
KIND Endorses the Central American Women and Children Protection Act of 2021 (H.R. 4017)

In June, the Central American Women and Children Protection Act was reintroduced in the House and the Senate. This bipartisan legislation would provide critical funding to address violence against women and children in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—one of the main drivers of child migration from the region. The bill would not only work to prevent violence, but also provide meaningful support to survivors so they feel safer in their communities.

Background

The Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras suffer from endemic levels of violence against women and children which force tens of thousands to flee their homes and communities in search of safety every year. Widespread gender inequality has led to pervasive gender-based violence, including high rates of femicide, sexual violence, violence against LGBTQ+ people, domestic violence, and child abuse.

Despite existing laws to protect women and children in these countries, capacity for implementation is limited. Violence against women and children often goes unreported and when violence is reported, survivors are faced with weak and underfunded institutions which lack the ability to investigate, prosecute, and protect survivors.¹ High impunity rates at or above 90 percent throughout the region result in a lack of accountability and contribute to cycles of violence.²

The dire situation facing women and children in the region has only worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic, as existing forms of gender inequality have become further entrenched and vulnerability to gender-based violence has increased dramatically. The growing economic insecurity, food shortages, and school closures, have increased children's risk of abuse, labor exploitation, and gang violence.³ While reporting of some violence has decreased, increased incidence of gender-based and sexual violence is evident through other data. For example, rates of adolescent and child pregnancy have increased in the region during the pandemic. For example, in El Salvador pregnancies in girls aged 10 to 14 increased by 79 percent during the spring of 2020 as compared to the same period in 2019.⁴ With no prospects of protection or relief from their own governments, women and children from the region will continue to flee their homes in search of safety.

Central American Women and Children Protection Act of 2021

In June 2021, the Central American Women and Children Protection Act (H.R.4017), was reintroduced by Representatives Norma Torres (D-CA) and Ann Wagner (R-MO) in the House.⁵ This bipartisan legislation seeks to provide \$25 million in funding to address and deter violence against women and children in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras and provide meaningful support and relief for victims of crimes.

The legislation would authorize the U.S. State Department to enter into bilateral agreements, known as "Women and Children Protection Compacts," with the governments of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. These compacts would set shared goals between the U.S. and Northern Triangle countries,

develop multi-year cooperative plans for implementation, and authorize \$25 million over fiscal years 2022 and 2023 to implement, monitor, and assess the outcomes in each country.

Specifically, the Central American Women and Children Protection Act would:

- Strengthen the compact countries' criminal justice systems and civil protection courts
- Secure, create, and sustain safe communities by providing justice system officials and civil society partners with the resources needed to assist vulnerable families and give them access to support services
- Ensure the safety of children in schools and promote the prevention and early detection of gender-based and domestic abuse within communities in the compact countries
- Increase access to high quality health care including post-rape and dignity kits, psychosocial support, and dedicated spaces and shelters for survivors of gender-based violence.

The success of the strategic plan will be informed through assessments of the incidence of violence against women and children in compact countries; ability of women and children to access protection and obtain effective judicial relief; and judicial and state capacity to respond to reports of violence against women and children and hold perpetrators accountable for criminal acts.

The cross-filed senate bill (S.2003) was introduced by Senators Marco Rubio (R-FL), Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH), Bob Menendez (D-NJ), Susan Collins (R-ME), Todd Young (R-IN), Chris Coons (D-DE), and Rob Portman (R-OH).⁶

Conclusion

U.S. foreign assistance to the Northern Triangle is critical to both short-term and long-term success in protecting vulnerable groups—especially women and children—and mitigating forced migration from the region. It is imperative that Congress acts quickly to pass legislation that strengthens the capacity of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to ensure women and children are protected and that perpetrators of violent crimes are held accountable.

KIND urges congressional members to support H.R.4017, which will work to address the root causes that force so many women and children to flee their home countries through increased foreign assistance and support to El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.

¹ Kids in Need of Defense, [Neither Security nor Justice: Sexual and Gender-based Violence and Gang Violence in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala](#), 7-8, May 2017.

² Andrea Fernandez Aponte, [Left in the Dark: Violence Against Women and LGBTI](#), Latin American Working Group, 2021.

³ Kids in Need of Defense, [Dual Crises: Gender-Based Violence and Inequality facing Children and Women during the COVID-19 pandemic in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras](#), Forthcoming 2021.

⁴ Id.

⁵ Central American Women and Children Protection Act, [H.R.4017](#), 117th Cong. (2021); The Office of Congresswoman Norma Torres, [Press Release: Torres Reintroduces Legislation Protecting Central American Women & Children](#), June 18, 2021.

⁶ Central American Women and Children Protection Act, [S.2003](#), 117th Cong. (2021).