

Dual Crises:

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



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

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.¹ 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.

1 USAID, “United States Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender-based Violence Globally,” August 2012. <https://www.dmeforpeace.org/peacexchange/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/US-Strategy-to-Prevent-and-Respond-to-GBV-Globally.pdf> (Accessed May 14, 2021)

- **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.

For full recommendations for the governments of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, as well as additional foreign policy recommendations for the U.S. government, please see the [*full report*](#).