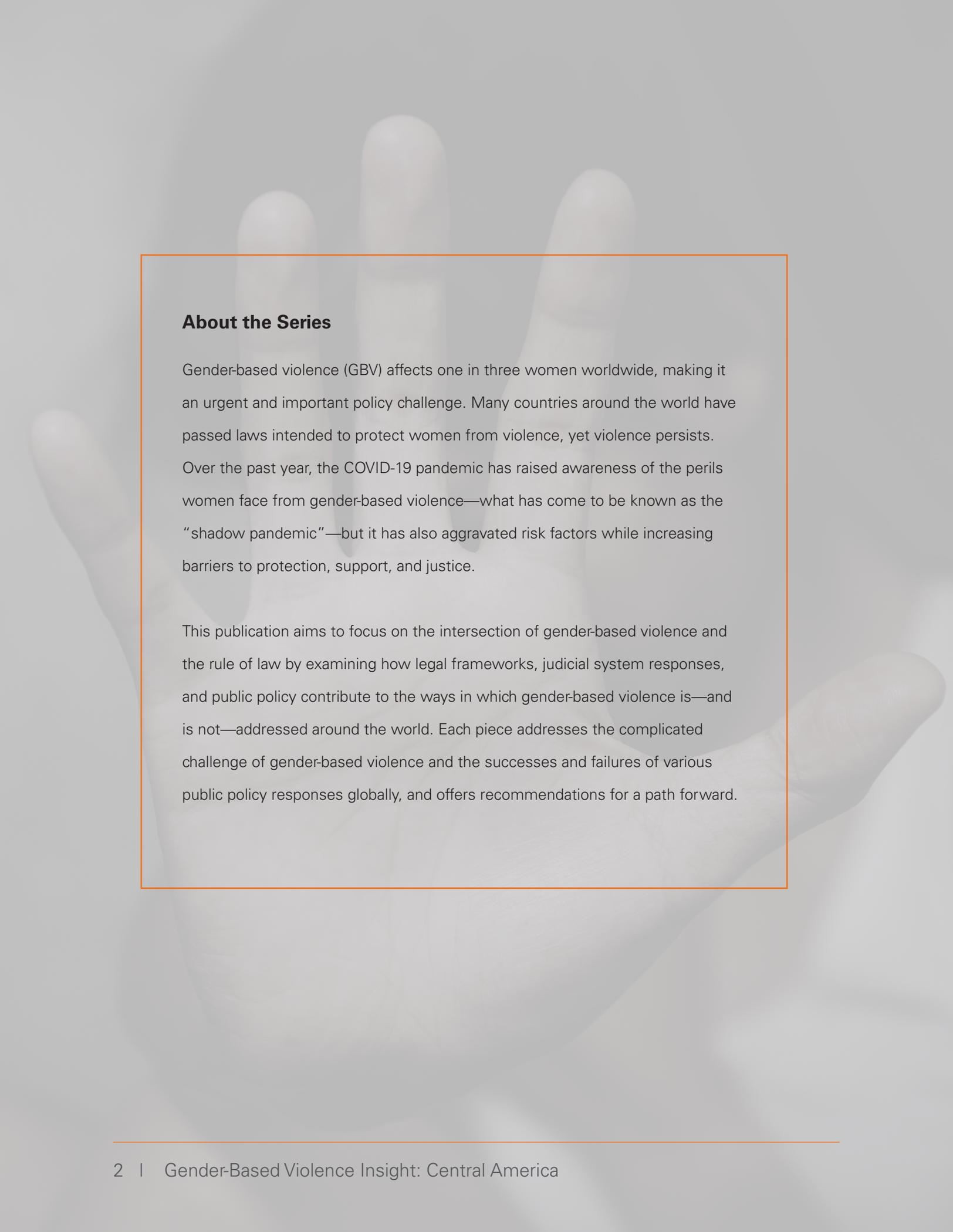




Photo Credit: Honduran women fleeing poverty and gang violence, at a stopover point in Oaxaca, Mexico, en route to the U.S.: Vic Hinterlang, Shutterstock, November 2018

No Justice: Gender-based Violence and Migration in Central America

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About the Series

Gender-based violence (GBV) affects one in three women worldwide, making it an urgent and important policy challenge. Many countries around the world have passed laws intended to protect women from violence, yet violence persists. Over the past year, the COVID-19 pandemic has raised awareness of the perils women face from gender-based violence—what has come to be known as the “shadow pandemic”—but it has also aggravated risk factors while increasing barriers to protection, support, and justice.

This publication aims to focus on the intersection of gender-based violence and the rule of law by examining how legal frameworks, judicial system responses, and public policy contribute to the ways in which gender-based violence is—and is not—addressed around the world. Each piece addresses the complicated challenge of gender-based violence and the successes and failures of various public policy responses globally, and offers recommendations for a path forward.

INTRODUCTION

Violence against women and girls is often excluded from conversations on the nexus of Central American migration, regional development, and domestic immigration reform. Over the last half-century, topics such as economic empowerment, democracy, transparency, and security have dominated the root-causes conversation.

The aim of these investments is to improve the overall stability and well-being of countries and communities in the region, but their effectiveness is limited by a failure to consider the impacts of gender-based violence on social and systemwide challenges.

Though there has been increasing focus from US and international influencers on the levels of violence in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras (known as the Northern Triangle) and its impact on migration, an adequate response to the gendered differences in the ways violence is perpetrated remains limited and at times nonexistent.

This needs to change, especially since gender-based violence within the Northern Triangle constitutes a daily threat to women and girls—one that has been significantly worsened by corruption, weak institutions, and a culture of impunity toward perpetrators. At individual and community levels, gender-based violence drives women and girls to internal displacement, migration to the United States, or a somber

“Violence in all three Northern Triangle countries is high, although women and girls face a ‘continuum of violence’ that affects all areas of their lives and is distinctly gendered.”

third path—death either by femicide or suicide. At national levels, it seriously inhibits security, opportunity, and development.

As circumstances at the southern border of the United States demonstrate, gender-based violence has a direct influence on migration flows across the region and is deeply tangled with cyclical challenges of inequity and poverty. For those who choose to seek assistance or flee their communities, high rates of revictimization and bias further obstruct access to justice and safety.

Until policies and programs respond to the serious violations of agency and human rights perpetuated against women and girls (and within systems and society at large), instability in and migration from the Northern Triangle only stand to grow.

As the United States and the international community consider a comprehensive plan on Central America and immigration reform, proposed strategies must anchor the status and safety of women and girls at the center of solutions.

WHY THIS MATTERS NOW: THE SILENT PANDEMIC

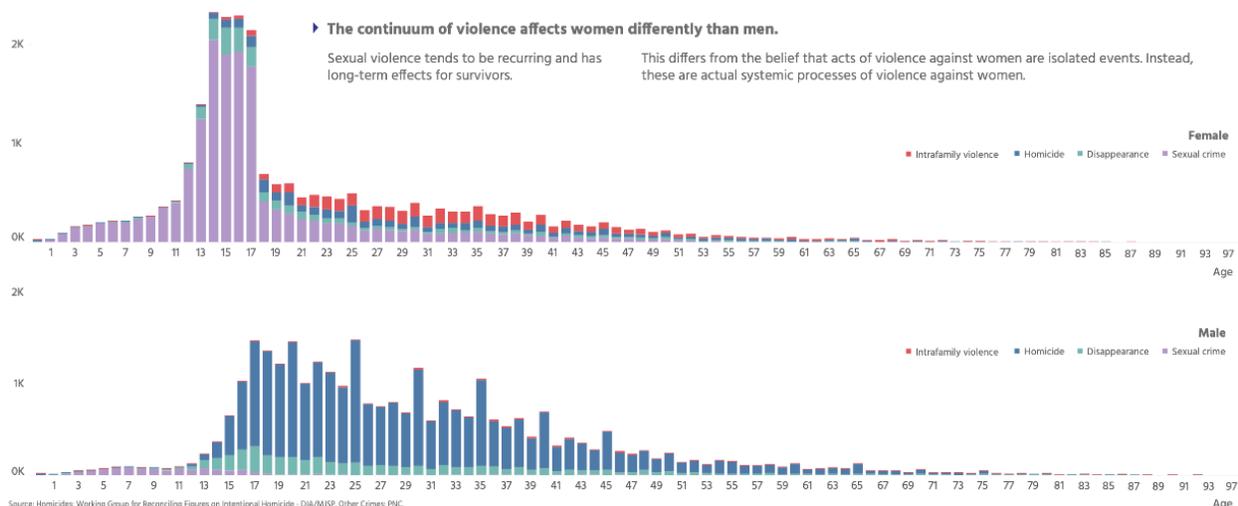
Gender-based violence is one of the most widespread and egregious human rights violations in the world. The United Nations defines gender-based violence as any act “that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women and girls, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.”¹

Plainly put, gender-based violence is any harmful act against a person because of their gender. This

THE CONTINUUM OF VIOLENCE

This refers to an inertia and continuity of violence in the lives of women, in which there seems to be a continuum in their histories where the norm and the constant is violence directed at them, always and everywhere.

Source: UNDP and USAID, 2016.



Technical Table for Conciliation on Homicides and Femicides Figures DIA-MJSP and PNC. From: "Violence against Women, El Salvador 2020," *Infosegura*, June 18, 2021.⁴

includes obvious behaviors such as harassment and sexual assault as well as lesser-known examples such as economic abuse (controlling a person's access to money and/or resources to keep them financially dependent on their abuser) and coercion.

Violence in all three Northern Triangle countries is high, although women and girls face a "continuum of violence" that affects all areas of their lives and is distinctly gendered.

For women and girls, toxic masculinity, machismo, gender inequality, and ineffective justice systems reinforce cyclical violence across all levels of society. From harassment and economic abuse to sexual assault and femicide, every point within this continuum undermines a victim's agency and well-being, as well as the stability and prosperity of her community.

While men in the region are at a higher risk of violent death, the continuum of abuse perpetrated against women is most often driven by sexual, intrafamily, and domestic violence. Additionally, women

and girls are habitually viewed as property by gangs² and can be targeted for torture, rape, and murder as a way to get revenge on rival members.³

Of the 25 most dangerous places in the world for women, 10 are in the Western Hemisphere, with Central American countries Honduras and El Salvador near the top of the list, at numbers two and four respectively.⁵

Young women and adolescent girls face the most serious threat of violence. For example, while the risk of murder exists throughout a woman's life, women of reproductive age face a significant risk of violent death, according to an analysis on the incidence of the crimes by *Infosegura*, which does data collection and analysis work on Central American citizen-security issues for the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the US Agency for International Development (USAID).

Honduras and El Salvador had Latin America's highest rates of femicide—the targeted killing of women and girls based on sex and gender—in 2019. And in



Photo Credit: A Guatemalan mother with her child in Guazacapán, Guatemala: Kyle M. Price, Shutterstock, November 2018

2020, an average of 11 women were murdered each month in El Salvador, with half of them under the age of 31.⁶

In Guatemala, teenage girls face a substantial risk of being “disappeared,” with 8 out of every 10,000 girls between the ages of 15 and 17 reported missing each year.⁷

Though the prevalence of early and forced marriage is often overlooked in the region (compared with other parts of the world), survey data from UNICEF reveals that Central American countries—including the Northern Triangle nations—have early marriage rates above both the global and regional averages. In Honduras and Guatemala, around one in three women between the ages of 20 and 24 indicated that they were in a marriage or informal union before the age of 18. The rate of early marriage is only slightly better in El Salvador, at one in four women.

Concerning perceptions about the status of women and male entitlement also persist, according to 2018 data from Oxfam that included Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador among its Latin American sample. Three-quarters of young people surveyed stated that their male friends believe harassment of women is normal, while a significant majority also said that their male friends monitor their female partners’ phones and social media.⁸

El Salvador: A sexual crime was reported every four hours on average in 2020, and 48.5 percent of victims were 14 years old or younger⁹—although the true number of victims is likely higher, as reporting rates are low (6 percent).¹⁰ A 2017 national survey found that 34 percent of women reported being a victim of violence within the last 12 months, 4 out of 10 women suffered sexual violence throughout their lives, and 1 in 10 said she had been a victim of sexual violence in the last 12 months.¹¹ Femicides reached a high of 16.8 per 100,000 in 2016. To put that number in perspective, that same year,

the total homicide rate for the United States was 5 per 100,000.¹²

Honduras: Honduras has the second-highest rate of femicide in Latin America.¹³ In 2020, there were at least seven sexual crimes reported each day, 54 percent of victims were under the age of 15, and 76 percent were under 20.¹⁴ Femicides in Honduras are 50 percent higher than the Latin American average and more than triple the global average.¹⁵ One-third of all femicides occurred in the home, up 600 percent from 2013. Honduras does not have a suicide-femicide law, but data show that female suicides start younger (6 to 9 years old) and occur more frequently than male suicides, up to the age of 14.¹⁶

“State-sanctioned and state-accepted gendered violence may have contributed to a culture that tolerates violence against women.”

Guatemala: In Guatemala, about 8 of every 1,000 women and girls were the victim of violence in 2020. Thirty women were murdered on average each month last year, or almost one per day, the lowest rate in the last 10 years. Reported rape cases averaged 14 per day.¹⁷ One of the most extreme and recognizable forms of gender-based violence is sex slavery. According to a report by the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) and UNICEF: “A combination of gangs, crime families, and drug trafficking organizations run sex trafficking rings in Guatemala that may involve some 48,500 victims.”¹⁸

Women in Indigenous and rural communities may have it even worse. For example, Indigenous women in Guatemala face multiple layers of discrimina-

tion, including a history of repression and genocide.

During the genocidal Guatemalan civil war that lasted from 1960 to 1996, state sanctioned mass rape during massacres was used to repress the Indigenous populations—with offenses committed publicly and bodies often left on display with the intent to instill terror in the Mayan communities.¹⁹ Truth commissions state that more than 100,000 Indigenous women were raped and forced into sex slavery.²⁰

State-sanctioned and state-accepted gendered violence may have contributed to a culture that tolerates violence against women. Guatemalans were the most accepting of gender-based violence in a 2014 survey of Latin American countries by Vanderbilt University, while El Salvador came in second.²¹

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the risk of violence to women and girls in the Northern Triangle, as it has in every region of the world. Exploited by gangs and others, lockdowns have forced those most at risk for violence to shelter in proximity to their abusers. All three countries within the region have reported sizable increases in intrafamily violence since the start of the pandemic. El Salvador has also seen a notable increase in intrafamily femicide.

The Role of Rights and Systems

Access to, and effectiveness and transparency of, social services and justice systems have considerable influence on the status and well-being of women and girls around the world. Sadly, the Northern Triangle provides one of the most poignant examples of what happens when justice and infrastructure remain out of reach or repeatedly fail.



Photo credit: A Central American asylum seeker boards a bus with her son in La Joya, Texas, that's headed to a border patrol station: Vic Hinterlang, Shutterstock, May 2021

El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras all have statutes that outline protections and support for women and girls impacted by violence. However, lack of enforcement, corruption, and serious resource challenges regularly undermine access to justice for women within the region, reinforcing a cycle of inequity and gender-based violence.

Despite having the highest rate of violence outside a war zone,²² pockets of the elite within the region are safe—primarily due to their ability to pay for private security.²³ This means that access to safety is directly related to wealth.

Regional impunity rates are high overall, and 95 percent of crimes against women and girls in all three countries go unpunished,²⁴ bolstering fear of reporting and retribution, the normalization of gender-based violence, and lack of trust in authorities.²⁵

Rape, domestic violence, and sexual harassment are all illegal under Salvadoran law and punishable by 6 to 10 years in prison, 1 to 3 years in prison, and 5 to 8 years in prison, respectively.²⁶ Spousal rape is criminalized, but at the discretion of the presiding judge. El Salvador is also the only country in the world where there is a law against femicide-suicide: the crime of driving a girl or woman to suicide by abusing her.²⁷

Honduras criminalizes acts of gender-based violence such as domestic abuse, sexual assault, and femicide. But the criminal justice system does not adequately punish perpetrators, leaving many victims to try to pursue justice under the Honduran Civil Code's Law Against Domestic Violence. The civil penalties are paltry—a mere one to three months of community service. Monetary damages are awarded only on the basis of economic harm.

“The lack of enforcement and access to justice for women and girls across the Northern Triangle has direct implications for the asylum crisis along the southern border of the United States.”

Like other countries in the region, Guatemala is a signatory of various international treaties focused on preventing and responding to gender-based violence. Additionally, both the 2008 Law Against Femicide and the Guatemalan Criminal Code criminalize gender-motivated violence, including psychological, economic, and physical abuse. The 2008 law specifically sets defined mandates for punishments for gender-based violence, including a 25- to 50-year sentence (without the possibility of early release) for those convicted of femicide.

But regardless of the scope of these and other laws, none of the prohibited crimes against women and girls are effectively enforced.

For example, even though El Salvador and Honduras have joined other countries across the region in moving forward strict legislation prohibiting the practice of early marriage, enforcement challenges, gang violence, and harmful social norms have limited progress in protecting young women and adolescent girls.

More than two-thirds of Salvadoran women have experienced violence in their lifetime, but only 6 percent reported the crimes against them, a 2017 national survey found.²⁸ Suicide among women and girls is on the rise in El Salvador, accounting for 57 percent of the deaths of girls between 10 and 19,

and it's the fourth leading cause of death among women ages 20 to 49. Unfortunately, since the inception of the femicide-suicide law in 2012, only 60 cases have been investigated, and only one has made it to court. Even more concerning, none have resulted in a conviction.²⁹

In Honduras, which has one of the highest rates of femicide in the world, no charges are brought or convictions secured in about 95 percent of cases.³⁰ Moreover, punishments are limited because most cases of gender-based violence are adjudicated under the Honduras Civil Codes Law Against Domestic Violence.

In Guatemala, resource gaps, limited response from law enforcement, and the commutability of sentences render justice and safety out of reach for many women, regardless of advancements in legislation to protect them. The United Nations estimated in 2018 that 83 percent of crimes against women in Guatemala go unpunished.³¹ Additionally, the country currently doesn't have any laws prohibiting sexual harassment.

The lack of enforcement and access to justice for women and girls across the Northern Triangle has direct implications for the asylum crisis along the southern border of the United States. About 60 percent of female Central American asylum seekers who responded to a 2015 United Nations survey said that they had reported incidents to the police, but none had received adequate protection—or, in some cases, any protection at all.³²

Machismo and gender bias also directly influence both judicial and civic institutions, causing further trauma for survivors. Ineffective coordination between agencies, law enforcement, and legal institutions—and their lack of informed policies when



Photo Credit: Indigenous Kaqchikel family members gather in a bride's home to ask for her hand in marriage, in Chimaltenango, Guatemala: Byron Ortiz, Shutterstock, November 2011

dealing with gender-based violence—worsens discrimination and the stigmatization of victims when crimes are reported.

Women and girls targeted by gangs are often discriminated against within the justice system, with law enforcement, prosecutors, and judges frequently believing that the women's abuse was attributed to gang affiliation. This results in poor investigations and classification of women's deaths as due to a "gang conflict" rather than femicide.³³

Perhaps most concerning, many survivors of gender-based violence report being assaulted or revictimized by the people who were supposed to help them. For example, approximately 12 percent of sexual violence cases reported to the Salvadoran Organization of Women for Peace were perpetrated by "judges, prosecutors, lawyers, and police officers."³⁴

This gender bias and social stigma carries over into other institutions, such as education and health. Adolescent mothers are often kicked out of school for being a "bad influence" on other students, and gender-based violence survivors have reported being denied medical assistance.³⁵

Coupled with the trauma already experienced by survivors, each of these factors contributes to a lack of trust in institutions, high levels of impunity for perpetrators, and a vicious cycle of repeat violence against women and girls.

Faced with this dire reality, women and girls often have three choices: (1) report and face disbelief, (2) stay and risk additional violence, or (3) flee.

THE INFLUENCE OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE ON MIGRATION

The reasons people migrate from the Northern Triangle are complex, based on a variety of interconnected factors. Some of the most obvious are poverty, instability, and corruption in their home countries, as well as impunity for violent offenders—a confluence of negatives that results in “push factors.” There are also more nuanced drivers that help create an environment people either choose to leave or are forced to leave. These include low educational attainment, the influence of remittances, and family reunification.

“Gender-based violence affects entire communities where it occurs, increasing the overall sense of instability and vulnerability.”

While many of these push factors have been present for years, the demographics of arrivals at the southwestern border of the United States are shifting.³⁶ As more women and children seek refuge from violence and inequity, it’s clear that one driver is having an outsized impact: gender-based violence.

For example, women in El Salvador were more likely than men to say that they intended to migrate because they felt they would be victims of crimes against their person (rather than against their property).³⁷ The number of women crossing the southern border tripled between 2018 and 2019.³⁸

Violence, and gender-based violence specifically, contribute significantly to overall instability in the

Northern Triangle. Gender-based violence lowers educational attainment and labor market participation, reduces gross domestic product (GDP), and leads to higher levels of internal displacement,³⁹ poorer health outcomes, higher maternal and infant mortality rates,⁴⁰ and worse development outcomes for children.⁴¹

A 2016–2017 study by Vanderbilt University found that both men and women expressed a higher intention to emigrate if they lived in neighborhoods where there had been attacks on women. Gender-based violence affects entire communities where it occurs, increasing the overall sense of instability and vulnerability.⁴²

Before reaching the southern border of the United States, many individuals and families are internally displaced, looking for safer areas in their own countries.⁴³ Many people are internally displaced multiple times before ultimately fleeing to another country.⁴⁴ Unfortunately, due to the ties that exist between wealth and security, many of them only have access to areas with equal or worse security concerns.⁴⁵

There are more than 1.4 million people internally displaced in the Northern Triangle, according to the International Rescue Committee. Most of those internally displaced in Honduras between 2004 and 2018 cited violence as the reason, with most displacements occurring from one department (state) to another.⁴⁶ High internal displacement is both emblematic of, and a contributor to, instability, which ultimately drives out migration.



Photo Credit: Indigenous Guatemalan mother and daughter walking in a rural village in Guatemala: Omri Eliyahu, Shutterstock, April 2019

Revictimization

A significant number of women and girls experience further victimization in their migration journey, on top of the personal security concerns they already faced in their home communities. Whether seeking security elsewhere in the region or making the arduous journey to the US border, kidnapping, coercion, sexual violence, and human trafficking are serious realities faced by female migrants already fleeing violence.

“The vast majority of victims of sexual violence in the context of migration are women and girls,” according to a 2021 analysis from the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime.⁴⁷ Most of these cases go unreported.⁴⁸ But the information that does exist—from law enforcement agencies, immigrant advocates, and migrant women themselves—reflects a highly concerning pattern of revictimization and abuse.

“The fact that many women face further risk of abuse within the United States is often overlooked, even as some attention has focused on the experiences of migrant women during their journey north.”

Migrants traveling through Mexico are vulnerable to smugglers (coyotes), gangs, cartels, and police.⁴⁹ More than 60 percent of migrants were exposed to a violent situation in the two years before leaving their home countries, according to a new report from Doctors Without Borders, which operates a number of health care posts in Mexico that offer services to migrants. Among migrants traveling with children, that number jumps to 76 percent. One-third of all migrants were internally displaced before making the journey north, and close to 58 percent

were exposed to additional violence along the route.⁵⁰ Unfortunately, gender disaggregated data is not available for comparison, a challenge that further hinders effective and targeted solutions.

Between 60 and 80 percent of female migrants are raped as they travel through Mexico, according to a study by Amnesty International.⁵¹ When preparing to migrate, many females get a contraceptive shot, knowing they face a high likelihood of assault during the journey.⁵² “Sexual violence is an unfortunate common feature of all smuggling routes,” a study by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime found, and sexual violence is used to “pay” for passage (transactional rape) or “perpetrated for no purpose other than a demonstration of power, misogyny, racism, or sexual gratification.”⁵³ Mexico must also take steps to protect migrants within its borders.

The fact that many women face further risk of abuse within the United States is often overlooked, even as some attention has focused on the experiences of migrant women during their journey north. Again, data gaps and fear of reporting remain challenges to understanding the full scope of revictimization, but testimonies increasingly describe an abhorrent pattern of gender-based violence perpetrated against female migrants within American border cities and beyond.

Women and girls undertake this risky journey with no guarantee of legal protection in the United States. But they come because the horrors they face at home are so much worse.

It’s important to remember that seeking asylum is often the only legal means that migrants who qualify have of entering the United States. Although requesting asylum is legal, the path to asylum is not

safe. An understanding of legal rights and access to services—including health, trauma, and legal support—also remain out of reach for many female migrants, furthering cycles of exploitation.

Current US refugee and asylum law does not recognize gender-based violence as its own category warranting protection. According to the American Bar Association, US protections for victims of gender-based violence are built upon 20 years of advocacy and sometimes favorable legal opinions.⁵⁴ These protections are tenuous, with any presidential administration able to roll back the decisions made under its predecessor. Attorney General Merrick Garland recently reinstated prior precedent for gender-based violence asylum requests and announced that the Department of Justice would pursue a formal rule.⁵⁵ But even this could be reversed in the future.

Until legislation enshrines gender-based violence as a condition warranting humanitarian protection, the United States will continue to turn away women and girls who merit refuge.

THE BROADER IMPACT OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE ON REGIONAL STABILITY AND PROSPERITY

Gender-based violence is estimated to cost some countries around the world as much as 3.7 percent of GDP—a total “more than double what most governments spend on education,” according to global data from the World Bank.⁵⁶

Simply put: A country cannot succeed when half of its population is undervalued, unprotected, and denied agency to decide and act upon their choices.

High levels of gender inequity and violence seriously inhibit opportunity, disincentivize investment, and ultimately stunt economic development.

How can anyone be expected to thrive when her day-to-day priority is simply to survive?

The realities facing women and children across the Northern Triangle are complex and acutely impacted by intersecting issues. Policy structures and legal systems, access to services and opportunities, interpersonal relationships, and community, social, and environmental pressures all affect the status and well-being of populations.

Though violence against women and girls as an issue is often viewed within a silo, it is both influenced by and an influence on broader barriers to stability and prosperity across the region.

“Simply put: A country cannot succeed when half of its population is undervalued, unprotected, and denied agency to decide and act upon their choices.”

From education and employment to health and well-being, the continuum of gender-based violence undercuts opportunities and upward mobility for individuals, communities, and populations at large.

For example, although most countries within Central America have seen significant progress and parity in primary school access and completion rates, the reality is vastly different when it comes to secondary education. While 9 in 10 boys and girls transition to secondary school, completion rates remain low.

Strongly influenced by safety concerns, secondary school attendance rates have only reached 44 percent in Guatemala, 47 percent in Honduras, and 60 percent in El Salvador. These equate to some of the lowest rates of adolescent school attendance across Latin America. Upper secondary school completion rates are even more concerning at 25 percent, 25 percent, and 36 percent for females in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, respectively.⁵⁷ And when it comes to migration specifically, around 70 percent of all migrants from the Northern Triangle claim to have received little to no education beyond primary curriculum.

Additionally, with one of the highest estimated adolescent fertility rates in the region, the prevalence of coercion, early unions, and sexual abuse significantly impact the ability of adolescent girls and young women to remain in school. For example, 22 percent of Salvadoran teenagers between the ages of 15 and 19 who dropped out of school became mothers soon after. Guatemala specifically suffers from a high teenage fertility rate (20 percent), with more than 104,000 births to girls 19 and under in 2020, including almost 5,000 to mothers between the ages of 10 and 14.⁵⁸ The true number of births to girls under 14 is unknown, however: In response to a 2012 law that mandates that hospitals report under-14 births, families have the girls deliver at home to protect the perpetrator. For girls under 14, 25 percent of reported rape cases involve the girl's father, while 89 percent involve a family member or someone known to the family.⁵⁹ While high in all three countries, Honduras has the highest rate of child marriage at 34 percent (30 percent in Guatemala, 26 percent in El Salvador).⁶⁰ In Honduras, 25 percent of girls become pregnant before turning 18, half of those as a result of rape.⁶¹

Gaps in educational attainment and high adolescent fertility rates overlaid with unequal gender norms also result in mothers having fewer opportunities to participate in the formal labor market and less economic independence. This includes a higher likelihood of involuntarily becoming primary care-takers and/or working in the informal market with little to no access to social security. This culminates in an increase in the burden of care and unpaid labor.⁶² This disparity has broader impacts on both economic growth and workforce participation. The Observatory for Sexual and Reproductive Health in Guatemala estimates that the gap in educational attainment between adolescent mothers and mothers ages 20 to 30 represents a loss of more than \$55 million dollars annually. Women face more limited options for employment than their male counterparts, “although women have achieved the same (or higher) educational levels as men in many countries, women’s employment continues to be concentrated in low-wage, informal-sector jobs.”⁶³

RECOMMENDATIONS

In seeking to implement effective and sustainable solutions to bolster peace and prosperity within the Northern Triangle, the following recommendations should be key considerations for policymakers, government institutions, and corporate and nonprofit actors. Though these recommendations were developed in response to the circumstances in the Northern Triangle, rates of gender-based violence across the Western Hemisphere and beyond demonstrate that many also have wider application:

The governments of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras should strengthen justice systems, enforce rule of law, and create/enhance a continuum of care approach to gender-based violence.

El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras must enforce the rule of law. This includes increasing access to reporting crimes, investigating, and prosecuting crimes (especially where state actors may be involved) and ensuring protection for survivors and witnesses. Enforcing the rule of law means taking all of these steps before gender-based violence reaches the level of sex trafficking or femicide. Harassment, verbal abuse, and other early forms of gender-based violence must receive greater acknowledgement and response.

El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras should also work with supporting partners—such as USAID, the International Development Bank, International Justice Mission, and others—to strengthen their justice systems and implement trauma-informed best practices.

Trauma-informed best practices should not start and stop at the justice system. Social service providers, health care professionals, educators, faith-based organizations, survivor shelters, and others should collaborate to provide a continuum of care approach to survivors of gender-based violence. Ultimately, developing a community-wide strategy will help foster trust in institutions and support the cultural and social change needed to prevent gender-based violence from happening in the first place.

The Mexican and US governments, in partnership with nonprofit organizations, should improve access to legal counsel and trauma support for women and girls fleeing gender-based violence.

Mexico, as a transit and receiving country, and the United States, as a destination country, should recognize the distinct needs of women and girls that are seeking humanitarian protection and also implement trauma-informed best practices and support for survivors fleeing gender-based violence.

Access to trauma-informed best practices and legal counsel ensures that victim's rights are protected and that those who qualify for asylum are granted it. In many cases, survivors may qualify for alternative forms of humanitarian protection, and access to legal counsel could reduce the asylum case backlog by helping survivors of gender-based violence navigate the complex immigration system and move their cases to other appropriate channels.

Governments, corporations, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) should prioritize gender disaggregated data collection.

The lack of gender disaggregated data creates critical knowledge gaps that can impede stakeholders' ability to support or implement strategies that effectively improve their respective issue-areas. Effective policy, at any level, cannot be made in a data vacuum.

For example, US Customs and Border Protection has limited disaggregated data collection on border apprehensions or asylum requests by gender. An

increased collection and dissemination of this data and other metrics can provide NGOs, policymakers, and officials with a more complete picture of what is happening on the southwestern border of the United States and the effectiveness of current policies in place.⁶⁴

Collaboration on security and humanitarian initiatives by the United States, Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras should include gender disaggregation of data they collect, as well as sharing of that data and analysis. A key component of this should focus on gender-based violence within the Northern Triangle and the experiences of migrant women. Accurate and updated data on the status and experiences of female migrants and survivors of violence remains woefully sparse, even more so among Indigenous, rural, and extremely poor communities. Moreover, data tracking the effectiveness and expediency of justice systems across the region also remain limited. Both policy and innovation can play a significant role in tackling these challenges.

NGOs have made notable inroads on original data collection and the combining of disparate official data sources to shine a light on gender-based violence. Infosegura, for example, is executed by the UNDP's Regional Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean and is funded by USAID. The result is invaluable data in seven countries (including the Northern Triangle countries) that provide local and international stakeholders with critical information on incidences of gender-based violence. The International Rescue Committee has also seen great success in both disseminating information and collecting data via its mobile phone-based application, CuéntaNos.⁶⁵

The private sector also has a role to play in funding these initiatives. Companies should provide technical and capacity-building support around digital initiatives as part of their social corporate responsibility programs and disaggregate and analyze their own internal data on the status and success of women on their staff. Innovation is a key driver of private sector success, and companies are well positioned to innovate around how they can best support their workforce and communities. For example, Applaudo Studios, a tech and software development company based in El Salvador, not only has specific training initiatives for women but also boasts that 45 percent of its leadership is female.

Collection and sharing of gender-disaggregated data is simply a necessity if stakeholders are going to positively effect change.

Governments and the private sector should invest in capacity-building of, partnership with, and direct investment in local organizations and advocates who are leading change.

Corporate, foundation, and government donors should partner with and meaningfully support local organizations and advocates in the Northern Triangle who are working to prevent gender-based violence, enhance community response efforts, and aid survivors.

Systemic and social change will take effort and investment from all members of society and at both macro and micro levels. Foreign aid on behalf of the United States should include capacity-building and partnership with the organizations and advocates that are leading change. Collaboration across sectors (such as information and communication

technologies, health, and education) and countries (El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and the United States) should be a component of any gender strategy.

Public and private sector stakeholders must meaningfully engage with local communities, including men and boys, on gender equity to challenge and uproot antiquated and harmful social norms.

In seeking to ensure sustainable progress in addressing gender-based violence, any investments in gender equality must incorporate targeted engagement with men and boys. Direct outreach to males opens channels of communication and understanding. It also enhances advocacy and the success of interventions through the key influence of allyship. This is particularly true when seeking to build affinity for the status and well-being of all members of society. And dismantling harmful gender norms and their acceptance within society is a critical step. Though greater resources are significantly needed in this area, organizations and influencers like Promundo and the Spouses of CARICOM Leaders Action Network have demonstrated and replicated impactful efforts focused on male allyship in the fight to eradicate gender-based violence.

Governments and private sector institutions should support advocacy efforts that inform women and girls of their rights and agency.

Despite their significant influence on their families, communities, and countries, many women in Central America are unaware of their individual rights as defined and protected by the law. This disconnect is especially acute in rural and Indigenous

regions. From mobile phone applications to radio broadcasts, advocacy and awareness campaigns that meet women and girls where they are can go a long way in building recognition of their agency and challenging patriarchy. International corporations that have had success in supporting knowledge and capacity-building around labor rights should explore ways in which these innovations can be adapted and expanded to include an emphasis on gender rights within the communities where they engage.

The US government and other international partners should leverage existing infrastructure and initiatives to include gender metrics and goals.

There are many initiatives implemented by international organizations and foreign and domestic governments. Many of these rightly focus on addressing root causes of migration, economic development, climate resiliency, and more. Stakeholders should evaluate their programs to see where gendered metrics and goals can be incorporated and where existing infrastructure and “wins” can be leveraged, enhanced, and replicated.

Creative and collaborative thinking here is welcomed. For example, each country has a strategy for implementing digitization—which could help reduce gender-based violence by increasing access to reporting and services, as well as information about rights, and could contribute to the implementation and efficient execution of best practices on the part of the provider. Domestic governments already have partnerships with international organizations, such as the Inter-American Development Bank, and US-based foreign assistance through USAID, to help reach their digitization goals. These partnerships should incorporate gender-advocacy groups that can

lend their expertise on how to best leverage digital technologies to reduce instances of gender-based violence.

CONCLUSION

The Northern Triangle, Mexico, and the United States are at a crossroads. El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras can either take advantage of a young population of prime working age by promoting policies that create a safe, stable environment where women and girls can fully participate, or they can continue on a path that is leading to substantial levels of gender-based violence, instability, migration, and economic stagnation.

As research continuously demonstrates, when empowered, active, and engaged, women and girls are a critical catalyst for security and prosperity. Countries with higher levels of gender equity are more peaceful and stable overall.⁶⁶ Gender equality can provide better outcomes for children, increased labor productivity, lower poverty rates, and reduced levels of violence.⁶⁷

In seeking to secure a brighter future across the Western Hemisphere, immigration and development policies must include solutions to address gender inequity and gender-based violence. As current circumstances at the southern border of the United States demonstrate, stability and prosperity are not possible without them.

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