



PULTE INSTITUTE
FOR GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT

Addressing the Sex and Gender-Based Violence in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador Fueling the U.S. Border Crisis

Impunity, and Violence Against Women and Girls

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OVERVIEW

Pervasive violence against women and girls in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador is perpetrated by gangs, narco-traffickers, human traffickers and a machismo culture fueled by corruption and impunity leading to some of the highest rates of violence against women and girls in the world, including the murder of women and girls. This sexual violence is causing severe harm, including rape, domestic and sexual servitude, sexual assault, forced disappearances, human trafficking and even death in the region, forcing women and girls to flee the region and migrate to the U.S. The epidemic of sexual violence continues unabated and without consequence given an overall impunity rate of 97 percent. In Guatemala, only 3 percent of all crimes are punished, in El Salvador only 3 percent of recent court cases involving violence against women and girls have resulted in guilty verdicts, and in the Honduras 95 percent of all female murders remain unsolved.

While there have been some efforts to provide federal funding to programs that combat violence against women and girls and corruption, to date, U.S. foreign assistance to the region has been in a scatter shot approach and often 50 percent of the diminishing aid is held back by the Department of State due to Congressionally mandated conditions and triggers. U.S. foreign aid to the region reached a high water mark of \$750 million in 2016, dropping to a little under \$520 million for 2020. Compounding matters, the Trump administration “re-programmed” or reallocated over \$404 million in foreign aid funding that was congressionally directed to be spent by federal agencies on efforts in the region in the spring of 2019 to other unrelated programs in other parts of the world. This move severely impacted important programs to address the root causes of violence, because there were no longer federal funds supporting these programs. The funding to address violence against women and girls is even smaller. Only one percent of U.S. foreign aid budget to El Salvador went to address violence, an extraordinarily low amount of funding for a country that has the highest rate of murder of women and girls in Latin America and the third highest rate of murder of women and girls in the world. The combination of conditions, cuts, withholding and re-programming of U.S. funding has hindered impactful programming and meaningful evaluation of U.S. funding to address root causes of the child migration crisis.

**STAGGERING
STATISTICS**

97%

**OF RECENT COURT CASES
INVOLVING VIOLENCE AGAINST
WOMEN AND GIRLS DO NOT
RESULT IN GUILTY VERDICTS**

CORRUPTION, IMPUNITY, AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

According to the U. S. Department of State, systemic and endemic corruption in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras is one of the most significant challenges these countries face. Corruption undermines rule of law and trust in public institutions, disrupts economic development and poverty reduction and facilitates a culture of lawlessness and lack of accountability. Corruption leads to impunity and organized crime and fuels the pervasive violence against women and girls in the region. International sponsored anti-corruption initiatives, like the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG), have had significant success in combatting corruption by networks of corrupt officials. Given that success, however, the mandates of these initiatives have been ended by corrupt officials to protect themselves and can serve as model for future efforts to combat sex and gender-based violence in the region.

VIOLENCE, SECURITY, AND MIGRATION

The Pulte Institute for Global Development at the University of Notre Dame has conducted several evaluations of programs that address the root causes of migration in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. Our work has examined key protective factors for violence involvement, ways to reduce recidivism, perceptions of security, and migration intentions. As evidence of the need for continued funding in the region, we have found that: the homicide rate has fallen faster and perception of security has risen faster in areas with programs supported by U.S. foreign assistance than at the country level. As violence diminishes and perception of security improves, migration intentions decrease.



**STAGGERING
STATISTICS**

95%

**OF ALL FEMALE MURDERS
COMMITTED IN HONDURAS
REMAIN UNSOLVED**



RECOMMENDATION 1: THE COMMISSION AGAINST SEX AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE (CAGSBV)

Political will, targeted policies, and dedicated resources in the Northern Triangle region have led to significant reductions in homicides in general and this success portends real potential for significantly reducing violence against and murder of women and girls. For example, El Salvador's homicide rate fell by 60 percent over three years in the 50 most violent areas due to effective programming. Research has also concluded that the International Commission Against Impunity reduced homicides 5 percent annually in Guatemala and homicide rates declined by 32 percent in Honduras from 2015 to 2018 due to U.S.-based foreign assistance. The potential to make significant gains in reducing violence against women and girls through U.S. foreign assistance is even more promising in context of the U.S. providing only \$600,000 or less than 1 percent of foreign assistance to El Salvador in 2018 to combat violence.

The demise of the anti-corruption and anti-impunity entities in Guatemala and Honduras and the recent election of President Bukele in El Salvador, along with Bukele's willingness to stand up a new anti-corruption mission present a unique opportunity to establish a new internationally sponsored justice initiative that would combat violence against women and girls in the Northern Triangle region.

- The U.S., the EU, and the UN working with the governments and civil society in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador could collaborate collectively to sponsor a new initiative, the Commission Against Sex and Gender-Based Violence (CASGBV) with clear mandates to combat and prevent pervasive violence against women and girls in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador would provide significant resources and support to target the impunity gap around sexual and gender-based violence.
- The Commission would be given a five-year mandate subject to renewal. It would be structured to ensure that it is constitutional in each country while maintaining independence from the executive branch. Its core mission would be to support national prosecutors and existing national tribunals and courts targeting femicides and other forms of sexual and gender-based violence. The CASGBV would focus on providing funding, capacity and resources to enforce existing laws, establish SGBV courts or support existing specialized courts, prosecute the perpetrators and provide survivor aftercare. Other services would include gathering and analyzing forensic evidence like DNA, legal representation, and providing protective orders. Accountability for perpetrators would include both punishment and rehabilitation to address the patriarchal and machismo culture in the NTCA.
- The U.S. could provide \$150 million in foreign assistance to El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to establish the new Commission with an additional funding designated to each nation's Attorney General conditioned on cooperation and support of the CASGBV. The Commission would include a target of a 10 percent annual reduction in violence against women and girls in year three to five of its first term.

**STAGGERING
STATISTICS**

97%

**OF ALL CRIMES COMMITTED
IN GUATEMALA ARE NOT
PUNISHED**



RECOMMENDATION 2:

TARGETED U.S. FUNDING TO COMBAT SEX AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND CORRUPTION

- The U.S. government should enact legislation to address root causes of violence against women and girls and provide federal funding as foreign assistance to the region to address sex and gender-based violence and combat corruption. Such legislation would build upon two current bills that have been introduced in this legislative session, the “US-Northern Triangle Enhanced Engagement Act of 2019” (HR 2615) and “Central American Women and Girls Protection Act of 2019” (HR 2836/S1781) and provide more robust funding to address root causes.
- President Trump in the President’s Budget Request for Fiscal Year 22 and the U.S. Congress in the Fiscal Year 22 State, Foreign, Operations spending bill should provide \$1 billion to civil society and non-governmental organizations for the U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America to address the root causes of forced migration from the region. Of the \$1 billion, \$225 million should be appropriated to address and prevent violence against women and girls including targeting such violence caused by gangs, narco-traffickers, human traffickers, impunity, and corruption.
- Of the \$225 million to address the root causes of violence against women and girls, Congress should provide \$60 million each to El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala for a total of \$180 million to create a new internationally sponsored justice initiative that would combat sex and gender-based violence in the region. The U.S., the EU, the UN, and civil society in these countries would partner to stand up new initiatives with clear mandates to combat pervasive SGBV in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. The Commission Against Sex and Gender-Based Violence (CAGSBV) with a five-year renewable mandate, would target impunity in the violence against and murder of women and girls in partnership with these countries, the U.S., the EU, and the UN. In addition, \$15 million each for the Attorney Generals of Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador to prevent and combat violence against women and girls conditioned on cooperation with the Commission Against Sex and Gender-Based Violence (CAGSBV).
- Congress should also pass an at least five-year authorization that can be reauthorized with funding for each of the countries in the Northern Triangle region that would address violence against women and girls and would combat drug cartels, corruption, criminal gangs, and address impunity—key drivers of such violence in the region. In addition to addressing the root causes of the current migration crisis, this bill would authorize the CAGSBV and recommended funding for the Commission and the Attorneys Generals of Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador.
- Congress should condition anti-corruption foreign aid on the restoration of the International Commission Against Impunity (CICIG) in Guatemala, the restoration of the Mission to Support the Fight against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (MACCIH) in Honduras and the establishment of an anti-corruption entity in El Salvador. Upon restoration of the anti-corruption entities, the U.S. will provide \$100 million each to Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador to support the anti-corruption initiatives.

THE POWER OF U.S.-BASED ASSISTANCE AND EFFECTIVE PROGRAMMING:

60%

**HOMICIDE RATE REDUCTION IN THE 50
MOST VIOLENT AREAS IN EL SALVADOR
OVER THREE YEARS**

5% PER
YEAR

**REDUCTION OF
HOMICIDES IN GUATEMALA**

32%

**DECLINE OF HOMICIDE RATES
IN HONDURAS FROM 2015-2018**

Overall, the pervasive violence against women and girls in the Northern Triangle region can be reduced significantly if there is regional cooperation and foreign assistance that addresses the root causes of the violence and combats corruption and impunity. These recommendations are concrete, specific steps to this approach.

Visit pulte.nd.edu/smith-sources for a full list of sources used to write this policy brief.

POLICY BRIEF TEAM



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