

Violence and Insecurity in the Northern Triangle of Central America: Dangerous Choices for Women and Girls

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A strong body of evidence shows that violence and abuse against women are not only critical indicators of instability, they are key to determining whether a society will continue to be mired in poverty, impunity, and insecurity.¹ A climate of violence against women has plagued the Northern Triangle of Central America and represents a threat to regional stability and prosperity. Country and regional strategies must address the status of women, eliminating impunity for crimes against them and integrating women into processes for building peace and security.

Renewed U.S. government attention to Central America provides the opportunity and the imperative to involve women more effectively in efforts to reduce violence and insecurity in the Northern Triangle countries—El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. Many women living in these countries are not safe, nor are they treated as equal partners in the social, economic, and political life of their countries. Violence there has displaced hundreds of thousands and created an influx of migrants to neighboring countries and the United States.

The U.S. government created the U.S. National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security (NAP) in 2011 to bolster U.S. national security by strengthening the role of women in countries affected by war, violence and insecurity². The NAP provides a framework to ensure investments in conflict resolution, violence prevention and economic development include women as equal partners in preventing conflict

and building peace. Investments for building peace and improving security are more effective when approaches fully integrate and involve women and when there are adequate measures in place to support and protect them.³

The strategies embedded in the U.S. NAP must be integrated fully into the U.S. response to the crisis in Central America. Doing so will help transform conditions in the Northern Triangle and contribute to a more peaceful, secure region. In addition, the U.S. should take immediate action to ensure that Central American women and children seeking protection in the United States are appropriately received and able to exercise the right to asylum.

I. Violence and Insecurity in the Northern Triangle

With daily reports of humanitarian crises and forced displacement in conflict-stricken regions around the world, the crisis in Central America is often overlooked. But following the devastating civil wars in the region during the 1970s and 80s, which were characterized by horrifying violence against women and large-scale impunity for such crimes, the region remains plagued by widespread violence against women and children. Discrimination and violence against women is taking place in a broader context of gang violence, organized crime, corruption, and weak institutions.

The Prevalence of Violence against Women and Children

El Salvador and Guatemala rank first and second respectively in rates of homicide against children and adolescents globally.⁴ The three Northern Triangle countries are in the top five globally for rates of female homicides.⁵

Citing statistics from the University Institute for Democracy, Peace, and Security in Honduras, the *Irish Times* reported that 531 women were murdered in 2014, the majority aged 15 to 24. Between 2005 and 2013, the number of violent deaths of women in Honduras increased by 263.4 percent. Carolina Sierra, spokesperson for the civil rights organization Foro de Mujeres por la Vida, said to a reporter for the *Irish Times*:

It's almost like there's a carte blanche for the assassination of women [in Honduras]. Anyone can murder a woman in Honduras and nothing will happen. With this lack of accountability, women's bodies are being used to send a message of fear and hate to the rest of the population.⁶

Sexual and gender-based violence is pervasive, particularly against women and girls. Domestic violence is reportedly the leading form of abuse against women and girls in El Salvador and Honduras. Violence perpetrated by gangs is also a significant threat.⁷ In Guatemala, every 46 minutes a new case of sexual violence is reported, but the number of incidents is likely much higher as many go unrecorded.⁸ Trafficking of women and children for forced labor and sex is a serious concern in all three countries.⁹ The consequences of such violence against women and children include severe trauma, which can have long-term health consequences if untreated.

Impunity is widespread in the Northern Triangle countries. In Honduras in 2014, for example, the United Nations reported that 95 percent of sexual violence and femicide cases were never investigated, while only 2.5 percent of cases of domestic violence were settled.¹⁰

Gangs, Organized Crime, and Violence against Women

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported in 2015 that women and children in Central America face alarming rates of “escalating, targeted violence and persecution, including murder, disappearance, assault, rape, and recruitment at the hands of criminal armed groups.”¹¹ According to one young Honduran woman,

The gangs treat women much worse than men. They want us to join as members, but then women are also threatened to be gang members’ “girlfriends,” and it’s never just sex with the one; it’s forced sex with all of them. Women are raped by them, tortured by them, abused by them.¹²

Sixty-four percent of refugee women from Central America and Mexico interviewed for UNHCR’s *Women on the Run* report described direct threats and attacks by armed criminal groups as one of the primary reasons for their flight, and 58 percent of women interviewed gave accounts of sexual assault and sexual abuse. One young Honduran woman said,

I saw the [drug cartel] kill someone on the street as I was leaving school. They saw me running away. The threats started this day. They told me if I said anything . . . they’d look for me, find me, and kill me. They raped me twice, kidnapped me four times, beat my partner, and mistreated me in so many other ways. They said they’d kill me. They also said if I didn’t leave, they’d find my family and kill them, too. So, I decided to go.¹³

Violence against women and children in the region is inextricably linked to criminality, insecurity, and the status of women in society. Throughout the Northern Triangle, efforts to mitigate gender-based violence, provide care for survivors, and address gender inequality have been insufficient.

Prevention and Response

Leading research institutions are working in the region to determine the most prevalent forms of violence against women and children, assess the social norms that perpetuate violence, and evaluate interventions and multisectoral initiatives to reduce it.¹⁴ Evidence-based programs to promote social norm change, empower women, and engage youth are essential for reducing violence and improving regional stability and security over the long run, and they require more attention and resources. If the sources of gender inequality and impunity for violent crimes against women remain unaddressed, the broader context of societal violence will continue and perpetuate state and regional insecurity.

II. Humanitarian Crisis

Violence in the Northern Triangle has forced many women, children, and men to flee their homes. They try to find safety in their own country or seek protection across the border in neighboring countries or in the United States.

Rising Internal Displacement

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) estimates that at least one million people had been displaced by criminal violence associated with drug trafficking and gang activity in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico as of December 2015.¹⁵ In Honduras, the government surveyed twenty of its more than three hundred municipalities and estimated 174,000 persons were displaced by violence between 2004 and 2014, or about 4 percent of the population in these

areas.¹⁶ In El Salvador, notorious for being one of the world's most deadly countries not at war, the IDMC reported there were more than 289,000 internally displaced persons at the end of 2015—almost 5 percent of the total population of just over six million.¹⁷ The year-end estimate for Guatemalans displaced by violence, including from the civil war, was 251,000.¹⁸ When women are internally displaced, they are often at greater risk; they tend to have less access to assistance and are more vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence.¹⁹

Increasing Numbers of Refugees

The inability to live safely in their home countries is pushing more Central Americans to seek protection in neighboring and nearby countries. Eighty percent of Honduran refugee women interviewed by UNHCR for its *Women on the Run* report had tried to relocate internally before deciding to flee their country. The same was true for 78 percent of the Salvadoran refugee women surveyed and 57 percent of the Guatemalan women.²⁰

Asylum applications by Northern Triangle citizens are on the rise. The number of applications in 2015 is nearly doubled from 2014, and growing numbers of women and girls and unaccompanied and separated children are among those fleeing.²¹ While the majority of applications were lodged in the United States, claims are also significantly increasing in the region and Mexico.

Even though asylum applications have increased, the reality for many women and children in need of protection is that they cannot exercise their right to asylum. Information about asylum processes is scant, and systems are underresourced and overwhelmed. In some countries, there are few accessible pathways to gain asylum protections. Without good options, women and children turn to smugglers or traffickers. Although they may have legitimate asylum claims, they find themselves at high risk of detention, assault, trafficking, and forced return. It is an experience that has been described as “a journey through hell.”²²

Last summer, governments in the Americas, international organizations, and civil society came together for the first international event focused on forced displacement in the region. Participants in the San Jose Conference agreed on a series of comprehensive actions and committed to review progress at the June 2017 meeting of the Organization of American States.²³

III. U.S. Engagement: Protection and Assistance Considerations

Stability and prosperity in the Northern Triangle is in the national interest of the United States. It is a question of hemispheric security, economic opportunities, managed migration, and reduction of transnational crime.

The U.S. government approach to the crisis in Central America is three-pronged: intensify efforts to halt migration and arrivals at the U.S. border; increase assistance to the Northern Triangle countries and the region to address factors driving migration; and support regional action to address cross-border displacement. Much more must be done to ensure that commitments under the refugee convention are upheld, that human rights are protected and that the particular needs of women and girls are identified and addressed.

Access to Protection in the United States

Actions to stop the migration of Central Americans to the United States have created significant barriers for women and children in need of protection. Those arriving at the U.S. border frequently do not know how to file and pursue an asylum claim. Single women and women travelling with children are systematically detained upon arrival. In some cases, families are separated at the border, with mothers sent to adult detention facilities and their children to children's shelters.

A Salvadoran woman interviewed by UNHCR said, “The things I lived through in detention have marked me for life. Please remember that we are also human beings. I didn't want to come here, but for me it was a question of life and death.” Another added, “They should help facilitate the asylum process so that one doesn't suffer in detention centers. They shouldn't be causing more harm.”²⁴

Those who succeed in filing a claim and have also been released from detention generally must wait three years to get a hearing in an immigration court. Over 50 percent of children and families are forced to present their claims to an immigration judge without the aid of an attorney. The poorly functioning immigration court system, together with the lack of information and prioritization of deportation has resulted in the forced return of at-risk migrants to unsafe circumstance.²⁵

Central Americans have had limited access to the U.S. Refugee Resettlement program. However, the United States has recently taken modest measures to open the program to Central Americans. In July, the U.S. government announced plans to expand the Central American Minors Program to include parents or caretakers of Central American children who qualify. In cooperation with UNHCR and the International Organization of Migration, the United States has also instituted a small-scale in-country refugee processing program and a program that would allow up to 200 persons in immediate danger to be hosted in Costa Rica pending processing of their claim.²⁶

IV. U.S. Assistance in the Region

The United States has recently increased foreign assistance for Central America, particularly the Northern Triangle countries, to tackle the underlying drivers of migration. In fiscal year 2016, the U.S. Congress appropriated up to \$750 million for the region. That is more than double FY 2014 assistance and a 34 percent increase over FY 2015.²⁷ There are a series of conditions attached to the aid to the Northern Triangle governments related to improvements in good governance, crime prevention, the rule of law, poverty reduction and equitable economic growth, engagement with civil society, and accountability, as well as enhancement of border management and reduction in irregular migration. The FY 2017 continuing resolution passed in December 2016 maintains that funding level, again with conditions. There are concerns that if governments overemphasize border control at the expense of civilian protection, the root causes driving migration will continue to grow.

U.S. investments in the Northern Triangle aimed at improving security, economic growth, and good governance will have the greatest impact when women are engaged as full partners in the work and when the investments intentionally scale up efforts to protect, assist, and empower women and girls. This integrated approach requires a sustained and strong commitment to inclusive development and to the actions identified in the U.S. government's NAP's implementation plans for the Western Hemisphere region: strengthen cooperation and respect for gender equality; integrate gender considerations into work with the security, law enforcement, and judicial sectors; and support women's leadership in political processes and their participation in violence prevention and peacebuilding initiatives.²⁸

The U.S. government is also supporting border enforcement efforts in the Northern Triangle countries and Mexico. However, border security measures in these countries do not adequately or consistently protect women and frequently fail to take into account the risks women face or are dismissive of requests for protection that are gender-based. Throughout the region, substantially more cooperation and investments are needed to establish fair and safe processes for female asylum seekers.

V. U.S. Leadership on Women, Peace, and Security: A Framework for Protection and Solutions in the Region

The United States has led in securing international support for the fundamental principle that there can be no sustainable peace or security without the full participation and engagement of women. The U.S. government created its NAP by building on this core principle. In November

2016, the U.S. House of Representatives passed bipartisan legislation (HR 5332) affirming the importance of U.S. global leadership on these issues and the need for U.S. diplomacy and programs to reinforce the meaningful participation of women in all aspects of conflict prevention, management, and resolution, and in post conflict relief and recovery efforts.

The U.S. government's NAP provides an effective, comprehensive response to security, development, and human rights challenges, elevating and integrating the views and needs of women and enlisting them in achieving lasting peace and greater security. Applying the NAP framework to U.S. efforts in the Northern Triangle is essential to meet humanitarian challenges and address the underlying conditions that will otherwise continue to perpetuate instability and violence in the region.

VI. Recommendations

In U.S. diplomacy and assistance to Northern Triangle countries, scale up efforts to promote gender equality and the safe and full participation of women in all spheres of political, social, and economic life.

- Support implementation of national strategies in each country to improve gender equality and prevent and respond to gender-based violence against women and girls in all sectors of society.
- Ensure that U.S.-funded programs across sectors—political, social, economic, security, and judicial—include a thorough gender analysis and are designed and implemented in partnership with women. Give special attention to scaling up and integrating programs that are designed to prevent and respond to gender-based violence, improve access and quality of services for survivors, and increase accountability and justice for perpetrators of gender-based violence.
- Invest not only in initiatives designed to support and empower women, but also in prevention programs for adolescent girls and boys that include curriculum for improving gender equality, promoting respect and healthy interactions, and providing the tools for better outcomes.
- Continue to promote and support the safe and robust engagement of civil society in all aspects of national life, in particular ensuring that women leaders and NGOs are included in consultations and planning. Work to improve protections for human rights defenders and women's rights leaders.
- Support development of appropriate and protective monitoring mechanisms and programs for migrant women, girls, and families who are returned to their countries but may still be at risk; expand community-led interventions to facilitate reintegration, support survivors of violence, and mitigate the risks of future violence.

- Urge greater attention to protection and assistance for internally displaced persons, including access to basic services and safe shelters for displaced women and girls at risk. Support development and implementation of national action plans to address the immediate needs of the internally displaced and to include displaced populations in development plans.

Support regional strategies to strengthen protection for Central America asylum seekers and refugees, including women and children.

- Provide transit and receiving countries with technical assistance such as training for personnel in asylum and refugee law and on the specific vulnerabilities of women and children.
- Help countries provide a safer haven for asylum seekers. They should, for example, establish reception facilities that meet minimum international standards for protection; facilitate access to legal aid and basic health services; support the successful integration of refugees through access to education and economic opportunities.
- Help develop and strengthen the capacity of a regional network of civil society organizations to implement programs that support refugees and asylum seekers, including programs to reduce gender-based violence, exploitation, and trafficking.
- Encourage parties to the San Jose Action Statement to report as pledged on progress made in implementing their commitments at the June 2017 meeting of the Organization of American States and to include a gender analysis in reporting.

Ensure that Central American women and children arriving at the U.S. border in need of protection are able to access it; fulfill U.S. resettlements commitments.

- Provide access to asylum procedures for those requesting protection at the border. End the use of expedited removal and detention of asylum seekers, in particular women and children. Implement alternatives to detention and a process that ensures protection and access to due process for asylum seekers, including increased access to legal information and legal assistance to improve fairness and efficiency.
- Recognize gender-based violence, including domestic violence and gang-related violence, as persecution grounds for asylum and ensure these claims are consistently adjudicated.
- Fully implement trafficking protections and integrate child welfare and trafficking experts into screening processes.
- Improve independent monitoring and accountability of border patrol stations and all places of custody for migrants and increase training on gender issues for all personnel.

- Increase funding and staffing for the Justice Department's Executive Office of Immigration Review and for the Department of Homeland Security's U.S. Customs and Immigration Service to support timely, efficient, and fair processing of asylum claims.
- Implement the U.S. government's Central American Minors program and its most recent resettlement commitments.

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