

# Dual Crises:

Gender-Based Violence and Inequality  
Facing Children and Women During  
the COVID-19 Pandemic in El Salvador,  
Guatemala, and Honduras



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## Methodology

This report reviews existing research and draws on interviews with children's and women's rights experts in the region to document the dramatic increase in gender-based violence (GBV) during the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on children and women in Central America, as well as how COVID-19 has worsened entrenched forms of gender inequality in the region that put children and women at greater risk of GBV. This report is based on interviews with children's and women's rights experts in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, as well as civil society organizations implementing gender-based violence prevention and response programming in the region. It also draws upon information published by sources including the Center for Global Development (CGD), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), UN Women, the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), Together for Girls, Save the Children, and local news.

# Glossary

## Domestic Violence

Domestic violence takes place in the home. It includes not only physical and sexual violence, but also psychological and economic abuse. Although anyone can be a victim, children and women are at greater risk. The term domestic violence is often used interchangeably with intimate partner violence, but also includes violence against children.

## Child

Person up to the age of 18.

## Child Labor

Child labor refers to the work that is mentally, physically, socially, or morally dangerous and harmful to children or otherwise denies them their dignity and potential. It can include work in hazardous, exploitative, or abusive conditions, long hours, and unfair compensation.

## Early Marriage/Unions

Early marriage/unions include any marriage or union in which either or both individuals are under the age of 18. Early marriages or unions disproportionately affect girls, and the practice can also perpetuate forms of gender-based violence, including sexual violence and early pregnancies. It has negative impacts on the health of girls and women and their access to educational and economic opportunities.

## Early Pregnancy

Early pregnancy refers to pregnancy in childhood and adolescence. It is often a result of sexual violence. Early pregnancy has negative consequences for girls' and young women's health and frequently limits access to education and economic opportunity.

## Femicide

Femicide is the intentional killing of a girl or a woman because of their gender.

## Gender

Gender describes the socially constructed categories that encompasses the roles, expectations, and attributes associated with femininity and masculinity in a specific time and social context.

## Gender Analysis

Gender analysis or a gender lens is a tool that helps examine and take into account the role that gender plays in people's everyday lives and the differential impact that programmatic and policy interventions may have on people and communities based on gender norms and relations in a given context. Gender analysis should consider how other identities—such as race, ethnicity, class, age, ability, and sexual orientation—intersect with gender.

## Gender Inequality

Gender inequality refers to the legal, social, and structural processes in which individuals do not enjoy equal treatment based on their sex or gender. It limits people's access to resources and opportunities.

## Gender-based Violence

Gender-based violence is any form of violence, including physical, sexual, and psychological harm, against a person based on their actual or perceived sex, gender, or sexual orientation. It includes violence perpetrated in public or private life, as well as violence perpetuated or condoned by the state. Gender-based violence typically manifests against women and girls, but victims can also be

men and boys, especially in the context of violence against children and LGBTQ+ individuals.

## Intimate Partner Violence

Intimate partner violence refers to violence committed by a current or former partner and can occur in or outside of the home or a marital relationship. It is commonly thought to include physical and sexual violence, but also includes psychological and financial abuse.

## LGBTQ+

LGBTQ+ is a term that refers to individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer, as well as other groups with non-normative gender identities or sexual orientations. The use of specific terminology changes over time and varies by context.

## Sex

Sex refers to a range of biological, anatomical, and physiological characteristics that are commonly associated with being female or male.

## Sexual Violence

Sexual violence is a form of gender-based violence and includes any sexual act or attempted sexual act that is carried out in the absence of freely given consent, regardless of the perpetrator's relationship to the victim. Sexual violence can also include coerced sexual acts in exchange for food, shelter, protection, or resources. While girls and women suffer the highest rates of sexual violence, boys and men are also impacted. LGBTQ+ people are also disproportionately vulnerable to sexual violence.

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# Executive Summary

Gender-based violence has long been one of the main drivers of migration from Central America to the United States. Widespread violence, including sexual abuse, human trafficking, and violence in the home and family, combined with a lack of access to protection and justice forces children and women to flee in search of safety.

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a dramatic increase in this violence in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras due to multiple factors, including stay-at-home measures that have left many children and women trapped at home with abusive family members and the deepened economic insecurity that has heightened household tensions. The closure of schools and other public spaces, the decreased capacity of already weak child protection and judicial institutions, and the shifting of public resources to respond to the pandemic have left survivors with few options for seeking protection and support. Gangs and other organized criminal groups swiftly adapted to the new normal, taking advantage of COVID-related restrictions to tighten or expand their control over people and territory by using violence to enforce restrictions on movement in communities.

Children and women from marginalized backgrounds, such as rural, indigenous, and Afro-descendant communities, who have faced systemic discrimination and limited access to resources, have been particularly impacted.

As this violence spikes, the United States may see a significant increase in children and women seeking protection during the coming months and years. That trend is seemingly

inevitable unless the governments of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, with the assistance of the United States government, take meaningful steps to prevent and address gender-based violence in their countries.

Drawing on existing research and interviews with children's and women's rights experts, this report lays out how the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated already pervasive forms of violence against children and women in Central America, as well as the deeply entrenched gender inequality that leaves children and women even more vulnerable to violence. This report also details recommendations for how the Central American and U.S. governments can confront this crisis to ensure the protection of children and women and mitigate continued forced migration from the region.



**“Virtually all forms of violence are linked to entrenched gender roles and inequalities, and [...] the violation of the rights of children is closely linked to the status of women.”**

**-World Health Organization, 2020**

## Key Findings

### Gender-based violence and exploitation have increased during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- **The COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to a dramatic increase in violence against children and women.** Children's and women's rights organizations have reported a dramatic increase in incidents of gender-based violence during the pandemic. Economic hardships resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic have increased tensions within households, while stay-at-home orders have forced children and women to spend more time in confined spaces with family members who might be perpetrators of violence. While underreporting of violence remains a problem, and official statistics can be unreliable, the high rate of early pregnancies among girls suggests a disturbing increase in sexual violence against children. For example, in El Salvador pregnancies in girls aged 10-14 increased 79 percent between April and June of 2020, compared to the same period in 2019. During the pandemic, gangs have increased their control over the communities where they operate, leaving children and women even more vulnerable to gang-based violence.
- **More families are looking to children as a source of critical economic support during times of great uncertainty.** School closures and loss of family income have led to increased reliance on child labor to supplement family income during the pandemic, putting children at risk of exploitation and violence. Children who are unable to find work in their communities may be forced to migrate to support their families, leading to separation of families

and the exposure of children to potential gender-based violence in their work outside the home or during the migration journey. The economic impact of COVID-19 has also put girls at greater risk of early marriage or unions, as more families who are struggling financially see early marriage as a potential path to security for their children or a way to reduce household expenses.

### The pandemic has exacerbated barriers to accessing justice, protection, and support services.

- **Restrictions put in place by the Salvadoran, Guatemalan, and Honduran governments to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 have exacerbated the long-standing barriers that children and women face in reporting violence and seeking assistance.** Children and women affected by gender-based violence, especially those from rural, indigenous, and Afro-descendant communities, face many obstacles to reporting violence and seeking help, such as discrimination, language barriers, limited access to judicial and protection services, high rates of impunity, and lack of protective services. Most children who have experienced violence never report to authorities. COVID-19 restrictions have made reporting violence even more difficult. During lockdowns, many children and women were trapped at home with abusive family members and had nowhere to go for help. Curfews and limited transportation made travel to police stations or other governmental offices exceedingly difficult. The closure of schools and other public spaces limited children's contact with adults outside their families who could have detected violence and offered support.
- **During the pandemic, government-administered services for survivors of**

**gender-based violence were dramatically reduced, leaving many children and women without protection or support.**

Institutions charged with responding to violence against children and women, many of which were already underfunded and understaffed, were temporarily closed or operated at severely reduced capacity. Other institutions that provided services to survivors of violence shifted their focus to COVID-19 response.

**The COVID-19 pandemic has had an inequitable impact on children's and women's access to resources and opportunities.**

- **Women were disproportionately impacted by economic insecurity, often with negative consequences for their children.** Women were more likely to lose their jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic, and many were forced to leave jobs to take on increasing work in the home as lockdown measures left more family members at home and increased the burden of domestic labor and risk of gender-based violence. Most women in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, and an even larger proportion of indigenous, Afro-descendant, and migrant women work in the informal economy, and a lack of access to health insurance, unemployment benefits, and other safety nets left them in an especially precarious position during the pandemic. The economic impact of the pandemic for women will be long-lasting and will have negative consequences for the well-being of their children.
- **Food security is dangerously high, and children are among the most affected.** Already high levels of hunger and child malnutrition have worsened significantly during COVID-19 and have increased particularly among indigenous and Afro-

descendant communities, due to loss of family income, increased food prices, and restrictions on movement that prevent families from leaving their homes or communities to access food. Girls and women have been disproportionately impacted, since they are often responsible for ensuring access to food for their families but nonetheless eat last and less. This will have long-term negative impacts on health outcomes for children in the region and is likely to drive further migration spikes.

- **School closures harmed children across the region and will likely increase education gaps for girls.** School closures during the COVID-19 pandemic left 11 million children in Central America without access to education, resulting in significant learning gaps and exposing them to multiple forms of violence as they were kept at home, in some cases with abusive caregivers. Remote education strategies were not inclusive and equitable for children, particularly for those from rural, indigenous, and Afro-descendant communities where families disproportionately lack access to technology. Experts predict that it is likely that many children who left school will not return. The impact will be even more severe for girls, many of whom will be prevented from continuing their education post-pandemic or joining the workforce full-time due to early pregnancy and increased household responsibility. Lack of access to education, combined with insufficient job opportunities for youth, will lead many children to migrate.
- **Public health care systems have been disrupted by the pandemic, leaving children and women with limited access to care.** Many Salvadoran, Guatemalan, and Honduran children have experienced serious barriers to accessing health care

during the COVID-19 pandemic, due to factors including the shutdown of public transportation, lack of access to technology to participate in telehealth, the diversion of public health resources towards the pandemic response, and hesitation to seek care for fear of COVID-19 infection. Geographic isolation has also widened existing gaps in access to medical care for children and women in indigenous and Afro-descendant communities and those in rural areas. The pandemic has also decreased access to pre-natal and sexual and reproductive health care, especially for adolescent girls and women in rural areas.

- **Children and women in indigenous and Afro-descendant communities in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras are disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.** Indigenous and Afro-descendant children and women faced higher levels of economic and food insecurity and compounded barriers to accessing education, health care, and other essential services during the pandemic due to discrimination, geographic constraints, and language barriers. Indigenous and Afro-descendant children and women remain at risk of being excluded from recovery and assistance efforts if their specific needs are not taken into account, including ensuring access to essential services that are culturally appropriate.

### **Efforts to address gender-based violence have fallen short.**

- **While government responses to the pandemic have not adequately addressed the needs of children and women, local civil society organizations have made significant efforts to fill the gap.** However, their reach and capacity are limited, and they need greater resources. The increased vulnerability of all children

and women during the COVID-19 pandemic, and in particular those from indigenous and Afro-descendant communities, and lack of access to protection and support, highlighted the inadequacy of existing gender-based violence prevention and response efforts by the Salvadoran, Guatemalan, and Honduran governments. At the same time, emergency response efforts in the three countries failed to adequately anticipate and respond to the increased risk children and women faced during the pandemic. Local civil society organizations have attempted to fill the gaps in protection and support, drawing on their in-depth knowledge of local contexts and the trust they have built within communities to reach the most vulnerable communities with critical information and services. However, factors including limited resources and personnel, long distances between communities and poor infrastructure, lack of access to technology, and challenges with maintaining the health and safety of both staff and communities have limited their capacity and reach.

- **Many U.S. foreign assistance programs aimed at addressing the root causes of migration have not included sufficient focus on gender or gender-based violence, and those that do lack capacity and geographic coverage.** The United States Department of State and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) manage the majority of U.S. foreign assistance and oversee a variety of programs in Central America focused on promoting prosperity, strengthening governance, and improving security. Unfortunately, decreasing funding levels and pauses in aid under the Trump Administration have undermined some of these programs. To date, most security programs have not prioritized the prevention of gang-related sexual and

gender-based violence and have neglected other types of gender-based violence, like femicide, intimate partner violence, and child abuse. Some State and USAID programming has included a specific focus on gender-based violence and while it may provide a promising model for community-based programming, the geographic coverage and capacity of these initiatives is currently very limited, and the services are not accessible to many of the children who need them. Increased transparency, oversight, and consultation is needed for the development assistance directed toward gender-based violence.

## Policy

## Recommendations

*Full recommendations can be found in Section 5.*

To prevent the forced displacement of children from Central America, governments should make significant and sustained investments to address gender-based-violence and its impacts on livelihoods, education, and health. The following recommendations draw on the input of children’s and women’s rights experts in Central America to provide concrete guidance to the governments of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and the United States on preventing and addressing violence against children and women and ensuring that response to the current pandemic and future emergencies includes a gender lens and prioritizes gender-based violence prevention and response.

### **Recommendations for the Governments of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras:**

The governments of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras face a myriad of challenges in

addressing gender-based violence and they continue to need assistance from private, bilateral, and multilateral donors to advance this work. At the same time, they must demonstrate serious commitment by prioritizing gender-based violence against children and women and advancing the following strategies:

- **Recognize the gendered impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and other emergencies, including increased risk of gender-based violence**, and develop proactive strategies to prevent gender-based violence to ensure that the needs of children and women are addressed in these contexts.
- **Place the needs of indigenous, Afro-descendent, and rural communities, especially children and women, at the center of all recovery and development efforts and ensure that policies and plans respond to their needs.** This includes ensuring that response efforts are culturally appropriate and reach remote rural areas, and that all information and services are provided in the languages spoken by local communities.
- **Improve government capacity to respond to gender-based violence by strengthening protection institutions, like judicial systems, shelter networks, and local child protection systems for vulnerable children.** Expand coverage and capacity in rural areas to ensure increased, equal access.
- **Develop emergency response plans guided by a child- and gender-sensitive lens, with cultural, gender, and sexual diversity at the center of the approach.** Include vulnerable and marginalized groups in decision-making, from local to national levels, including decisions regarding budget and resource allocation, to guarantee that the design and implementation of policies and programs are inclusive and equitable.

- **Enhance investment in economic and social inclusion programs to guarantee equal rights and reduce gender gaps in access to resources, food security, education, health care, and technology,** with a focus on addressing the specific needs of girls, women, and LGBTQ+ individuals.
- **To achieve just, non-violent, and equitable societies, governments must develop and invest in policies and programming** that prevent gender-based violence at the family, school, and community levels by shifting the societal norms and stereotypes that foment gender-based violence and discrimination against children and women.

### Recommendations for the U.S. Government:

The U.S. government must resume a leadership role in promoting gender equality and prioritize gender-based violence prevention and response in its diplomacy, foreign assistance, and stakeholder relationships.

#### Recommendations for Congress:

- **Congress should prioritize foreign assistance programs in Central America that prevent and respond to gender-based violence** by increasing appropriations of dedicated funding for gender-based violence programs, enhancing oversight efforts, and authorizing new programs that directly address gender-based violence in the region.

#### Recommendations for the White House:

- **The White House should demonstrate renewed leadership in supporting women’s rights through visible, proactive diplomacy and strategic aid programs.** The White House must also use its convening power and leverage to prioritize

gender-based violence with other relevant stakeholders within government agencies and with Central American governments, civil society, multilateral organizations, and other donors.

- **As the U.S. government implements a new strategy to address the root causes of migration, the White House must ensure that gender-based violence remains a priority with dedicated funding.** Successful implementation of the *U.S. Strategy for Addressing the Root Causes of Migration in Central America* must start by acknowledging that gender-based violence is a primary driver of migration and includes most violence against children. As such, resources allocated to gender-based violence prevention and response should reflect the scale and scope of the challenge and ensure a child-sensitive approach. The strategy’s fifth pillar on “combatting sexual, gender-based, and domestic violence” must be allocated funding, staffing, and prominence equal to that of the other strategy pillars. Gender-based violence concerns must be considered and addressed in all pillars of the strategy.
- **The White House must lead diverse and inclusive processes to update relevant U.S. government strategies and action plans on gender equality, gender-based violence, inclusive development, and children’s rights,** particularly the 2016 United States Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender-based Violence Globally, which gives agencies the guidance needed to integrate and execute programs related to gender-based violence issues. Policy development and processes must include robust stakeholder engagement, as well as plans for implementation, monitoring, and public reporting on progress.
- **As the U.S. government works to leverage private sector engagement through**

**initiatives such as the Partnership for Central America, it must prioritize gender-based violence and the needs of children and women in its private sector partnerships.** To be effective, these efforts should prioritize the inclusion and empowerment of children and women and should involve substantive consultation with experts, members of civil society, and affected communities.

### **Recommendations for U.S. State Department and USAID in implementing foreign assistance programs:**

- **All foreign assistance programs, including security assistance implemented by the State Department, must be informed by robust gender analysis and updated U.S. government strategies.** Although USAID already considers gender analysis in the development of its country strategies and development programs, these processes would be improved through a more robust inclusion analysis that considers the needs of indigenous and Afro-descendant populations, people with disabilities, members of the LGBTQ+ community, and other marginalized populations. State Department programs lack a similar mandate; all State programs, and particularly security programs, must be designed in collaboration with gender and inclusion advisors and include new mandates for program design and inclusive stakeholder consultation.
- **All foreign assistance programs that impact children should be informed by child development specialists and child-specific strategies,** like the U.S. government’s “Children in Adversity” strategy. State and USAID programs should be designed in consultation with experts on child welfare and youth development so they address the needs of children; programs should also be implemented in

child-sensitive ways with the assistance of technical experts.

- **USAID should fulfill its stated aim to integrate gender-based violence prevention in all its foreign assistance programs** in accordance with its implementation plan in the 2012 United States Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender-based Violence Globally.<sup>1</sup> Integrating gender-based violence prevention and response activities into all programs is essential to ensure that projects in each sector are proactively addressing the risk of gender-based violence and are not unintentionally contributing to increases in violence against children and women. This is especially important for emergency and humanitarian assistance provided in response to crises including natural disasters, climate change events, and pandemics.
- **Prioritize and increase funding for programs with a primary purpose of promoting gender equality and preventing and responding to gender-based violence, including violence against children.** Gender-based violence programs should address not only sexual violence and intimate-partner violence, but also violence against children, including child abuse, neglect, and exploitation. All gender-based violence programs should be child-sensitive and serve survivors with a trauma-informed response.
- **Gender based-violence prevention programs must engage boys and men** through community-based programs and expanded use of a healthy masculinities’ framework.
- **Within new and existing violence prevention programming, there must be increased emphasis on community-based violence prevention and response,**

**especially as it affects children, youth, and women.** Violence prevention programming and other citizen security sector programs should scale up effective community-based projects and assist youth who are victims of violence or are renouncing gang membership.

- **Build the capacity of child welfare and child protection systems in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.** The child welfare systems are currently weak, poorly funded, too centralized, and unable to provide basic protection to children in need—especially for children living outside of major cities. Building the capacity of child protection systems within these countries means that children experiencing violence, abuse, or neglect would have increased access to protection in their communities, additional resources, and viable alternatives to migration.
- **Address the acute needs of children and families through immediate emergency assistance** for communities hit hardest by food scarcity, the COVID-19 pandemic, and natural disasters. Ensure that assistance reaches children, women, and other vulnerable populations and is implemented in a way that accounts for their particular needs.

# Introduction



**“The impacts of crises are never gender-neutral, and Covid-19 is no exception.”**

- UN Women, 2020

Gender-based violence, combined with widespread gaps in protection and assistance for children and survivors of gender-based violence by the governments of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, propels Central American children and women to leave their countries and seek safety in Mexico and in the United States. Structural and systemic gender inequality limit access to education, health care, and economic resources for women and children, especially girls, leaving them vulnerable to gender-based violence, and with few options aside from migration to escape violence. The dire situation facing children and women 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. This will cause even more children and women to flee in the coming months and years unless gender-based violence is addressed and protection is offered to survivors.

While official statistics fail to tell the full story due to widespread underreporting, children’s and women’s rights experts in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras report that rates of violence, including intimate partner violence and sexual and physical violence against children by family members and relatives, have increased dramatically. At the same time, the barriers survivors of violence face in seeking protection and assistance have multiplied. The closure of schools and other public spaces and strict lockdowns have left children especially vulnerable, as many are trapped at home with

abusive family members. Already weak and underfunded child protection and judicial systems have faced reduced personnel and resources during the pandemic, leaving them unable to guarantee the safety of children and women experiencing violence.

Along with increasing vulnerability to gender-based violence, the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively impacted the health and well-being of children and women in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. Increased economic insecurity stemming from lost jobs and income and increases in the price of basic goods have left families throughout the region without access to basic needs. Already high levels of food insecurity have increased dramatically during the pandemic, leaving children even more vulnerable to severe malnutrition, while further strain on already weak health care systems has left many without access to primary health care. Extended school closures have affected all children but will likely exacerbate existing gender gaps in education access and completion, leaving girls and women even further behind.

Strict COVID lockdowns, border closures, and other policies put in place by the United States, Mexican, and Central American governments stopped people, including survivors of gender-based violence, from leaving their countries to seek safety. As restrictions on movement have eased in recent months, the rising number of people fleeing the region and seeking protection in the United States and Mexico highlights the



desperation that many victims and survivors of gender-based violence experienced during the pandemic. Unless the governments of the region immediately prioritize and effectively prevent and address gender-based violence, migration surges will continue.

This report draws on existing research as well as interviews with experts in Central America to document the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's rights and safety in the Central American countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. It identifies the emerging risks related to gender-based violence against children and outlines key recommendations for preventing gender-based violence against children and increasing access to prevention and support for survivors, especially in times of crises. These interventions are critical to prevent future waves of forced child migration from the region.

Section 1 describes the long-standing and pervasive gender-based violence against children and women in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in exacerbating violence against children and the disruption of already fragile protection, justice, and support systems.

Section 2 of this report explores how the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing structural inequalities that negatively impact the rights of children, especially girls, and their families, by further weakening their access to economic resources, food security, education, and health.

Section 3 details how KIND and its partners have adapted existing gender-based violence prevention and response programming in Guatemala and Honduras to respond to the specific vulnerabilities and needs children and their families face during the pandemic.

“The pandemic has undermined the fundamental rights of children in Guatemala. Children’s health has been negatively affected because of delays with vaccination schemes; the educational gap has increased mainly due to inequity in access to technology among different groups of the country. Children’s safety has decreased. We see an increase in sexual violence against girls in the large numbers of early pregnancies reported. This type of gender-based violence against girls will impact the girls’ health and their chances of a better future since, most likely, they won’t be able to continue their studies. In addition, the food insecurity that families are experiencing, mainly in rural and marginalized areas of the country, has increased the rates of chronic malnutrition, which will generate more deaths of girls and boys. Finally, the increase in the economic gap will lead to a rise in violence, and families will be forced to flee in search of safety and livelihood.”

–**Judith Erazo**, *Coordinator, Migration Program, Equipo de Estudios Comunitarios y Acción Psicosocial (ECAP)*

Section 4 summarizes recent U.S. foreign assistance to Central America, particularly as it relates to gender-based violence prevention and response.

Section 5 concludes with policy recommendations for the governments of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to better prevent and respond to gender-based violence, particularly in times of crises, to protect children, and prevent forced child migration. It also provides foreign policy recommendations to the United States government to ensure that U.S. foreign assistance adequately addresses gender-based violence prevention and response in Central America.

# Gender-Based Violence Against Children and Women

**Gender-based Violence** is a fundamental violation of human rights. It is any violence that is directed at a person based on their biological sex or gender.<sup>2</sup> It is a manifestation of gender-based discrimination, harmful social norms, and unequal power relations between males and females. While gender-based violence can impact anyone, it **disproportionately affects children and women** across their lives.

While gender-based violence affects children and women in all aspects of their lives, they are especially vulnerable to violence during migration. Not only is gender-based violence a leading cause of child migration, but children and women also experience high rates of violence in transit and remain vulnerable to violence in their places of destination. Throughout the migration route, migrant children, women, and LGBTQ+ individuals are frequent targets of sexual assault, kidnapping, and human trafficking, among other forms of violence.<sup>3</sup>

Gender-based violence against children includes any violence inflicted upon a child due to their actual or perceived gender or biological sex. It can include physical, psychological, or sexual abuse, neglect, abandonment, and exploitation that cause harm to the health, development, and dignity of the child. These forms of violence often occur in a relationship of responsibility, trust or power, and put the child's survival in danger.<sup>4</sup> According to the UN Study on Violence Against Children, **“virtually all forms of violence are linked to entrenched gender roles and inequalities, and [...] the violation of the rights of children is closely linked to the status of women.”**<sup>5</sup> Therefore, nearly

all violence against children has a gendered component and can be understood as a form of gender-based violence.

Gender-based violence is extremely widespread. According to the World Health Organization, globally **one in two children ages 2 – 17 years old** have experienced violence in the past year<sup>6</sup>, and UN Women estimates suggest that **one in three girls and women** experience physical or sexual violence in their lifetime.<sup>7</sup>





# 1. Heightened Gender-Based Violence in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras During the COVID-19 Pandemic

**The tendency for rates of gender-based violence against children and women to increase amid public health and humanitarian crises has been well documented in relation to the Zika, SARS and Ebola epidemics.<sup>8</sup>** This is due to several interconnected factors. Crises exacerbate existing structural inequalities, further threatening access to healthcare, education, livelihoods, and other basic rights for children and women. They also limit availability of and access to protection and support for survivors of violence, especially when adequate efforts are not made by governments to incorporate gender into public health and risk mitigation strategies. Finally, crises increase both stress and isolation at the individual and family levels, which can contribute to

or exacerbate gender-based violence.<sup>9</sup> In El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, these factors have come together during the COVID-19 pandemic to leave children and women highly exposed to gender-based violence, and with few options for seeking assistance.<sup>10</sup>



“Pandemic restrictions have kept women and children indoors, pushing them further into hiding when they were already sort of an invisible population. This is group of people that already received insufficient attention, resources, care and protection.”

-Ricardo Coello Alonzo, Program Director  
Casa Alianza Honduras

## Gender-Based Violence: A Long-Standing Problem That Compels Children and Women from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to Migrate

Gender-based violence, including rape and sexual assault, intimate partner violence, human trafficking, hate-based violence against LGBTQ+ people, and femicide, permeates the lives of children and women in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras<sup>11</sup>, and is one of the main drivers of forced migration.<sup>12</sup> These forms of violence have deep roots in “patriarchal attitudes and a machista culture,”<sup>13</sup> as well as structural forms of gender inequality that marginalize women, girls, indigenous and Afro-descendent people, and LGBTQ+ people, and justify discrimination and violence against them.<sup>14</sup> In El Salvador, more than 67 percent of girls and women report having experienced violence, and four in every ten women report having experienced sexual violence through their lives.<sup>15</sup> In Honduras, an estimated 53,229 girls under the age of 17 suffered sexual violence between 2009 and 2018, and most victims were between the ages of 10 and 14.<sup>16</sup> In Guatemala, reports showed that six out of every ten people who disappeared in 2017 were women and girls, and from January to September 2018, 4,576 cases of sexual assault against children under 18 years old were recorded by the Public Prosecutor’s Office.<sup>17</sup>

Actual numbers are probably significantly higher because impunity, fear, shame, and gender inequalities prevent many survivors from disclosing or reporting violence.<sup>18</sup> Children, and youth who identify or are labeled by others as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex face frequent hate-based violence, including physical, verbal, and sexual abuse, in their homes, families, and communities.<sup>19</sup>

In recent years, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras have adopted laws prohibiting and punishing gender-based violence, including violence against children. Nonetheless, gender-based violence—including intimate partner violence, child abuse, and sexual violence by gangs and other organized criminal groups—affect thousands of children and women in these countries each year, causing lasting harm to their health and well-being. Weak child protection and judicial systems and limited investment in gender-based violence prevention leave survivors with nowhere to turn for protection, allowing this cycle of violence to continue.

For many children in Central America, home is not a place of safety, but of danger. In El Salvador, 70 percent of children who experience sexual violence are targeted in their homes or another familiar location, and for 77 percent of women who experienced sexual violence prior to age 18, the perpetrator is someone they know, such as a family member, neighbor, or intimate partner.<sup>20</sup> Children also frequently witness intimate partner violence against their mothers or other female caregivers. The violence these women experience can negatively impact their ability to care for their children. In Honduras, there are more than 17,000 children alive today who were orphaned because of the femicide of their mother,<sup>21</sup> and the majority of these murders were committed by the child’s father or mother’s intimate partner.<sup>22</sup>

Gangs and other organized criminal groups also frequently target children and youth for

violence, including gender-based violence. Gangs with widespread presence in Central America play a role in reinforcing harmful gender norms by using gender-based violence to exert control over the communities where they operate and to intimidate or punish those who challenge their power.<sup>23</sup> Though both girls and boys are at risk of gang violence, gangs target them in different ways. Gang members frequently threaten, intimidate, and sexually assault girls and young women.<sup>24</sup> Girls are forced into sexual relationships with gang members and used as “girlfriends,” and gangs threaten to kill them or their families if they do not comply.<sup>25</sup> As a consequence, many girls go into hiding in their homes in an attempt to escape further violence.<sup>26</sup> Trapped in situations of violence and with nowhere to go for protection, some young women targeted by gangs take their own lives.<sup>27</sup> Boys are frequently targeted by gangs based on norms of masculinity that associate men

and boys with power and violence, and responsibility for providing livelihood and protection to their families.<sup>28</sup> Gangs use violence against boys and young men to enforce social norms around masculinity, including through physical and sexual violence. LGBTQ+ boys and those suspected of being LGBTQ+ for any number of reasons, including simply not having a girlfriend or not complying with conventional gender norms, are frequent targets of gang violence.<sup>29</sup> Boys and young men who live in gang-dominated neighborhoods are at risk of being forced or coerced into service for the gang, serving as a lookout, collecting extortion money, or carrying illicit goods.<sup>30</sup> Those who refuse face violence or death, and those who comply are viewed as disposable by the gang and may be killed when they are no longer considered to be useful.<sup>31</sup>

## 1.1 Increased Violence Against Children and Women Within the Home and Family

Multiple factors have increased children’s vulnerability to violence within the home and family during the COVID-19 pandemic, placing children at greater risk of forced migration.<sup>32</sup> With the closure of schools and lockdown measures, children have been spending most of their time at home, in many cases with increased exposure to abusive family members or other known adults, and without access to other safe adults. Families have faced heightened confinement and isolation as well as increased stress within households as a result of greater economic insecurity.<sup>33</sup> Twenty-five

percent of Salvadoran children interviewed for a study by Save the Children reported tension in their household during the COVID-19 pandemic due to loss of a source of income by a family member.<sup>34</sup>

According to Judith Erazo, Coordinator of the Migration Program for Equipo de Estudios Comunitarios y Acción Psicosocial (ECAP), an organization that works with children and youth in Quiché, Guatemala, the pandemic forced traditional gender roles to change. Men without employment were forced to stay at home due to lockdown measures. Women engaged with ECAP’s gender-based violence prevention and response programs informed them that, “[...] with the men in the house 24/7 tensions rose and, in some cases, led to intimate-partner violence within the home.”<sup>35</sup>

The increase in rates of violence is evident in the spike in calls to emergency hotlines during the early months of the pandemic, when most people were at home following strict lockdown orders. The Organization of Salvadoran Women for Peace (ORMUSA) reported a 70 percent increase in complaints of violence against women in El Salvador during the first three months of lockdown.<sup>36</sup> During the same timeframe in Honduras, every hour a woman experienced some form of gender-based violence.<sup>37</sup> The number of reported cases of intimate partner and intra-familial violence increased by 4.1 percent per week during the first three months of lockdown, with 10,000 reports made to the National 911 Emergency System in April alone.<sup>38</sup> From January to October 2020, the Honduran 911 registered 85,855 calls from women seeking help after experiencing some type of aggression.<sup>39</sup> Rates of violence against children have also increased during the pandemic, as many children have been forced to spend 24 hours a day in confined spaces with abusive family members.<sup>40</sup> While severe underreporting of child abuse means that official statistics are not reliable, children's rights organization Casa Alianza Honduras reported a significant increase in rates of violence against children in their homes during the pandemic.<sup>41</sup>



“The isolation of lockdown has really led to a lot of violence. Not being able to go out, have access to education, earning one’s daily income is a major source of stress for families. We are seeing, nationwide, an increase in gender-based violence incidents affecting children, and women, and especially in cases regarding domestic violence and sexual abuse.”

-Ricardo Coello Alonzo, Program Director  
Casa Alianza Honduras

## During First 3 Months of Lockdown

### El Salvador

A large, stylized graphic of the number '70%' in white with a blue outline, set against a dark blue background with a faint map of El Salvador.

increase in complaints of violence against women

### Honduras

The words 'every' and 'hour' in a large, white, rounded font with a blue outline, set against a dark blue background.

a woman experienced some form of gender-based violence

The number of reported cases of intimate partner and intra-familial violence

A graphic showing '4.1%' in large white font, 'per week' in smaller white font, and a white upward-pointing arrow with a zigzag line, all on a dark blue background.

The number '10,000' in a large, white, rounded font with a blue outline, set against a dark blue background.

reports to the National 911 Emergency System in April alone

## 1.2 Increased Sexual Violence Against Children and Early Pregnancy

Sexual violence affects thousands of children each year in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. In many cases, this violence results in early pregnancy, endangering the health and long-term well-being of the victim. Lack of access to protection and support for children affected by sexual violence and the stigma against pregnant and parenting adolescents force many to leave their countries. This has only worsened during the pandemic, as rates of sexual violence and early pregnancy have increased, and children have even fewer options for protection and support.

Accurate data on sexual violence against children is difficult to obtain due to widespread underreporting. However, **increases in rates of sexual violence can be detected through higher rates of early pregnancies**, which are in many cases a result of sexual violence by someone known to the child.<sup>42</sup> Increased early pregnancy rates in 2020 reveal the heightened risk of sexual violence that children have faced. In El Salvador, there was a 79 percent increase in pregnancies in girls aged 10-14 and a 71.6 percent increase in pregnancies in girls aged 15-19 between April and June of 2020, compared to the same period in 2019.<sup>43</sup> In Guatemala, more than 100,000 pregnancies were registered among girls 19 and under in 2020, and nearly 5,000 of those were among girls ages 10 to 14.<sup>44</sup> In Honduras, rates of early pregnancy are on the rise, with an estimated 50 percent caused by rape, in many cases by someone the child knows.<sup>45</sup>

### El Salvador



Increase in pregnancies in girls in El Salvador between April-June 2020, compared to the same period in 2019.

### Guatemala

Pregnancies registered among girls in Guatemala in 2020.

more than  
**100,000**  
pregnant girls 19 and under

nearly  
**5,000**  
girls 10 - 14 yo

### Honduras

An estimated

**50%**

of early pregnancies in Honduras are caused by rape.



Bessy Valle, Residential Program Coordinator at Casa Alianza, noted that the human cost of lockdown was especially visible in the lives of the girls admitted to Casa Alianza's shelter who had been sexually abused. "These young women survivors of sexual violence described how lockdown restrictions exacerbated their existing vulnerabilities, leaving them at heightened risk of psychosocial problems, homelessness, and even further abuse within their homes."<sup>46</sup>

Women's rights experts and organizations have denounced the exposure of children, especially girls, to sexual violence during the pandemic and highlighted that their situation is made even more serious because access to justice and health services, such as contraceptives, have been limited by the confinement measures (factors discussed in more detail in Section 2).<sup>47</sup> According to ECAP, the rise in intimate partner violence during the pandemic has resulted in increased rates of early pregnancy. Judith Erazo and Marleny Montenegro of ECAP explained: "From January to May 5 of 2021, 207 pregnancies in girls between 10 and 19 years old have been registered only here in Nebaj, which is where we work. The most notorious case was that of an 11-year-old girl who was raped by her brother-in-law. Our psychologist has worked with the girl, her family, and her school to deal with the trauma, break down stigmas, and empower the girl so that she can continue her studies, which she has done. However, in many cases, girls who are victims of sexual abuse and who become pregnant are forced to marry or enter into a common-law union with the person who was their aggressor."<sup>48</sup>

"We have seen that the increase in adolescent pregnancies during the pandemic correlates with a rise in teenage suicides. Although the statistics on this are not official, we see the stigma and gender-based violence suffered by pregnant adolescents perpetuated by members of their family, as well as their communities, and we are aware of cases in which pregnant adolescent females have committed suicide since they don't have support."

-**Rina Montti**, Human Rights Monitoring System Director  
*Cristosal*

### 1.3 Increased Early Marriage and Unions

Latin America is the only region globally where rates of child marriage and unions have not decreased in the last 25 years, and in the region "one in five girls and adolescents marry a man at least ten years her senior."<sup>49</sup> The pandemic has exacerbated this issue and is another reason more girls may migrate in the future.

Laws prohibiting child marriage in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras have been strengthened in recent years. However, it is extremely common for girls to be entered into informal unions, due to factors including social practices and economic deprivation.<sup>50</sup>

**Over a quarter of girls in the region are married or in informal unions before the age of 18.**<sup>51</sup> In Honduras, that number reaches 35 percent overall and 40 percent for girls in rural areas,<sup>52</sup> and for some ethnic and racial minority communities, it is nearly 50 percent.<sup>53</sup>

**High rates of early marriage and unions are driven by factors including gender inequality and social norms that view children and women as property, as well as extreme economic deprivation.**<sup>54</sup> Early unions are

also correlated with low levels of educational attainment for girls.<sup>55</sup> In El Salvador, for example, 52 percent of women who entered into a union before age 18 have no formal education, while only 3 percent finished university.<sup>56</sup> In Guatemala, girls in remote rural areas where educational attainment levels tend to be lower often “married young in order to reduce their perceived financial burden on their families,”<sup>57</sup> while those with higher education tend to delay marriage.<sup>58</sup> In some cases, girls in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras are forced into early marriages or unions when they become pregnant, including as a result of sexual violence.<sup>59</sup>

**Early marriage and unions are a form of gender-based violence,** and also put girls

at greater risk for other forms of violence. According to the organization Girls Not Brides, “globally, girls married before the age of 15 are almost 50 percent more likely to have experienced either physical or sexual intimate partner violence than those married after 18.”<sup>60</sup> Children who enter early marriages and unions are more likely to get pregnant at a younger age, leading to increased risk of complications during pregnancy and death during childbirth.<sup>61</sup>

The COVID pandemic has only worsened this scenario. Harmful gender norms combined with extreme economic insecurity make more families view the marriage or early unions of their daughters as a path to greater security and a way to provide critical economic support during times of great uncertainty.<sup>62</sup> Save the Children estimates that 367,000 additional girls in Latin America and the Caribbean will be at risk for child marriage over the next five years due to the economic impact of the pandemic.<sup>63</sup>

These structural cycles of inequality and violence within their families and communities push many of those girls who are not forced into early marriages and unions to migrate within their countries or to other countries to seek independence and a life free of violence.”

## 1.4 Child Labor and Exploitation

Child labor has long been prevalent in Latin America and the Caribbean, where approximately 5.7 million children work, many of them in unsafe and exploitative conditions.<sup>64</sup> In Guatemala, for example, more than 200,000 children ages 7 to 14 were working in 2019, and more than 90 percent of them worked in the agriculture and domestic labor sectors. In Honduras, more than 400,000 children between 5 and 17 years old work, most of them in agriculture, construction, and manufacturing,<sup>65</sup> industries where children are likely to be exposed to dangerous workplace conditions.

Reports have highlighted children’s vulnerability to labor abuse, exploitation, and human trafficking, which is exacerbated by the fact that most children work in the informal sector and therefore lack access to labor protections.<sup>66</sup> These risks are increased for children from indigenous and Afro-descendant communities, and those living in rural areas. In Guatemala, more than half of child laborers are from rural indigenous communities, and some are sold to criminal organizations to work in the streets in cities. Girls, LGBTQ+, and indigenous people are more vulnerable to commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking.<sup>67</sup>

As a result of the severe economic impact the pandemic has had on El Salvador, Guatemalan, and Honduran families, reliance on

child labor has increased during the pandemic,<sup>68</sup> putting children at risk of exploitation.<sup>69</sup> In the months since the start of the crisis, many children who are out of school due to the pandemic have pursued income generating activities, while others have been forced into child labor or recruited into gangs.<sup>70</sup> According to Judith Erazo of ECAP, “The economic and food insecurity that families have been facing have severely impacted boys, who, pressured by gender stereotypes, are burdened to provide for their families, exposing them to multiple vulnerabilities and risks including labor exploitation and targeting by gangs.”<sup>71</sup>

**Domestic and intrafamily violence has increased considerably during the pandemic. Children are forced to live on the streets due to violence and mistreatment.**<sup>72</sup> Children’s rights organizations in the region have also reported an increase in the number of children begging on the street during the pandemic. Some of these children are homeless, and others are sent by their families to beg to support their households.<sup>73</sup> At home, these children can suffer abuse by their caregivers if they are not able to obtain the resources necessary to meet their family’s needs. And in the streets, they are exposed to physical and sexual violence by gang members and other perpetrators, including being forced to engage in survival sex in exchange for food or protection.<sup>74</sup>

## 1.5 Heightened Control Exerted by Gangs

The COVID-19 pandemic immediately impacted organized crime across the three northern Central American countries as lockdowns slowed movement of people and goods. However, gangs and other organized criminal groups swiftly adapted to the new normal, taking advantage of COVID-related restrictions

to tighten or expand their control over people and territory by using violence to enforce restrictions on movement in communities.<sup>75</sup> Gang-related violence, including gender-based violence, has long been one of the main drivers of child migration from Central America.<sup>76</sup> As violence and control by gangs has increased during the pandemic, it is likely that more children living in gang-dominated communities will be forced to flee their countries to escape violence.

During the pandemic, **gangs have used tactics including “stepping up of extortion, and sexual and gender-based violence, and using forced disappearances, murders, and death threats against those who do not comply”<sup>77</sup> with curfews and other restrictions.**<sup>78</sup> With many businesses closed or operating at reduced capacity, gangs also adapted their strategy for collecting extortion by demanding amounts from a larger number of individuals and families, leaving more people exposed to potential violence for failure to comply.<sup>79</sup> Criminal groups have attempted to use the pandemic to their advantage in a range of ways, from interfering in the distribution of government emergency assistance to ensure it benefited gang-connected families, to handing out food to families in desperate need of assistance to increase their dependence on the gangs.<sup>80</sup>

In El Salvador, gangs imposed curfews and strict limitations on movement under the pretext of containing viral spread, with failure to comply punishable by physical violence.<sup>81</sup> In late April 2020, 74 people were killed by gangs over the course of four days, far surpassing the previous average of approximately three deaths per day due to gang violence.<sup>82</sup> In Honduras, gangs increased their recruitment and attacks on rivals during the pandemic.<sup>83</sup> Criminal groups have also been active in rural areas during the pandemic. In Guatemala, groups have targeted indigenous families, forcing them to leave their lands.<sup>84</sup>

A survey by UNICEF and UNHCR published in December 2020 showed linkages between the increase in criminal gang activity during the COVID pandemic and an upsurge in violence against children and their families. Disruptions of children's education and loss of families' economic opportunities have made it easier for gangs to extort children or force them to carry out activities in service of the gang, and harm them if they show any resistance.<sup>85</sup>

## 1.6 High Rates of Femicide and Murders of Children

El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras have some of the highest rates of femicide,<sup>86</sup> or the violent killing of a woman or girl based on her gender, in the world. This violence has continued to be rampant during the pandemic. In Guatemala, 522 femicides were registered in April and May of 2020 alone.<sup>87</sup> In Honduras, 295 femicides were registered between January and November 2020.<sup>88</sup> In El Salvador, Organización de Mujeres Salvadoreñas por la Paz (ORMUSA) reported a total of 130 femicides in 2020,<sup>89</sup> and an increase of 40 percent in femicides in the first two months of 2021 over the same period in 2020 (before the COVID-19 related restrictions were put in place).<sup>90</sup> Given the restrictions on movement in place at the time, it is likely that the majority of those women were killed in their homes.<sup>91</sup>

In a region where rates of homicide against children are among the world's highest,<sup>92</sup> an alarming number of children were murdered in 2020, many of them during the COVID-19 lockdown. In Guatemala, at least 138 children were killed with firearms and 94 asphyxiated during the first six months of 2020, in some cases as a result of domestic violence.<sup>93</sup>

## Historical Roots of Gender-Based Violence and Impunity in Central America

Contemporary realities of gender-based violence and impunity in Central America trace their roots to the colonial period, when the Spanish used sexual violence against indigenous women and girls as a strategy of subjugation and genocide.<sup>94</sup> In the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, El Salvador and Guatemala faced extended civil wars between U.S.-backed military governments and guerilla groups. In both countries, government forces and right-wing paramilitary groups carried out the vast majority of acts of violence and used rape and torture of girls and women as a systematic strategy to terrorize and control civilians.<sup>95</sup> In Guatemala, widespread sexual violence was a key tactic of a state-led campaign of genocide against the country's indigenous population.<sup>96</sup> While Honduras did not face the same level of armed conflict as its neighbors, in the 1980s, hundreds were killed, disappeared, and tortured by right-wing death squads.<sup>97</sup>

For the most part, there has been no accountability for perpetrators of the violence, many of whom have ties to the government and economic elite. One notable exception was the successful conviction in 2016 of former Guatemalan military agents for sexual violence and sexual slavery against Maya Q'eqchi' women at a military recreation center in the Sepur Zarco community in the 1980s.<sup>98</sup> While groundbreaking, this decision on behalf of 14 survivors also underlines the reality of the many thousands of survivors and their families and communities who still have not found justice.<sup>99</sup>

Decades of military rule and internal armed conflict weakened government institutions in the region. More recently, the growing power of gangs and other organized criminal groups and their involvement in every level of government have further undermined democratic structures and processes, and entrenched impunity. Gangs have also reinforced harmful gender norms and used sexual and other forms of gender-based violence to exercise control in areas where they operate (see Section 1 for more information). In addition, human rights and land rights defenders, many of them women and from indigenous communities, face ongoing criminalization and violence.<sup>100</sup> This has further normalized gender-based violence and eroded public trust in government institutions, making it less likely that survivors will report gender-based violence, while at the same time undermining the rule of law and structures that should protect women and hold perpetrators of violence accountable.

## 1.7 Disruptions in Access to Justice, Protection, and Social Services During COVID

Access to justice and protection for survivors of gender-based violence has long been limited in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, leaving survivors of gender-based violence with few options but to flee their countries to seek safety. Just as the pandemic has left children and women, and especially girls, even more vulnerable to gender-based violence, COVID-related restrictions have deepened existing barriers and created new ones for survivors seeking protection, justice, and support services.

### Increased challenges to reporting violence

Children and women in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras have long faced barriers to reporting violence and seeking assistance. Many children in these countries who have experienced violence have never talked to an adult about their experience, let alone made a report to authorities. According to research by Together for Girls published in 2019, in El Salvador, only 16 percent of females surveyed who experienced sexual violence prior to age 18 sought help,<sup>101</sup> while in Honduras, only eight percent reached out for support services.<sup>102</sup> With no one to turn to for protection or support, many children leave their communities, and even their countries, to seek safety.

Violence against children and women is highly normalized and, in some cases, victims may not realize that what they are experiencing is violence. Within the home and family, the use of violence by male relatives to control or punish the behavior of children and women is

widespread and often considered to be justified. Women also play a role in reinforcing these gendered power dynamics, including in some cases by committing violence against children. Intimate partner violence and child abuse is widely considered to be a “private” matter rather than a serious crime, and survivors who report violence face criticism or even retribution from their families for involving the authorities, and often stigma within their communities.<sup>103</sup>

Structural barriers and lack of confidence in the police and judicial systems also prevent many children and women survivors of violence from reporting. Many do not report because they fear retribution by the perpetrator, and children often fear that they will not be believed or will be blamed for what happened.<sup>104</sup> Others do not report due to loyalty to the perpetrator or fear or mistrust of authorities, especially those who come from marginalized communities that have been targeted by police. When the victim of violence is a child and the perpetrator is a caretaker or other family member, the barriers to reporting can be insurmountable. Without the assistance of an adult, few children have the knowledge or capacity to report violence to authorities. In many cases, children and women are financially dependent on abusive family members, and jail time or large fines threaten the family’s financial survival. Additionally, long wait times for cases to be investigated and prosecuted leave survivors vulnerable to intimidation and coercion, leading many to abandon their cases.<sup>105</sup>

The restrictions imposed by the pandemic have increased these long-standing barriers to reporting violence and seeking assistance.<sup>106</sup> Children’s and women’s rights organizations in the region have expressed concerns that the fear that prevents many survivors from disclosing or reporting gender-based violence have only intensified during the pandemic.<sup>107</sup> According to Rina Montti, Director of Cristosal’s Human

Rights Monitoring System, “[during lockdown] children have reduced contact with trusted adults outside their households. In many cases, violence is perpetrated by members of the child’s extended family, and children trapped at home during lockdown may have reduced options for leaving the home or using a hotline to report violence without detection by family members.”<sup>108</sup>

One of the unintended consequences of government response to the pandemic has been to further isolate children affected by violence and severely limit their ability to report violence and seek help. Mechanisms for identifying children affected by violence and providing them with information and support, which were already limited, have been further weakened during the pandemic.<sup>109</sup> With school closures, child survivors of gender-based violence have less opportunity to disclose violence to teachers or other trusted adults and ask for help. Health care providers also play a critical role in identification of children affected by violence,<sup>110</sup> but their capacity has been limited as health care systems are strained to the point of collapse and families’ fear of exposure to COVID has caused many to avoid or delay seeking medical care.<sup>111</sup>

Movement restrictions and shutdowns of public transportation have made it even more difficult for children and women in rural and peripheral urban areas to access government institutions where they can report violence and seek assistance; many of these institutions are centralized in urban areas. For example, in Guatemala—where many remote communities are located a full day or more of travel from the nearest departmental capital—the closure of public transportation by presidential decree left thousands of children and families in rural areas completely isolated,<sup>112</sup> limiting further their capacity to report gender-based violence. Those who experience gender-based violence

have long faced increased barriers to reporting violence and seeking assistance in cases where the violence is committed by gang members or where the victim lives in a gang-controlled area, regardless of whether the aggressor is affiliated with a gang. Gang-imposed rules that prohibit communicating with police and other government authorities, along with widespread collusion between gangs and government authorities at all levels, have made reporting violence extremely dangerous or even deadly.<sup>113</sup> This danger has intensified during COVID, as gangs have increased levels of control and vigilance, closely monitoring the movements of community members, and enforcing curfews and stay-at-home orders with violence.<sup>114</sup>

Strict enforcement of lockdown measures by state security forces—including police and in some cases the military—created additional barriers to reporting violence and seeking assistance during the pandemic. In El Salvador, police and military aggressively enforced COVID-related curfews and stay-at-home orders, detaining over 2,000 people for alleged quarantine and curfew violations.<sup>115</sup> While survivors were allowed by law to leave their homes to report abuse during lockdown, fear of detention or even violence by authorities likely prevented many from seeking assistance. According to Silvia Juárez of ORMUSA, “Women were faced with the fear of being detained since there was no certainty about whether reporting violence was a justifiable reason for leaving the house during lockdown.”<sup>116</sup> Those who attempted to report violence found that police and other local authorities were focused on enforcing quarantine and did not provide adequate assistance.<sup>117</sup>

Widespread human rights violations during the pandemic have further undermined people’s trust in their governments, making it less likely that victims of violence will report in the future.<sup>118</sup> In Honduras, military police used

tear gas against those protesting the lack of food and medical supplies.<sup>119</sup> The organization Cristosal has reported cases in which Salvadoran military forces in charge of enforcing COVID-19 restrictions in local communities sexually harassed girls and women.<sup>120</sup> In rural Guatemalan communities where cases of COVID-19 had been identified, the military prohibited any movement in or out of the community, including to transport food or other resources.<sup>121</sup>

The economic impact of the pandemic, discussed in more detail in Section 2 below, has increased many women's dependence on male family members for survival and created an additional barrier to reporting violence and seeking assistance. Restrictions on movement, including military checkpoints in the case of El Salvador, prevented women from traveling to access the limited emergency assistance, such as food and hygiene supplies, that was available. With both civil society organizations and government agencies operating at reduced capacity and the challenges of accessing support from family and friends during lockdown, victims had fewer options for seeking help with the costs and requirements of reporting violence, including transportation and meals, phone calls, photocopies of documents, and childcare.<sup>122</sup>

### Access to justice and protection for survivors further eroded

If children and women survivors are able to report gender-based violence and seek protection, they still have an uphill battle ahead of them. In recent years El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala have passed laws prohibiting and punishing violence against children and women,<sup>123</sup> but those laws are far from being fully implemented and most cases of violence end in impunity. Across the three countries, fewer than

ten percent of cases of gender-based violence result in prosecution.<sup>124</sup> In interviews with women from Central America seeking asylum in the United States, UNHCR found that 60 percent reported violence to the authorities in their country, but had never received adequate assistance or protection, which forced many to move within their countries.<sup>125</sup>



“We believe that the increase in gender-based violence against children and women is because impunity is embedded in our institutions. Though the country has government agencies in charge of providing support and protection to survivors of gender-based violence, their effectiveness has been low. With the pandemic, this situation is even worse. Assistance for survivors seeking protection is almost non-existent.”

-**Rina Montti**, *Human Rights Monitoring System Director*  
Cristosal

The barriers Salvadoran, Guatemalan, and Honduran survivors of violence face in accessing justice and protection are many. The normalization of violence against children and women along with gender bias within policing and judicial systems puts gender-based violence cases last on the priority list. Child protection systems and specialized units within police and judicial systems charged with responding to violence against children and women are severely understaffed and underfunded and have limited capacity to follow up on reports of violence in a timely manner and to provide protection to survivors.<sup>126</sup> Judicial processes are often long and place the burden on survivors to follow up on their cases to ensure that they move forward, and many survivors continue to

be subject to violence and threats during and after the judicial process.<sup>127</sup>

Government capacity to respond to violence against children and women and provide protection to survivors has been further eroded because of the COVID-19 pandemic, just as prevalence of violence has increased. Agencies charged with responding to gender-based violence have faced severe reductions in capacity as in-person operations have been severely reduced to prevent the spread of COVID, and resources have shifted towards controlling the spread of the virus.<sup>128</sup>

Child protection systems in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, which are responsible for “preventing and responding to violence, abuse, neglect, and exploitation of children,”<sup>129</sup> have operated at reduced capacity throughout the pandemic. Movement restrictions and lack of protective equipment have limited the ability of staff to follow up on reports of child abuse and neglect, leaving children vulnerable to continued violence and without access to protection. Protection screening of repatriated unaccompanied children essentially stopped during the pandemic.<sup>130</sup> Overwhelmed by the pandemic, child protection agencies focused on pandemic prevention, rather than child safety. Without screenings, returned unaccompanied children faced the possibility of being sent back to unsafe conditions.<sup>131</sup>

Throughout the region, law enforcement agencies have diverted resources towards enforcing curfews and other COVID-related restrictions, leaving them with capacity to respond to “serious” violence only, a category that is generally thought to exclude violence against children and women.<sup>132</sup> In El Salvador, for example, up to 95 percent of government services to respond to victims of violence were closed during the early months of the

pandemic,<sup>133</sup> and UNIMUJER, the specialized unit responsible for investigating and responding to gender-based violence, operated at reduced capacity and was unable to respond to requests for assistance in an adequate and timely manner.<sup>134</sup> Even in cases where government institutions remained open, the lack of clear and timely information about services available meant that many people assumed they were closed and did not seek assistance, especially during the early months of the pandemic.<sup>135</sup>

Several international organizations have reported that indigenous and Afro-descendant children and women face even greater barriers to seeking protection from gender-based violence, ranging from discrimination to a lack of culturally and linguistically appropriate services,<sup>136</sup> and these barriers have only increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. In Guatemala, the national emergency hotline that offered one of the few options for reporting violence during lockdown provides interpretation for only four of the country’s 22 indigenous languages, making reporting more difficult and leaving many without access to assistance in their language.<sup>137</sup> In Honduras, Afro-descendant people cannot access health and support services due to the language barriers as well.<sup>138</sup>

The lack of geographic coverage of specialized police units, public prosecutor’s offices, and courts focused on violence against children and women in many rural areas of the country is a long-standing problem,<sup>139</sup> and the pandemic-related lockdown and closure of public transportation made these institutions and the assistance they provide even less accessible for children and women, especially those from Afro-descendant,<sup>140</sup> rural, and indigenous communities.<sup>141</sup>

In Guatemala, the Women’s Division of the Public Prosecutor’s Office worked at reduced

capacity during the early months of the pandemic.<sup>142</sup> Along with reduced access to transportation, this contributed to a 34 percent decrease in requests for protection orders compared with the previous year.<sup>143</sup> In Honduras, the capacity of the Public Prosecutor's Office to provide specialized attention to victims of gender-based violence was also reduced during the pandemic.<sup>144</sup> Modules for Integrated Specialized Assistance (MAIEs), in charge of providing a multidisciplinary response and accompaniment to victims of violence and abuse, were not functioning during the early months of the pandemic. The Immediate Response Units (URIs), responsible for providing legal services and investigative police, continued to operate but did not have psychologists available to respond to emergencies.<sup>145</sup> In areas of El Salvador, some victims of intimate partner violence were told that courts were not issuing protective orders due to the COVID-19-related emergency order.<sup>146</sup>

Human rights experts reported that many courts in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras put trials on hold during the pandemic, and as they have started to reopen, they face lengthy backlogs that impede immediate access to protection for survivors.<sup>147</sup> This will likely lead to even longer waits for justice for survivors of gender-based violence and higher levels of impunity for perpetrators, and leave children and women in danger, with no option other than to flee.<sup>148</sup>

### Reductions in support services for survivors

Access to essential services for children and women who are survivors of gender-based violence, including shelter, mental health services, and legal support, is woefully inadequate in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, and along with lack of access to

protection is an additional factor driving children and women who are victims of gender-based violence to migrate. Reduced government capacity during the pandemic has dramatically worsened these gaps in services, exacerbating the impact of gender-based violence by making it difficult or impossible for survivors to access support.<sup>149</sup>



“The national budget assigned to care for victims of violence [in El Salvador] continues to be reduced by the current administration. Addressing and responding to violence against children, women, and LGBTQIA+ individuals has not been a priority—and less now, in times of a pandemic [...] The government says with their actions that GBV survivors have no other choice but to migrate.”

—**Rina Montti**, *Human Rights Monitoring System Director*  
*Cristosal*

Safe and accessible shelter options are essential to enable survivors to leave violent situations. However, options in the region are extremely limited. In Honduras, for example, there are only seven shelters for survivors of intimate partner violence, with very limited capacity.<sup>150</sup> In Tegucigalpa, where more than 4,000 reports of intimate partner violence are made each year, there is only one shelter with capacity for no more than 20 women and their children, and security cannot be guaranteed in cases where the perpetrator of abuse is part of a gang.<sup>151</sup> With the outbreak of the coronavirus, many shelters either shifted their operations to serve as quarantine facilities, stopped receiving new residents to protect current residents and staff from exposure, or closed or operated at limited capacity due to their inability to meet the physical distancing requirements. This shift

left children and women impacted by violence without options for leaving abusive situations and increased the risk of serious injury or even death by abusive family members.<sup>152</sup>

Other essential services for girls and women, including survivors of gender-based violence, were also temporarily limited or reduced during the pandemic. The government of El Salvador repurposed some government-run centers that provide services to women and survivors of gender-based violence, known as Ciudad Mujer, to be used as containment centers during the pandemic,<sup>153</sup> including the Lourdes Colón and San Martín locations.<sup>154</sup> In Honduras, the Secretary of Health waited three weeks after the quarantine was declared to ensure that local health facilities were distributing contraception, and a civil society organization reported that health centers in multiple departments stopped distribution of contraception early in the pandemic to comply with an order from the Secretary of Health that they only treat patients suspected of having COVID-19.<sup>155</sup> Shutdowns of public transportation made it difficult or impossible for survivors to access the services that remained open, especially in areas where traveling by foot increases women's exposure to harassment or sexual abuse on the street.<sup>156</sup>

Public awareness campaigns around gender-based violence and government services were also impacted. Women's rights experts and civil society organizations in the three countries indicated that some women were unaware of their rights to seek protection and remain safe under lockdown, since the governments were slow to launch their public service campaigns on gender-based violence awareness.<sup>157</sup>

In El Salvador, women's organizations acted quickly at the onset of the pandemic to distribute the hotline number to report incidents of violence, seek psychosocial support, and receive legal counseling, while the

Salvadoran government waited 45 days to do the same.<sup>158</sup> Children and women in rural areas and those without access to technology had even more limited information about how to seek help if they were experiencing violence.<sup>159</sup> And in the case of Guatemala, public health and gender-based violence prevention and response messages were not distributed broadly in all indigenous languages, leaving many communities without access to information.<sup>160</sup>

Since government institutions have operated at limited capacity and had limited reach during the pandemic, community-based civil society organizations in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras have stepped in to provide essential services. Because these organizations are often more trusted by community members than the police or other government institutions, they have played a central role in connecting survivors of gender-based violence to social services and aiding with reporting violence to authorities when needed.

During the pandemic, organizations like Casa Alianza Honduras began to function as reporting centers for children, especially for those being abused at home or who were homeless.<sup>161</sup> Others, like Colectivo Vida Digna in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, provided telemental health care and psychosocial support via phone or virtual platforms to children in rural areas where these services were not available.<sup>162</sup> However, the outreach of civil society organizations was constrained by limited resources and organizational capacity, leaving most children and other survivors without access to services.

## The Impact of Hurricanes Eta and Iota on Women and Children

In November 2020, as Central America was coping with the devastating impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, two hurricanes hit the region within the span of three weeks. The impact was felt throughout the region, but Nicaragua and Honduras were especially hard hit. The storms displaced more than 130,000 and destroyed homes, crops, and livelihoods.<sup>163</sup> Families were forced to stay in shelters that lacked space for social distancing and access to hygiene supplies,<sup>164</sup> putting them at greater risk for contracting COVID-19.

The health and safety of children and women, already impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, was further undermined by the hurricanes. Health care systems weakened by COVID faced further shortages of personnel, supplies, and

space, causing widespread disruptions in health care services, including reproductive, maternal, and child health services.<sup>165</sup> In shelters with cramped living quarters and little privacy, children and women were especially vulnerable to sexual violence and harassment.<sup>166</sup>

The impacts of the hurricanes in the region will be long-lasting, and recovery will require long-term investment by Central American governments as well as the United States and other governments.<sup>167</sup> That investment must prioritize the specific needs and vulnerabilities of children and women and help to build the capacity of Central American governments to prevent and respond to gender-based violence in future emergencies.

## 2. A Gendered Crisis: The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Salvadoran, Guatemalan, and Honduran Children and Women

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on all aspects of society in Central America, but the impacts on children and women have been especially severe and wide reaching. As the pandemic has exacerbated existing gender inequalities, it has also further limited children's and women's rights and their social support networks.<sup>168</sup> Evidence collected by CARE has shown an increase in violence, especially domestic violence, against children

and women driven by tensions in the household related to isolation, food, financial insecurity, and to the closure of schools.<sup>169</sup>

These forms of inequality increase exposure to gender-based violence and limit opportunities and well-being for children and women in Central America, increasing the likelihood that they will migrate to seek protection and survival.<sup>170</sup>

# Economic Impacts of COVID-19 Increase Vulnerability to GBV

Sister Catalina from the Centro de los Derechos del Migrante, Reynosa, spoke with KIND about how the economic impact of the pandemic in Central America has left children and women more vulnerable to gender-based violence. Her organization worked with a woman and her daughters who fled Guatemala to escape violence they experienced during the pandemic. When schools closed in Guatemala due to COVID-19, the girls stopped studying. The

woman was forced to close her small business because she lost clients, and since the family needed income to survive, the girls had to start working. The woman's adolescent daughter was sexually assaulted by her employer. The family reported the sexual violence to the authorities, but they did not receive protection. Instead, the employer, a powerful man within the community, threatened them, forcing them to flee the country.

## 2.1 Livelihoods

The COVID-19 pandemic has had enormous economic impact around the world, and Latin America has been one of the regions hardest hit.<sup>171</sup> In Central America, governments paused much of their economic activity to reduce local spread, leaving the population with few options for meeting their basic needs. This has had severe consequences for the most vulnerable social groups and has impacted children and women in unique ways.

The strict measures taken by governments in the region to limit movement and impose social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic have had a disproportionate impact on women's economic well-being.<sup>172</sup> A significantly higher proportion of female heads of household with children under age six were unable to work due to the pandemic compared to male heads of household. In El Salvador and Honduras, the number of female-headed households with children under six left without work reached over 50 percent.<sup>173</sup>

Across Latin America, women were 44 percent

more likely than men to lose their jobs at the beginning of the pandemic, and as some workers returned to their jobs the gap in unemployment rates between men and women persisted.<sup>174</sup> Women in the informal economy were even more vulnerable during COVID. Recent data shows that more than 80 percent of women in Honduras work in the informal sector,<sup>175</sup> followed by 79 percent in Guatemala,<sup>176</sup> and 72 percent in El Salvador.<sup>177</sup> These women lack access to the social security and other protections that formal employment usually provides.<sup>178</sup>

In El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, paid domestic workers make up 11 percent of the female workforce.<sup>179</sup> Many of them are migrants, indigenous or Afro-descendant.<sup>180</sup> During COVID-19, these women have found themselves in a particularly precarious situation as few of them have access to traditional safety nets like health insurance, unemployment benefits, or retirement accounts.<sup>181</sup>

With this increased economic insecurity, women may be less likely to leave an abusive partner when they have no options for financially supporting themselves and their children.<sup>182</sup>

(See Section 1 for more information on gender-based violence during COVID).

The COVID-19 crisis has also reinforced existing gender inequalities, including unequal distribution of unpaid labor within households. Before the pandemic, women and girls took on a disproportionate share of the unpaid work at home, like cooking, cleaning, and childcare.<sup>183</sup> Salvadoran, Guatemalan, and Honduran women perform an average of 78 percent of unpaid domestic labor.<sup>184</sup> Women in rural communities spend up to 14 hours a day doing unpaid housework, and girls are often expected to fill in for their mothers in unpaid care activities as needed.<sup>185</sup> As is often the case in crises, COVID has led to a further feminization of the burden of domestic duties, as the additional housework and care responsibilities that come from having more family members at home due to lockdown and school closures falls primarily to women and girls.<sup>186</sup> Many women who left jobs outside of the home due to COVID will find it particularly difficult to return because they work in some of the areas hardest hit by the pandemic such as tourism and manufacturing.<sup>187</sup> Over their lifetimes, this will result in significant loss in earnings that will likely never be recovered.

## 2.2 Food Insecurity

One of the most devastating results of the COVID-19 pandemic in Central America has been a severe increase in already high levels of food insecurity. Food insecurity and child malnutrition are longstanding problems in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, where rates of extreme, chronic undernourishment in 2019 were 8.9 percent, 16.1 percent, and 13.8 percent, respectively.<sup>188</sup>

The Global Network Against Food Crises projected that the number of people

experiencing acute food insecurity in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras would increase from 4.4 million in 2019 to more than 8 million by March 2021,<sup>189</sup> reflecting a food security crisis that was already underway due to climate change and was severely exacerbated by the pandemic.<sup>190</sup>

Given the social values and practices that underpin gender inequalities within households, girls and women tend to experience an especially severe reduction in quality and quantity of food intake when food is scarce. Increased food insecurity combined with increased tension in the household may place women at heightened risk of domestic violence.<sup>191</sup>

For women in rural areas, COVID-related restrictions on movement have also prevented them from reaching community gardens where they grow food and accessing markets to sell goods, limiting their ability to earn income and guarantee food security for themselves and their families.<sup>192</sup> Food scarcity and restricted movement may also force children and women into transactional sex and other forms of sexual exploitation.

During the pandemic, several factors have contributed to deepened food insecurity, leaving many thousands of children and women, including indigenous and Afro-descendant children living in remote areas,<sup>193</sup> without access to adequate nutrition. These include closure of meal services in schools, disruption of supply chains, decreased income, and movement and lockdown restrictions.<sup>194</sup> To cope with food insecurity, households in Central America have responded by taking out loans, using up any existing savings, and reducing the size and quality of their meals.<sup>195</sup>

In Guatemala, surveys conducted by CARE in March and April 2020 indicated that 64

percent of families lacked the economic resources to meet basic food needs.<sup>196</sup> A study by OXFAM found an increase in the number of Guatemalan households that needed food assistance and showed acute malnutrition rates had quadrupled, from 7.4 percent in 2019 to 28.8 percent in 2020.<sup>197</sup> In Honduras, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reported in April that 3.2 million people needed food assistance.<sup>198</sup>

Food insecurity levels have continued to increase during COVID-19 and have further intensified with the aftermath of hurricanes that hit Central America in November 2020. The storms affected more than six million people and damaged homes, crops, farmland, livestock, and critical infrastructure.<sup>199</sup>

## 2.3 Education

Education is a right for all children and has lifelong benefits including increased access to employment and earnings and better health outcomes.<sup>200</sup> For girls, increased education levels are also correlated with increased economic independence, marrying at a later age, joining the formal labor market, having healthier children, and more autonomy over the number and timing of pregnancies.<sup>201</sup>

In recent years, El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala have made progress in increasing access to primary education for children.<sup>202</sup> However, education remains far from universal. More than 20 percent of children from the region that begin primary school do not complete their secondary studies<sup>203</sup> due to factors ranging from the need to work to support their families or care for younger siblings, to the threat of gang violence in or on the way to and from school.<sup>204</sup> A 2019 report by Kids in Need of Defense

documented the extreme danger many school children face in Honduras, where gangs target students in school and also on their way to and from school. In some cases, gangs entered schools to kidnap or murder students.<sup>205</sup> In El Salvador, data from 2018 showed that of the 1,000 children who dropped out of school every week,<sup>206</sup> more than 12 percent did so because of gangs' presence around their schools.<sup>207</sup> Insufficient investment in public education by governments in the region also plays a role. Of the approximately three million school-aged children in Honduras, the government only has the capacity to enroll 800,000 in public schools.<sup>208</sup>

Girls and LGBTQ+ children face additional barriers to continuing their education. In El Salvador, only 50 percent of the LGBTQ+ population finishes primary education,<sup>209</sup> compared to 80 percent of the general population.<sup>210</sup> In Mesoamerica,<sup>211</sup> 20 percent of girls between 11 and 18 years old surveyed by the Inter-American Development Bank who are out of school do not go to school because of pregnancy and household work.<sup>212</sup> Girls from many indigenous and Afro-descendent communities also face additional barriers to continuing their education, including economic hardship, social discrimination, high rates of early marriage or unions, and early pregnancy.<sup>213</sup>

Access to education, already tenuous for many children in the region, has been even more severely restricted during COVID. School closures resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic left 11 million children in Central America without access to education, increasing their exposure to multiple forms of violence, including early marriages or unions, and jeopardizing their futures,<sup>214</sup> especially for those children living in rural, indigenous and Afro-descendant communities.<sup>215</sup>



“For children, going to school means an escape from the violence experienced in their homes. The confinement experienced during the pandemic has contributed to the increase in gender violence, especially against children.”

-**Judith Erazo**, Coordinator of Migration Programs, and **Marleny Montenegro**, Psychologist, Equipo de Estudios Comunitarios y Acción Psicosocial (ECAP)

In June and July of 2020, 98 percent of children in Latin America and the Caribbean reported that their school was completely closed during the pandemic, while only two percent reported having access to distance education.<sup>216</sup> In Honduras, a country with 9.3 million inhabitants, the number of children between the ages of 5 and 17 who are out of the educational system has increased during the pandemic from one million to more than 2.5 million.<sup>217</sup> It is likely that many of the Salvadoran, Guatemalan, and Honduran children who left school during pandemic-related closures will never come back. In a survey by Save the Children, 41 percent of parents and caretakers in Latin America and the Caribbean reported that they thought their child would not return to school post-pandemic.<sup>218</sup>

One of the major factors driving educational disparities during the pandemic is disparate access to technology, as schools have increasingly relied on distance education and households face limited connectivity. In Guatemala, only 17 percent of households have internet access,<sup>219</sup> and few women own a mobile phone compared to men.<sup>220</sup> In Honduras, less than 20 percent of households have internet access.<sup>221</sup> Casa Alianza reported that one million children have dropped out of school during the pandemic, in part because many children also lack access to technology, such as computers or smart phones, which have become necessary to allow full participation in remote

learning.<sup>222</sup> In addition, teachers did not receive sufficient training to design and implement remote classes, which made learning more challenging for those students that were already disadvantaged, especially indigenous and Afro-descendant children.<sup>223</sup>

In El Salvador, 77.5 percent of rural households do not have access to connectivity services of sufficient quality to access educational, medical, or any other type of public service.<sup>224</sup> In Guatemala, the proportion of rural households affected by low connectivity reaches 85 percent.<sup>225</sup> Honduras' connectivity in rural areas is also very low,<sup>226</sup> and 80 percent of households do not have sufficient connection.<sup>227</sup> Children's rights experts reported that because most indigenous children and those in rural areas lack access to internet and technological supplies, learning has become even more unequal, violating children's rights to a “free, safe and equal education.”<sup>228</sup>

While extended time out of school during the pandemic has harmed all children, it has also exacerbated existing gender inequalities and differentially impacted girls. Globally, the number of girls reporting that household chores are an obstacle to learning during COVID doubled in comparison to boys.<sup>229</sup> Increased responsibilities in the home leave girls with less time to participate in remote learning and will likely prevent many from returning to school after reopening.<sup>230</sup> At the same time, higher rates of gender-based violence, early marriage and unions, and early pregnancy during COVID (see Section 1 above) will all contribute to fewer girls continuing their studies when in-person classes resume.<sup>231</sup> This reality will limit girls' educational attainment and negatively impact their access to higher education and future earnings.<sup>232</sup> In Guatemala, this will impact more indigenous girls and those living in rural areas.<sup>233</sup>

## 2.4 Health Care

Access to health care in Latin America and the Caribbean is highly determined by household income levels, sex, rural versus urban location, and racial or ethnic background. An estimated 30 percent of the population of El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala does not have access to health services due to financial reasons, and another 21 percent due to geographical constraints, according to the Pan American Health Organization.<sup>234</sup> Data from 2018 showed that El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras were among the nine countries in the world with the lowest number of hospital beds per capita, with Guatemala ranking last.<sup>235</sup> There are approximately 1.6 physicians per 1,000 people in El Salvador, 0.36 in Guatemala and 0.31 in Honduras,<sup>236</sup> significantly below the World Health Organization's minimum of 23 healthcare workers per 10,000 people to guarantee coverage to those seeking care.<sup>237</sup>

In addition, structural barriers and discrimination continue to limit access to health services and treatment,<sup>238</sup> especially for indigenous and Afro-descendent girls and women and those residing in rural areas.<sup>239</sup> In Guatemala and Honduras, lack of access to sexual and reproductive health care for indigenous women negatively impacts health outcomes for women and their children.<sup>240</sup>

Limited access to basic health services has a profound impact on health outcomes of Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and Hondurans in general,<sup>241</sup> but even more so for women and children. The maternal mortality rates per 100,000 live births is 95 in Guatemala, 65 in Honduras, and 46 in El Salvador, compared to 19 in the United States.<sup>242</sup> The infant mortality rates in all three countries are also over double those in the United States.<sup>243</sup> This is due in large part to limited access to contraception and prenatal

health care, especially girls and women in rural and indigenous communities.<sup>244</sup>

Health care systems in the region are under resourced and fragmented, in some cases further weakened by corruption. A 2015 investigation by the Public Ministry in Honduras revealed that hundreds of millions of dollars had been embezzled out of the health care system, some of it going to fund the first presidential campaign of President Juan Orlando Hernandez, while Hondurans went without access to medicine and hospital beds.<sup>245</sup>

The pandemic has pushed already weak health care systems to the breaking point, as resources are diverted from primary and preventative care to COVID response, severely limiting access to medical care.<sup>246</sup> In Honduras, for example, when the pandemic hit, the public health system faced budget cuts and lack of proper personal protective equipment and functional ventilators.<sup>247</sup>

The impact of the crisis on women and children's health has been profound. In a global survey by Save the Children, nearly 90 percent of parents and caretakers reported that "their households' access to health care, medicine or medical supplies have been affected as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, [...] and nearly half of households with children with chronic medical conditions reported being unable to provide regular health and rehabilitation services to their child during the pandemic."<sup>248</sup> In Honduras, Casa Alianza reported that children who needed medical attention did not receive it because their symptoms were not COVID related.<sup>249</sup>

In El Salvador, Save the Children reported "serious restrictions or barriers to access the health system during confinement, which meant that these people or their families could not access their medical check-ups, because the entire health system was focused

on attending to the pandemic.”<sup>250</sup> Eight out of ten Salvadorans surveyed expressed that they could not access any health services during the pandemic, while seven out of ten children did not receive medical care.<sup>251</sup> Since some medical services have moved to tele-medicine, those families without access to technology were left without access to care.<sup>252</sup> In Guatemala, the United Nations predicted that maternal and infant mortality could increase by 33 and 34 percent, respectively, due to the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>253</sup>

The pandemic has also limited access to sexual and reproductive health services, as well as mental health services and specialized medical services for survivors of sexual violence (see Section 1 above for more information on access to services for survivors during the pandemic).<sup>254</sup> In El Salvador, for example, distribution of contraception was down 22 percent in 2020 compared to 2019, and 29 percent for 16- to 18-year-olds, leaving many girls and women without options for preventing unwanted pregnancy.<sup>255</sup>

### 3. KIND Partner Organizations Respond to Gender-Based Violence During the Pandemic

KIND partners with civil society organizations in Central America to engage in programming and advocacy to address the root causes of child migration from the region, including gender-based violence. Since 2016, KIND, with funding from private donors and foundations, has partnered with local civil society organizations in Guatemala and Honduras to address gender-based violence against children and develop prevention and response programming. This programming aims to make children safer in their homes, schools, and communities so that they are not forced to migrate. To date, this initiative has engaged more than 3,000 children, teachers, parents, and community leaders. KIND partners work with local communities to shift widespread social norms that justify gender-based violence against children and to promote gender equity and the right to a life free from gender-based violence, while also supporting and empowering survivors. These organizations take a community-based approach, engaging

children, teachers, family members, local government officials, and community leaders in efforts to prevent gender-based violence and increase support for survivors at the local level.

While COVID-related restrictions have limited in-person programming, KIND’s Guatemalan and Honduran partners adopted new, creative approaches to their gender-based violence prevention and response work. Asociación Pop No’j used virtual platforms to train primary and secondary school teachers in Huehuetenango, Guatemala, in sexual abuse prevention to ensure that when schools reopen, teachers will have the knowledge and tools to identify children impacted by violence and connect them with appropriate services. Casa Alianza Honduras used social media to engage children in conversations to increase awareness of gender-based virtual harassment and bullying and where to seek help, and hosted virtual forums with community leaders where



**Masks created and sold by girls and their families as part of Colectivo Vida Digna’s economic empowerment programming.** (Photo Credit: Colectivo Vida Digna)

they learned about the role they can play in preventing and responding to gender-based violence.

Organizations also distributed gender-based violence prevention and awareness materials to children and their caretakers along with distance learning resources sent home from schools and supplemented materials with content shared through a local radio program. Partners in Guatemala shared messages in indigenous languages including Maya Mam, Ixil, K’iche’, Kaqchikel, Q’eqchi’, Poqomchi, and Achí, ensuring that critical information on gender-based violence prevention and public health updates on COVID were available to indigenous communities that often lack access to this information.

KIND’s partners also provided psychosocial support, including counseling and support groups, to children and families to help them cope with the stress and isolation brought on by the pandemic. Colectivo Vida Digna in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, provided virtual and telephonic counseling that allowed children and youth affected by or at risk for gender-based violence to connect with support as needed. Mennonite Social Action Commission (CASM) in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, engaged parents in virtual support groups where they developed

strategies to cope with the increased stress brought on by the pandemic and engage in positive communication with their children. To address gaps in access to technology, KIND supported partners to provide some children and families with smart phones and internet and cell phone credit so that they could access information, connect with programs and services, and purchase additional equipment for staff so that they could continue their work remotely during the pandemic. However, lack of internet and cellular coverage in many rural areas continued to prevent children and families from connecting to programs and services. In-person services, using physical distancing and other precautions, remained necessary to reach some of the highest need children and families.



**“My Rights during the COVID-19 Pandemic”** (Educational material distributed by Equipo de Estudios Comunitarios y Acción Psicosocial (ECAP))

KIND partners have worked to address the economic impact of COVID on families while empowering women and girls. Asociación Pop No’j, for example, launched a family garden project where children and their families in Huehuetenango, Guatemala, have been given the seeds, tools, and technical support to cultivate fast-growing and nutrient-dense foods

in family gardens. Colectivo Vida Digna worked with teenage girls and their family members to design and produce face masks using techniques drawn from local textile traditions, which they sold in local markets with profits going to participants. KIND's partners have also provided funding and training to families, including female-headed households, to start or rebuild their small business and agriculture projects impacted by COVID and destroyed by the hurricanes.

While making a sustained commitment to preventing and addressing gender-based violence, KIND's partners have also responded to the immediate needs of children and families during COVID by providing emergency assistance, including food assistance, health and hygiene kits, transportation support, and other services.

The dedication and creativity of KIND's partners and countless other local organizations in Central America have allowed them to reach many children and families who would otherwise go without support, but the challenges these organizations face in carrying out their work are formidable and have only increased during COVID. While the need to



**Equipo de Estudios Comunitarios y Acción Psicosocial (ECAP) provides support to rural families impacted by COVID** (Photo Credit: ECAP)



**Casa Alianza Honduras participants celebrate the International Day of the Girl** (Photo Credit: Casa Alianza Honduras)

prevent and address gender-based violence and other needs facing children and families in Central America is urgent, funding available to civil society organizations in the region does not reflect this reality. Organizations must choose between equally important priorities, often leaving critical needs unmet due to lack of funding, while spending a significant amount of their resources and capacity on fundraising to keep current programs going. Poor infrastructure and lack of connectivity create an additional barrier, especially for organizations working in rural areas. In Guatemala, even for locally based organizations, travel to remote communities in the highlands can take multiple days. These same communities often lack access to internet and cellular service, making it difficult or impossible to participate in remote services. Even as organizations developed strategies to expand their reach during the COVID-19 lockdown, individuals and families in some of the most remote communities were left without access to essential information and services. This means that increased financial support from the private sector and multilateral organizations, as well as increased investment from regional governments, is more vital than ever to allow organizations to prevent gender-based violence and ensure support for survivors.

# Children's reflections on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their lives

## How has the pandemic affected your life?

"In my life it affected my education. I couldn't understand my schoolwork. The teachers didn't explain it well. I didn't turn in a few assignments because I didn't understand what I was supposed to do. It was difficult for me to not attend classes."

**17-year-old girl, Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, Maya Mam**  
Interviewed by *Colectivo Vida Digna*

"[The pandemic] stopped us from working normally, making our families to struggle financially which made it difficult for us to purchase food. We recognize that this didn't happen just in my community in the Quiché department, but it had a national and international impact, and it affected all members of our families like uncles, aunts, grandparents and cousins."

**-15-year-old boy, Quiché, Guatemala**  
Interviewed by *Equipo de Estudios Comunitarios y Acción Psicosocial (ECAP)*

## How did the pandemic impact dynamics within your home?

"It had a big impact. My mom and I got mad at each other and fought constantly. It affected my brother too. We said terrible things to each other, we insulted each other, and we haven't been respectful. We are also always stressed out. My father has become distant from us. We don't communicate like we did before."

**19-year-old girl, Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, Maya Mam**  
Interviewed by *Colectivo Vida Digna*

## What has been your experience of the restrictions the government imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic?

"It's been bad because now I can't leave the house and just being at home, cleaning and helping my mother, I get really bored."

**15-year-old girl, Nebaj, Quiché**  
Interviewed by *Equipo de Estudios Comunitarios y Acción Psicosocial (ECAP)*

"The truth is that it's a bad experience to not be able to go buy things that one needs at home. It affected us a lot, we've even been afraid of the police because they've treated people very badly. They fine people for being in the street after curfew, and they shouldn't be like that because sometimes they are people who work in the fields [and have to travel long distances to get home]. Going to the hospital when someone gets sick is difficult because there is no public transportation and it's expensive to hire a car and one doesn't have the money to pay. I think it's been difficult for the population to move and obtain food and money."

**19-year-old girl, Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, Maya Mam**  
Interviewed by *Colectivo Vida Digna*

# 4. U.S. Government Support for Gender-Based Violence Response and Prevention Programs in Central America

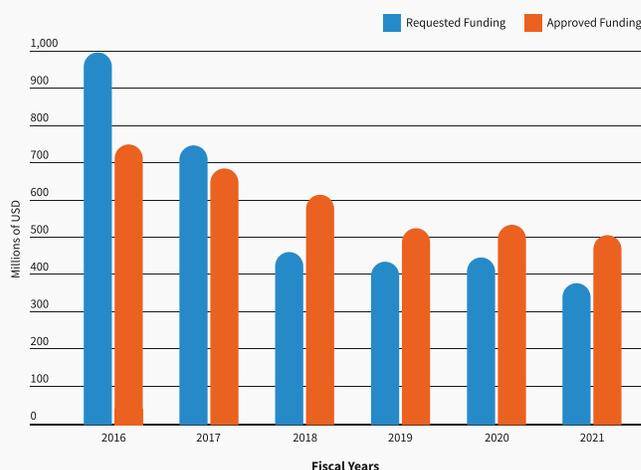
## Recent Foreign Assistance to Central America

In response to record numbers of Central American children arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border in 2014, the United States government increased engagement with Central America to address the root causes of migration. That year, the Obama Administration released a new U.S. government strategy for engagement in Central America, made modest increases in funding for Central America, and, later, requested substantial increases in foreign assistance appropriations for the region starting with the FY2016 budget.<sup>256</sup> Largely implemented by the Department of State and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the new strategy focused on three pillars: security, prosperity, and governance. The U.S. government strategy barely referenced gender-based violence, domestic violence, or other forms of violence against children and women.<sup>257</sup> It has been criticized by some experts for failing to recognize the gravity of gender-based violence in the region and over-emphasizing security indicators like homicide rates as opposed to other crime and violence indicators more likely to affect women, like rape or domestic violence.<sup>258</sup>

The Trump Administration maintained the strategy's approach with an increased focus on deterring migration.<sup>259</sup> But as some programs were still in early stages, the Trump

Administration proposed large cuts to foreign assistance and starting in 2017, progressively reduced the amount of funding requested. In turn, Congress appropriated less assistance over time.

### U.S. Assistance for Central America



**SOURCE:** Congressional Research Service

In March 2019, the Trump Administration abruptly suspended most foreign aid to El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras and reprogrammed approximately \$400 million in aid intended for Central America to other regions.<sup>260</sup> These aid suspensions resulted in USAID and the State Department closing projects and cancelling planned activities that helped address violence, poverty, and other drivers of migration. In Honduras, for example, the total number of beneficiaries of USAID activities was cut in half from 1.5 million in March 2019 to 700,000 in March 2020.<sup>261</sup> One report detailed how Trump's freezing of aid to Guatemala ended

funding for successful programs, including one project in which 30 percent of participating youth had reported that they were no longer seriously considering migrating after enrolling.<sup>262</sup> The termination of programs not only ended critical support and interventions for children and families, but also resulted in sudden job losses for those running programs, who were often members of the very same communities being served. Communities and individuals in Central America are still suffering from the sudden termination of these programs and the irreparable damage it caused.<sup>263</sup>

In 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic and two back-to-back hurricanes wreaked havoc on Central America, the U.S. government response was slow. The U.S. government initially committed \$22 million in pandemic response for El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico, and later humanitarian aid in response to the hurricanes; none of those funds were directed towards children or women, nor did any funds specifically address gender-based violence.<sup>264</sup>

In 2021, U.S. foreign assistance shifted dramatically again with the Biden Administration's pledge to create a new strategy for the region and invest \$4 billion in Central America over the next four years, including \$861 million as part of the FY 2022 foreign assistance budget request.<sup>265</sup> The administration also took more immediate action to increase funding levels to Central America. In April 2021, Vice President Kamala Harris pledged an additional \$310 million in U.S. aid to Central America in response to the 2020 hurricanes and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, among other acute crises. However, it is still unclear how much of that funding will go to addressing gender-based violence or the gendered harms of the pandemic.<sup>266</sup>

In July 2021, the Biden Administration released new strategies to manage regional migration

and address the root causes of migration.<sup>267</sup> Notably, the *U.S. Strategy for Addressing the Root Causes of Migration* includes “combatting sexual, gender-based, and domestic violence” as the fifth of five key pillars.

The inclusion of gender-based violence as a key pillar in the new strategy marks significant progress. But it is essential that it be given equal weight in strategy implementation and not become overshadowed, in funding, staffing, or significance, by the other pillars. It is also vital that the administration recognizes violence against children, both girls and boys, as an urgent part of the problem and includes programs to strengthen child protection under the pillar.

Furthermore, to ensure successful implementation of the strategy as a whole, it is critical that the administration recognizes that gender-based violence is a central driver of child migration from the region and a cross-cutting issue. As such, the administration must ensure that the strategy is implemented with a gender lens and that gender-based violence issues are adequately addressed in each of the other four pillars of the strategy. For example, addressing gender-based violence is integral to respecting the human rights of marginalized populations like indigenous and Afro-descendant children and women and LGBTQ+ individuals. Good governance and rule of law can be promoted by strengthening local child protection services and child welfare agencies. Gang violence can be addressed through violence prevention programming and include targeted violence against girls and women while also engaging boys and men in work on healthy masculinities. All programs to address human trafficking should have a survivor-centered approach and prioritize services for survivors, not just prosecution. All efforts to improve economic prosperity must include measures to mitigate unintended increases in gender-based violence.

## Foreign Assistance to Address Gender-based Violence

Tracking U.S. investments in gender equality and gender-based violence is notoriously difficult and can be even harder to decipher within a specific region. But reports indicate that U.S. funding for gender equality programs globally has decreased over the past several years and the United States spends less on these investments compared to other wealthy donor countries.<sup>268</sup>

The U.S. government has developed a series of policies to promote gender equality and address gender-based violence globally. These policies can inform foreign assistance and shape programming in the region to ensure that it is gender-sensitive and responsive to the needs and perspectives of both women and men, and girls and boys. Some of these policies, like the 2012 United States Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender-based Violence Globally, must be updated and strengthened with new implementation efforts.<sup>269</sup> Others, like USAID's policy on gender equality was updated in

2020 and hastily published in January 2021, before President Biden's inauguration. Several organizations criticized both the substance of the policy and the rushed process and lack of meaningful stakeholder input.<sup>270</sup> Still, USAID's policy on gender equality does ensure a certain level of accountability for gender-sensitive program design and implementation. For example, USAID has in-house gender advisors and requires a gender analysis for all country strategies and program development. While additional efforts are needed for USAID to fully realize gender-inclusive development, they are far ahead of other agencies, like the State Department, which lacks similar mandates. Ultimately, both State and USAID need additional tools, resources, and staff to better plan, implement, and measure how U.S. aid programs promote gender equality, address gender-based violence, and serve children. The U.S. government must improve transparency and reporting on these issues and more fully engage women's rights groups and other civil society organizations in Central American countries in developing and implementing a meaningful foreign policy response to gender-based violence.

## 5. Policy Recommendations

Sustained action is needed to address gender-based violence and gender inequality to guarantee children's access to rights and protection and prevent forced migration. During the COVID-19 pandemic, international and national resources have been strained and programs and services to end gender-based violence against children have fallen as

a priority. International donors and national governments must work with civil society organizations to ensure gender-based violence is a priority in pandemic recovery efforts and that local institutions can prevent and respond to gender-based violence in any potential future crises. This will require significant coordination and a sustained investment of resources.

## Recommendations for the Governments of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras

Governments in the region face a myriad of significant challenges in preventing and providing effective protection and support to survivors, and continue to need assistance from private, bilateral, and multilateral donors to effectively confront them. At the same time, they must demonstrate serious and consistent commitment to preventing and addressing gender-based violence by investing in the strategies outlined below. The following recommendations come from KIND's engagement with civil society organizations and children's and women's rights experts in the region and reflect their perspectives on challenges shared by governments across the region and steps these governments can take to end violence against children and women and guarantee their access to safety and well-being.

### Prioritize gender-based violence against children and women:

- To adequately protect against and respond to gender-based violence during non-emergency times and in emergencies requires political will to prioritize the welfare and rights of children and women. The governments of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras must urgently recognize these issues as national priorities and allocate dedicated funding, increased resources, and attention to address the violence. National governments must incentivize local governments to similarly commit to tackling the cycle of violence.
- The governments of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras must recognize the gendered impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and other emergencies, including increased risk of gender-based violence, and develop proactive preventative strategies and

ensure that the needs of children and women are addressed in these contexts. This requires long-term investment in funding for child protection, judicial, health care, and education systems so that they are equipped to continue operating during emergencies. It also requires developing specific plans for continuity of services during emergencies, including plans to ensure that services reach the most vulnerable populations, such as those in isolated rural areas.

- The governments of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras must place the needs of indigenous, Afro-descendent, and rural communities, especially children and women, at the center of all recovery and development efforts and ensure that policies and plans respond to their needs. This includes designing recovery efforts in consultation with those communities and ensuring that response efforts are culturally appropriate and reach remote rural areas, and that all information and services are provided in the languages spoken by local communities.

### Strengthen government capacity to respond to gender-based violence:

- **Strengthen the ability of child protection systems to protect vulnerable children.** Increase staffing, funding, training, monitoring, and accountability of child protection systems at the national and municipal levels. Expand coverage and capacity in rural areas to ensure that child protection officials can follow up on cases of violence or neglect against children. Expand family-based shelter options and ensure that they are available throughout each country, not just near capital cities.
- **Strengthen the capacity of judicial systems to respond to violence against children and women.** Provide mandatory

specialized ongoing training for police, judges, prosecutors, and other officials to work with survivors of trauma. Increase funding for specialized units that respond to violence against children and women to ensure adequate staffing and to expand their coverage, especially in rural areas.

- **Develop oversight systems to monitor and report abuse of children, women, indigenous people, and LGBTQ+ people within the public institutions in charge of providing protection and services, including public officials.** These systems should allow complaints to be made to and evaluated by an independent body and help ensure that any abuse would result in both accountability for government officials involved and necessary institutional reforms to guarantee that such abuses do not occur in the future.
- **Provide linguistically and culturally relevant services for survivors of violence, and ensure those services are fully funded.** Ensure the availability of accessible information and services in all languages used by local populations, including indigenous languages. Provide ongoing, mandatory training for police, judges, prosecutors, health care personnel, and others who work directly with survivors of violence to provide culturally relevant, child appropriate, and respectful services to indigenous and Afro-descendent communities, and invest in the hiring and advancement of professionals from those communities.
- **Significantly increase the capacity and coverage of shelters for survivors of gender-based violence,** including survivors of all genders and parents or caretakers with children. An adequate shelter system will allow governments to respond rapidly in ensuring that shelters are accessible and comply with public health protocols during an emergency.
- **Develop strategies for early detection of violence against children and women,** including through training and protocols for teachers, health care providers, community leaders, and others who have direct contact with these populations. This will increase the likelihood that victims of violence will be identified and connected with protection and support, even when they are unable to report violence to authorities or proactively seek assistance.
- **Increase investment in sexual and reproductive health care.** Ensure coverage of services in rural areas as well as provision of services in all indigenous languages spoken by communities in the service area. Develop protocols to ensure continuity of services during emergencies and ensure sufficient staffing and resources for ongoing operation.
- **Strengthen public education systems to increase access to primary and secondary education for girls and boys.** Increase access to quality education for children by investing in teacher training and professional development as well as adequate facilities and materials. Invest in early childhood education programs, expand coverage of secondary schools in rural areas, and address gender gaps in education. Develop strategies to reach children who have left school due to the pandemic, violence, the need to work to support their families, migration, and early pregnancy, for example, and provide options to return to the classroom or participate in alternative education programs. Also, increase funding for vocational training, apprenticeships, and other informal education programs to increase skills and opportunities for children and youth.
- **In coordination with Ministries of Education and local education**

**authorities, work to provide inclusive and safe learning environments for all children** by incorporating gender-based violence prevention and comprehensive sexual and reproductive health education into teaching curriculums to challenge the negative social norms that drive gender-based violence.

### Develop emergency response plans that consider the specific needs and vulnerabilities of children and women:

- **Emergency response should be guided by a child- and gender-sensitive lens, with ethnic, cultural, and sexual diversity at the center of the approach.** This will require that vulnerable and marginalized groups have a seat at decision-making tables in emergency response planning, from local to national levels, including decisions regarding budget and resource allocation, to guarantee that the design and implementation of policies and programs are inclusive and equitable.
- **Develop plans and protocols to respond to public health, extreme weather conditions and events, and other emergencies that include proactive strategies to prevent violence** and ensure continuity of assistance for victims. This should include plans to maintain adequate staffing for government agencies that provide essential services, including food, shelter, protection, and medical and mental health services.
- **Develop strategies and protocols for disseminating information on the rights of victims and survivors of violence** and how to report violence and access assistance during emergencies in a clear and timely way. Develop partnerships with local government and civil society to ensure that this information reaches all people and is available in all languages spoken by

the population. These strategies should be developed in advance of an emergency to limit delays in sharing critical information.

- **Where movement restrictions are put in place due to emergencies,** governments should create clear pathways for survivors of gender-based violence or those at risk of experiencing violence to seek safety and access vital forms of support.

### Invest in gender-based violence prevention to reduce violence in the long term:

- **To achieve a long-term reduction in gender-based violence, governments must invest in gender-based violence prevention** at the school, family, and community levels to combat harmful social norms that tolerate violence and discrimination against children and women. Prevention efforts should proactively engage boys and men as agents of change to challenge harmful gender norms and practices.
- **Develop and implement public policies to prevent child and adolescent pregnancy** and to ensure access to education, health care, and other rights of children and adolescents who are pregnant and parenting. These policies should include specific measures to mitigate the increased risk of early pregnancies during emergencies, by ensuring continued access to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services, including for victims of sexual violence.
- **Scale up support for gender-responsive efforts to address food insecurity** to ensure that all people, especially vulnerable groups including children and women, have access to adequate nutrition. Efforts to address food insecurity should include immediate emergency food or cash assistance as well as longer-term strategies

such as providing families with resources and training to establish or re-establish crops and engage in sustainable agriculture, with priority for female-headed households.

- **To empower girls and women and prevent gender-based violence, address gender-based economic exclusion and marginalization** by creating programs that provide girls and women with training, access to financial tools, and affordable childcare to allow them to enter or re-enter the labor market or start small businesses.

### Recommendations for the U.S. Government

The U.S. government must resume a leadership role in promoting gender equality and prioritize gender-based violence prevention and response in its diplomacy, foreign assistance, and stakeholder relationships.

#### Recommendations for Congress:

- **Congress should increase appropriations for foreign assistance programs in Central America that prevent and respond to gender-based violence.** Strong Congressional directives to double the amount of funding allocated to gender-based violence programs in the region are needed to adequately address the scope and severity of the problem.
- **Congress must enhance its oversight over U.S. foreign assistance in Central America to ensure that gender-based violence is a priority,** especially involving violence against children. Congress should also urge increased transparency for funding streams, particularly those dedicated to gender-based violence.
- **Congress must authorize and appropriate spending for new programs designed to**

### prevent and respond to gender-based violence in Central America.

#### Recommendations for the White House:

- **The White House should demonstrate renewed leadership in supporting women's rights through visible, proactive diplomacy and strategic aid programs.** For example, the State Department must resume full coverage of women's rights, including reproductive rights and rights of the LGBTQ+ community, in the department's annual human rights reports. The White House must also use its convening power and leverage to prioritize gender-based violence with other relevant stakeholders not just across agencies, but also with Central American governments, civil society, multilateral organizations, and other donors.
- **As the U.S. government implements a new strategy to address the root causes of migration from Central America, the White House must ensure that gender-based violence remains a priority area with dedicated funding.** Successful implementation of the *U.S. Strategy for Addressing the Root Causes of Migration in Central America* must start by acknowledging that gender-based violence is a primary driver of migration and that it includes most violence against children. As such, resources allocated to gender-based violence prevention and response should reflect the scale and scope of the challenge and ensure a child-sensitive approach. Strategy implementation should be informed by relevant interagency policies, such as the strategies on gender-based violence globally and "Children in Adversity." Importantly, the strategy's fifth pillar on "combatting sexual, gender-based, and domestic violence" must be

allocated funding, staffing, and prominence equal to that of the other strategy pillars, and gender-based violence concerns must be considered and addressed in all pillars of the strategy.

- **The White House must lead diverse and inclusive processes to update relevant U.S. government strategies and action plans on gender equality, gender-based violence, inclusive development, and children’s rights**, particularly the 2016 *United States Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender-based Violence Globally*, which gives agencies guidance to integrate and execute programs related to gender-based violence issues. The White House must provide development guidance, invest resources, and dedicate staff to ensuring that U.S. aid programs promote gender equality, address gender-based violence, serve children and also instruct relevant agencies to improve transparency and reporting on these issues. Policy development and processes must include robust stakeholder engagement, as well as plans for implementation, monitoring, and public reporting on progress.
- **As the U.S. government works to leverage private sector engagement through initiatives such as the Partnership for Central America, it must prioritize gender-based violence and the needs of children and women in its private sector partnerships.** To be effective these efforts should prioritize the inclusion and empowerment of children and women and should involve substantive consultation with experts, members of civil society, and affected communities.

### Recommendations for U.S. State Department and USAID:

In implementing most of the U.S. foreign assistance to Central America, the State

Department and USAID must play a key role in ensuring foreign assistance programs address gender-based violence in the region.

- **All foreign assistance programs, including security assistance implemented by the State Department, must be informed by robust gender analysis and updated U.S. government strategies.** Although USAID already considers gender analysis in the development of its country strategies and development programs, strategy and program development would be improved through a more robust inclusion analysis that considers the needs of indigenous and Afro-descendant populations, people with disabilities, members of the LGBTQ+ community, and other marginalized populations. State Department programs lack a similar mandate; all State programs, and particularly the security programs, must be designed in collaboration with gender and inclusion advisors and include new mandates for program design and inclusive stakeholder consultation.
- **All foreign assistance programs that impact children should be informed by child development specialists and child-specific strategies**, like the U.S. government’s “Children in Adversity” strategy. State and USAID programs should be designed in consultation with experts on child welfare and youth development so they address the needs of children; programs should also be implemented in child-sensitive ways with the assistance of technical experts.
- **USAID should fulfill its stated aim to integrate gender-based violence prevention in all its foreign assistance programs** in accordance with its implementation plan in the 2012 United States Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender-based Violence Globally.<sup>271</sup> Integrating gender-based violence

prevention and response activities into all programs is essential to ensure that projects in each sector are proactively addressing the risk of gender-based violence and are not unintentionally contributing to increases in violence against children and women. This is especially important for emergency and humanitarian assistance provided in response to crises including natural disasters, climate change events, and pandemics.

- **Prioritize and increase funding for programs with a primary purpose of promoting gender equality and preventing and responding to gender-based violence, including violence against children.** Gender-based violence programs should address not only sexual violence and intimate-partner violence, but also violence against children, including child abuse, neglect, and exploitation. All gender-based violence programs should be child-sensitive and serve survivors with a trauma-informed response.
- **Gender-based violence prevention programs must engage boys and men** through community-based programs and expanded use of a healthy masculinities’ framework. Programs should give boys and men the skills to question and transform harmful social norms that perpetuate gender-based violence and promote positive concepts of masculinity and gender relations based in respect, responsibility, and care.
- **Gender-based violence response programs must build the capacity of local social services, law enforcement, and judicial systems to protect survivors and respond to GBV-related crimes, including crimes against children, in trauma informed ways.** Programs should support specialized training for protection officials, police, prosecutors, judges, and

other personnel to work with survivors of violence, as well as increase family-based shelter options for children and women in need of protection.

- **Within new and existing violence prevention programming, there must be increased emphasis on community-based violence prevention and response, especially as it affects children, youth, and women.** Violence prevention programming and other citizen security sector programs should scale up effective community-based projects and assist youth who are victims of violence or are renouncing gang membership.
- **Build the capacity of child welfare and child protection systems in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.** The child welfare systems are currently weak, poorly funded, too centralized, and unable to provide basic protection to children in need—especially for children living outside of major cities. Building the capacity of child protection systems within these countries means that children experiencing violence, abuse, or neglect would have increased access to protection in their communities, additional resources, and viable alternatives to migration.
- **State and USAID must address other gendered harms that are contributing to the high rates of gender-based violence in the region by prioritizing assistance for women and children in these key sectors:**
  - Address the acute needs of children and families through immediate emergency assistance for communities hit hardest by food scarcity, the COVID-19 pandemic, and natural disasters. Ensure that assistance reaches children, women, and other vulnerable populations and is implemented in a way that

accounts for their particular needs.

- Alleviate extreme poverty and hunger through inclusive economic growth and food security programs targeted to children, women, and mothers. Ensure all programming includes robust gender analysis that considers and mitigates the risk of contributing to increased gender-based violence against recipients.
- Increase educational and economic opportunities for youth with differentiated approaches for boys and girls. Vocational training should be tied to workforce needs and economic programs should include rural communities and address the distinct needs of urban and rural youth.
- Increase access to primary and secondary education for girls, particularly in rural areas. To increase options for children to remain in their communities, a significant and long-term investment of resources in education systems is critical. The U.S. government must take a role in increasing investments in education through its own assistance but also by encouraging the deployment of domestic private and public resources as well as investments from other donors and international entities.
- Increase global health programming that provides sexual, reproductive, and mental health services to children and youth, especially in rural settings.

For more detailed domestic and foreign policy recommendations for the U.S. government, see KIND's administrative blueprint, [Concrete Steps to Protect Unaccompanied Children on the Move](#).

# Endnotes

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In El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, coronavirus is not the only pandemic the countries are facing. In 2019, the dengue outbreak in the region left the countries' health systems even weaker and without enough supplies to tackle a new pandemic. In Honduras, for example, the public health system had already suffered budget cuts and was disrupted by corruption and lack of equipment. Sixty-one percent of all the dengue-related deaths in Central America were in Honduras. With the physical distancing measures in place for COVID, the need for mosquito control increased during this pandemic. Given house confinements and limited public resources, it was up to families to look for stagnant water, reduce and dispose solid waste, and ensure proper covering of water storage containers. For more information: The New York Times, "In Some Nations, Coronavirus Is Only One of Many Outbreaks," by Kirk Semple, May 30, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/30/world/americas/virus-central-america-dengue.html>; PAHO, "Dengue cases in the Americas top 1.6 million, highlighting the need for mosquito control during COVID-19 pandemic," June 23, 2020. <https://www.paho.org/en/news/23-6-2020-dengue-cases-americas-top-16-million-highlighting-need-mosquito-control-during-covid>

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