March 8, 2021, Mexico City International Women's Day march. Photo by Olivia Schmidt.

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN TIMES OF COVID:

Mexico, Guatemala, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Belize, Honduras and the Caribbean

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School girls in Honduras, 2018. Photo by Olivia Schmidt.

Aims of the Study and Preliminary Recommendations

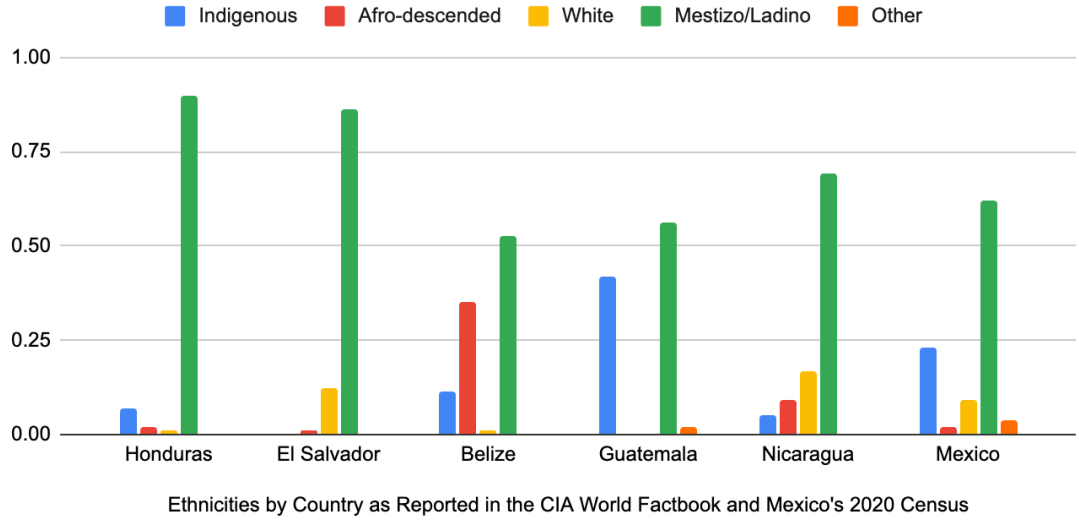
The following study was conducted as part of the University of Virginia's Diplomacy Lab program in connection with the U.S. State Department, and with funding from the University of Virginia's Center for Global Inquiry and Innovation. Our aim is to provide information on the nature of gender-based violence in Mexico, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Belize and parts of the Caribbean during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, including a focus on Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities in the region (see Figs. 1 and 2).[1]

[1] We use the term "gender-based" violence in place of "violence against women," since it includes assault of individuals along a spectrum of gender identity including LGBTQ+ people, who are disproportionately targeted for violence in the region, and because the term emphasizes the systemic and structural nature of this violence as part of the patriarchal framework in which power is attained and reproduced throughout the world.

Figure 1: Map of the Region Under Study

Source: Map courtesy of University of TexasLibraries, http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/americas/middleamerica.jpg.

Figure 2: Ethnicity by Region in Select Latin American Countries, 2020



Ethnicities by Country as Reported in the CIA World Factbook and Mexico's 2020 Census

Utilizing information from a diversity of sources (including interviews with international non-profit groups such as the Pan American Development Foundation; reports from global organizations such as the World Health Organization and United Nations Women; announcements, polls and organizing efforts and radio broadcasts on social media feeds and sites; country-specific governmental data; and discussions and workshops with academics, researchers, activists and lawyers working in the region), we considered the way different forces may have affected rates and types of violence based on gender identity during the course of the pandemic, for differing social and ethnic groups. Types of gender-based violence studied include intimate-partner or familial physical and/or sexual violence as well as control of access to resources or mobility; rape; trafficking; adolescent pregnancy; neglect; "survival sex" (to pay for food or other resources); feminicide; and "feminicide suicide"—or suicide committed for fear of feminicide.[2] For each region, we considered the influence of histories of colonialism, slavery, and civil war; environmental factors; statistics on and trends in gender-based violence before COVID; sources of and statistics for gender-based violence during COVID; and the prevalence and effectiveness of the various innovative practices for prevention currently being utilized.

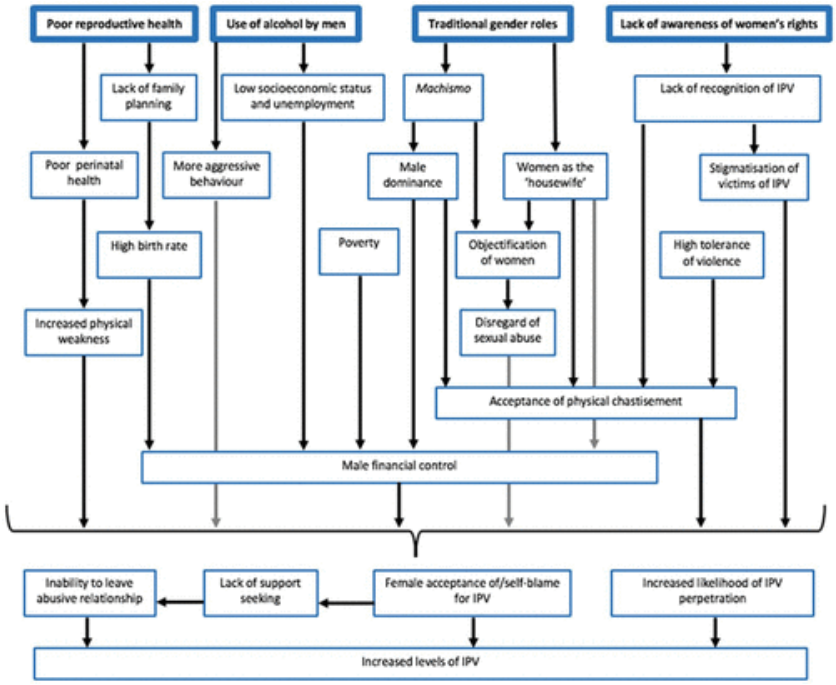
"Sexual violence has long been explained as an unfortunate outcome of war in which men are placed in extraordinary circumstances that provoke aberrant behavior. This is no longer a tenable theory. The work of the International Criminal Court, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, feminist scholars, and human rights advocates has done much to reframe the issue. This conceptual shift was clearly expressed in by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, who reported in 2009 that studies of wartime rape 'conclusively demonstrate that sexual violence is not an outcome of war, but that women's bodies are an important site of war…..'"—Victoria Sanford, Sofía Duyos Álvare-Arenas, and Kathleen Dill, citing Yakin Ertürk ("Sexual Violence as a Weapon During the Guatemalan Genocide" in Victoria Sanford, Katerina Stefatos, and Cecilia M. Salvi (eds.), *Gender Violence in Peace and War: States of Complicity*, New Brunswick/London: Rutgers, 2016, 35).

As will be discussed below, our research suggests a rise in a variety of forms of gender-based violence across all countries in which these existed previously, and for which statistics were available, with the possible exception of feminicide, for which there are clear variations between countries. Our broad-based conclusion is derived primarily from statistics on feminicides, domestic violence hotline calls, and adolescent pregnancies; considerations of school closures and economic downturns; and partial migration statistics by gender and origin. These are combined with expert studies and reports on the connections between these factors and gender-based sexual and labor exploitation; mental and emotional stress; physical harm; and long-lasting psychological trauma and socio-economic marginalization (see Fig. 3).

[2] We use the term "feminicide" in place of "femicide," since the former goes beyond identifying gendered homicides to emphasize the structural and systemic nature of these killings which, instead of merely representing the murder of an individual, also represent an expression of patriarchal power and authority over women's bodies, choices, and lives. Based on the available data, "feminicide suicide" appears to be a particular problem in El Salvador, the only country which has a law directly targeting this crime. According to the Ministry of Justice in El Salvador, in 2018 fifty-one of the 285 femicides recorded for January to July of 2018 were suicides (see Ministerio de Justicia y Seguridad Publica, El Salvador, "Hechos de violencia contra mujeres en El Salvador, enero-julio 2018" (San Salvador, 2018)).

Figure 3: Sources of Gender-Based Violence

Gender-based violence is experienced throughout the world, among all ages, cultures, races, classes and gendered identities. However, some social and environmental forces tend to make people more vulnerable to gender-based violence, as seen in the flow-chart below, designed by anthropologists working in western Guatemala.



Source: Zoe Elspeth Wands and Tolib Mirzoev, "Intimate Partner Violence against Indigenous Women in Sololá, Guatemala: Qualitative Insights into Perspectives of Service Providers" (*Violence Against Women,* 2021, 1-19).

Critically, female, LGBTQ+ and ability diverse children and adolescents, especially from marginalized populations (the rural poor, Afro-descendant, and Indigenous communities) present some of the starkest indicators of increased abuse and varieties of violence during the first year of the pandemic, including adolescent pregnancies; a rise in trafficking, prostitution and migration; and lessened access to education and services as compared to cisgender males in their age categories, with more long-standing negative effects on their social and economic mobility.[3]

Globally, **women with disabilities are 2-4 times more likely to suffer intimate partner violence (IPV)**. In Latin America and the Caribbean, an estimated 12% of the population, or about 66 million people, have some form of disability; disability rates are generally higher for women than men (UN Women and CARE, "Latin America and the Caribbean Rapid Gender Analysis," May 2020, 149).

[3] J. Azevedo, M. Favara, S. Haddock, L.F. Lopez-Calva, M. Muller, and E. Perova, "Teenage Pregnancy and Opportunities in Latin America and the Caribbean: On Teenage Fertility Decisions, Poverty and Economic Achievement" (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2012).

Also noteworthy is the fact that this rise in violence happened despite the potential protection from public, street, and police violence offered by quarantine measures, suggesting a reaffirmation of what scholars have long argued: that the site of greatest danger is in the home or with an intimate partner.[4] During lockdown, domestic violence has likely been compounded by increased time at home with potential abusers, as well as reduced access to health and advocacy services, including legal, psychological and emotional counseling, as well as contraception tools and ante- and post-natal care.

According to Amnesty International, **transgender women in El Salvador have a life expectancy that is 41 years lower than the average of the overall population** (Astrid Valencia and Josefina Salomón, "For many trans women, living in El Salvador is a death sentence. Coronavirus is making it even worse," *Amnesty International*, August 15, 2020). As one of 300 transgender Hondurans who left in a caravan for the U.S. in January of 2021 reported, "When you go to ask for support, what they do is discriminate against us. After the pandemic, sex work collapsed, and we have fewer and fewer resources for daily subsistence" ("This is how 300 LGBTQ people in the first Honduran migrant caravan of 2021 live," *Washington Blade*, Feb. 3, 2021). According to the Pan-American Development Foundation, **80% of hate crimes against the LGBTQ+ community in the world occur in Latin America and the Caribbean** (Virginie Martin-Onraët and David Alvarez Veloso, "Citizen Security for All: Gender and Security in El Salvador, Honduras, and Mexico," Pan-American Development Foundation, 2020, 23)

The greatest limitation on our study was lack of access to reliable data.[5] Data-collection is hampered by a diversity of barriers to reporting, including a lack of access to phones, internet or services (especially under lockdown, at the site of the violence, and in rural communities), as well as the stigma attached to admitting to violence and/or the assumption that it is normal and should be tolerated; a culture of negligence among police or a lack of resources leading to these reports' inattention, especially during the pandemic, and especially as it relates to marginalized groups who are often neglected or even targeted by state services; and unclear or competing guidelines within and across each country on how to define gender-based violence and thus how to proceed in terms of legal, criminal or medical reports. Even if all these barriers are surmounted, the data produced is often not disaggregated by critical factors such as race, age, gender identity, rural versus urban settings, and type of violence, limiting our ability to analyze sources and preventions. Though we were extremely fortunate to get feedback from experts "on the ground" (through zoom interviews, invited speakers and workshop leaders, emails, and, in one case, a digitally-distributed questionnaire), our data is also insufficient because of its lack of

[4] Gender-based violence occurs everywhere and to everyone, yet has been proven most frequent and lethal at the hands of intimate partners. According to a recent Pan-American Development Foundation report, two out of three female murder victims are killed by their partners, ex-partners, or male relatives (Virginie Martin-Onraët and David Alvarez Veloso, "Citizen Security for All: Gender and Security in El Salvador, Honduras, and Mexico," Pan-American Development Foundation, 2020, 7).

[5] This was especially difficult in the case of Belize, which many studies of "Latin America," "Central America," and/or "the Caribbean" leave out, primarily due to the apparent geopolitical ambiguity surrounding the region of which Belize is a part. According to UVA undergraduate Lauren Prince, few government statistics on gender-based violence existed for either 2020 or 2021, and much of what data did exist was not disaggregated by ethnicity. Because of these barriers, Lauren used data from the UN and European Union's "Spotlight Initiative" for gender equality, some in-depth ethnographic studies, and releases from the Government of Belize Press Office, Ministry of Human Development, and the Belize Crime Observatory as primary sources.

access to the voices of many women in the countries under study. Finally, national data on COVID cases and deaths have also proved unreliable, as will be discussed below.

An average of 45% of victims of domestic, sexual and/or physical abuse never tell anyone about it because of the stigma involved (UN Women and CARE, "Latin America and the Caribbean Rapid Gender Analysis," May 2020, p 27); in addition, according to a study published in 2020, fewer than 7 percent of crimes against women are investigated (Anya Prusa et al., "Pandemic of Violence: Protecting Women during COVID-19" *ReliefWeb*, May 15, 2020). The case of Belize, where, according to a 2020 government press release, **1 in 20 women believed that a man was justified to beat his wife**, is instructive (Government of Belize Press Office, "Launch of 16 Days of Activism against gender-based violence," November 25, 2020). According to sociologist Kiesha Warren-Gordon, who interviewed rural women in central Belize who had been victims of gender-based violence, all of her interviewees "spoke of either having no resources or the only resource being in the form of the police in their rural communities," yet the police themselves were perpetrators. As one woman noted, **"there were two police officers [,] and I never went to them because everybody knew that they wouldn't do nothing. One of them beats his own wife."** On the familial level, the acceptance of gender-based violence also translated into silence, as was the case when another of Warren-Gordon's interviewees said she went to her mother after being hit by her partner. Approaching her mother with a visibly swollen eye, the mother asked her what happened, to which she responded that she "fell." According to the interviewee, "She didn't ask any questions; she just looked. She knew he hit me but didn't say anything" (Warren-Gordon, "Violence Against Women of Belize in Rural Communities," *International Journal of Rural Criminology*, 5:2 (2020) 228–243.

Many of the statistics on gender-based violence during COVID have also been unreliable due to their politicization. In El Salvador, President Nayib Bukele's "triumph" over COVID due to early and strict lockdowns has been transformed into one of his greatest possible failures in terms of the country's record for gender-based violence since March of 2020.[6] In Nicaragua, President Daniel Ortega has sanctioned a muzzle on any information that "causes alarm, fear or anxiety," contributing to a human rights record which is, in itself, a source of women's endangerment, as political prisoners or migrants as well as citizens.[7]

[6] In October 2020, El Salvador still held one of the lowest death rates in Latin America (Hannah Ritchie, Esteban Ortiz-Ospina, Diana Beltekian, Edouard Mathieu, Joe Hasell, Bobbie Macdonald, Charlie Giattino, Cameron Appel, Lucas Rodés-Guirao and Max Roser, "Coronavirus Pandemic (COVID-19)," published online at *OurWorldInData.org;* https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus). These complaints were supported by a United Nations Development Program report that calculated that "50 percent more women died from feminicide than from coronavirus" (see "Violence Against Women Has Not Slowed During the Pandemic" *El Faro*, May 15, 2021, https://elfaro.net/en/202005/el_salvador/24460/Violence-against-women-has-not-slowed-during-the-pandemic.htm).

[7] Amnesty International, "Silence At Any Cost: State Tactics to Deepen the Repression in Nicaragua" (London: Amnesty International, 2021).).

According to Mexican president Antonio Manuel López Obrador, 90% of calls to domestic violence hotlines "are fake" a claim which helps explain why a number of Mexican advocacy groups focus their activism almost exclusively on data transparency ("Mexico's President Says Most Domestic Violence Calls Are 'Fake,'" *New York Times*, May 31, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/31/world/americas/violence-women-mexico-president.html). Noteworthy among the organizations working for greater transparency in this particular realm in Mexico are Nosotras Tenemos Otros Datos ("We Have Other Data") and the Observatorio Ciudadano Nacional de Feminicidio (National Citizen's Feminicide Observatory).).

In Honduras, protests against strict laws barring same-sex marriage and abortion have been bolstered by evidence of attacks on and discrimination against women and members of the LGBTQ+ community, rendering governmental data linked these issues unreliable at best.[8] In Guatemala, the disproportionate number of Indigenous women who suffer gender-based violence serves as a continuous reminder of Guatemala's still unacknowledged history of genocide, revealing a continuous obfuscation of data stretching across decades, with which researchers continue to struggle.[9] Even Mexico's theoretically benign efforts to raise public awareness about domestic violence during quarantine have ultimately revealed the government's ignorance about the sources and consequences of the problem. The clearest example of this was the administration's "No pierdas la paciencia" ("Don't lose patience") public awareness campaign, which suggested that Mexico's soaring domestic violence rates were due to "impatience" on the part of both women and men forced into perpetual cohabitation during quarantine, and could be solved by "counting to ten" (see Fig. 4). The campaign sparked its own round of protests from activist groups demanding a far more realistic confrontation of domestic violence's sources and consequences.[10]

[8] See, for example, Human Rights Watch, "Honduras: Attack on Reproductive Rights, Marriage Equality" (Jan. 23, 2021, https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/01/23/honduras-attack-reproductive-rights-marriage-equality https://www.wola.org/analysis/transparency-in-honduras/).

[9] Regarding Guatemalan Mayan women as particular targets of gender-based violence and feminicide in recent years, see Zoë ElspethWands and Tolib Mitzoev, "Intimate Partner Violence Against Indigenous Women in Sololá, Guatemala: Qualitative Insights into Perspectives of Service Providers" (*Violence Against Women* (2012): 1-19). Some examples of studies emphasizing the ongoing invisibility of violence against Mayan women and girls as connected to its normalization during the genocide of the early 1980s, see, for example, Kristen Weld, *Paper Cadavers: The Archives of Dictatorship in Guatemala* (Durham/London: Duke, 2014); Diane Nelson, *Who Counts? The Mathematics of Death and Life after Genocide* (Durham/London: Duke, 2015); and Dorlisa Minnick and Patricia O'Brien, "Domestic Violence, Human Rights, and Postcolonial Intersectionality of Afro-descendant and Indigenous Women in Cuba and Guatemala" (*Journal of Human Rights and Social Work*, 3:7 (Dec. 2018): 216-228).

[10] "Mexico's President Says Most Domestic Violence Calls Are 'Fake,'" *New York Times*, May 31, 2020 https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/31/world/americas/violence-women-mexico-president.html.

Figure 4: Mexico's misguided "Don't lose patience" public awareness campaign, 2020.

Source: "Mexico's President Says Most Domestic Violence Calls Are 'Fake,'" *New York Times*, May 31, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/31/world/americas/violence-women-mexico-president.html.

These political, economic and historical problems have directly shaped our recommendations. As in much of the literature published between 2019 and 2021 by organizations such as UN Women, the World Health Organization (WHO), the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), and the Pan-American Development Foundation (PADF), we see better data-collecting as crucial to protecting those in danger of gender-based violence. A move towards encouraging a greater presence of women in decision-making roles; gender-informed policies and practices in government institutions; and COVID-specific efforts to protect women from poverty and health risks (such as supplying cash transfers and "dignity kits" and making shelters and access to reproductive healthcare "essential") are also critical. Finally, providing continuous support to civil society organizations advocating for local sexual health and gender-based violence protection, services and care should also be a primary goal, to which we would add a continuation of the following:

-efforts at enhancing connections and opportunities for collaboration between urban and rural communities
-sources of support for youth empowerment
-support for counternarratives to binary gender roles in media, community events and education
-encouragement of international collaboration between women, youth, and LGBTQ+ and minority groups
-coordinated data collection
-making reproductive health and resources "essential" during quarantine

Our "recommendations" are not meant to offer up new solutions or remedies to the rise gender-based violence in Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean, where many innovative, appropriate, diverse, and both long- and short-term solutions are already being implemented and utilized by a variety of groups on the ground in our countries of interest. Instead, we hope to highlight the most important trends and possible solutions we have seen in our research, and to expand the dissemination of knowledge on this topic for future research, policymaking, and activism.

We would also emphasize the hollowness of these efforts without a concerted reconstruction of the outlook for migrants (including refugees, deportees and internally displaced persons, or IDPs) in and between these countries, especially those who have a history of suffering gender-based violence. An in-depth discussion of migration policy reform lies outside of the scope of this study. At the same time, migrant populations, especially in our region of study, are some of the most vulnerable to all of the indicators researched. Besides often being homeless, about 80% are jobless[11]; about 50% are female[12]; many are children[13]; about 6% are Indigenous[14]; many have a history of sexual abuse and threats[15], will suffer abuse on the migrant trail[16], are historically more vulnerable to trafficking[17], and have remained largely outside of efforts to be

[11] UN Women and CARE, "Latin America and the Caribbean Rapid Gender Analysis" (May 2020, 23); ECLAC, "Social Panorama of Latin America 2020" (Santiago: United Nations, 2021, 107).

[12] UN Women and CARE, "Latin America and the Caribbean…," 23. According to this same 2020 report, 22.8% of migrants from Central America repatriated by Mexican officials were women, many of whom had fled gender-based violence.

[13] See, also, UNHCR, "Children on the Run: Unaccompanied Children Leaving Central America and Mexico and the Need for International Protection" (March 2014, https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/children-on-the-run.html)

[14] UN ECLAC, "Los pueblos indígenas en América Latina: avances y y retos pendientes para la garantía de sus derechos" (November 2014, 67 and 72, https://repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/37050/4/S1420783_es.pdf).

[15] See footnote #11, above. According to the UNHCR's 2015 report, "Women on the Run: El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala and Mexico," 82% of the 16,077 women seeking asylum from this region who were subject to the credible fear screening were found to have a significant possibility of gaining protection under the Convention against Torture based on a history of sexual attacks and death threats. According to a 2017 Amnesty International report, 88% of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers from Central America's Northern Triangle fled gender-based violence ("No Safe Place Salvadorans, Guatemalans and Hondurans Seeking Asylum in Mexico Based on their Sexual Orientation and/or Gender Identity"). According to a 2019 report, 65,000 women seeking asylum in the U.S. from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala were fleeing gender-based violence (Eileen Wang, Megan D'Andrea, Kimberly Baranowski, Elizabeth Singer "Experiences of Gender-Based Violence in Women Asylum Seekers from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala: a Retrospective, Qualitative Study" *Torture* 29:3 (2019): 46-58).

[16] UN Women and CARE, "Latin America and the Caribbean…," 149.

[17] UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), Population Division, "International Migration 2020: Highlights" (2020, 25, https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/undesa_pd_2020_international_migration_highlights_updated.pdf). According to a 2020 study of Mexico, 70% of women trafficked were Indigenous (Madison Eagan, "Indigenous Women: The Invisible Victims of Femicide in Mexico," *Harvard International Review*, November 30, 2020, https://hir.harvard.edu/indigenous-women-victims-of-femicide-in-mexico/). Violence against Nicaraguans

vaccinated against COVID or attended to by health professionals[18]; and are in danger of being assaulted at the hands of police or security forces.[19] Not only are the gender rights of this population in urgent need of support and material follow-up, but they remind us that a major reason gender-based violence continues to be a common and effective way of demonstrating and commanding authority over others is that its roots lie not simply in contexts of inequality, instability and racism, but in a long history of colonialism, imperialism and patriarchy on which the "protection" and preservation of national borders and our control over them is built. Advocating for change in Mexico, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Belize, as well as the rest of Latin America, remains an empty call to action if we persist in holding to our pattern in the U.S. of not only of turning back asylum seekers, many of whom are themselves victims of gender-based violence, but also perpetuating that violence, at the hands of border authorities, in detention centers, and in our communities.

Methodology

Our aim has been to conduct our study within a decolonialist framework, using as many avenues as possible to hear the voices of a variety of stakeholders in the countries under study through their own understandings of gender-based violence, in order to gain insight on necessary solutions and precautions, and possible sources of prevention and healing.[20] By the same token, our goal included using an intersectional lens to understand the ways multiple historical forces and current institutional structures complicated efforts to enumerate discrete social groups and experiences into discernible aggregates on a graph.[21] This was particularly revealing when

migrating to Costa Rica demonstrate a rise in both extorsion and threats as well as sexual violence and trafficking. See Chris Jillson, "Costa Rica's Neighbor, Intruder, and Essential Worker: The Covid-19 pandemic Has Fueled Xenophobia against Nicaraguan Migrants, Dovetailing with a Long History of Discrimination and Exclusion" (*NACLA* 52:4 (Nov. 2020): 385-390); and UN Sustainable Development Group (SDG), "Walking in Lilith's shoes" (Nov. 2020, https://unsdg.un.org/latest/stories/walking-liliths-shoes).

[18] Danzhen You, Naomi Lindt, Rose Allen, Claus Hansen, Jan Beise and Saskia Blume, "Migrant and Displaced Children in The Age Of COVID-19: How the Pandemic Is Impacting Them and What Can We Do To Help," (*Migration Policy Practice*, 10:2 (April-June 2020): 32-39).

[19] Cesar Infante, et al., "Rape, Transactional Sex and Related Factors Among Migrants in Transit Through Mexico to the USA," (*Cult Health Sex* 22:10 (2020): 1145-1160); and by the same author, "Violence Committed Against Migrants in Transit: Experiences on the Northern Mexican Border" (*Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health* 14:3 (2011): 449-59).

[20] In this case, a "decolonialist framework" implies reimagining the power dynamics between "researchers" and "researched," ideally rendering them one and the same, enabling the "subjects" of research to set the agenda, ask the questions, and interpret the answers within a non-Eurocentric framework. Given the context of this report (written during lockdown without face-to-face or on-the-ground contact, within a limited time period, and for the purpose of U.S. policymaking and aid dispersal), a truly decolonial methodology would be nearly impossible. Nonetheless, we have aimed to use interviews and class workshops, webinars, and an analysis of protests against gender-based violence as well as organizational and awareness efforts on social media to give us greater access to different voices, different interpretations of violence, and different ways of "counting" and "solving" the affronts produced by gender-based violence for a variety of peoples.

[21] "Intersectionality" refers to the ways overlapping forms of oppression operate simultaneously and cannot be understood in discrete categories based, for example, on race, gender identity, age, ability or class.

considering the kinds of gender-based violence experienced by Indigenous women or women of African descent, the LGBTQ+ community, peoples with diverse abilities, migrants, youth, or the poor more generally. While neither COVID-19 nor gender-based violence has exclusively affected these groups, their historical marginalization from adequate health care, police protection, economic stability and access to legal representation has made any one source of gender-based violence, especially in terms of how it has coincided with the effects of the COVID pandemic, impossible to consider in isolation.

"Perhaps the problem is not solely a lack of reporting and/or attention given to race/ethnicity in our countries of study, but also whether race is an appropriate lens to look through, and if so, to what degree? Maybe, because of my background in the U.S., I am looking for something (disparities amongst races) that may not exist or map out in the same way as in the United States. Perhaps, it is not race but urban versus rural living or citizenship that should be the lens we apply rather than attention dedicated to race and ethnicity."—Lauren Prince, undergraduate researcher on Belize

The unique responses of Mexico, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Belize and parts of the Caribbean to COVID-19 add another layer to the forces of violence, poverty, defense, hope and healing in pre-COVID life. As in the case of the U.S., contracting economies, the continued danger of contagion to frontline health and service workers, neglected populations such as the incarcerated or homeless, the stress of quarantine, and a hiatus from school and public services have meant those previously influenced by these forces are now even more at risk for falling sick, being forced into unwanted jobs or relationships, or becoming defenseless against aggressors. At the same time, evidence of measures taken by governments, programs initiated by international non-profits, and awareness campaigns and services offered by groups on social media, as well as political protests, demonstrate a variety of efforts to counter COVID's negative effects on those vulnerable to gender-based violence.

Taken together, all of these factors support our conclusion that gender-based violence has risen in this region during COVID, and that solutions to this violence need to come from a variety of sectors which will be discussed in more detail below.

The Pre-COVID Context

Latin America and the Caribbean (herein "LAC") went into the pandemic with one of the highest rates of gender-based violence in the world, encompassing sexual violence, physical violence, emotional abuse and controlling behaviors, with some studies estimating this occurring among 60%-75% of women across the region.[22] Historically, fourteen of the nations with the highest feminicide rates in the world have been in LAC[23], with Honduras and El Salvador reporting 6.2

[22] UN ECLAC, "Addressing Violence Against Women and Girls During and After the COVID-19 Pandemic Requires Financing, Responses, Prevention and Data Compilation" (Nov. 2020, 3).

[23] Mireille Widmer and Irene Pavesi, "A Gendered Analysis of Violent Deaths" (*Small Arms Survey Research Notes*, n. 63 (November 2016).

and 3.1 deaths respectively for every 100,000 women in 2019; in August of that year alone, Mexico registered 93 feminicides, with a total of 4000 estimated feminicides occurring that year in the region as a whole.[24]

LAC also has the second highest adolescent fertility rates—statistically evidenced to channel women into a cycle of lower education levels, intergenerational poverty, and domestic violence.[25] LAC has the highest number of homicides in the world, at 17.2 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in 2016, compared to the global average of 6.1 per 100,000 for that year.[26] Finally, LAC is also one of the regions of greatest inequality in the world[27], with an average poverty rate of 30.5% and extreme poverty at 11.3%, concentrated in rural areas, among the Indigenous and Afro-descendant population[28], and among single female-headed households, which make up more than one in every four homes, making Latin America and the Caribbean the region with the highest rate of single, female-headed households in the world.[29]

Despite the fact that LAC has had a number of female presidents and has made huge advances in increasing women's political participation more generally (especially since imposing quotas and parity laws in the 1990s, 2008 and 2019), these have occurred unevenly and, in some cases, not at all, a pattern especially striking among the Indigenous and Afro-descendant populations, who are disproportionately excluded. According to the Council for Foreign Relations' "Women's Power Index," the Mexican government has one of the world's greatest percentage of women

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[24] UN ECLAC, "Addressing Violence….," 3-5.

[25] World Bank Corp, "Closing Gender Gaps in Latin America and the Caribbean" (13-17); World Health Organization, "Adolescent Pregnancy" (Factsheets, Jan. 31 2020); and J. Azevedo, M. Favara, S. Haddock, L.F. Lopez-Calva, M. Muller, and E. Perova, "Teenage Pregnancy and Opportunities in Latin America and the Caribbean: On Teenage Fertility Decisions, Poverty and Economic Achievement" (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2012).

[26] See UN Office on Drugs and Crime (ODC), *Global Study on Homicide: Executive Summary* (Vienna: UNODC, 2019, www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/global-study-on-homicide.html).

[27] According to the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), the wealthiest Latin Americans, 10% of the total population, make 22 times the amount of the poorest—this is considered double the wealth gap of "developed" countries and the highest regional gap in the world. Further, the biggest gaps lie within each nation, not across nations, with Honduras and Panama being the most unequal countries economically (Matías Busso and Julián Messina, "The Inequality Crisis: Latin America and the Caribbean at the Crossroads," IADB, 2020, 19).

[28] According to UN ECLAC, in 2019 Indigenous populations were twice as likely to be impoverished and 3 times as likely to be in extreme poverty than their non-Indigenous and non-Afro-descended counterparts. Similarly, Afro-descendants are 60% more likely to be impoverished than non-Indigenous or non-Afro-descended peoples ("Social Panorama…," 59-60). In Mexico, a full 80% of Indigenous peoples are impoverished (Madison Eagan, "Indigenous Women: The Invisible Victims of Femicide in Mexico" *Harvard International Review* (Nov, 2020), https://hir.harvard.edu/indigenous-women-victims-of-femicide-in-mexico/).

[29] In 2019, the poverty rate was 12.7% higher in working-age women than in similarly-aged men. In the case of the extreme poverty rate, the highest value is observed in single-parent households, 85% of which are headed by women who are responsible for children and adolescents. In 2019, one in three single-parent households were in poverty, and almost half of those were in extreme poverty (UN ECLAC, "Social Panorama… 61).

representatives in the national government (scoring higher than the United States). On the other hand, Guatemala scores among the lowest in the world on this index.[30] Further, Afro-descendant women, estimated to make up over 11% of LAC's population, only hold about .1% of government offices.[31] Indigenous women are less excluded across Latin America and the Caribbean than Afro-descended peoples, due to some national efforts (in Mexico and Bolivia) to impose quotas on Indigenous representation for electoral districts.[32] Despite having implemented these quotas since 2017, however, Mexico still only has 5 Indigenous legislators out of a total of 500, none of whom are women.[33] In the case of Guatemala, where Indigenous peoples make up a full 44% of the population, only 10% of representatives in the national cabinet are Indigenous.[34]

Women also make up the vast majority of "frontline" workers who would be most exposed to health risks during COVID-19, including health workers (50% of doctors and 80% of nurses in LAC are women)[35]; the informal sector[36]; and domestic service workers.[37] These jobs would also be some of the first to disappear during quarantine.[38] Before the pandemic, women were also

[30] Council on Foreign Relations, "Women's Power Index," 2021 (https://www.cfr.org/article/womens-power-index).

[31] Beatriz Llanos, "Towards parity and inclusive participation in Latin America and the Caribbean Regional overview and contributions to CSW65" (UN Women, 2021, 22).

[32] In Mexico, the National Electoral Institute, endorsed by the Electoral Tribunal of the Federal Judicial Power (TEPJ), stipulated that in 13 of the 28 electoral districts with a more than 40% Indigenous population, the candidacies nominated by political parties should include, as a minimum, 50% Indigenous women (Beatriz Llanos, "Towards parity…" 20).

[33] Madison Eagan, "Indigenous Women: The Invisible Victims…"

[34] Beatriz Llanos, "Towards parity…" 21.

[35] Inter-American Commission on Women (OAS-CIM), "COVID19 In Women's Lives: the Global Care Emergency" (General Secretariat of the Organization of American States (GS/OAS), 2020, 20). On the other hand, only 31% of ministries of health are run by women (UN Women and CARE, "Gender Rapid Analysis," 20).

[36] Before COVID, 80% of workers in Honduras, Guatemala and Nicaragua were in the informal sector; this statistic hovered at about 65% in Mexico and 70% in El Salvador. In all cases men were less represented in the informal sector, ranging from about 6% less men than women (in Mexico) to about 12% less in Guatemala and El Salvador (OAS-CIM "Global Care Emergency…," 15-16). Indigenous peoples are also overrepresented in the informal sector; according to UN Women and CARE's "Gender Rapid Analysis," 78.2% of Mexico's Indigenous population has no social security, which means that they have no protection against unemployment, illness or disability (19). Finally, transwomen are also overrepresented in the informal sector, especially in sex work.

[37] 93% of domestic workers are women, representing 14% of the female labor force in the region as a whole. According to UN Women and CARE's Rapid Gender Analysis for COVID-19, 78% of these women work informally with no access to protection or benefits (17).

[38] According to the ECLAC, 56.9% of women are in sectors considered to be "at high risk of impact from the pandemic," as opposed to 40.6% of men ("Social Panorama…" 100). A survey conducted by a group of experts found that, in the Caribbean, 42.4% of LGBTQ+ respondents lost their jobs or had their businesses closed due to COVID, and 25.6% suffered from temporary layoffs or reduced hours. These statistics do not align with the national rates (Nastassia Rambarran, "Caribbean LGBTQ+ COVID -19 Survey," Parliamentarians for Global Action, https://www.pgaction.org/pdf/2020/caribbean-lgbtq-covid-survey.pdf).

doing about four times more unpaid care and household work than men[39] and had less access to internet[40], both statistics which drop further in the case of Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and rural communities, where time spent on household chores is often also expanded due to limitations on access to water, which can itself put women in danger of assault.[41]

These inequalities have direct impacts on the ways COVID-19 has affected the populations in the countries under study, and are themselves partly inherited from common histories of colonialism and slavery, neocolonialism and imperialism. Indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples in particular have suffered annihilation or subjugation, political and social marginalization, and the systematic use of gender-based violence, particularly in the form of rape and child marriage, as part of those historical processes.[42] During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, serf-like labor on haciendas in Mexico and El Salvador, and landlessness and exploitation of Indigenous labor by national and foreign companies in Guatemala, Nicaragua, Honduras, Belize and the Caribbean continued this trend: according to Julie Gibbings, German men's creation of "second families" with Q'echi' wives in Guatemala in order to "expand the labor pool" for their coffee plantations in the 1930s was supported by the then president Ubico since it had the added benefit of "whitening" Guatemala's Indigenous population.[43] In the particular cases of El Salvador and Guatemala, twentieth century state-organized campaigns of ethnic cleansing overlapped with vicious, U.S.-funded civil wars to reenforce the use of gender-based violence as an effective tool

[39] OAS-CIM: "Global Care Emergency…." 15. In Mexico in 2019, an average of 24.7 percent of women's time was spent on unpaid household and care work versus 8.8 percent of men's (Comisión Económica de América Latina y el Caribe, "Género: Proporción de tiempo dedicado a quehaceres domésticos y cuidados no remunerados, según sexo," CEPALSTAT: Bases de Datos y Publicaciones Estadísticas, https://cepalstat-prod.cepal.org/cepalstat/tabulador/ConsultaIntegrada.asp?idIndicador=3201&idioma=e.

[40] Globally, women are 21 percent less likely to own a mobile phone (Joan Caivano, Sofia Lalinde, and Melanie Ordóñez "Domestic Violence in the Context of COVID-19: State Responses and Alliances in Latin America" *The Dialogue,* June 15, 2020, https://www.thedialogue.org/blogs/2020/06/domestic-violence-in-the-context-of-covid-19-state-responses-alliances-in-latin-america/). For updated data, see the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), "Statistics" https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx.

[41] Cultural Survival reports that in El Salvador, many Indigenous people, especially those living in rural areas, have little to no access to sources of clean drinking water. 90% of the surface water in El Salvador has been reported to be contaminated, and because clean water from a tap will flow once or twice a week at best, many Indigenous rural residents are forced to drink the contaminated water. This lack of access to a source of clean drinking water often leads to people traveling outside of their communities to search for a clean water source. However, this search outside of their communities can also place them at higher risk of experiencing violence. If Indigenous peoples are forced to acquire water in territories controlled by gangs, they are often exposed to increased risk of experiencing "robbery, rape, and other attacks" ("Observations on the State of Indigenous Human Rights in El Salvador" March 2019, 1–8, https://www.culturalsurvival.org/sites/default/files/El-Salvador-UPR-final.pdf).

[42] See, for example, Nancy van Deusen "The Intimacies of Bondage: Female Indigenous Servants and Slaves and Their Spanish Masters, 1492–1555" (*Journal of Women's History* 24:1 (Spring 2012): 13-43); Richard N. Adams, "The Conquest Tradition of Mesoamerica" (*The Americas* 46:2 (Oct., 1989): 119-136); and Rebecca Anne Goetz, "Indian Slavery: An Atlantic and Hemispheric Problem" (*History Compass* 14:2 (2016): 59-70).

[43] See Julie Gibbings, "'In the Shadow of Slavery': Historical Time, Labor and Citizenship in Nineteenth-Century Alta Verapaz, Guatemala" (*Hispanic American Historical Review* 96:1 (2016): 73-107). The Q'echi' Maya are one of fourteen different Mayan groups in Guatemala, which together make up about 42% of Guatemala's population.

of war, leaving in its wake the legacy of what UN Women is now calling the "shadow pandemic" of domestic violence and feminicide in the region today.[44]

Historically, one element that sets the Caribbean apart from other regions is its recent emancipation from European rule and slavery. Despite the abolition of slavery in British territories in 1864, universal adult suffrage was not achieved in the Caribbean until 1944, less than a century ago. Colonial legislation that aimed to safeguard the wealth of the elite class in the Caribbean through the exploitation of African labor created deep racial and economic inequalities that persist today. For example, in Barbados, former slaves and their descendants were not allowed to purchase land under the colonial Contract Law. As of 1970, roughly 77% of land in Barbados was owned by the country's wealthiest 10%.[45]

As we attempt to analyze the pressures on and violence against women, especially poor, displaced, rural, Indigenous and Afro-descended women, these histories of slavery, feminicide, genocide, torture and "conquest" are worth reviewing, since they frame many of the issues people face today. For example, the Miskitu of Nicaragua and Honduras, who trace their ancestry to a mixed heritage of native peoples and runaway enslaved Africans, have a long history of marginalization, especially in their relationship with Nicaragua's Sandinista past and Nicaragua's current president and former Sandinista leader, Daniel Ortega.[46] As in the case of the civil wars in El Salvador and Guatemala, the 1979-1990 war between the socialist

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[44] Indigenous women were particularly targeted in "La Matanza" ("The Massacre") of 1932 in El Salvador, during which government forces killed 35,000 to 50,000 civilians, especially those that wore Indigenous clothing and spoke Indigenous languages (see William Stanley, *The Protection Racket State: Elite Politics, Military Extortion and Civil War in El Salvador*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996, 42). Murder and rape were also a common element of the Salvadoran civil war of 1979-1992 (though barely acknowledged by the UN Truth Commission; see the United Nations Security Council, Annex, "From Madness to Hope: Report on the Commission for Truth for El Salvador," S/25500, 1993, 5-8). As part of the civil war, the El Mozote massacre of 1981 witnessed the ongoing gang rape and then murder of hundreds of women over the course of a few days (see Mark Danner, *The Massacre at El Mozote*, New York: Random House, 1994). The department where El Mozote is located, Morazán, continues to be one of the most violent in the country.

In Guatemala, Indigenous women's exploitation has gone uninterrupted since the colonial period, but was accentuated in the genocidal civil war of 1960 to 1996, killing about 200,000 people, about 85% of which were Indigenous Mayans, along with tens of thousands who were "disappeared," internally displaced or forced into refugee camps in Mexico or exile elsewhere; of the more than 100,000 women raped during the war, an estimated 90% were Mayan (see Shelton Davis, "Introduction: Sowing the Seeds of Violence," in Robert Carmack (ed.) *Harvest of Violence: The Mayan Indians and the Guatemalan Crisis, Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma,* 1992, 10-14 and 21-30; and Ofelia de Pablo, Javier Zurita and Giles Tremlett, "Guatemalan war rape survivors: 'We have no voice'," *The Guardian*, July 28, 2011, https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2011/jul/28/guatemalan-women-mass-rape-give-evidence). According to Victoria Sanford, founding director of the Center for Human Rights and Peace Studies at Lehman College, by 2019 feminicide rates in Guatemala had only risen since the peace agreement signed by representatives of the Guatemalan government and the Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG) (presentation for the University of Virginia Centro de las América/Americas Center Symposium "From the Mouth of a Shark: Causes and Consequences of the Central American Refugee Crisis," Friday, November 8, 2019).

[45] Morgan Hollie, "Emancipation Day – A Reminder That Caribbean Still Needs Justice, Repair" (*Human Rights Watch*, August 3, 2020).

[46] See, for example, Charles Hale, *Resistance and Contradiction: Miskitu Indians and the Nicaraguan State, 1894-1987* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

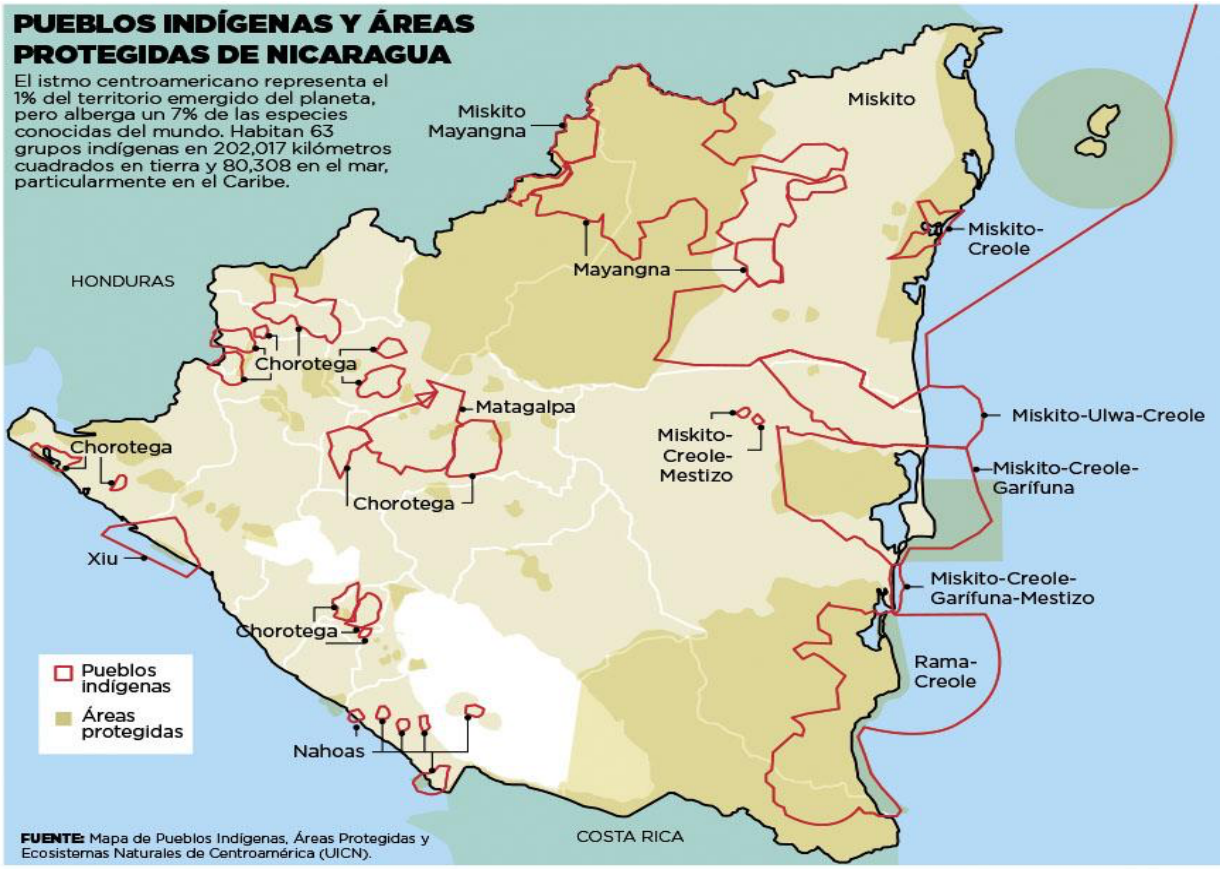
Sandinistas and the U.S.-backed Contras in Nicaragua incorporated an attack on the Miskitu, Rama, Sumo (or Mayanga) and Black Creole peoples of Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast in the early 1980s, again resulting in women from all of these groups being tortured, raped, murdered, imprisoned and forced into work camps alongside the destruction of many of their villages, families, and food sources, leading some of them to seek exile in Honduras and elsewhere (see Fig. 5).[47] Though all of these groups eventually gained official "autonomy" over their territory (nominally in the 1980s but in many cases not until 2009), this was not until after vast amounts of destruction of their lives and cultures and the military occupation of their land by Spanish-speaking Mestizo (non-Indigenous, non-Afro-descendant) officials, who have continued to perpetuate acts of racism and violence towards local inhabitants.[48] Now in their autonomous regions, the Miskitu, Rama, Sumo/Mayanga and Black Creole peoples have also lost any possibility of financial and humanitarian support from the Nicaraguan government as they fight against continuous environmental disasters and now COVID. Finally, homicide, feminicide, child and adolescent marriages and poverty rates in this region continue to be well above the national average.[49]

[47] See the discussion in Stephen Kinzer's *Blood Brothers: Life and War in Nicaragua* (Cambridge: David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, 1991, 251-288); Margaret Randall's interview of Mirna Cunningham, a Miskitu doctor and political organizer aligned with the Sandinistas (*Sandino's Daughters Revisited: Feminism in Nicaragua*, New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1994, 67-84); and Jennifer Goett's *Black Autonomy: Race, Gender and Afro-Nicaraguan Activism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017).

[48] See Goett, *Black Autonomy…;* see, also, Dolores Figueroa Romero and Arelly Barbeyto, "Indigenous, Mestizo and Afro-Descendent Women against Violence: Building Interethnic Alliances in the Context of Regional Autonomy" (*Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 33:3 (2014), 305–318).

[49] According to Figueroa and Barbeyto, rape cases in the North Caribbean Autonomous Region (RAAN) of Nicaragua are often ignored, and many local judges dismiss cases either because of the lack of well-defined legal structures or because many of the cases are attributed to intra-family violence and thus are deemed to require "community arbitration" rather than direct intervention by the justice department. According to Figueroa and Barbeyto, of the 453 complaints of sexual violence made to the local police in the RAAN between January and August of 2014, 55% were committed against minors by male members of the family or close family friends ("Indigenous, Mestizo and Afro-Descendent Women…"). The comparison between homicide rates in the Atlantic Coast autonomous regions and the rest of Nicaragua have historically been stark; according to 2019 statistics, the homicide rate in Nicaragua nationally was 11 murders per 100,000 people, while on the Atlantic coast it was 17 (for 2019 rates, we consulted Overseas Security Advisory Council (OSAC), "Nicaragua 2020 Crime and Safety Report," https://www.osac.gov/Country/Nicaragua/Detail).

Figure 5: Indigenous Groups and Protected Regions of Nicaragua



Source: *Vos TV* (n.d.), available at: Vostv.com.ni

Figure 6: Nicaraguan Departments and Autonomous regions

Source: *Nicaragua Maps & Facts*. (n.d.). WorldAtlas, https://www.worldatlas.com/maps/nicaragua

The Garifuna people of Belize, Honduras, Nicaragua and Guatemala also identify as Afro-Indigenous and have endured a history of slavery, territorial displacement, exile, migration and discrimination.[50] In 2014, Garifuna people in Honduras were violently displaced from their ancestral territory in Tela to make room for the construction of the Hilton Indura Beach & Golf Resort, a state-promoted tourism project. When the Garifuna people launched an international legal case against the Honduran state, Antonio Bernández, a Garifuna leader and key witness, was murdered. The Inter-American Court of Human Rights found the Honduran government

[50] The Garifuna (or Garinagu) trace their heritage to the Kalinago (or "Carib") peoples of northern South America and the Lesser Antilles, as well as enslaved Africans brought to the island of St. Vincent in the 17th century. After protracted battles with the British throughout the 18th century, many of the Garifuna were exiled to Central America, and in 2003 numbered approximately 200,000 in Honduras, 15,000 in Belize, 5,000 in Guatemala, 2,000 in Nicaragua, and 1,000 in St. Vincent, with about the same total number in New York City. For 2016, Paul Joseph López Oro claims a total of 290,000 Garifunas in all five boroughs of New York; there are also sizable communities in Los Angeles (Paul Joseph López Oro, "'Ni de aquí ni de allá': Garífuna Subjectivities and the Politics of Diasporic Belonging" in Petro R. River-Rideau, Jennifer A. Jones, and Tianna S. Paschel eds., *Afro-Latinos in Movement: Critical Approaches to Blackness and Transnationalism in the Americas*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016, 61-83). For the Garifuna more generally, see Carlos Agudelo, "Los garifunas, identidades y reivindicaciones de un pueblo afrodescendiente de América Central" (in *Afrodescendencia: Aproximaciones Contemporáneas de América Latina y el Caribe*, Centro de Información de las Naciones Unidas para México, Cuba y República Dominicana and Red de Centros de Información de América Latina y el Caribe, 2011, 59-66); and Nancie Gonzalez, *Sojourners of the Caribbean: Ethnogenesis and Ethnohistory of the Garifuna* (Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

guilty of "violating collective property rights, failing to ensure judicial protection and violating the Garifuna people's right to free, prior and informed consent regarding the large-scale economic projects approved in their territories."[51] The Honduran government still has not taken action to stop the project or grant reparations.

The notorious assassination of Indigenous Lenca leader and environmental activist Berta Cáceres in Honduras in 2016, and the less well-known gang rape of eleven Mayan women during forced evictions carried out by the state on behalf of a Canadian mining company in Guatemala in 2020, also remind us of the connection between the current disposability of women's rights and bodies and a long history of colonialism, imperialism and displacement. Cáceres was assassinated in her home in 2016, after leading protests against an energy company's construction of a dam in Lenca territory.[52] Her murder was orchestrated by executives and investors with a vested interest in building the dam. Military and law-enforcement officials were complicit in Cáceres' murder and the perpetrators have yet to be held accountable.[53] In the case of the Guatemalan women, they had been attacked by police, the military and mining company security forces. The case was miraculously taken to national and then international (Canadian) courts, by the Q'echi' activist Angélica Choc, whose own husband was murdered by a nickel mining company's security forces seven years before.[54] Unfortunately, these cases are not isolated; Indigenous, Afro-descended and other women's rights leaders have been at the forefront of fighting transnational corporate encroachment and seizure of their lands in Central America and Mexico for decades, and continue to face threats. In Honduras alone, twelve Indigenous activists were killed in 2020.[55]

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[51] Jackie McVicar, "Indigenous Men in Honduras Are Being Abducted. Are the Police to Blame?" (*America: The Jesuit Review,* Aug. 5, 2020, https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2020/08/05/indigenous-men-honduras-are-being-abducted-are-police-blame)

[52] The Lenca are the largest Indigenous community in Honduras, making up over 60% of the Indigenous population.

[53] Danielle Mackey and Chiara Eisner, "Inside the Plot to Murder Honduran Activist Berta Cáceres" (*The Intercept*, Dec. 21, 2019, https://theintercept.com/2019/12/21/berta-caceres-murder-plot-honduras/)

[54] Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), "Indigenous Women's Struggle Against Corporate Abuse in Guatemala" (December 7, 2020, https://www.wilpf.org/indigenous-womens-struggle-against-corporate-abuse-in-guatemala/)

[55] In March of 2021, Jennifer and Marianela Mejía Solorzano, two sisters and members of Garifuna activist group *Organización Fraternal Negra Hondureña* (OFRANEH), were arrested and charged with usurpation of land from real estate developer Bienes y Raíces Juca SRL which has been planning to build real estate projects on ancestral territories. In an interview with *Real World Radio*, Marianela Solórzano explained that she and her sister thought they were being kidnapped by the National Police and would not return, since Garifuna land activists have a history of being kidnapped and killed by corporations and the police. The sisters and their community believe that the international attention of their arrest led to their release from jail. They are awaiting trial and are not allowed to leave the country (Allison Lira, "The Criminalization of Marianela and Jennifer Solórzano" *WFP Solidarity Collective*, Mar. 17, 2021, https://www.solidaritycollective.org/post/the-criminalization-of-marianela-and-jennifer-sol%C3%B3rzano). March 2021 also marked the assassination of Lenca activist Cerro Escalante, who helped lead the fight against a dam being built on Lenca ancestral territory ("Indigenous activist killed in Honduras, led fight against construction of a dam." *NBC News*, Mar. 22, 2021, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/indigenous-activist-killed-honduras-led-fight-construction-dam-rcna469).

One final consideration for our study has been the historical role of gangs and organized crime in perpetuating violence and impunity in the region. While an analysis of the percent of overall gender-based violence which can be attributed to gangs or cartels is beyond the scope of this study, published testimonies from women, girls and their families, as well as from ex-gang members, suggest that girls join gangs for much the same reasons boys do—due to pressure on the part of the gang, because they need protection, or because they seek an alternative to an abusive household or homelessness.[56] Yet for a girl, being part of a gang almost always means being victim to regular bouts of sexual assault by multiple gang members, and many female refugees from gang violence flee precisely because they are being threatened with having to be a gang member's "girlfriend," to act as sex slaves to pay the debts of their family members, or because their gruesome abuse or death will be used as a form of retaliation between gangs.[57] In general, evidence points to gangs regularly using an excess of violence in their attacks on women as a form of message-sending about their power and control over territory and their ability to break social norms.[58] Though the extent of gang control over territory, politics and economics in Central America and Mexico vary, in all cases gangs play a pivotal role in framing levels of homicide and feminicide in these regions, as well as the extent of impunity to which drug-running, human trafficking, sexual slavery, and public display of violence are normalized.

On the other hand, it is crucial that we again consider the broader context in which gangs have gained so much notoriety as bloodthirsty killers of women in Mexico and Central America. The "shadow pandemic" of gender-based violence in many ways appears worst in Honduras, which had the highest rate of feminicides in the region in 2019, and the second highest in the world in 2018 (behind South Africa).[59] Yet, according to historian Dana Frank, the 2009 coup in Honduras, and the U.S. government's overt support of its illegitimate outcome (which was preceded by a history of U.S. military intervention and neocolonial and neoliberal management of much of the economy and politics) "precipitated a rapid downward spiral that cast the Honduran people into a maelstrom of repression, violence and increasing poverty…[destroying] the rule of law and gutt[ing] the country's welfare state—indeed, the state itself."[60]

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[56] See, for example, Orlando J. Pérez, "Gang Violence and Insecurity in Contemporary Central America" (*Bulletin of Latin American Research* (2013): 217-234).

[57] Tina Zedginidze, "Domestic Abuse and Gang Violence against Women: Expanding the Particular Social Group Finding in Matter of A-R-C-G- to Grant Asylum to Women Persecuted by Gangs" (*Law & Inequality* 34 (2016): 221-245); as well as the Center for Gender and Refugee Studies' 2014 report "Thousands of Girls and Women are Fleeing Rape, Sexual Violence and Torture in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala" https://cgrs.uchastings.edu/talking_points_and_stories

[58] The worst offenders in the countries under study are the transnational gangs Barrio 18 and MS-13 (see Orlando J. Pérez, "Gang Violence…). For a comparative view of gang violence in the region, see Thomas Bruneau, Lucía Dammert, and Elizabeth Skinner (eds.) *Maras: Gang Violence and Security in Central America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011, 87–103); and Hannes Warnecke-Berger, *Politics and Violence in Central America and the Caribbean* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

[59] UN Gender Equality Observatory, "Femicide or feminicide" https://oig.cepal.org/en/indicators/femicide-or-feminicide; UN ODC, "Homicide rate by sex," https://dataunodc.un.org/data/homicide/Homicide%20rate%20by%20sex

[60] Dana Frank, *The Long Honduran Night. Resistance, Terror and the United States in the Aftermath of the Coup*, (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2018, 5). Cecilia Menjívar and Shannon Drysdale Walsh reaffirm this vision of 2009

Further, many of the gangs plaguing Honduras and El Salvador find their origin in Los Angeles, where refugees from the Salvadoran civil war of 1979 to 1992 became both criminalized and deported under U.S. auspices.[61] In the case of Mexico, the spate of feminicide in the northern city of Ciudad Juárez (in the state of Chihuahua) that became international news in the 1990s has not decreased, and scholars and activists still debate which forces are most at fault for the rape, mutilation, and murder of nearly 300 women in that city alone between 1993 and 2001.[62] While some suggest these deaths were the result of the presence and power of organized crime and related violence, others have pointed to simple misogyny or jealousy at women's ability to get work in factories at "the expense" of men; still others have pointed to internal migrant women and girls to the region being more vulnerable to such attacks; others emphasize the border region's historical role as a crucible of criminality and exploitation, especially in a context of post-NAFTA neoliberal deregulation of businesses and the cross-border flow of commerce.[63] The last case, especially, highlights the ongoing role of U.S. policies, commercial demands, and cultural attitudes in contributing to and protecting many of the sources of gender-based violence here discussed.

The Context of COVID-19

How has gender-based violence and incidents of feminicide been affected during the first year of the pandemic (2020)? In general, poverty and extreme poverty rates have shot up in all countries, particularly affecting rural sectors as well as those populations that were already impoverished going into the pandemic. In the case of Belize and Nicaragua, this trend is only projected to keep rising, through 2030. By the end of 2021, an estimate 20 million women and girls will be living below the poverty level in Latin America and the Caribbean region as a whole. [64]

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as a critical point leading to a downward spiral in the well-being and safety of the average Honduran, especially in the case of gender-based violence ("The Architecture of Feminicide: The State, Inequalities, and Everyday Gender Violence in Honduras" *Latin American Research Review* 52:2 (2017): 221-240).

[61] See Elana Zilberg, *Space of Detention: The Making of a Transnational Gang Crisis in Los Angeles and San Salvador* (Durham/London: Duke, 2011).

[62] Rosa Linda Fregoso and Cynthia Bejarano, *Terrorizing Women: Feminicide in the Americas* (Durham/London: Duke, 2011, p. 36, fn 15).

[63] Héctor Domínguez-Ruvalcaba and Patricia Ravelo Blancas, "Obedience without Compliance: The Role of the Government, Organized Crime, and NGOs in the System of Impunity That Murders the Women of Ciudad Juárez," (in Rosa Linda Fregoso and Cynthia Bejarano (eds.), *Terrorizing Women….*, 182-196); and Lourdes Portillo (Dir.), *Señorita Extraviada, Missing Young Woman* (USA, 2001).

[64] UN Women, "COVID-19 is driving women deeper into poverty" (Oct. 17, 2020, https://data.unwomen.org/features/covid-19-driving-women-and-girls-deeper-poverty.)

These statistics set the context for what we have narrowed down as our key findings in the context of COVID:

- Homicide rates went down in across the region during the first year of COVID; gender-based violence rates did not (Fig. 7);

- Gender-based violence and feminicide reporting and punishment requires the training and efforts of experts in this field, at the local, regional and national levels;

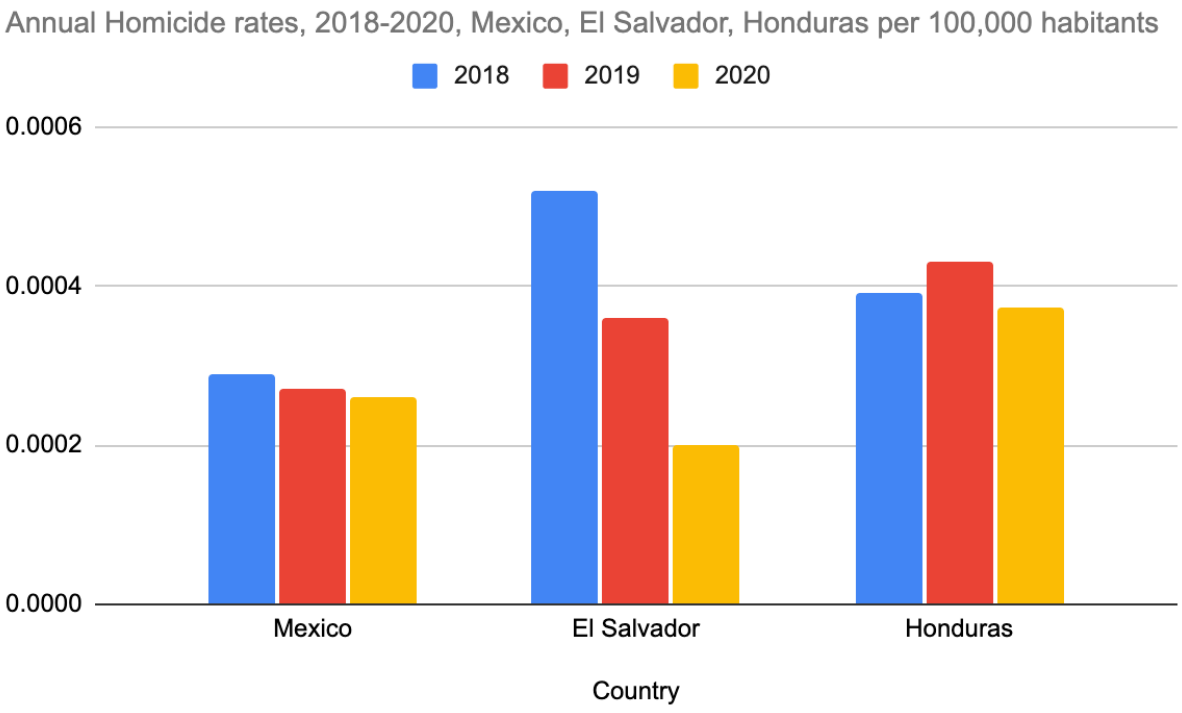
- Mexico has the most comprehensive laws on gender parity, access to abortion, and feminicide conviction, and yet it still has some of the highest rates of feminicide, which went up during lockdown;

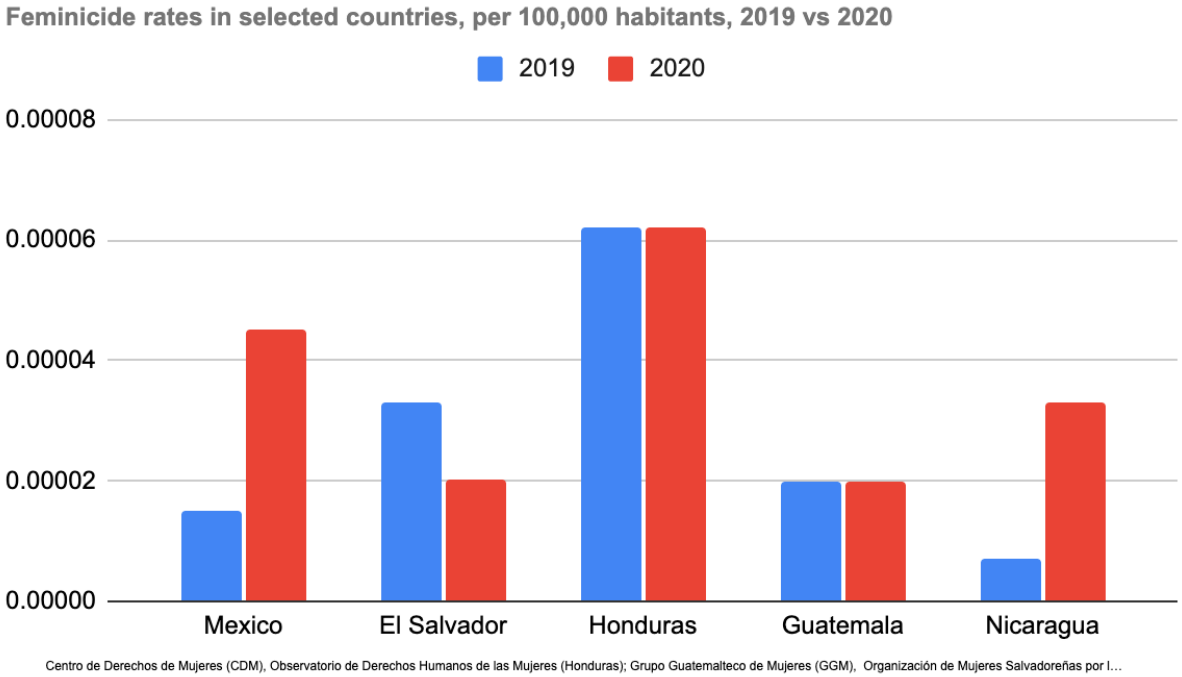
- A number of indicators point to adolescent girls being some of the affected by the pandemic due to their loss of education and higher likelihood of early marriage and early pregnancy, as well as vulnerability to sexual assault and abuse at home;

- Women's protests in Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala tell us that they want and need a voice and a presence, not simply more accurate numbers;

- The enormous inequality, on all levels, between rural and urban populations has grown even more during the pandemic, and should be reduced by bridging these two worlds

Figure 7: Homicide vs. Gender-Based Violence and Feminicide Rates





Scholars and researchers have consistently argued that societies with high homicide rates tend to have high feminicide rates.[65] The COVID pandemic, and prolonged quarantine, has complicated that equation. President Nayib Bukele of El Salvador has been very proud of the drop in homicides overseen by his administration since 2019—El Salvador went from being one of the most murderous countries in the hemisphere (52 deaths per 100,000 people in 2018) to dropping to a "region-wide level" (20 per 100,000 people in 2020).[66] El Salvador's extremely strict, three-month lockdown (resulting in arrest for any violators) unsurprisingly contributed to a surge in domestic violence, sexual abuse, and unwanted pregnancies, and though lockdown may have curbed El Salvador's feminicides, it certainly did not eliminate them: in 2020, 1.9 women were murdered per 100,000, as compared to 3.3 in 2019.[67] Guatemala's homicide and feminicide rates also experienced a parallel drop in 2020: homicide rates dropped 28% (to 15.3 per 100,000 people), and feminicide rates dropped from 2.7 per every 100,000 women in 2019 to 2.0 in 2020.[68]

Yet in the case of Honduras, while homicide rates dropped about 13% (to 37.6 per 100,000 people in 2020 as compared to 42 in 2019), feminicide rates for the two years were almost identical. Further, according to Honduras' Centro de Derechos de Mujeres (CDM), a full 57% of 2020's feminicides occurred *during* quarantine, in March 2020, and a third of the total feminicides reported occurred at home. At the same time, 65% of feminicides were committed by strangers, indicating that they did not happen while people were on lockdown in their houses.[69] Considering the margin for error based on underreporting, these statistics suggest that being gendered as female in Honduras at this time was particularly lethal, especially in San Pedro Sula or Tegucigalpa, the two largest cities, often with the highest rates of feminicide

[65] See, for example, Cecilia Menjívar and Shannon Drysdale Walsh "The Architecture of Feminicide…"

[66] Mariana Arévalo, "Violencia contra la mujer en El Salvador aumenta 70% en cuarentena" (*La Prensa Gráfica*, May 26, 2020, https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/Violencia-contra-la-mujer-en-El-Salvador-aumenta-70-en-cuarentena-20200525-0088.html).

[67] The source is Organización de Mujeres Salvadoreñas por la Paz (ORMUSA), an independent women's organization in El Salvador, using data from the nation's Attorney General (Kristina Zanzinger et al., "Underreported and Unpunished, Femicides in El Salvador Continue" *NACLA*, March 5, 2021, https://nacla.org/news/2021/03/04/femicides-el-salvador-pandemic).

[68] ECLAC, "Addressing violence against women and girls during and after the COVID-19 pandemic requires FINANCING, RESPONSES, PREVENTION AND DATA COMPILATION" (Nov. 2020, 3); and Grupo Guatemalteco de Mujeres (GGM), "Datos estadísticos de muertes violentas de mujeres actualizado 1 de enero al quince de julio, 2020," http://ggm.org.gt/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Datos-estad%C3%ADsticos_-MVM-ACTUALIZADO-1-de-enero-al-15-de-junio-2020.pdf

[69] Centro de Derechos de Mujeres (CDM), Observatorio de Derechos Humanos de las Mujeres, "Observatorio de Derechos Humanos de las Mujeres 2020" https://derechosdelamujer.org/project/monitoreo-2020/

and/or homicide.[70] According to CDM, between January and November of 2020, approximately one woman was killed every 27 hours.[71]

In El Salvador and Honduras, even women's attempts to seek counseling or shelter outside of the home, to get to jobs, or to access reproductive health services in cases of injury, pregnancy, or childbirth have been hindered by their own fears of contagion, lack of transport and economic pressures, and strict quarantine enforcement by mobile police units who themselves have been accused of gender-based violence and even feminicide during the pandemic. A stark example of this is the case of **Keyla Martínez, a 26-year-old nursing student who was found dead in a jail cell in La Esperanza, Honduras, after she and a friend were arrested for driving after the state-mandated curfew of 9pm**. Despite local police reports of suicide, both the Attorney General's Office and medical examiners provided evidence that Keyla had instead died of asphyxiation after having received violent blows to the head, neck, and mouth, and after having foreign objects put in her mouth. Though Keyla's February 2021 death is under investigation, and has been reclassified from suicide to homicide by the police, no officers have yet been held accountable (H. Silva Ávalos, "Keyla Martínez and Extrajudicial Killings in Honduras" *InSight Crime*, 2020, https://insightcrime.org/news/keyla-martinez-extrajudicial-killings-honduras/). **In El Salvador, over 16,000 people accused of breaking the national lockdown were placed in detention centers by the Salvadoran military and authorities** (Amnesty International, "When Protection Becomes Repression: Mandatory Quarantines under COVID-19 in the Americas" September 21, 2020).

Most dramatically, both Nicaragua and Mexico's feminicide rates went up during the pandemic's first year, even as homicide rates dropped. As far as can be gleaned due to Nicaragua's notorious control over, and politicization of data, homicide rates dropped to 4.4 per 100,000 people in 2020, down from 11 in 2019 (these numbers refer to the national average; for the Atlantic Coast region, the murder rate for 2019 was about 17 murders per 100,000 people).[72] Feminicide rates, on the other hand, appear to have risen to an all-time high of 3.3 (for 2019, they were calculated at .7).[73]

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[70] For example, according to the CDM, by November 16 of 2020, 250 feminicides were reported for the country as a whole, with 50 of these occurring in the district of Cortés, where San Pedro Sula is located, and another 74 occurring in Francisco Morazán, the site of Tegucigalpa ("Observatorio de Derechos Humanos de las Mujeres 2020").

[71] *Idem.*

[72] For 2019 rates, we consulted OSAC, "Nicaragua 2020 Crime and Safety Report," https://www.osac.gov/Country/Nicaragua/Content/Detail/Report/3fda678c-faba-4d2b-9381-18536e231839#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20Government%20of,almost%20double%20the%20national%20average; for 2020 rates, we looked at the report published by Elvira Cuadra on the Monitoreo Azul y Blanco Facebook site, "Violencia e inseguridad Nicaragua, 2020" https://www.facebook.com/MonitoreoAzulyBlanco/photos/a.125856315854966/264990538608209/

[73] For feminicide rates in Nicaragua, we consulted data from the independent women's organization Enredadas, as well as Red Latinoamericana y del Caribe Católicas por el Derecho de Decidir (see Carmen Herrera and Agustina Cáceres, "Covid-19 y crisis política en Nicaragua: caldo de cultivo para el aumento de los femicidios de niñas y mujeres en el 2020," January 14, 2021). According to Enredadas, 18 out of the 75 femicides calculated for 2020 occurred in the Atlantic Coast region, where only 14% of the Nicaraguan population lives. According to Noelia Gutiérrez, who gets her data on feminicides from the Nicaraguan independent organization Observatorio Voces (https://voces.org.ni/femicidio), Nicaragua's National Police only reported approximately 17% of the feminicides that occurred in 2019 ("Entre Entre múltiples crisis, se asienta la violencia de género," *Violentadas en cuarentena*, https://violentadasencuarentena.distintaslatitudes.net/portfolio/nicaragua/).

In the case of Mexico, homicide rates dropped only incrementally as compared to the 2019 rates, to 27 murders per 100,000, or the equivalent of "just over one day's worth of the average daily homicide toll of 95 killings."[74] Feminicide, clocked in by governmental officials at 1.5 murders per 100,000 women, was also the same as 2019; however, María Salguero, creator of the Mapa de Feminicidios (Feminicide Map) in Mexico, contends that in fact the feminicide rate for Mexico in 2020 looks more like 4.5 murders per 100,000 women.[75] According to Salguero, the feminicide rate has been steadily rising since 2016, though governmental counts are far lower.[76]

Across the region, reports of gender-based violence have surged in 2020. In El Salvador, Organización de Mujeres Salvadoreñas por la Paz (ORMUSA) reported a 70% increase in cases as compared to 2019, while in Honduras this figure is 60%.[77] In Guatemala, the calls to Línea 1572, a helpline for women experiencing physical, psychological or sexual violence, went up to 380 calls in April of 2020 as compared to 230 in April of 2019, amounting to a 60% rise.[78] In Mexico, 911 calls hit a record high between January and April of 2020, up 60% from 2019, alongside a similar surge in calls to shelters.[79]

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[74] "Mexico's homicide rate stayed high in 2020 despite pandemic" (*AP News,* Jan. 20, 2021, https://apnews.com/article/homicide-coronavirus-pandemic-latin-america-mexico-a90c2a172f39ab2546de465c73a60543). Detailed month-to-month information on Mexico's homicides can be obtained for both 2019 and 2020 via the Comisión Nacional de Seguridad page on the governmental website, http://www.informeseguridad.cns.gob.mx/

[75] Although the Mexican government's database shows 144 feminicides between March and April 2020, the National Map of Feminicides in Mexico reported 405 feminicides during the same timeframe. See "Los feminicidios en México" https://feminicidiosmx.crowdmap.com/

[76] Tom Phillips, "Mexico: activists voice anger at AMLO's failure to tackle 'femicide emergency'" (*The Guardian,* Mar. 5, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/05/mexico-femicide-emergency-activists).

[77] ORMUSA, Observatorio de Violencia Contra Las Mujeres, available at: https://observatoriodeviolenciaormusa.org/; for Honduras, see CDM-Observatorio de Derechos Humanos de las Mujeres, *Boletín Violencia contra las mujeres en Honduras, enero-octubre 2020* (November 2020, http://derechosdelamujer.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Boleti%CC%81n-Violencia-contra-mujeres-2020.pdf).

[78] Luis Felipe López-Calva, "No Safer Place Than Home?: The Increase in Domestic and Gender-Based Violence During COVID-19 Lockdowns in LAC" (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), November 3, 2020, https://www.latinamerica.undp.org/content/rblac/en/home/presscenter/director-s-graph-for-thought/no-safer-place-than-home---the-increase-in-domestic-and-gender-b.html.)

[79] Anya Prusa et al., "Pandemic of Violence: Protecting Women during COVID-19" (*ReliefWeb*, May 15, 2020,: https://reliefweb.int/report/mexico/pandemic-violence-protecting-women-during-covid-19). For Mexico, month-by-month tallies of all emergency calls by type have been kept for a number of years, so it is possible to look at comparative data between 2019 and 2020 (see Secretariado Ejecutivo del Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Publica, https://www.gob.mx/911/documentos/estadistica-nacional-del-numero-de-atencion-de-llamadas-de-emergencia-9-1-1-111029?state=published). The Special Prosecutor's Office for Feminicide and Crimes Against Women reported a 35% increase in calls to shelter helplines from March 9-23 compared to the same period in 2019, and then a 60% increase in calls between March 23 and April 8 (UN Women and CARE, "Latin America and the Caribbean…," 27).

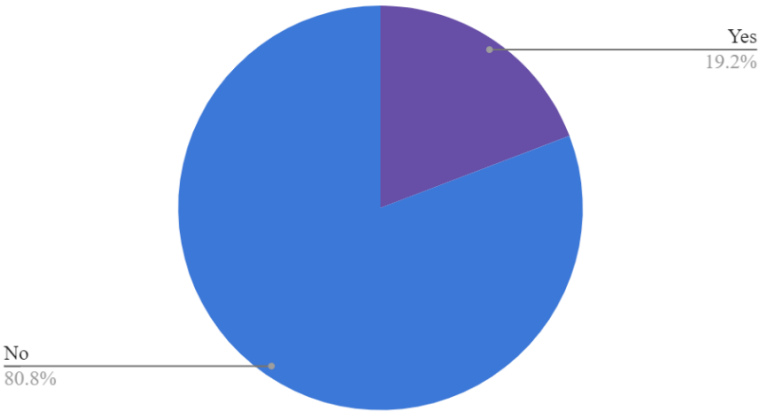
In November 2020, hurricanes Eta and Iota devastated Honduras and displaced almost a third of the country from their homes. The disasters, like the pandemic, disproportionately affected women and girls who made up more than half of refugees in shelters. Gender-based and sexual violence was an issue in shelters where refugees had no privacy, even in bathrooms, and where females lacked menstrual hygiene products. By December, **the Directorate of Children and Families in Honduras had intervened in over 100 shelters due to complaints of sexual violence, eventually placing 6,400 children under protection against assaults** (Josh Collins, "Dispatch from Honduras: The Devastating Aftermath of Eta and Iota." Sierra Club, December 9, 2020; and "Los abusos sexuales a los que están expuestas miles de niñas y adolescentes en albergues de Centroamérica por los huracanes Iota y Eta" *BBC News Mundo,* December 23, 2020).

On the other hand, many women are not using hotlines at all, because they cannot call when they are locked up with their abusers. According to Guatemala's Ministerio Público, though there was a rise in calls in April of 2019, in March, when the quarantine started, there was a 75% drop in calls compared to the previous month. Officials agree that the only reason for this could be that people are not using the phone, not a sudden drop in violence. In fact, according to one report, there is evidence that many Guatemalan women are responding to the crisis by fleeing their homes with their children, suggesting "a preference for coronavirus over beatings."[80] According to polls conducted by the United Nations' Spotlight Initiative, during El Salvador's three-month quarantine only 19% of people experiencing violence in the home chose to seek help. Of those who did not, 53% thought the violence was not serious enough; 13% thought it was better to fix the problem themselves; 10% did not trust institutions; and another 10% felt the institutions would not solve anything (Fig. 8).[81]

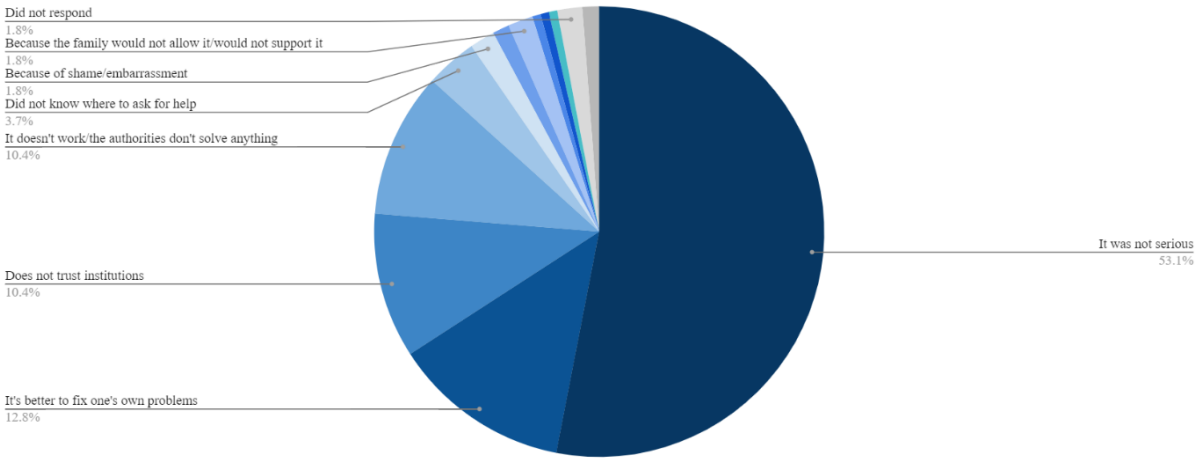
[80] Douglas Cuevas, "Cuarentena: Mujeres escapan de la violencia en plena crisis por el coronavirus" (*Prensa Libre*, April 14, 2020).

[81] Iniciativa Spotlight, "Sondeo de opinión sobre la violencia de género durante el periodo de emergencia por la pandemia de COVID-19" (Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública (IUDOP), 2020, 1–69).

Figure 8: ***Responses to the question of whether those who experienced violence During the Domestic Quarantine in El Salvador (March-June 2020) sought help/information***



If you did not seek help or information, why not?



Source: Iniciativa Spotlight, "Sondeo de opinión sobre la violencia de género durante el periodo de emergencia por la pandemia de COVID-19" (Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública (IUDOP), 2020, 1–69).

Our data for the Caribbean is slightly less clear. Puerto Rico recently declared a state of emergency after a surge of femicides, reflecting an ongoing trend from 2020, when at least 60 "direct" and "indirect" femicides were committed.[82] Indirect femicides are cases in which a female victim died due to medical malpractice such as a misconducted abortion, trafficking, gang activity, or neglect.[83] Of these 60 femicides in Puerto Rico during COVID six cases pertained to

[82] Gender Equality Observatory, "Featured Indicators" (Gender Equality Observatory, United Nations. Accessed March 15, 2021; https://oig.cepal.org/en).

[83] Femicide Watch, "The Must-Knows on Femicide" (UN Studies Association, May 2018, available at: http://femicide-watch.org/readers/must-knows-femicide).

trans people.[84] In terms of violence, the survey found that, of those who were victims of sexual violence, 45.4% reported that their husbands or partners were the perpetrators. The survey found that over 50% of respondents did not call anyone to report the abuse. Only 9.4% of those who experienced gender-based violence during COVID called the police or law enforcement.[85]

According to the Intensive Care National Audit and Research Centre in the UK, Afro-Caribbean and LGBTQ+ communities there were not only more at risk to the adverse effects of COVID-19 (such as increased GBV, economic hardship, and mental stress) but also more likely to have severe symptoms of the virus itself. Although Black and minority ethnic (BAME) groups made up roughly 14% of the UK population, they accounted for roughly 34% of critically ill patients, supporting similar research conducted in the US. Another report showed that 94% of doctors and dentists, as well as 71% of nurses and midwives who died from the virus, were from a BAME background, although they only make up 44% and 20% of the fields respectively (Shera Chok, "Covid-19 and the Impact on BAME Communities" *HealthCareITNews,* April 28, 2020).

Gender-based violence and feminicide reporting and punishment requires the training and efforts of experts in this field, at the local, regional and national levels.

The above data reflecting varying effects of quarantine on rates of feminicide provide yet another reason to question our understanding of where feminicide, homicide, and gender-based violence overlap or can be distinguished from each other. While most feminicides occur outside the home by a stranger, the ratio of these compared to "intimate feminicides" vary profoundly between countries.[86] When we take into account the number of women who "disappear," flee attempted murder by intimate partners, die as a result of isolation from health care when they have been injured by a partner, die as a result of sex trafficking or brutality and neglect experienced while migrating internationally, the number of murdered women rises substantially. This is especially the case when private and public realms become mixed—in prisons, for the homeless or those who work on the street, for migrants, for those in shelters and even for domestic servants, whose "public" space is someone else's home. In 2020, a full 162 feminicides in Honduras were committed by strangers. Were these attacks by gangs, and must those kinds of feminicides be understood, and solutions pursued, differently? According to María Salguero, author of the National Feminicide Map in Mexico, the Mexican government does not consider the murder of women by cartels crimes of feminicide, resulting in substantial underreporting.[87]

[84] Theresa Braine, "Puerto Rico Declares State of Emergency Over Alarming Rate of Violence Against Women" (*New York Daily News*, January 29, 2021; https://www.nydailynews.com/news/crime/ny-puerto-rico-state-of-emergency-declaration-violence-against-women-20210129-bd7nna6wuve7vkkgwxup5vsnoy-story.html).

[85] Nastassia Rambarran, "Caribbean LGBTQ+ COVID -19 Survey" (Parliamentarians for Global Action, May 2020, https://www.pgaction.org/pdf/2020/caribbean-lgbtq-covid-survey.pdf.

[86] UN ECLAC, "Addressing Violence….," 5.

[87] Lara Loaiza, "Map Links Mexico's Femicide Crisis, Organized Crime" (*InSight Crime*, July 9, 2020. https://insightcrime.org/news/analysis/mexico-femicide-organized-crime/).

In 2018, the Organization of American States (OAS), the Commission of Women (CIM) and the Follow-up Mechanism to the Belém do Pará Convention[88] (MESECVI) compiled a Model Law on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of the Gender-Related Killing of Women and Girls, and a Latin American "model protocol" document was also produced. [89] Still, these guidelines have been taken up differently by our countries under study (Fig. 9). For example, in Honduras and Nicaragua, only men may be accused of feminicide.[90] Possibly one of the most comprehensive definitions of feminicide can be found in Mexico, including the following considerations as indicative of the crime of feminicide: the kinds of wounds (degrading or vicious); any evidence of sexual violence; any history of sexual violence; a prior relation of inequality between victim and abuser(s) (work, school, home); a romantic history between the victim and killer(s); any evidence of previous threats or harassment; evidence of the victim being isolated from others or unable to communicate; and the body left exposed or degraded in public, among other indicative factors.[91] Still, even in Mexico, definitions of feminicide and the steps to process it legally differ between the 31 states and the Federal District (Mexico City). Finally, "hate crimes," which specifically target not only women but also the Indigenous, Afro-descendant and LGBTQ+ population, may also get categorized differently, as mere homicides, because they are attacking not simply women but social or ethnic minorities.

[88] Also known as the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence against Women. This was adopted in Belém do Pará, Brazil, in 1994, and defines violence against women and calls for states to set up clear mechanisms to combat the problem. MESECVI (created in 2004) continuously evaluates countries' progress on implementing the goals set up in the 1994 Convention (see OAS, "About MESECVI", https://www.oas.org/en/mesecvi/about.asp).

[89] Inter-American Commission of Women, Follow-up Mechanism to the Belém do Pará Convention (MESECVI), *Inter-American Model Law on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of the Gender-Related Killing of Women and Girls (Femicide/Feminicide)* (OAS, 2018).

[90] Alicia Deus and Diana Gonzalez, *Analysis of Femicide/Feminicide Legislation in Latin America and the Caribbean and a Proposal for a Model Law*, UN Women-MESCEVI, 2018, 71-72.

[91] Observatorio Ciudadano Nacional de Feminicidio (OCNF) *Informe implementación del tipo penal de feminicidio en México: desafíos para acreditar las razones de género, 2014-2017* (Católicas por el Derecho de Decidir, A.C., 2018).

Figure 9: Feminicide Laws in Selected Countries[92]

Feminicide is criminalized and penalized as part of other laws on violence and the Criminal Code			
	Mexico		
No comprehensive law on violence against women, but they include the crime of femicide/feminicide through specific laws to that effect			
	Honduras		
Only Male Perpetrators			
	Honduras		
	Nicaragua		
Gender-based motive or relationship, based on control or submission, or gender-based discrimination demonstrated by specifically outlined behaviors or situations			
	Mexico		
	El Salvador		
In addition to the killing, demonstration of gender-based motive or gender-based submissive or discriminatory relationship required in all cases, that must occur within a defined context or specific acts or circumstances			
	Guatemala		
	Honduras		
	Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador		

Critical to punishing, and hopefully diminishing hate crimes and gender-based violence (whether as feminicide or as other abuses) would be a clear understanding of how these crimes overlap and are symptoms of a broader category of "hate" and discrimination. It is our belief that fostering more robust support links between semi-autonomous bodies (such as those in various countries working alongside UN Women) with expertise in identifying, quantifying, defending against, counseling on, and prosecuting these crimes and local police and judicial systems is critical. Though police in Mexico, Honduras and El Salvador are now required to do some

[92] Alicia Deus and Diana González, *Analysis of Femicide/Feminicide Legislation….*

training in gender-sensitivity and measures to combat gender violence, these have proved insufficient.[93]

Gender-based violence data also merits more critical analysis. As mentioned earlier, defining "criminal" versus somehow more "acceptable" gender-based violence continues to depend largely on the decision of those being accosted, who are often dependent on their abuser for their daily sustenance and the roof over their heads. As Melissa Beske has reported from her interviews with women in rural Belize, "for many [survivors,] daily beatings are preferable to indigence and starvation."[94]

While reports of violence, negligence and impunity at the hands of police and even judicial officials are certainly not justified nor should they go unpunished, the burden of adequate reporting, investigation and data-collection should be under the direction of experts in this material working with law enforcement. Further, such a body would need to have knowledge of and respect for the communities from which these cases arise, ideally incorporating community members and interests in reporting efforts. These kinds of collaborations and community-based approaches have been attempted at various levels in our countries of study. For example, in Nicaragua, the Nicaraguan Women's Institute, in collaboration with other ministries, began a 5-year plan to prevent and reduce domestic and sexual violence, which included the establishment of *Comisarías de La Mujer y la Niñez*, specialized police stations for women and children with social workers and female police officers. A study done in 2016 found that approximately 98% of women knew about these stations and 77% believed they helped reduce levels of violence against women. Unfortunately, these police citations were closed down by President Ortega in 2016.[95]

Currently, the Pan-American Development Program is working on a project to digitally map thousands of local organizations dedicated to helping women seek shelter from violence and gain access to resources for their psychological, emotional, and physical health especially as it relates to gender-based abuse. This map would ideally be available both to anyone in need of the services as well as national and international organizations hoping to share information and resources across the hemisphere.[96]

Another prevention effort linking the international with the local is the Spotlight Program, a global initiative between the European Union and the United Nations focused on eliminating all forms of violence against women and girls, drawing specific attention to "at risk" groups of girls and women who face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination.[97] Still, while we found

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[93] Virginie Martin-Onraët and David Alvarez Veloso, "Citizen Security for All…," 76-79.

[94] Melissa Beske, *Intimate Partner Violence and Advocate Response: Redefining Love in Western Belize* (New York/London: Lexington Books, 2016, 86).

[95] M. Ellsberg et al, "Long-term change in the prevalence of intimate partner violence: A 20-year follow-up study in León, Nicaragua, 1995-2016" (*BMJ Global Health*, 5:4 (2020): 1-12).

[96] Dr. Laura Aragón, Women and Gender Thematic Leader at PADF, in-class workshop, Mar. 3, 2021.

[97] See the Spotlight Initiative's webpage, https://www.spotlightinitiative.org/

the Spotlight Initiative to have an important impact in El Salvador (especially through a survey on gender-based violence during the pandemic which they conducted through WhatsApp and email), it seemed to be slightly less helpful in Belize, where there was little evidence of the program having affected isolated rural communities and ethnic minorities.[98]

Mexico has the most comprehensive laws on gender parity, access to abortion, and feminicide conviction, and yet it still has some of the highest rates of feminicide, which went up during lockdown

There is some debate over the importance of women's role in leadership positions as a way to curb violence against women locally, regionally, nationally and internationally. According to some, it does not matter how many women you have in government, if they are not doing anything to prioritize women's issues.[99] Yet many credit Argentina's recent legalization of abortion with the parallel strength of women's representation in ministerial posts.[100] Further, even if women's, Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and ability diverse peoples' presence in powerful decision-making positions is suppressed or their voices silenced, they still provide key models for future generations of leaders, and they help normalize the kind of diversity which could ultimately help eliminate violent trends against minorities and historically subjugated groups in society. Yet the example of Mexico shows that gendered, and to some degree ethnic "parity" is not the immediate solution to gender-based violence: despite women's 46% presence in Congress, for example, Mexico still has some of the highest rates of feminicide, among other indicators of women's inequity.

Similarly, Mexican women have relatively greater access to contraception, the day after pill and legal abortion than women in other Latin American countries, with direct implications for women's ability to combat some of the sources and consequences of gender-based violence (Fig. 10). Yet, while Mexico does have a lower adolescent pregnancy rate, it is still high rate relative to the rest of the world (Fig. 11).

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[98] Iniciativa Spotlight, "Sondeo de opinión sobre la violencia de género durante el periodo de emergencia por la pandemia de COVID-19" (Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública, El Salvador, 2020, 1–69, https://elsalvador.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/sondeo_vbgcovid19_spotlightsv2020.pdf); and Tania Libertad Camal-Cheluja, "El género en la agenda de desarrollo de Belice: La brecha entre los compromisos internacionales y la acción local" (Asociación para el Fomento de los Estudios Históricos en Centroamérica, *Boletín* n. 70 (Sept. 2016): 15).

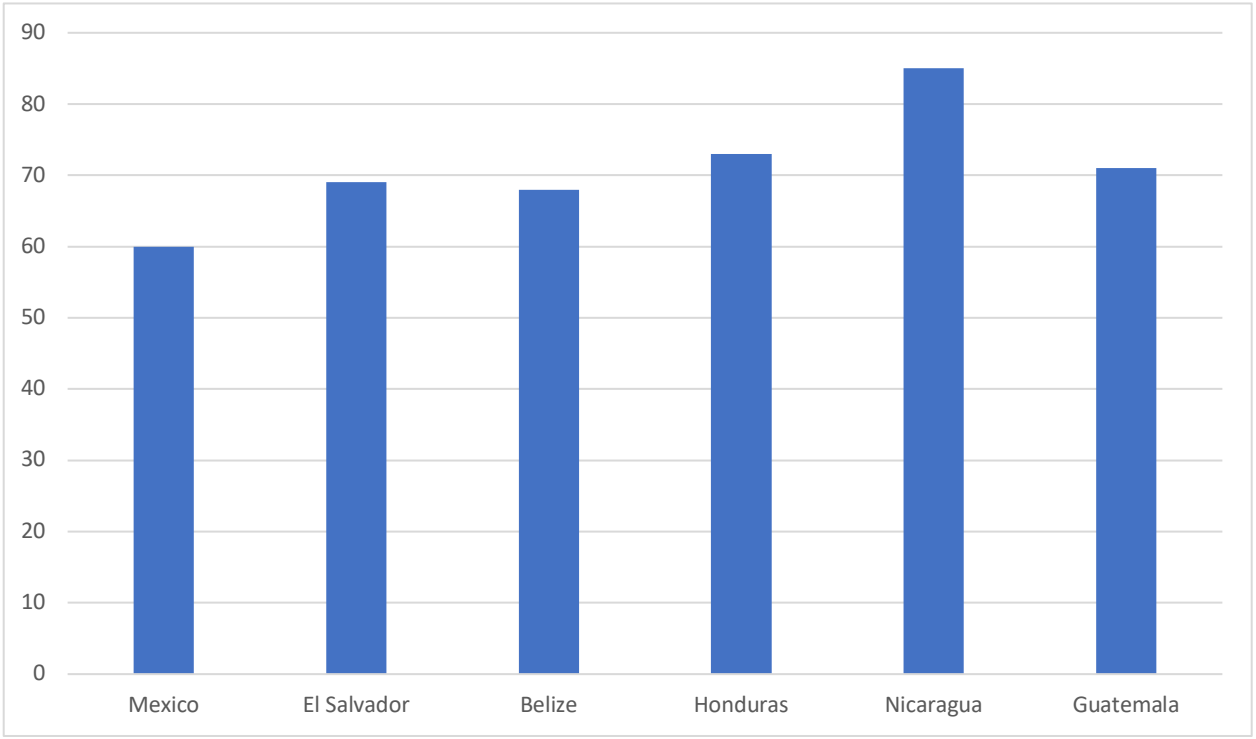
[99] See the discussion between Rebecca Tavares, Lynn Mounzer, and Sophia Azizian, "Closing the Gender Gap: Empowering Women's Economic Participation" (Wilson Center webinar, Mar. 9, 2021, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/closing-gender-gap-empowering-womens-economic-participation?utm_medium=email&utm_source=newsletter&utm_campaign=wilson&emci=d050e7f5-5683-eb11-85aa-00155d43c992&emdi=f3b81ca6-6283-eb11-85aa-00155d43c992&ceid=263540.)

[100] Alisha Haridasani Gupta and Daniel Politi, "These Three Feminists Are Changing Argentina from the Inside" (*New York Times*, May 11, 2021). The article focuses on Elizabeth Gómez Alcorta, minister of Women, Genders and Diversity; Vilma Ibarra, the president's top legal adviser; and Mercedes D'Alessandro, Argentina's first national director of economy, equality and gender within the Ministry of Economy.

Figure 10: Access to Legal Abortion in Select Countries

Abortion Laws			
Entirely Prohibited under all circumstances	Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador		
Allowed in cases of rape, fatal fetal anomaly, or to save the mother's life	Guatemala, Belize		
Available on Demand	Mexico City and Oaxaca		

Figure 11: Births per 1,000 Women Ages 15-19 in Select Countries, 2017



Source: World Bank Corp, "Closing Gender Gaps in Latin America and the Caribbean," 15.

Yet the trip to Mexico City or Oaxaca (where women can get legal abortions) may be out of reach for many young women, and the cultural implications of abortion's decriminalization in certain parts of the country may not enact enough of a change of attitude towards women's autonomy to lower patterns of gender-based violence. Continued patterns of women doing the bulk of unpaid work in the home also point to ingrained attitudes about gender roles that may further perpetuate women's economic and political exclusion or subordination, as well as men's lack of investment in family care and health, despite legal gains.

The strength of Mexico's movement against gender-based violence and feminicide has also confronted a counterforce of anti-protest efforts by members of the general populace as well as the police and the administration. Mexico's anti-violence crusade has been popularly supported,

internationally visible, and ongoing since 2017, when Mexico's #MeToo movement gained press attention due to Mexican actress Karla Souza's claim that it was experiences of sexual assault that made her migrate to the United States. In the Spring of 2018, hashtags like #Yaestuvo ("that's enough") and others protesting sexual assault in particular professions (such as #MeTooPeriodistasMexicanas) appeared.[101] These accounts and hashtags were meant as a form of support and public awareness for survivors of sexual assault to tell their stories.

On Valentines' Day 2020, right before the COVID-19 pandemic shut down the world, protests erupted in Mexico City in the wake of two particularly gruesome femicides: that of 25-year-old Ingrid Escamilla, who was stabbed and skinned by her partner in February 2020, and Fátima Cecilia Aldrighetti Antón, a 7-year-old girl who was abducted and murdered in Mexico City. Antón's body was later found naked in a plastic bag. Activists gathered in front of the presidential palace, spray painting the door with names of women who were murdered and phrases like "estado femicida," ("femicide state").[102] Organizers used hashtags to spread awareness of their efforts and to promote women telling their stories, including #PeligroEnCasa, #DangerAtHome, #FeminicidoEsPandemia, and #FemicideIsPandemic.[103] One month later, tens of thousands of women attended the International Women's Day protests in Mexico City, in March 2020.

Yet advocates against gender-based violence in Mexico are still being denied legitimacy by the president and anti-protest forces alike. The 2020 protests were met with an aggressive police response with tear gas, injuring 60 people.[104] The next day, a national strike occurred, where 6.6 million women stayed at home to show what society would look like without women.[105] The most recent controversy surrounding Mexican president López Obrador and the feminist movement has been AMLO's continued support of Félix Salgado Macedonio, a gubernatorial candidate who has been accused of sexual assault. To bring attention to the issue, feminist groups organized a protest in Mexico City on March 9, 2021, in honor of International Women's Day. López Obrador dismissed the protests as backed by the conservative party, his opposition. Riot police responded to protestors with batons and tear gas, resulting in injuries for 19 civilians and 62 officers.[106] Women attending protests have experienced excessive use of force, arrests,

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[101] Edmé Domínguez, "Mexico and Latin America: From #MeToo to #NiUnaMenos" (I. Erlingsdóttir (ed.), *The Routledge Handbooks of the Politics of the #MeToo Movement*, Taylor & Francis, 2020, 423-438).

[102] Tom Phillips, "'This is Our Feminist Spring': Millions of Mexican Women Prepare to Strike Over Femicides" (*The Guardian*, March 7, 2020,: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/07/mexico-femicides-protest-women-strike).Ibid.

[103] Angélica Pena 2021. Pena, A. (2021, March 11). "Gender-Based Violence Is Increasing Amid COVID-19" (*The Daily Chela*, March 11, 2021, https://www.dailychela.com/gender-based-violence-is-increasing-in-wake-of-covid-19/).

[104] BBC, "International Women's Day: Clashes Mar Mexico City March" (*BBC News*, March 9, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-51796605).

[105] Pena, "Gender-Based Violence…."

[106] Miriam Berger, "Women in Mexico are protesting femicide. Police have responded with force" (*The Washington Post*, March 9, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/03/09/womens-day-protests-amlo-mexico/).

and sexual assault in the hands of police officers, both male and female. Media coverage of protests has focused on protestors' use of graffiti and glitter instead of the instances of sexual assault and police violence.[107]

Why does Mexico have the feminicide rates it does—is it because the changes promoting women's equality have gained enough momentum, and made enough difference, to make women and their gains seem a more serious threat? Is it merely because reporting feminicide in Mexico increased? Or is it instead because women's bodies are increasingly considered more disposable? Clearly it is a combination of these and other factors. The case of Mexico reminds us that rates of gender-based violence do not simply go up or down based on poverty levels, quarantine, or historic inequalities, but must also be considered a symptom of the widespread fear, hatred and/or anxiety produced by non-conformity with traditional gender-, class- and race-based "roles" in today's social hierarchies.

A number of indicators point to adolescent girls being some of the most affected by the pandemic due to their loss of education and higher likelihood of early marriage and early pregnancy, as well as vulnerability to sexual assault and abuse at home

Early on in the pandemic, access to contraceptives was flagged by international women's health agencies as a key concern for women and girls around the globe due to its implications for sexual health, broadly conceived, as well as women's well-being, continued education, and economic status. Yet inability to access contraceptives during quarantine remains a severe problem throughout our region of study, especially for women of diverse abilities.[108] The statistics are grim: according to the World Health Organization (WHO), pregnancy- and childbirth-related complications are the single most common cause of death to girls fifteen to nineteen.[109] These deaths are of course more likely during quarantine, when girls stop having access to reproductive health providers or resources, are pregnant as a result of domestic abuse (with the accompanying stigma attached), or are afraid to get help because they do not want to contract the virus. The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that during the 2014 Ebola crisis, 3589 people died of the virus in Sierra Leone, while the separate death toll of newborns and mothers dying during childbirth was between 3,593 and 4,936.[110] On the other hand, if girl mothers are blessed with

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[107] Albinson Linares, "In Mexico, women have been physically, sexually abused for participating in protests" (*NBCNews.com*, March 10, 2021, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/mexico-women-physically-sexually-abused-participating-protests-rcna373).

[108] Taylor Riley et al., "Estimates of the Potential Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Sexual and Reproductive Health in Low- and Middle-Income Countries" (*International Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health* 46 (2021): 73-76, https://www.guttmacher.org/journals/ipsrh/2020/04/estimates-potential-impact-covid-19-pandemic-sexual-and-reproductive-health).

[109] WHO, "Adolescent Pregnancy" January 31, 2020, https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/adolescent-pregnancy).

[110] Melinda Gates, "The Pandemic's Toll on Women" (*Foreign Affairs*, July 15, 2020, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2020-07-15/melinda-gates-pandemics-toll-women).

healthy births, their futures will likely be economically, emotionally and physically fraught with far more demands and constraints than their peers.

Latin America's high adolescent pregnancy rates and strict anti-abortion laws have set Latin American girls and adolescents up for frightening outcomes during the pandemic, when they are at greater risk for intra-familial and domestic violence, prostitution, poverty, and lack of access to contraceptives. The statistics for sexual violence against girls for 2020 are also concerning: in Honduras, at least 50% of domestic violence hotline calls between January and October of 2020 concerned girls ages 10-19; feminicides of girls ages 0-17 for the same period hovered at 7.5 percent of Honduras' total (for both statistics, there was a substantial quantity of women of undetermined ages not counted).[111] In Nicaragua, of the 39 feminicides occurring between March and September of 2020, five were below the age of 14.[112] In many ways, this follows a more generalized pattern of gender-based violence in Nicaragua, with an estimated 88% percent of sexual violence victims being young girls, and 28% of women giving birth before 18 years of age.[113] As of April 2021, just above 40% of married women in Nicaragua were under 18 and 10% were under 15.

In El Salvador, the data from the Ministerio de Justicia y Seguridad Pública shows that while women ages 20-80 suffered the bulk of abuse reported during the first half of 2020 in terms of physical, domestic, psychological, economic and cyber-violence, it was girls 1-19 that suffered the most sexual violence—a total of about 1650 recorded cases as compared to about 550 for their older counterparts (Fig. 12).[114]

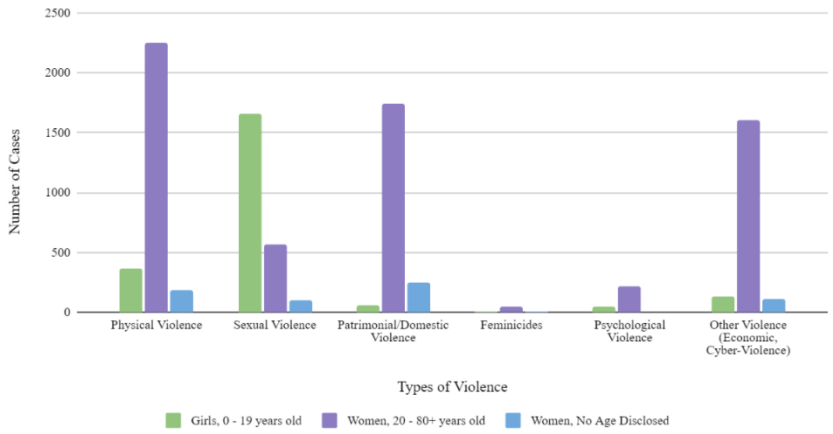
[111] CDM, "Observatorio de Derechos Humanos de las Mujeres, 2020."

[112] Observatorio por la Vida de las Mujeres, "Machismo es pandemia" infograph (dated September 2020, https://elmachismoespandemia.org/).

[113] Plan International, "Stopping sexual violence in Nicaragua" (April 4, 2016, https://plan-international.org/because-i-am-a-girl/stopping-sexual-violence-nicaragua). According to a 2013 Amnesty International report, in the first six months of 2012, there were 1,862 reports of sexual violence, with 1,048 of the survivors under the age of 14 and 80% of the survivors were 17 or younger. Additionally, between 2000-2009, the number of girls between the ages of 10-14 who gave birth increased by 47.9% even though sexual intercourse with a girl under the age of 14 is statutory rape according to Nicaraguan law ("NICARAGUA Key concerns relating to human rights promotion and protection in Nicaragua," 2013, https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/12000/amr430042013en.pdf). Belize holds to a somewhat similar pattern. According to the Government of Belize Press Office, 75% of all cases of sexual violence in 2018 were among girls 10-19 (Government of Belize Press Office, 2020).

[114] Ministerio de Justicia y Seguridad Pública, *Hechos de Violencia Contra las Mujeres—El Salvador, enero-junio 2020,* Gobierno de El Salvador, 2020, 1–56.

Figure 12: Gender-Based Violence Cases in El Salvador – January to June 2020



Source: Ministerio de Justicia y Seguridad Pública, *Hechos de Violencia Contra las Mujeres—El Salvador, enero-junio 2020*, Gobierno de El Salvador, 2020, 1–56.

The Salvadoran Ministry also reports that there were 1,193 cases of medical services being given due to sexual violence in El Salvador for this early period, with 928 cases being for girls under the age of 18 and 243 cases being for girls in a state of pregnancy.[115] According to the Salvadoran Ministry of Health, 114 girls aged 10 to 14 became pregnant during the lockdown.[116]

Adolescent girls may be affected in other gendered ways as a result of the pandemic. According to Suzanne Elhers, CEO of the Malala Fund, girls in many parts of the world are less likely than boys to return to their schools when they reopen.[117] A disproportionate number of girls paused their education when schools became virtual because they have domestic responsibilities at home, and in households with limited digital resources, boys' studies are often a priority. In Honduras, many fear that families' dire economic situations and halted education for girls may also lead to increased rates of child marriage.[118] According to a study by the Center for Global development, the majority of school operators, education service delivery organizations, and other children's rights, care, gender equality, health and government organizations throughout the world believed that a) girls would be more negatively affected by school closures than boys; and b) that girls' exposure to gender-based violence at home during school closures is one of

[115] *Idem*.

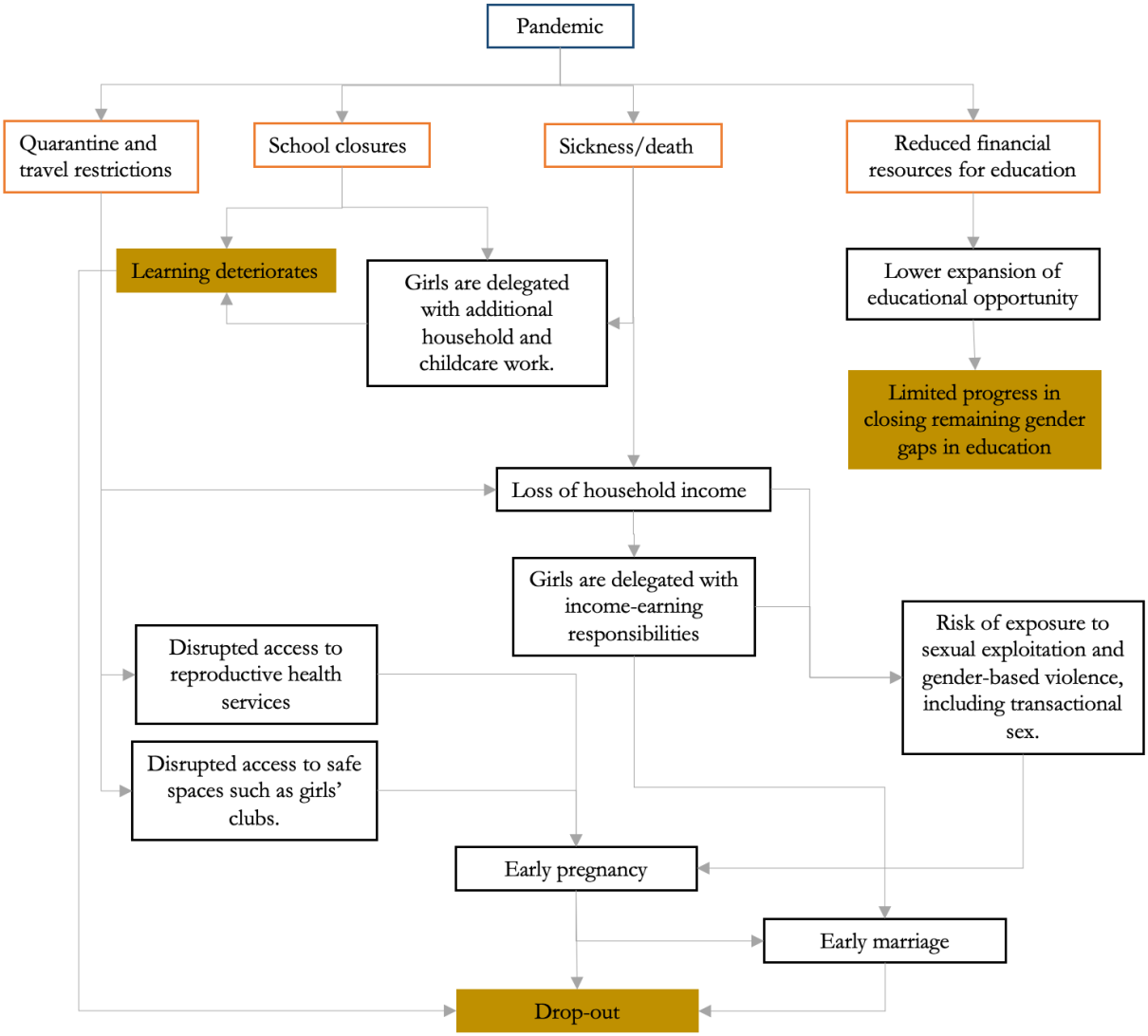
[116] Anastasia Moloney, "'No options' for El Salvador's Pregnant Girls Raped on Lockdown" (*Reuters*, August 31, 2020, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-el-salvador-aborti-idUSKBN25R2YY).

[117] Suzanne Ehlers, S. "COVID-19 One Year Later: What's Working for Women in Response and Recovery". [Zoom Conference]. Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace, and Security, February 18, 2021, https://giwps.georgetown.edu/event/covid-19-one-year-on-whats-working-for-women-in-response-and-recovery/).

[118] Plan International, "Futuro incierto de niñas hondureñas luego de tres meses de Eta y Iota" (March 2021, https://plan-international.org/es/latin-america/3-meses-eta-iota-Honduras).

their main concerns.[119] In another study, Amina Mendez Acosta and David Evans created a flow chart of what they saw as the most concerning forces within the pandemic contexts in terms of girls' schooling and development, including additional household duties, financial responsibilities, and risk of abuse or early marriage or pregnancy (Fig. 13).[120]

Figure 13: Pandemic Pressures on Girls' Schooling and Development



Source: Amina Mendez Acosta and David Evans, *How Previous Crises Have Affected Girls' Education* in "COVID and Girls' Education: What We Know So Far and What We Expect" Center for Global Development, Oct. 2, 2020, https://www.cgdev.org/blog/covid-19-and-girls-education-what-we-know-so-far-and-what-we-expect-happen.

[119] Maryam Akmal et al., "Gendered Impacts of COVID-19 School Closures: Insights from Frontline Organizations" (Center for Global Development Policy Paper 175, May 2020).

[120] Amina Mendez Acosta and David Evans, "How Previous Crises Have Affected Girls' Education" (in *COVID and Girls' Education: What We Know So Far and What We Expect*, Center for Global Development, Oct. 2, 2020, https://www.cgdev.org/blog/covid-19-and-girls-education-what-we-know-so-far-and-what-we-expect-happen).

The enormous inequality, on all levels, between rural and urban populations has grown even more during the pandemic, and should be reduced by bridging these two worlds

According to ECLAC, the poverty rates in rural Latin America tend to be twice as high as in urban ones, and about 21% of Latin America and the Caribbean's population cannot access health services due to geographic barriers.[121] Many of the regions of our study are rural: over half of the population of both Belize and Guatemala live outside any city.[122] Both Mexico and Honduras also went into the pandemic with poverty rates of over 30% and extreme poverty rates of over 10%, predominating in the rural areas (fully half of Honduras' population was under the poverty level before the pandemic began).[123] According to a 2020 report by a number of UN agencies, all of the countries under our study will likely witness growth stunting, especially in rural areas, which are also home to most of the Indigenous and Afro-descendant populations in these countries, with Mexico most affected.[124]

In his workshop with our class, anthropologist Jan Rus discussed the problems he has had in finding the true numbers of victims and survivors of COVID in Mayan Tzeltal and Tzotzil communities in rural highland Chiapas. The data on this region is inconsistent and underestimates the deaths and cases. Rus hypothesizes that this is due to both the state and communities suppressing numbers, as those gathering information for the government and even some hospital workers themselves are looked on with distrust, while governmental officials simultaneously have a history of ignoring deaths within these populations. On the other hand, some members of highland communities have also chosen to stay at home to hide their illness from neighbors and friends (Jan Rus, HILA 4993 class workshop, Apr. 12, 2021).

[121] In 2019, poverty rates in rural areas averaged 45.7% as against those reported in urban areas (26.9%) (ECLAC, "Social Panorama…" 51).

[122] See CIA World Factbook, "Belize" (https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/belize/).

[123] ECLAC, "Social Panorama…" 52.

[124] The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), and the Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), among others: *Panorama de la seguridad alimentaria y nutricional en América Latina y el Caribe 2020* (Santiago: 2020, 52, 55).

In Nicaragua, the combination of poverty and the politicization of medicine has rendered rural regions among the least prepared for the pandemic in terms of healthcare. Nicaragua's health system is considered a universal public health system, implemented through localized community-care carried out by midwives, volunteers, and 'brigadistas,' all of which are organized by the Local Comprehensive Health Care Systems (SILAIS).[125] Though the Ministry of Health (MINSA) is the national regulator of healthcare, the work on the ground is done through SILAIS. Even though the goal is to provide affordable services, there are many challenges facing the health system which are largely caused by the politicization of medicine. In 2018, the Ortega administration dismissed approximately 250 doctors.[126] The combination of poor health education and localization of medicine has resulted in health inequities for rural regions. According to a 2011 report by PATH, a global nonprofit, 70% of maternity-related deaths were in rural regions, 39.6% of children in these areas were malnourished, and 35% of rural health facilities lacked reliable electricity.[127]

A lack of access to clean water and internet connection are also obvious barriers for health care among rural populations during COVID, especially among women and girls living in abusive situations. For example, in Guatemala, where over half the population lives outside of any city, 30% of the population had no running water or electricity before COVID hit.[128] This means far more labor is involved—and sometimes possibly dangerous trips out of the house—in accessing water, performing household chores, and protecting oneself and one's family from the virus. It also means less access to schooling during quarantine. Finally, limited access to internet also means a greater lack of access to information about the virus more generally and about how to protect oneself from it. On the other hand, in rural Chiapas, Mexico, distrust of hospitals and the government generally fed into conspiracy theories in 2020 when access to Whatsapp and other social media outlets helped spread the rumor that the government was spraying COVID-19 particles via airplanes to deal with overpopulation, and that vaccines contained fatal chemicals. Violence broke out in response to these fears, resulting in attacks on clinics, healthcare workers, and hospitals in the summer of that year.[129]

In terms of gender-based violence, women in rural areas, especially Indigenous women, have always had less access to care and resources than their urban, Spanish-speaking counterparts. Quarantine has exacerbated these circumstances. For example, a teenager in Panzós, Guatemala, was abused by a family member and required medical attention. Her family made the decision to

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[125] "Healthcare in Nicaragua: Unsung Heroes" (The Borgen Project, July 28, 2020, https://borgenproject.org/healthcare-in-nicaragua-unsung-heroes/).

[126] Elena Vargas-Palacios et al., "The Politicised and Crumbling Nicaraguan Health System" (*The Lancet*, 392:10165 (Dec. 2018-Jan. 2019) 2694–2695).

[127] Magda Sequeira et al., "The Nicaraguan Health System: An Overview of Critical Challenges and Opportunities," (Seattle, Washington: PATH, 2011).

[128] Adriana Quiñones, UN Women Representative in Guatemala, "The Impact of COVID-19 on Gender Disparities in Latin America" (Woodrow Wilson webinar, May 20, 2020).

[129] Leonardo Toledo Garibaldi, "La suma de todos los miedos: el Covid-19 en las cadenas de WhatsApp de Chiapas" (*Chiapas Paralelo*, July 14, 2020).

wait until lockdown had been lifted until getting her to a hospital, due to concerns about COVID and hospital availability.[130]

In all the countries we have studied, there are ongoing efforts to form bridges between the rural and urban worlds. In Oaxaca, Mexico, the women's organization Lunas del Sur has spearheaded classes on the connections between gender, discrimination, poverty and health for rural, predominantly Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities to take for university credit, and for which they can get transport from their homes and places to stay while taking the course. These are not simply courses, however. In Mexico, Indigenous communities have some autonomy over how they deal with violence and abuse within their communities based on ethnically- and locally-based "usos y costumbres." The courses thus create an exchange between Indigenous legal and cultural frameworks and lawyers working under Mexico's national laws. Unfortunately, these classes have been shut down during COVID, not only because Lunas del Sur now does not have the money to put people up in local homes, but because many Indigenous communities in the region have been holding strictly to community-based quarantines, blocking off roads against travel in and out of towns.[131] In many cases, language barriers must also be surmounted for these efforts, a problem one group, Colectivo ñuu Ayava, also in Mexico, has tackled with an Indigenous language application for mobile phones, which provides COVID-related information in eleven variants of eight different languages.[132]

One young man in a rural Salvadoran community tied his cellphone to a string and put it up high on a bamboo pole in an elevated field, in order to get internet access. Pretty soon, other members of the community followed suit, with students gathering to do their schoolwork, propping up their notebooks, phones, and calculators in their laps. Eventually, the community came to be known as "the village of the hanging cell phones" (Beatríz Beiras, "El ingenio de unos salvadoreños para tener acceso a internet durante la cuarentena" *EuroNews*, May 3, 2020).

Women's protests in Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala tell us that they want and need a voice and a presence, not simply more accurate numbers

During the first year of the pandemic, and despite the danger of contagion and the demands of quarantine, various countries exploded in protest specifically targeting government, law

[130] Sofía Muñoz and Jaret Waters, "A Pandemic Within a Pandemic: Violence in Latin America Against Women and The LGBTQ+ Community During Covid-19," Latin American Working Group (LAWG), February 12, 2021, https://www.lawg.org/a-pandemic-within-a-pandemic-violence-in-latin-america-against-women-and-the-lgbtq-community-during-covid-19/).

[131] Lunas del Sur, interview and class workshop, March 31, 2021. Lunas del Sur is an independent organization run by two lawyers, Erika Lili and Yesica Díaz Cruz, in Oaxaca City, Oaxaca, Mexico. They run workshops, a library, and defend cases with and for Indigenous and Afro-descended women in Oaxaca (see https://lunadelsurac.blogspot.com/).

[132] Laken Brooks, "Oaxacan Youth Create an App to Share Information About the Pandemic in Indigenous Languages" (*Forbes*, Mar. 30, 2021).

enforcement, and society's inability to prioritize violence against women as a parallel danger alongside the virus. We understand these protests as among some of the key strategies for combating gender-based violence and its sources, because they helped bring awareness to the seriousness of violence that is often made invisible, either because it happens in homes and behind closed doors or because it has become so normalized. Further, these protests provide evidence of what survivors and their advocates, not just scholars and policymakers, believe are the biggest problems or avenues towards solutions to these problems.

In many cases, we see the demand to be "counted," in the sense of numbers and statistics that render gender-based violence a "fact" that can support new "evidence-based policies." This demand also reflects the contention that government-issued numbers are false and that these errors in counting are politically-motivated. Examples of these claims are evident in some of the hashtags used to unite against gender-based violence, including #NiUnaMenos (used in several countries) and #Cuéntalo (especially Guatemala). Before the pandemic, in 2018, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) launched its interactive CuéntaNos platform which now operates a multi-platform information hub and two-way WhatsApp messaging in Mexico, the Northern Triangle, Colombia, and Venezuela. During the pandemic, CuéntaNos allowed women experiencing gender-based violence to seek information and help through online resource libraries and WhatsApp messaging.[133]

On the other hand, Mexico's International Women's Day protests of March 8, 2021, emphasized far more than numbers—individual names of deceased women were painted on the National Palace, reflecting a purposefully overwhelming visualization of the diversity of people, stories, relationships and whole worlds which had been lost to feminicide. Further, protesters themselves made tangible the erasure and scars felt in the wake of public and, especially, governmental apathy and indifference. This was even more clearly expressed by the fact that protesters were forced to only leave their messages on wooden boards, rather than the building itself, because government officials had carefully boarded up the National Palace ahead of time to avoid letting any spray paint touch the façade, as had occurred on the same day the previous year (Fig. 14).

[133] International Rescue Committee, "IRC announces launch of humanitarian information service designed for Salvadorans: CuéntaNos" (2018, https://www.rescue.org/press-release/irc-announces-launch-humanitarian-information-service-designed-salvadorans-cuentanos.). CuéntaNos collects data that reveals interesting trends in gender-based violence, unemployment, and migration based on people's searches. Several data points suggest increased instances of gender-based violence since the start of the pandemic. Before the pandemic, in February of 2020, CuéntaNos' Facebook page for gender-based violence had 1,574 unique visitors. In May of 2020, that number saw a 30-fold increase to 38,902 unique visitors ("IRC data shows an increase in reports of gender-based violence across Latin America," International Rescue Committee, June 9, 2020, https://www.rescue.org/press-release/irc-data-shows-increase-reports-gender-based-violence-across-latin-america). In March of 2020, one user requested gender-based-violence related support through CuéntaNos WhatsApp messaging, and in May of 2020, 121 users reached out for help. More recent data shows that between October and November of 2020, when hurricanes Eta and Iota hit countries in the Northern Triangle, there was an additional spike of requests for information and services related to gender-based violence in the region ("IRC: Migration search trends point to growing displacement from Central America due to COVID, climate change and conflict" International Rescue Committee, March 16, 2021, https://www.rescue.org/press-release/irc-migration-search-trends-point-growing-displacement-central-america-due-covid). Requests for such services remained high through early 2021.

Figure 14: Preparing for International Women's Day in Mexico City, Mar. 8, 2021

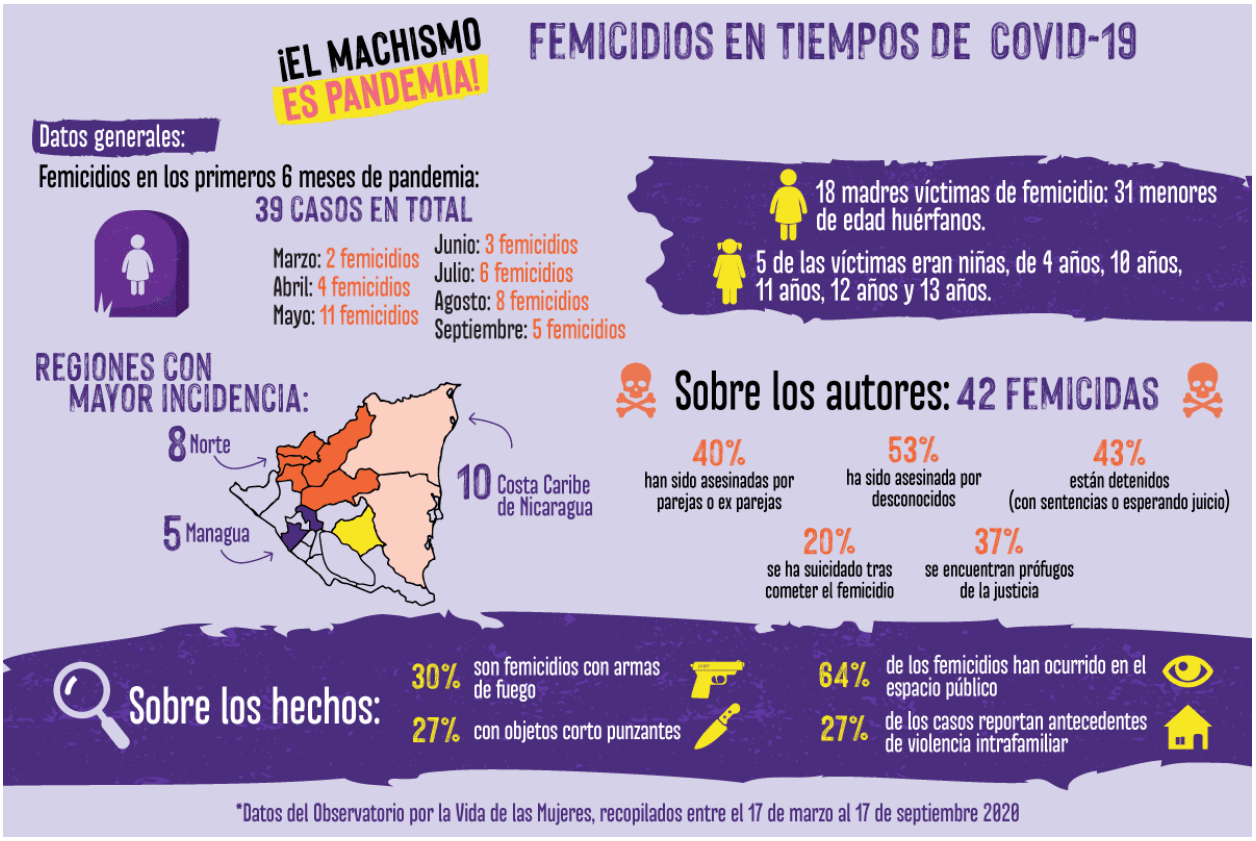
Photo by Olivia Schmidt, 2021.

In the case of Guatemala and Honduras, single women's losses of life became central to society-wide demands for government action. These were not simply demands for investigation of particular cases but for justice more broadly conceived, a call against the invisibility of violence against women, minorities, and marginalized populations due to negligence and impunity, and the underlying systems, structures and ideologies that normalized that kind of negligence. For example, the death of Keyla Martínez, who was killed in Honduran police custody for breaking quarantine restrictions, became the inspiration for street protests in La Esperanza, Honduras, while the hashtag #JusticiaParaKeyla united activists on social media.[134] In Guatemala, two other violent deaths sparked similar movements: that of 20-year-old student Litzy Amelia Cordón Gurdado, who was kidnapped, held for ransom, and, after weeks of captivity, found lifeless in the town of Teculutan in Eastern Guatemala; and of 28-year-old elementary school teacher Laura Daniela Hernández Guerra, who was also found murdered in the same town. The hashtags #JusticiaParaLitzy and #JusticiaParaLaura have rendered these women's lives and deaths resounding demands for justice on a broader level, as well as a recognition for lives wrongfully ignored.

What may be even more concerning are the voices that are not being represented in these marches, their placards, or the Twitter and Facebook posts and WhatsApp platforms that advertise and record these mobilizations. While social media have helped galvanize crowds behind these issues, many rural communities lack connectivity or the technology to take advantage of these outlets. In other cases, this technology is controlled by peoples' aggressors. Increasingly, the internet itself has become a site of gender-based violence.To rely on these digital outlets too much to support voices of those struggling with violence would be equivalent to further marginalizing those already least able to make their concerns and needs known. In some cases, infographics like that produced by Nicaragua's Observatorio por la Vida de las Mujeres may be more effective (Fig. 15).

[134] BBC News, "Death of Honduran student in police custody sparks protests" (BBC News, February 10, 2021, available https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-56009346).

Figure 15: "Machismo es pandemia" (Machismo is a pandemic) infograph (Sept., 2020)



Source: Observatorio por la Vida de las Mujeres, Nicaragua

Conclusion

This report has highlighted the rise in gendered violence during the first year of COVID, as well as the sectors most vulnerable to this violence and to the structural, economic, and psychological collapse that the world as a whole went through. Still, there is no reason to only focus on a dark future; despite the fact that, for example, adolescent girls appear to be some of the most affected by this global catastrophe, historically they are also the most resilient—across Latin America and the Caribbean, prior to the pandemic, young girls have been more employed, and more likely to attend school, than their male counterparts; this reflects deep changes across the past 25 years.[135] Further, opinion polls, such as those conducted by Latinobarómetro, suggest that, despite lives ravaged by violence, environmental disaster, and now a pandemic, LAC youth are the most open to difference: to embracing people of differing gendered identities, nationalities, and ethnicities, and encouraging their political participation.[136] There is little evidence that women, girls, LGBTQ+ people and their advocates have stopped fighting, been ready to slip into the shadows,

[135] UN Women and CARE, "Latin America and the Caribbean…," 15; Evidence for Gender and Education Resource (EGER), Education Roadmap (by country, https://egeresource.org/profiles/countries/HN/).

[136] Latinobarómetro, "Problemas personales, sociales y del país"> "problemas de género," filtered by age, 2018, for Mexico, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala.

or lost the creativity to seek new avenues for breaking the chains of patriarchal power, apathy, and inertia. They will be key actors in creating a better future.

Grandmother, Honduras, 2018. Photo by Olivia Schmidt.