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THE NORTHERN TRIANGLE: THE EPICENTER OF MACHISMO AND FEMICIDES

Violence against women in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala

ABOUT POLITICS4HER:

Politics4Her is an intersectional feminist platform & youth-led movement advocating for the inclusive participation of young women and girls in politics. Politics4Her works to broaden dialogue and to bring international human rights into practice through advising policymakers and states by bringing international best ideas. Politics4Her strives to contribute to a more equitably governed world by democratizing national laws and legislation.

ABOUT THE PROGRAM:

The Young Feminist Scholars Programme is meant for any student who is extremely passionate about feminism and gender issues. The goal will be for each scholar to deliver a report specializing on a region in the world covering issues related to gender-based violence and/or women's political participation. Our two criteria for our scholars are to identify as international feminists (regardless of their gender) and most importantly to be able to showcase leadership. Scholars get to work in research, writing, policy as well as communications advocacy. Our main goal is for them to explore these different fields and see what they are most interested in while offering them guidance and mentorship so that it potentially helps them launch their early career.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:



Megan (Meg) MacGregor holds a dual degree in International Relations and Spanish from the University of San Diego. She is currently pursuing an MA in Political Science and Public Affairs with an emphasis on International Crises at Saint Louis University - Madrid Campus. Her research interests include femicide and violence against women in Latin America and asylum seeker and refugee policy and protection both in Central America and at the international border. Prior to pursuing her MA, she worked as a North American Language and Culture Assistant with the Spanish Ministry of Education at a school in Madrid, Spain. She is fluent in Spanish and wants to pursue a career that will allow her to use her bilingual skills and her passion for women's rights to make a positive impact in the world.

TRIGGER WARNING:

Please note that since this policy brief includes words and phrases that should be avoided, you may come across some that you consider discriminatory or that have been used historically to oppress certain people or groups. These may cause distress to people who have experienced discrimination on the basis of their identity. Given the nature of this policy brief, we understand that many of the issues it discusses are personal and emotive for many people. While naming oppressions is necessary to deconstruct them, we recognize that this can take a toll on those directly affected. Please take care in the reading of the policy brief and prioritize your wellbeing.

Executive Summary



Image: Columbia Journal of Transnational Law (2021)

Women living in the Northern Triangle are in danger. Violence against women in this region has long been an epidemic in the region but is recently gaining more attention to the increase of migrant women from the region to the United States. The Northern Triangle, which is the region in Central America composed of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, has reported some of the highest femicide statistics in the world. This policy brief aims to educate the public about the different types of femicides, the scope of the femicides occurring in Central American countries, and propose possible solutions to ending this lethal form of violence against women. This problem is multifaceted and complex, therefore, in order to adequately protect women in the region, we need to find solutions that involve cooperation between countries and a mixture of economic, developmental, political, and security reforms.

What is Femicide?

Violence against women comprises a wide range of acts – from verbal harassment and other forms of emotional abuse to daily physical or sexual abuse. At the far end of the spectrum is femicide. Femicide, as defined by World Health or feminicide, is understood as “the intentional murder of women because they are women” (“Understanding and Addressing Violence Against Women, 2012”). Femicide is usually perpetrated by men, but sometimes female family members can be involved. Most cases of femicide are committed by partners or ex-partners and involve ongoing abuse in the home, threats or intimidation, sexual violence, or situations where women have less power or fewer resources than their partners.

The scope of violence against women in the Caribbean and Latin America is of epic proportions and continues to claim the lives of thousands of women and girls each year. In the Northern Triangle region in particular, women living in these countries are not safe, nor are they treated as equals in the social, economic, cultural, and political realms of their countries. Although we are easily able to define femicide, it is difficult to quantify the extent of violence faced by women and girls in the region. Unfortunately, violence against women has become so normalized, that many instances of violence against women go unreported, are ignored, or contested. Our goal in writing this policy brief is to address the socio-cultural and political background of the region that leads to women being treated this way and to offer policy recommendations for how to restore safety and security to women living in the Northern Triangle.



Image: La Nueva Mañana (2020)

Types of Femicides

Intimate Femicide

Femicide that is committed by a current or former husband or boyfriend is known as intimate femicide or intimate partner homicide.



"Honor" Killings

*It is important to note that there is nothing honorable about killing a woman, and as feminists, we must disrupt the narrative around this term.

Murders that involve the killing of a girl or woman by a family member for an actual or assumed sexual or behavioral transgression, including adultery, sexual intercourse or pregnancy outside marriage – or even for being raped.



Dowry-related Femicide

This type of femicide involves newly married women being killed by in-laws over conflicts related to dowry, such as bringing insufficient dowry to the family (World Health Organization 2012).



Non-intimate femicides and other femicides

Femicide is committed by someone that does not have an intimate relationship with the victim.

This includes the death of a woman who takes her own life after being sexually assaulted and the death of women because they cannot access a safe abortion.



Femicide Risk Factors

An intersectional feminist approach means that we must consider that there are certain factors that increase women's risk of being killed. For example, women from marginalized communities, such as indigenous women, or women of lower socio-economic status in the region may be more likely to experience violence than other women. Another group of women that are more likely to experience violence are pregnant women. The most widely used model for understanding any form of violence is the ecological model, which according to the World Health Organization (2012) proposes that "violence is influenced by factors operating at four levels: individual, family/relationship, community, and societal or structural" (p. 4). The figure below helps us to understand the different kinds of risk factors at these levels.

Examples of risk and protective factors for perpetration of and victimization related to femicide		
	For perpetrating femicide	For being a victim of femicide
Risk factors	Individual level	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unemployment^a (3,4,11) • Gun ownership (especially in the USA but also in countries with high levels of gun violence, such as South Africa, and in conflict and post-conflict settings) (3,4,11,29) • Threats to kill with a weapon (3,11) • Forcing sexual intercourse on a partner (3,11) • Problematic alcohol use and illicit drug use^b (3,4) • Mental health problems^b (3,30) (especially for femicide-suicide, in which the male perpetrator kills himself after killing his female partner) (30) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pregnancy, and being abused during pregnancy^a (3,11,30). This association has been found primarily in the USA but studies from a few other countries have linked intimate partner violence with maternal mortality. For example, a study from Mozambique found that violence was the fourth highest cause of maternal death at one hospital; and as much as 16% of maternal mortality was attributable to intimate partner violence in Maharashtra, India.
	Family/relationship level	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prior intimate partner abuse^a (particularly against the woman they killed) (3,11) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prior abuse by the perpetrator^a (32), especially severe abuse which took place within the previous month, and when abuse was increasingly frequent^a • Presence of a child from a previous relationship (not the biological child of the perpetrator) (3,4,11) • Estrangement from the partner (3,11) • Leaving an abusive relationship (4,32)
Protective factors	Societal/structural level	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gender inequality, including low number of women in elected government^b (33) • Reductions in government social spending on areas such as health and education (i.e. government final consumption expenditure) (33) 	
	Individual level	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • University education (versus a high school education), including when unemployed but looking for work (11) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having a separate domicile (3)
	Societal/structural level	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased numbers of police (34) • Legislation restricting access to firearms for perpetrators of intimate partner violence (34) • Mandated arrest for violation of restraining orders related to intimate partner violence (34) 	

^a Most prominent factor across studies.

^b Evidence is equivocal or unclear.

Source: World Health Organization. (2012). *Understanding and addressing violence against women: Health consequences*.



Image: Justice in Mexico

"For many women, home is not a refuge. In many countries neither is the criminal justice system, despite laws criminalizing femicide and other forms of gender-based violence"

Former Democratic
Congresswoman Jane Harman

Methodology

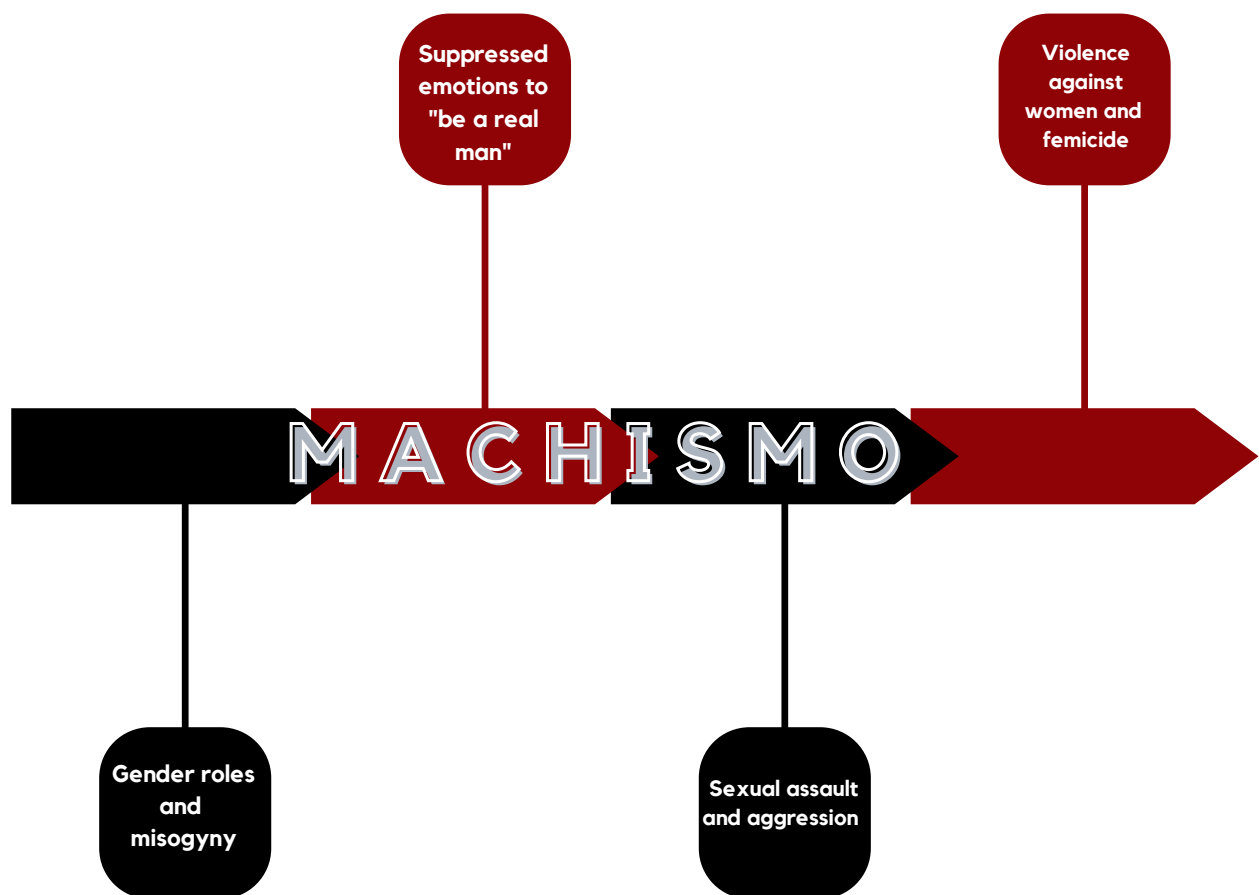
This policy brief will make use of both qualitative and quantitative data to effectively analyze the scope of femicides in the Northern Triangle and make recommendations on how to prevent femicides from happening. The quantitative data will consist of how many femicides occur for every 100,000 women in the Northern Triangle retrieved from the Pan American Health Organization and from the U.S. Civil Society Working Group on Women, Peace and Security, as well as the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC).

Furthermore, this report will be using qualitative analysis in the discussion of the context of the region and the machismo culture that has normalized violence against women. This report will also highlight a few high profile femicides that have occurred in the region and their outcomes. It is important to note that the data regarding femicides is incomplete, and that there may be significantly more femicides that occur than are actually reported. This lack of transparency further highlights the patriarchal culture of the region, where female lives are not valued as much as their male counterparts.

Why does Femicide Happen?

A Discussion on Machismo

In order to propose policy recommendations to prevent femicide, one must understand the roots of violence against women. Femicide in the Northern Triangle takes place within a region plagued by deep-rooted socio-cultural and systematic factors, including a widespread machismo culture that values men and the social construct of masculinity over women and femininity, low degrees of institutional capacity due to weak economic systems, and high degrees of impunity for those who do commit crimes against women. Machismo is a social construct that perpetuates in Latin American culture that describes the beliefs and expectations about the role of men in society. It is a set of values, attitudes, and beliefs about masculinity, or what a man "should" be or how a man "should" act. In Latin America, machismo also includes attitudinal beliefs that consider it appropriate for women to remain in traditional roles and, therefore, these beliefs encourage male domination over women.



Machismo is a power issue in which hyper masculinity is perpetuated by men as a result of culture, fear, and the patriarchy. Machismo can be understood as a spectrum of behaviors that are harmful to both men and women.

Where does Machismo come from?

There are many perspectives regarding the origins of machismo, but one widely recognized view is that machismo has its roots in the colonization of the New World by the Spanish. When the Spanish arrived in the New World, they needed to find ways to control the Native Americans and maintain their power. One such way the Spanish gained control was through the imposition of the Catholic religion, in which indigenous groups were stripped of their cultural identity and forced to follow a religion that imposed strict social, racial, and gender hierarchies. Under the pressure of Spanish colonial rule, indigenous people were influenced by binary conceptions of race, class, and gender. People subjected to ideas of appropriate and inappropriate masculinity, which were also imposed by the teachings of the Catholic Church.



Effects of Machismo on Men and Women

Men are expected to aggressively demonstrate their manhood to society, leading to unnecessary displays of power and violence against women. This expectation contributes to the normalization of gender-based violence and the belief that men have the right to use violence to maintain control in their personal and familial relationships with women. Machismo also has a counterpart, which is called marianismo, and this ideology also has its roots in colonial Catholic values. Marianismo is defined as a construction of expected female gender roles based on the model of the Virgin Mary. Marianismo represents women in nurturing roles and prescribes respect for patriarchal values, and encourages passivity, self-sacrifice and chastity (Gil & Velázquez, 1996; Niemann, 2004).

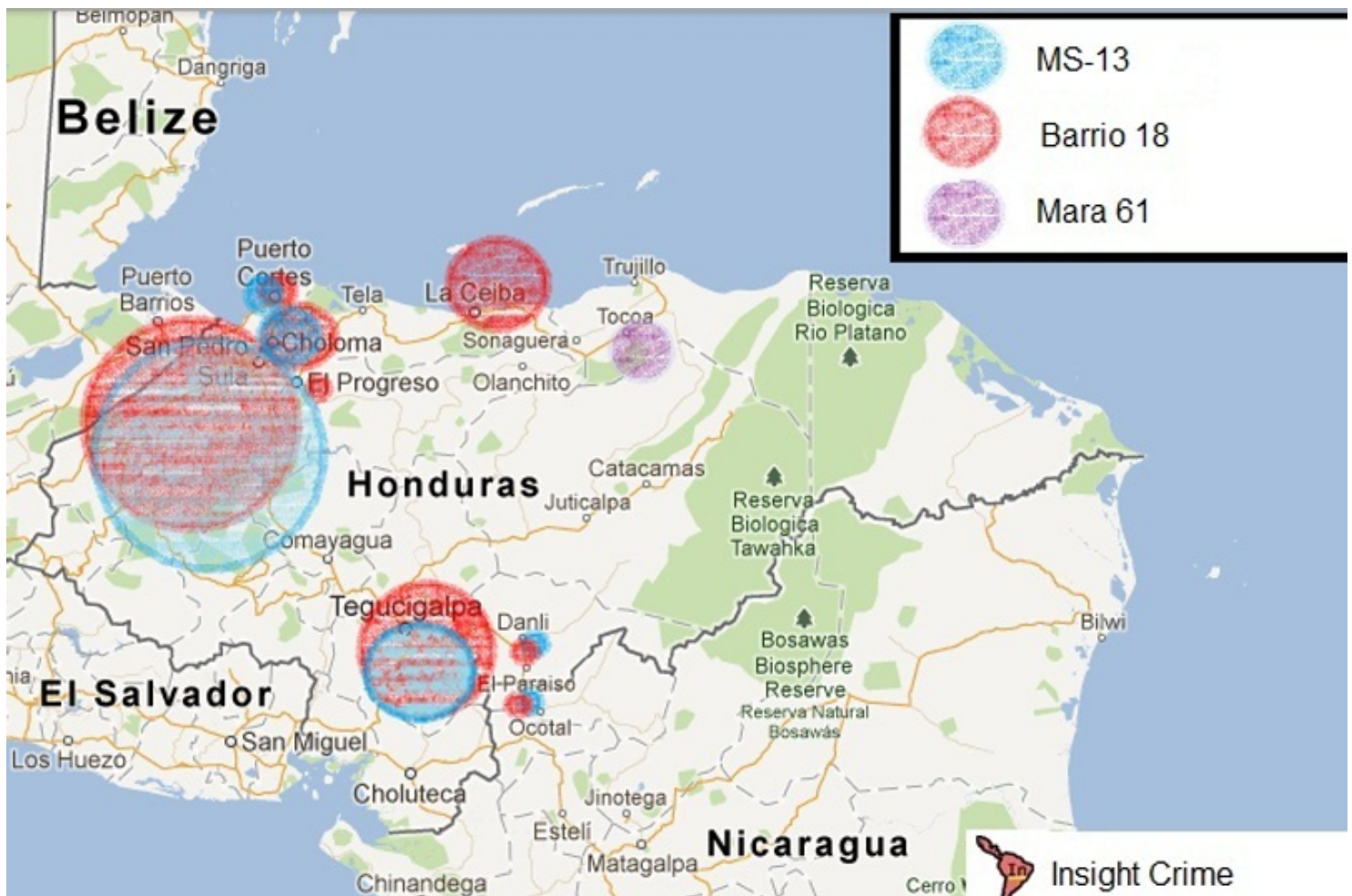
Ideology of Machismo	Ideology of Marianismo
Violence and Aggression	Fulfill nurturing roles
Suppressed Emotions	Passivity and submission
Maintain power, control and dominance over women	Obey men and respect patriarchal values

We can see how these hierarchies affect the power dynamics between men and women. The machista culture, which teaches women that they must be submissive and modest to be respected, also shames women for embracing their bodies and openly expressing their sexuality. This leads to a toxic rape culture that teaches men to objectify women's bodies and makes them believe they have the right to access women's bodies for their own pleasure. If women oppose this and fight back, machismo makes men believe that it is socially acceptable for them to act against women to regain their control, using whatever power and violence necessary to get what they want. This is a vicious cycle of violence that can have serious consequences for women.

Political and Historical Context: The Northern Triangle

Now that we better understand the socio-cultural roots of machismo in the region through a feminist perspective, we must examine the political and historical context in Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala, the three countries where this epidemic of violence is taking place. Although they are three different countries, the countries have quite a bit in common in terms of their political and historical contexts. According to Gilbert (2018), Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala are all "governed by States that in focusing their efforts on counter-insurgency contributed to extreme insecurity on the part of their civilian population" (4) due to their governments' tendencies to resort to using the military against their people.

During the 1980s and 1990s, numerous human rights cases of abuse in each country often were committed by paramilitary groups, including death squads and civil defense patrols that were linked to the police, military, and ruling class. In all three countries, gender violence became part of a counterinsurgency strategy designed to destroy the guerrillas and any civilian groups that the government saw as sympathetic to their cause. After the civil wars, many military and police members returned to their elite positions in government and industry and politicians became dangerously intertwined with gang members.



Source: The Counterterrorism Group (2021)

Significance of Mara-Salvatrucha

Gang Activity

The two leading gangs in the region, Mara-Salavatrucha (MS-13) and Mara 18, began when they were forced to flee to the United States to escape from the most debilitating and incomprehensibly violent civil war ever in El Salvador (Rivers 2019). During this time period, a leftist guerrilla group called the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), which is still present in the region today, recruited child soldiers in an attempt to combat the army's "scorched earth" campaign (Grillo 2016). In Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala, the gangs have grown in size and in power as the police force and the government have been unable to adequately contain them and their influence.

Mara Salvatrucha has become one of the most powerful yet loosely structured gangs in the Northern Hemisphere and has become known for brutality. Its motto was "kill, rape, and control" (Pirtle 2019). This is why the context of the gangs in the Northern Triangle is so important since gang violence manifests in lethal violence against women. These transnational criminal gangs frequently use rape and violence against women as a weapon and as a brutal war to demonstrate their power and control in the region.



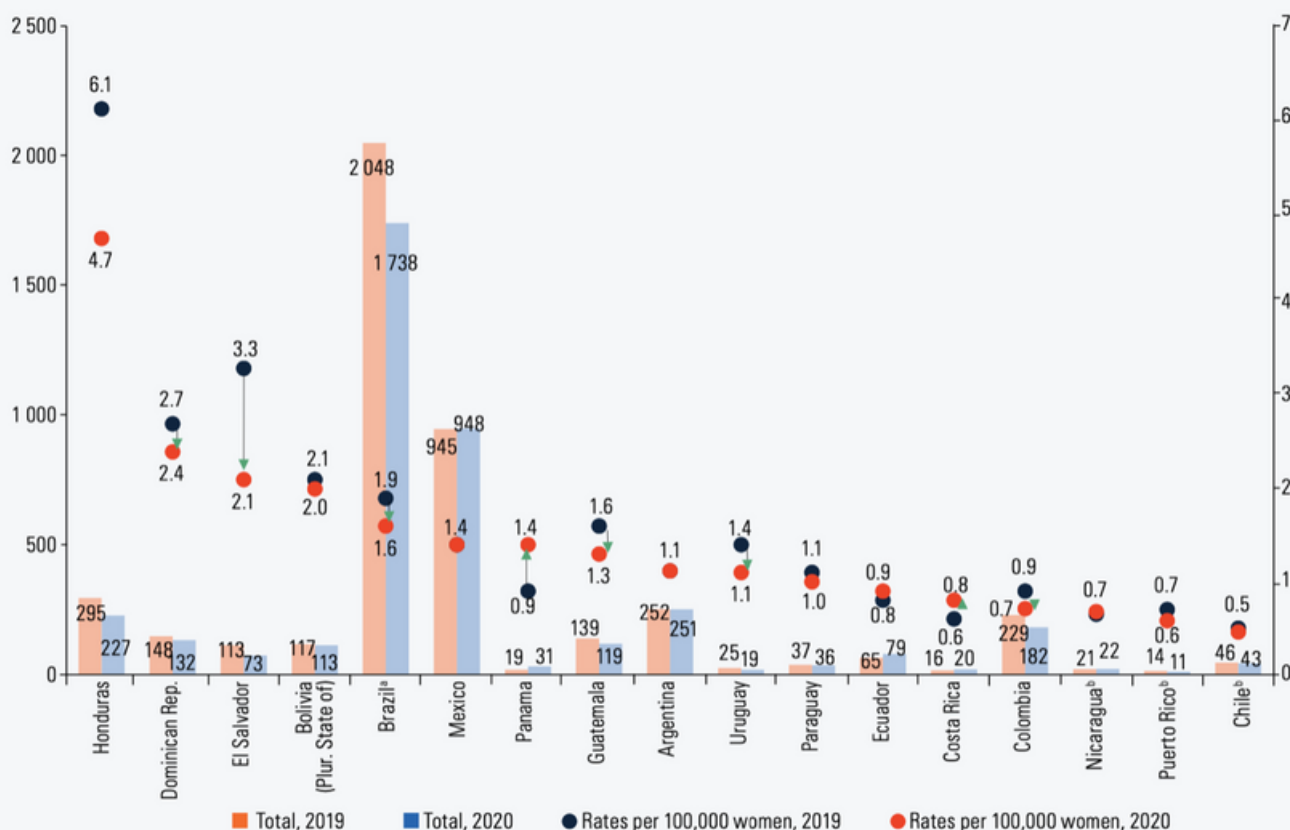
Femicide Statistics

Overall, the Northern Triangle is an extremely dangerous place for women. According to Georgetown's Women's Peace and Security Index (2021), El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras are second-tier performers in terms of women's well-being, placing 77th, 102nd, and 83rd among 152 countries, respectively. Despite these countries' comparatively small populations (just 5 percent of the region's total population), together, the three countries rank third in terms of the largest total number of femicides, with 1,804 deaths in 2016 alone (Arguello and Couch 2018).

According to data from Boerman and Knapp (2017), El Salvador is specifically "most commonly recognized as one of the most dangerous countries in the world for women" and "between just 2001 and 2011, while the country's overall homicide rate doubled with the rate of violent deaths among women increasing five-fold" (3). Honduras reports similar statistics. Between 2002 and 2012, over 3,000 Honduran girls and women were murdered, and during the period 2005–2013, the number of violent deaths increased by approximately 265% ("Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women", 2014). Finally, in Guatemala, over 5,000 women and girls were murdered between 2000 and 2009, many of whom were victims of femicide. ("Progress Against Impunity, 2009).

Latin America (17 countries): cases of femicide or feminicide, 2019–2020

(Absolute numbers and rates per 100,000 women)



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), Gender Equality Observatory for Latin America and the Caribbean [online] <https://oig.cepal.org/en>.

^a Brazil does not have a single register of cases of femicide. The National Council of Justice only registers new procedural cases entering the legal system.

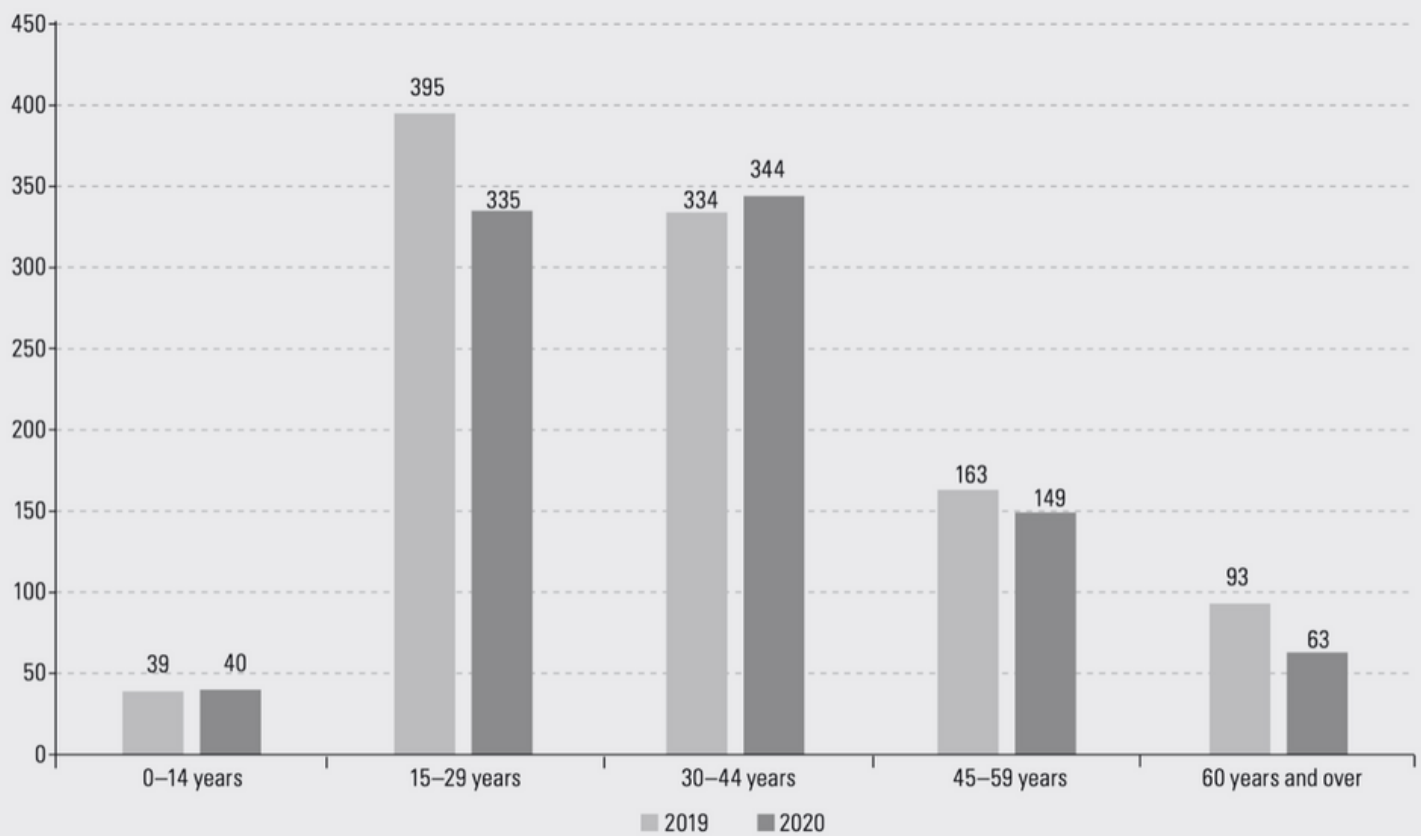
^b Chile, Nicaragua and Puerto Rico report only cases of intimate-partner femicide, that is, committed by the woman's partner or former partner. Chile amended its legislation in 2020 to include the generic concept of gender-based killing of women.

Latin America (17 countries): cases of femicide or feminicide, 2019–2020. The pandemic in the shadows: Femicides or feminicides in 2020 in Latin America and the Caribbean. Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC). (2021)

The Northern Triangle reports some of the highest femicide rates when put in comparison with the rest of the countries in Latin America. A study called “The Pandemic in the Shadows” by ECLAC (2021) analyzed femicides in twenty six countries in Latin America and in the Caribbean that occurred throughout 2020. In Latin America, the highest rates of femicides occurred in Honduras (4.7 per 100,000 women), the Dominican Republic (2.4 per 100,000 women) and El Salvador (2.1 per 100,000 women) (“Pandemic in the Shadows”, 2021).

Furthermore, according to the same data from ECLAC, femicidal violence “most occurs most frequently during women’s reproductive years, it is nevertheless present throughout their life cycle, with the absolute number of cases being at its highest in the 30–44 age group” (“Pandemic in the Shadows”, 2021). Young adult women aged 15-29 “represent the second highest incidence of femicide, with 335 victims in 2020” (“Pandemic in the Shadows”, 2021).

Latin America and the Caribbean (18 countries and territories):^a femicides by age range of victims, 2019–2020
(Absolute numbers)



Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), Gender Equality Observatory for Latin America and the Caribbean [online] <https://oig.cepal.org/en>.
^a Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, Argentina, Belize, British Virgin Islands, Chile, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Grenada, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Puerto Rico, Trinidad and Tobago and Uruguay.

High Profile Femicide Cases

Victim and Country

What Happened?

Outcome of Case

Cristina Siekavizza
Guatemala



In 2011, a young housewife from a wealthy suburb of Guatemala City disappeared. Later, it was found out that she was "allegedly bludgeoned to death by her husband Barreda after they had a furious fight."

There were claims that "Barreda's mother, former Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) president Beatriz de León, helped him clean up the crime scene and dispose of the body." To date, the whereabouts of Barreda and the children is unknown.

Carolina Echevarría Haylock
Honduras



In 2021, a lawyer, former congresswoman and congressional candidate for the Liberal Party of Honduras from the predominantly Indigenous Miskitu department of Gracias a Dios, was "murdered by five assassins and shot 14 times by hitmen that were disguised as a COVID-19 medical team while she was helping her husband recover at home from COVID-19."

Only three of the five hitmen hired for her assassination have been arrested. These hitmen, also allegedly members of the Maras gang, are not believed to have been the sole perpetrators. The intellectual author and party that paid to have Echeverría murdered has yet to be held accountable.

Graciela Eugenia Ramírez Chávez
El Salvador



She had "left her home to go buy wedding shoes" and was "later found dead in a garden in a suburb of the El Salvadoran capital of San Salvador" after her fiancé had stabbed her 56 times.

According to the investigating Attorney General Melendez, the police had failed to act on warnings in the months leading to her murder, stating that "on repeated occasions neighbors had called the [emergency number] to report the victim was being attacked but the police never turned up to help her."



Source: Atlantic Council (2020)

Conclusion

As this paper has demonstrated, lethal violence against women has its roots in years of patriarchal culture mixed with gang violence. Machismo takes many forms, but its most extreme form is femicide in an attempt to assert control over women. As demonstrated, femicide can take many different forms, but much of the violence against women is carried out by an intimate partner or someone that the women know on a personal level. Women are at varying levels of risk for becoming a victim of femicide, but women from marginalized groups, impoverished women, and women during their reproductive years are at greater risk than others.

Furthermore, the presence and influence of transnational criminal groups in the region such as Mara-Salvatrucha exacerbate the problem because they use rape and violence against women as a weapon to assert their power, dominance, and control. This paper has demonstrated that violence against Central American women has become an epidemic and we must take direct action to combat it and restore safety and security to women living in the region. This violence against women cannot be allowed to continue any longer.

Policy Recommendations

Step 1: Offer Conditional Economic Assistance

Comprehensive Education

In schools on gender roles, machismo, and the harmful effects they have on society



Police Training and Response

Strengthening police forces in responding to gender based violence and developing a transnational emergency hotline and shelter network



Support Existing Feminist Movements

In their protests, strikes, and campaign to raise awareness about femicides



Step 2: Discourage Gang Violence and Activity

Investment in Economy and Infrastructure

So that they can achieve enough economic growth to be able to adequately appropriate resources to their citizens



International Supervision Team

Send a team of multinational government officials to make sure that politicians and other leaders are being held accountable and are investing the money appropriately



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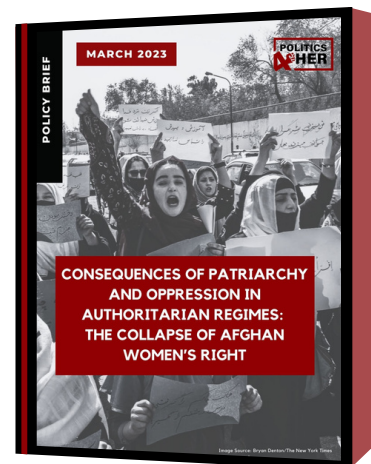
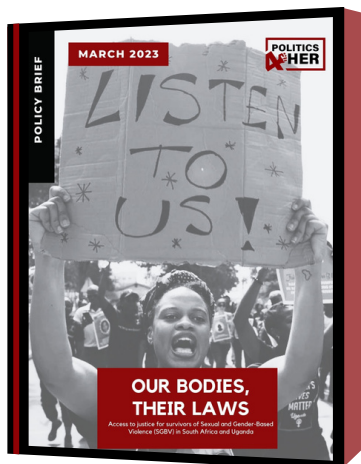
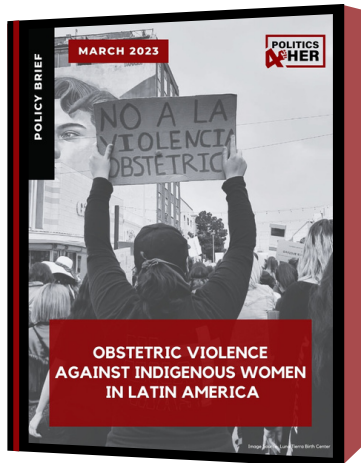
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OUR OTHER POLICY BRIEFS





We are committed to assisting and providing resources for young women to become active participants of politics, international affairs and diplomacy. **Ideas matter, they shape the world we live in.** So, we strive to build a community to allow us to raise our voices, promote our ideas and share our vision, empowering women to be part of the change.



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