption. Small thugs with enough power to keep a community terrorized and compliant with the extortion requests because they can always call upon “friends” who will remind them of their duty.**

**The working poor usually have no one and nothing. X actually went to a lawyer because the older children pulled the money together. The lawyer filed a charge against “unknown males.” But soon after the lawyer said, “you need to leave. There’s no help for you here.”**

**Heartbreaking. To see the visible terror as they recount the facts, as they respond to the question, "What will happen if you are returned to your country?"  And so they break down, sometimes sobbing, "I will be killed." I have nowhere to go."  We ask, have you ever been to this country before?  No.**

**But ponder these facts and the official rhetoric in this country. They are invaders, exploiters and, if women, they’re wanting to get here only to produce "anchor babies."   Migration = criminal in the mindset of exclusionary policy and practice.**

**All immigrants are presumed illegal. Where will this inhumane perspective enacted into law take us as a nation?**

**@Elvia Arriola, July 2018**