

## MORMON WOMEN FOR ETHICAL GOVERNMENT

# We visited the border. We urge all to find humanity — in migrants, in border agents and in ourselves

Azcena motioned toward the shallow water a few feet away, saying wistfully: "It seems so easy to cross. But it's not easy. I want to do it the right way, so I will wait." She had been waiting nearly seven months.

Raul, in Honduras, Azcena's family had been targeted by gangs, so she left her government job and made the arduous trek to Mexico. She now lives in a makeshift refugee camp along the Rio Grande, surrounded by flies and garbage. Every day she goes on the U.S. Customs and Border Protection's One mobile app on her phone in hopes of scheduling an appointment to enter the U.S. and start the process of claiming asylum.

Azcena is just one of many people we met at the McAllen-Remosa border in April with our group of leaders from Mormon Women for Ethical Government. We came with curiosity, concern and a desire to hear from people with multiple perspectives, including those of Border Patrol agents and Immigration and Customs Enforcement detention workers.

As the Biden administration enacts restrictions on asylum-seekers, we bear witness to the realities we found at the border. We hope that sharing them might help move us toward more secure and compassionate solutions to immigration.

The people we met crossing the border were not "invaders." Most migrants arrive — from Central and South America, China, Ukraine, Russia and elsewhere — with their arms up in surrender, many seeking the legal right to asylum. At the Catholic Charities Humanitarian Respite Center in McAllen, Texas, families who had already been processed by CBP were moving on to the next destination to await court dates. As we helped parents with babies on their hips find formula and played with children in pajamas, our



A woman holds her baby in front of a concertina wire fence on the U.S.-Mexico border in El Paso, Texas, as seen from Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, on June 4. Officials with Mormon Women for Ethical Government are urging Americans to be more accepting and welcoming of asylum-seekers.

common humanity became clear.

Widespread perceptions of immigrants often do not match reality. To pack just one stereotype, immigrants are actually less likely to be incarcerated or convicted of a crime than natural-born U.S. citizens. All of society is harmed if we use dehumanizing language to describe immigrants, such as "animals" or people who are "poisoning the blood of our country." They are our brothers and sisters made in the image of God. We should speak about immigrants with respect and treat them as fellow human beings and children of God.

Many of the adults we met at the Catholic Charities shelter had

already been through an ICE detention facility. At the Port Isabel Center, asylum-seekers are vetted and given a chance to make their case in a courtroom on-site. If denied asylum or deemed a security threat, they are deported to their country of origin. The facility was just over half full, not flooded with people. Its staff — many first- or second-generation immigrants themselves — provide medical care, mental health services and an enrichment library.

Members of the Border Patrol, the agents who look for and detain border crossers between ports of entry and at interior checkpoints, also met with us. Aided by sophisticated

surveillance equipment and roads along border walls, these agents encounter migrants daily who are dehydrated, starving and desperate. Again, our common humanity became clear as the agents expressed a desire to be seen not as robots but as real people who spend much of their time aiding migrants, most of whom they believe are good people seeking a better life.

The journeys migrant individuals and families are undertaking are not new. As Liliana Riera of World Relief declared, "God is not overwhelmed by migration." He actually calls people to migrate.

Though God is not overwhelmed, our country is. This is

largely because our immigration policies, which have not significantly changed since 1986, are inadequate to address the current situation. The unprecedented number of families and children coming from many countries and continents are pushed here by a combination of factors — threats of violence, corruption, gang activity, poverty and persecution. They are also pulled by our low unemployment and high standard of living.

Even if we cannot always provide them with a home, we can still do better to act as humane participants in their journeys.

Immigration law is complex, and policies are ever-changing. As citizens, we should all be suspicious of anyone who boils down immigration issues into a few sound bites. Many political leaders, both in and outside the U.S., are trying to gain power by using false information and oversimplification to stoke fear and anger.

That fear and anger lead to greater polarization and stall our ability to find bipartisan solutions, which the majority of Americans want. We must work together toward a sensible immigration policy while respecting the humanity of those, like Azcena, who want to enter our country to find safety, fill essential jobs and contribute richly to our society.

We invite you to join us as we let go of fear and embrace the truth that it is possible to both secure the border and treat all people with compassion and dignity.

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## Boys and men get everything, except the thing that's most worth having

The 20-year-old college student and gamer I met in Cedar City, Utah, didn't seem particularly amused by his own joke that he was a cultural cliché. He lived in his grandma's basement, and barely left the house except to go to classes. He spent the vast majority of his free time online playing video games, watching porn and hanging out on Discord, the heavily male-skewed communication platform, where users gather in communities devoted to topics ranging from innocuously nerdy to the utterly horrifying. By his own admission, he was brutally lonely.

During the pandemic, he was a moderator for a Discord community, at first mainly sorting out technical problems and weeding out trolls. But one night, an adolescent boy called him over voice chat, and started sharing how lonely and depressed he was. He spoke with the boy for an hour, trying to talk him down and give him hope. That call led to more like it. Over time, he developed a reputation as an unofficial therapist on the server. By the time he left Discord a year or so later, he'd had about 200 calls with different people, both men and women, who spoke of contemplating suicide.

But it was the boys who seemed the most desperately lonely and isolated. On the site, he said, he found "a lot more unhealthy men than unhealthy women." He added, "With men, there is a huge thing about mental health and shame because you're not supposed to be weak. You're not supposed to be broken." A male mental-health crisis was flying under the radar.

I have spent the last few years

talking to boys as research for my new book, as well as raising my own three sons, and I have come to believe the conditions of modern boyhood amount to a perfect storm for loneliness. This is a new problem bumping up against an old one. All of the old deficiencies and blind spots of male socialization are still in circulation — the same mass failure to teach boys relational skills and emotional intelligence, the same rigid masculinity norms and social prohibitions that push them away from intimacy and emotionality. But in screen-addicted, culture-war-torn America, we have also added new ones.

The micro-generation that was just hitting puberty as the #MeToo movement exploded in 2017 is now of college (and voting) age. They have lived their whole adolescence not just in the digital era, but with a glorious array of virtual options to avoid the angst of real-world socializing, but also in the shadow of a wider cultural reckoning around toxic masculinity.

We have spent the past half-decade wrestling with ideas of gender and privilege, attempting to challenge the old stereotypes and power structures. These conversations should have been an opportunity to throw out the old pressures and norms of manhood, and to help boys and men be more emotionally open and engaged. But in many ways this environment has apparently had the opposite effect — it has shut them down even further.

For many progressives, weary from a pileup of male misconduct, the refusal to engage with men's feelings has now become almost a point of principle. For every right-wing tough guy urging



"The statistics are starting to feel like their own cliché," writes Ruth Whippman. "Over a quarter of men under 30 say they have no close friends. Teenage boys now spend two hours less a week socializing than girls and they also spend about seven hours more per week than their female peers on screens."

his crying son to "man up," there's a voice from the left telling him that to voice his concerns is to take a time away from a woman or someone more marginalized. In many cases, the same people who are urging boys and men to become more emotionally expressive are also taking a moral stand against hearing how they actually feel. For many boys, it can seem as though their emotions get dismissed by both sides. This political isolation has combined with existing masculine norms to push a worrying number of boys into a kind of resentful, semi-politicized rejection.

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As a mother of boys, I get a chill down my spine at these numbers. And my own research has fed my fears. I talked to boys of all types. Jocks and nerds, popular kids and socially awkward, rich and poor. And the same theme came up over and over for boys who on the face of it had little else in common. They were lonely.

Some of them were genuinely isolated. Others had plenty of friends. But almost all of them had the nagging sense that something important was missing in those friendships. They found it almost impossible to talk to their male peers about anything

intimate or express vulnerability. One teenager described his social circle, a group of boys who had been best friends since kindergarten, as a "very unsupportive support system." Another revealed that he could recall only one emotionally open conversation with a male friend in his life, and that even his twin brother had not seen him cry in years. But they felt unable to articulate this pain or seek help, because of a fear that, because they were boys, no one would listen.

As one 20-year-old put it, "If a man voices any concern, they get deflected with all of their so-called privileges." He added: "They'd be like, 'Whatever. Women have suffered more than you, so you have no right to complain.'"

Almost without exception, the boys I talked to craved closer, more emotionally open relationships, but had neither the skills nor the social permission to change the story.

Perhaps it's not surprising that boys don't know how to listen and engage with their friends' emotions on any deeper level, after all, no one really engages with theirs. We are convinced that men and boys have had more than their fair share of our attention already because in a sexist society, male opinions hold outsized value. But the world — including their own parents — has less time for their feelings.

One study from 2014 showed that parents were more likely to use emotional words when talking with their 4-year-old

daughters than those speaking to their 4-year-old sons. (Right from birth, mothers were less likely to chat back to boys' early sounds.) A more recent study comparing fathers of boys with fathers of girls found that fathers of boys were less attentively engaged with their boys, spent less time talking about their son's sad feelings and instead were more likely to roughhouse with them. They even used subtly different vocabularies when talking with boys, with fewer feelings-centered words, and more competition and winning-focused language.

Spend any time in the manosphere, and it's easy to start to hate men and boys. The extreme misogyny, the gleeful hate speech, the violent threats and thrum of menace make it hard to summon much sympathy for male concerns, and easy to forget the ways that patriarchy harms them, too.

Perhaps it's not surprising that in the grip of the culture wars, caring about boys has become subtly coded as a right-wing cause, a dog whistle for a MAGA-style faith politics. Men have had way more than their fair share of our concern already, the reasoning goes, and now it's time for them to pipe down. But for boys, to privilege and harm intertwined in complex ways — male socialization is a strangely destructive blend of indulgence and neglect. It's only reinforcing this problem, pushing them further into isolation and defensiveness. The prescription for creating a generation of healthier, more socially and emotionally competent men is the same in the wider political discourse as it is in our own homes — to approach boys generously rather than punitively. We need to acknowledge boys' feelings, to talk with our sons in the same way we do our daughters, to hear them and empathize rather than dismiss or minimize, to engage with them as fully emotional beings.

They are more than ready to talk. We just need to make sure we are listening.

Ruth Whippman is the author of "Boysmen: Reimagining Boyhood in the Age of Impossible Masculinity."

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