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Gender-Focused Violence in the Northern Triangle Puts Women and Children on Massive Exodus

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Category/Department: Region
Published: 2016-01-07

In addition to its more visible components—gangs, organized crime networks, and political targets—violence in Central America’s northernmost territory has a less visible, yet highly critical, ingredient: gender-based aggression.

Increasing attacks on women, either as main or collateral victims, and a rise in femicides are leading a growing number of women and children to flee from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, the three sides of the violent Central American Northern Triangle.

By the thousands, and usually in the hands of criminal networks that engage in human trafficking, they are looking for safety in other Central American nations, Mexico (although women are also escaping the violence that is affecting several Mexican regions), or the United States.

Applications for asylum by women from the triangle have skyrocketed in these destinations, according to a recent study by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) entitled “Women on the Run. First-hand accounts of refugees fleeing El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico.”

Presenting the study in Washington on Oct. 28, UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres warned, “The dramatic refugee crises we are witnessing in the world today are not confined to the Middle East or Africa. We are seeing another refugee situation unfolding in the Americas. This report is an early warning to raise awareness of the challenges refugee women face and a call to action to respond regionally to a looming refugee crisis.”

In Guterres’ view, “the violence being perpetrated by organized, transnational criminal groups in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and certain parts of Mexico has become pervasive.”

The triangle—by different estimates, one of the world’s most violent regions—shows general homicide rates way above the global average of 6.2 per 100,000 population, with Honduras topping the list, at 90.4, closely followed by El Salvador with 82.2, and Guatemala with 39.9 (NotiCen, Jan. 29, 2015, and July 30, 2015).

According to the Center for Gender and Refugee Studies (CGRS) at the University of California, Hastings College of the Law, El Salvador has the highest femicide rate of the three countries, with over 600 cases reported in 2011. General gender violence has soared, from 1,500 reported cases in 2000 to over 6,000 cases a year in 2009 and 2010.

A CGRS report noted that “widespread impunity remains the norm” in the triangle, where courts resolve less than 3% of the reported femicide cases.

As a result, “violent aggressors are emboldened by knowing that the chance of being convicted for these horrendous crimes is virtually nonexistent, a fact that only further normalizes the violence.”
A huge target

In an interview with the New York-based news outlet BuzzFeed published on Oct. 28, Michelle Brane, director of the Migrant Rights and Justice Program for the New York-based NGO Women’s Refugee Commission, said that regional violence has focused largely on women, who “have been a huge target.”

“They’re either the primary targets of violence, or they are secondary targets. So if someone is going after a young man who is refusing to join a gang, they’ll threaten their mother, sister, or girlfriend,” she explained.

“Women also face threats of rape, domestic violence, and there are no shelters or places to keep them safe,” Brane said, adding that, for years, her organization has “seen an increase in asylum-seekers, especially women, arriving to the US.”

Trying to reach US soil in search of protection, Brane said, these women face many hazards, including the risk of being trafficked, a reason why the involved countries should react (NotiCen, April 30, 2015).

She said women escape from their countries of origin because the authorities do not provide them with the needed protection.

“If you were fleeing a burning house, but you risk facing more danger in your way as you flee the fire, you’re still going to flee regardless of whatever is in your way,” she said. “These women, they are fleeing endless threats of sexual violence, abuse, and exploitation ... nothing will be stopping them when they leave. Nothing will get in their way.”

The US basically responds by closing its borders to these forced migrants, detaining and deporting them, which only worsens the problem, Brane told BuzzFeed.

“The US is focused on border closures, detention, and deporting people – they’re not helping those fleeing for their lives, and are exacerbating the problem in Central America,” she said.

Not a border-control issue

In Brane’s view, Central American nations—and the US—must recognize that regional violence is triggering what she said was a growing refugee crisis and “not a border-control issue.”

According to the UNHCR study, women interviewed said they and their children faced extreme violence on a near-daily basis in their communities, and that they were victims of rape, assault, extortion and threats by armed criminal groups.

In the study, 85% of those interviewed said they live in neighborhoods controlled by “maras” (violent gangs) or other transnational or local criminal organizations, including drug-trafficking gangs. Over 60% said they had been involved in incidents in which gang members either killed or were directly responsible for the disappearance of family members, including children or partners.

“Women emphasized that the presence of criminal armed groups in their neighborhoods had a deep impact on their daily lives,” and that they “increasingly barricaded themselves and their...
children inside their homes, unable to go to school or work, fearing gunfights or direct threats from armed groups,” the study points out.

Nevertheless, 40% said they did not report such incidents to the police because “some had seen the police fail to provide sufficient responses to family or friends who had made reports,” while “others felt that criminal armed groups maintained such tight control of their neighborhoods that the police were unable to intervene effectively on their behalf,” according to the UNHCR study.

**Police offer little help**

Also, 10% said the police “or other authorities were the direct source of their harm in their home countries. In certain instances, women described collusion between the police and criminal armed groups,” the study notes, which the women said made it “very difficult to seek protection.”

In one of the cases included in the UNHCR document, a young Honduran woman identified as Nelly said, “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.”

In another case, an unidentified Guatemalan woman said, “In the local market, the people from the cartel put the dead body of a woman on public display to strike fear into everyone.”

And Claudia, a Salvadoran victim of domestic violence by her gang-affiliated husband, said, “The whole reason I was in danger was because I was a woman. A man feels like he is entitled to physical and emotional power over you.”

Minors are also a vulnerable group, and an added cause of major concern for women in the region. An unidentified Salvadoran told the UNHCR she was able to bring some of her children with her when she fled.

“I took my son and grandson to the US so they wouldn’t be recruited into the gangs, but I couldn’t take my daughters as well. I am very worried for them,” she said. “My daughters are still in El Salvador and I worry for their safety ... I worry that they will be killed by the gangs.”

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