

VIOLENT WOMEN AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Gender Relations in the *Maras* and Other Street Gangs of
Central America's Northern Triangle Region

Isabel Aguilar Umaña and Jeanne Ridders

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AUTHORS

Isabel Aguilar Umaña

Isabel Aguilar Umaña is Regional Coordinator of Interpeace's Central American Youth Programme, based in Guatemala. She has a Masters in Human Rights from the San Carlos University in Guatemala. She has ten years of experience in facilitating dialogues processes. Her fields of expertise include youth related violence, human rights, conflict resolution, peace studies and gender analysis.

Jeanne Rikkers

Jeanne Rikkers is Regional Research Coordinator of Interpeace's Central American Youth Programme and is based in El Salvador. She holds a degree in Liberal Arts from Calvin College in Michigan. She has more than 20 years of work experience in peacebuilding and human rights promotion among youth and other vulnerable groups across Central America. Her current research interests include conflict transformation and violence prevention in relation to youth involved in gangs.

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INTRODUCTION

The so-called *maras* and other youth gangs of Central America's Northern Triangle are mainly comprised of men; nevertheless, women are present in multiple ways in the lives of gang members, either as mothers, sisters, girlfriends, friends or fellow gang members. This publication is based on the findings of an exploratory study of the role of women and gender-based relations in the inner circles of these gangs. The study examines the motivations of some girls and teenagers to join street gangs, their experiences as women in these groups which are dominated by men, as well as the reasons why some of them decide to leave the group. The study is based on a series of interviews with active or former female gang members from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras; interviews with male gang members and former gang members; interviews with some professional social workers who work on social reinsertion programmes for gang members.

This publication concludes with a series of policy and funding recommendations to international policy makers to address the issues raised in the study to ensure that that vulnerable young girls and teenage women who are victims of gender violence receive appropriate and timely interventions.

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1 The POLJUVE project was funded by the Governments of Spain, Canada and the Netherlands.

2 <http://www.ifp-ew.eu/>. <http://www.interpeace.org>

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the last ten years, the governments of Central America's Northern Triangle region have adopted primarily repressive security strategies to tackle the problem of youth violence and wage a frontal battle against youth and street gangs. These measures have had little effect on reducing the problems of violence and lack of security, and have instead violated the human rights of many young people.

The so-called *maras* and other youth gangs of Central America's Northern Triangle are mainly comprised of men; nevertheless, women are present in multiple ways in the lives of gang members, either as mothers, sisters, girlfriends, friends or fellow gang members.

Receiving much less media attention is the violence against women, which has claimed many victims in the region. There are alarming reports of femicide, sexual violence, human trafficking, domestic violence and abuse. Added to this are the limited services available for female victims of violence and the poor assistance women receive from many public officials when they report acts of violence, which often results in them being re-victimised and not offered any type of protection.

Faced with the huge scale of the problems experienced in the region, it is necessary for public policies aimed at preventing and handling problems related to violence to be holistic, focused and have a gender approach; i.e. they should take into account the fact that women and men experience violence in different ways and should therefore be offered different and specialised care. In other words, laws, policies, programmes and projects must be designed and implemented with a focus on gender, which is fundamental to change gender relations in male-dominated societies.

After having briefly presented the origins and the recent evolution of gang activities in Central America, this publication highlights the vision and experience of the women who have been inside these gangs, not just as family, but as initiated members. Generally speaking, women and men have been studied in a similar fashion in spite of the great differences and inequalities which exist between them, but this paper further examines how the presence of women in gangs can be explained within the complex and changing context of this region. It then concludes with six policy recommendations for national and international stakeholders to improve their strategies and programmes on these issues.

The recommended actions are:

1. Targeted programme in high-crime areas to address the particular reasons why young women drop out of school.
2. Primary-school-based programmes to detect and intervene when young girls show signs of family violence.
3. Specialised training for teachers, healthcare workers and law-enforcement officers to address the psychological effects of violence and abuse on the lives of girls and young women.
4. Design and expansion of programmes for girls and young women in high-crime areas to provide real opportunities for building self-esteem, identity, employment, non-violent conflict management and human rights.
5. Sexual and reproductive health programmes including strategies to reach women in marginalised areas and other vulnerable women.
6. Programmes designed to holistically address the needs and rights of teenagers and women in conflict with the law.

1. ORIGINS AND ACTIVITIES OF THE *MARAS* AND OTHER GANGS IN THE CENTRAL AMERICAN NORTHERN TRIANGLE

Gangs are nothing new to the Central American northern triangle region. There are records of gangs dating back to the 1970s and 1980s. However, in the 1990s, the two gangs that grew significantly in urban marginal areas were the *Mara Salvatrucha* or MS13 and *Barrio 18* (the 18th Street gang), both originally from California.

THE CREATION OF GANGS

Many Central Americans emigrated to the United States to escape the political violence and economic crisis of that time. They settled in poor, urban neighbourhoods of California and other states where they were faced with poverty and discrimination. In these areas they found gangs of juveniles such as the 18th Street gang, which had been there since the 1960s, and which were comprised mostly of Mexican-American men. Some of the Central American youths joined those existing gangs to be both accepted and as a protection strategy.

A LONG-STANDING RIVALRY

A group of immigrants from El Salvador formed MS13 to protect themselves from the harassment and discrimination of other gangs. Since then a deadly rivalry has emerged between the 18th Street gang and MS13. This rivalry was carried back to Central America by gang members who were deported or returned following the end of the region's civil conflicts. The post-war periods in Guatemala and El Salvador saw a merging of older forms of youth gangs with "LA-style" street gangs.

MS13 and 18th Street grew rapidly in the marginal urban areas of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. There are no exact figures on how many children and teenagers are now part of these groups. The figures have varied with time and often in response to political motivations: in 2005 it was estimated that the number of gang members oscillated between 50,000 and 100,000 in the northern triangle.

THE USE OF VIOLENCE BY GANGS

The hermetic nature of the gangs, and the extremely repressive response to youth participation in them, has made information about their internal culture, and especially their participation in criminal activity, difficult to obtain.

High levels of impunity in the criminal justice systems of all three countries make definitive statements by law enforcement with regard to gangs and criminal activity somewhat suspect until further studies and better criminal investigation methods can be established. Nevertheless, it is clear that violent crime has been and continues to play a large part in the lives of many gang members, as do the extortion rackets which financially support the economies of gang members, both in and out of prison, as well as their families.

THE EFFECTS OF REPRESSIVE POLICIES

Some gang experts indicate that social discrimination and strong repression against members of *maras* and gangs has caused a decline in the amount of children and teenagers attracted by these groups, resulting in a drop in the number of new members in recent years. Others, however, assert that pre-teens in gang-dominated communities continue to join gangs and have come to see membership as one of few social and economic options in the face of stigmatisation and marginalisation.

Currently, the street gangs are predominantly located in “hot” neighbourhoods of large cities, where, in some cases, they feel safe from police incursions or are virtually held hostage by security forces who control the perimeter of the community. Generally speaking, gang members have little contact with the outside world and only leave their area to carry out a “mission” entrusted to them by the gang; they then return to the relative safety of their neighbourhood.

STATE REPRESSION AGAINST AND SOCIAL ALIENATION OF GANGS

MARGINILASATION OF GANG MEMBERS

The state and society have favoured two approaches to respond to the problem of gangs: the social approach and the reactive/repressive approach. The first approach states that gang members are a product of a system which has marginalised and excluded them; therefore, they have a right to be rehabilitated into and by that same society. The second approach proposes treating them as criminals by considering them members of illicit associations; it proposes dealing with the problem using police repression and criminal punishment.

A NEED TO SEEK CREATIVE SOLUTIONS

Forced to seek solutions which are more creative and in agreement with their particular realities, the Central American countries are trying to find new ways out of this phenomenon, which has expanded throughout the region and which threatens the safety of the area’s population in different ways. However, before studying the possible and most suitable state responses, the fact that behind the gangs there are unequal and largely exclusive societies, as well as states which offer very little protection and minimum security for children and teenagers, has to be acknowledged and taken into account in any policy which hopes to be effective.

It is also important to recognise that principally repressive measures, while failing to resolve the problem, are considered to be linked to multiple human rights violations. These violations range from violations of process and false imprisonment, to sentences being served in some of the most overpopulated and inhumane prison conditions in the world and, in some cases, even torture and extrajudicial killings.

2. WOMEN IN GANGS

MOTIVATIONS AND MEANS OF ENTRY INTO THE GANG

WHY GIRLS JOIN GANGS

There are multiple economic, social and personal factors which influence a girl's decision to join a gang. Not all of these factors are immediately recognised by the participants, but studies show that they include poverty – especially in areas with highly unequal distribution of wealth and basic services – sexual violence, child abuse, high school drop-out rates, unemployment, easy access to weapons and drugs, and prolonged exposure to violence in the home and community as well as by the authorities.

SIMILAR MOTIVATING FACTORS AS YOUNG MEN

These factors are similar to those mentioned by young men, especially when both share historical-structural contexts and social environments which put them in a position of vulnerability and risk. In general, they cited similar motivations for joining a gang as men. The women interviewed said they joined gangs for the need to belong to a group; the search for protection and affection; the need for money; a desire to be recognised; the need to escape a conflictive and violent family environment.

I joined the 18th Street gang when I was 12 because my mum used to make me deliver money. She didn't care where it came from, I had to carry it. I learned everything on the street, I was arrested, I tried every kind of drug. I have been living with an ex-gang member for 18 years now, but I want my daughters to have another way.

LA TINY, EX-GANG MEMBER, GUATEMALA³

A STRONG DESIRE TO FLEE THE FAMILY

A common theme among most of the women interviewed was the desire to flee from their own family and seek protection, affection, resources and identity. Some young girls feel attracted by the identity and dynamics of the gangs and want to be part of the group.

POTENTIAL DIFFERENCE BETWEEN JOINING A GANG AND HAVING A RELATIONSHIP WITH A GANG MEMBER

Many of them join after falling in love with a gang member. It is important to acknowledge that most women who enter into relationships do not become initiated members of the gang, and their stories and experiences deserve further study as they may differ from the experiences related by the participants in this study, who made the decision to become gang members themselves.

HARSH INITIATION RITUALS FOR WOMEN

The requirements to accept women into a gang are even greater than those for men. This not surprising in societies where women's acceptance into traditionally male spheres is limited at best. To be "recognised" by the gang, they must prove their bravery and loyalty. Normally, aspiring members must first pass a series of tests during a "checking out" phase. During this phase, they must carry out tasks set by the gang. The actual initiation takes place when they pass those tests. For the men, the initiation involves receiving a beating by gang members, which lasts for 13 seconds (in the case of MS13) or 18 seconds (18th Street). Women have two options: receive a beating or have sexual intercourse with gang members. Practically all the women chose the beating over the collective sexual rape because they feel their dignity would be better preserved this way.

3 For security reasons, the researchers have used fake acronyms or mere titles in order for interviewed persons not to be recognised.

The fact that girls are offered sexual intercourse as a method to join the gang reflects the use of their bodies as territory for their male colleagues to exercise their strength, which turns the sexual act into an act of humiliation and gender violence.

As previously mentioned, many women enter a gang because of their relationship with one male gang member. These relationships can give a woman an advantage which allows her to avoid a beating or the degradation of a sexual initiation. Among those interviewed, women mainly referred to relationships with male gang leaders or men with some influence in the gang (drug dealers, arms dealers, treasurers, veterans). On very few occasions did women say they chose a partner who had little influence or experience in the gang (such as a “soldier” or new member). This is a characteristic trait of courtships in societies and groups ruled by patriarchy, in the sense that in these societies the men with greater social “prestige” (whatever the source of this prestige may be) are the ones most attractive to women, and that the women seek these types of men because it gives them access to better security, better resources, a better social position, etc.

As for male gang members, they prefer courting young women from outside the gang and generally pick underage girlfriends between 13 and 15 years old who are not gang members. In contrast, female gang members can only look for a boyfriend inside the clique or inside the gang. Otherwise, they do not have boyfriends because generally the group forbids them to have one outside the gang.

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE GANG

HISTORIC ROLE OF WOMEN IN GANGS WAS ONE OF CARER

The role of women as members of a gang itself, as well as those who are closely related through long-term relationships with gang members, has undergone some noticeable changes which resonate with the evolution of gang structures over time. Initially, the roles assigned to women were directly derived from the patriarchal system of domination. Male members perceived them as girlfriends, partners, mothers of gang members’ children and carers for the group. Women usually did not participate in the gang’s activities. Another important responsibility was to serve as a link between the gang and the outside world.

ROLE NOW INVOLVES CRIMINAL ACTIVITIES

However, as the gangs have evolved, women have been increasingly involved in gangs’ criminal activities. Some of them have stopped being passive spectators to now carrying out violent and criminal acts themselves. It is not clear yet whether these changes are due to gang strategy or whether they are the result of the women claiming equal rights within the gangs’ inner circles. It is also unclear as to whether this is due to the persecution to which gang members were subjected as a result of the repressive and heavy-handed policies previously implemented by governments. It is now common to see women carrying out “missions” ordered by the group, such as extorting money from transport drivers and traders, attacks on product delivery vans, drug smuggling and arms trafficking, among others. In these activities they take advantage of both their physical attractiveness, as well as their image of innocence, in order not to arouse the suspicion of victims or the police. In many cases, the female image is used to safeguard weapons, to obtain information, carry out surveillance tasks and follow victims for kidnapping, etc. According to male gang members, these tasks are more successful when they are performed by women.

WOMEN ARE THE DIRECT LINK TO THOSE IN PRISON

Women, mostly those who are not members of gangs, carry the primary responsibility of visiting gang members in prison as it is more difficult for men to visit prisons for fear of the police. Women are sometimes used to smuggle drugs into prisons, as well as the more common tasks such as bringing food, clothes, and medicines to imprisoned male gang members. In El Salvador, women are often subjected to invasive and abusive security measures in order to enter prisons on the assumption that they are trafficking illegal substances. They play an important role as a communication channel for information coming in and out of prison, only some of which may be illicit in nature. They are the direct link between neighbourhood gang members and those in prison. They also bring information about gang members’ girlfriends, wives and children who are not part of the gang.

FURTHER STUDY OF MOTIVES NEEDED

Further studies are needed to determine the extent to which coercion is involved in women's participation in the illicit trade in drugs, weapons and mobile phones in prison systems. While the vast majority of women visiting gang members in prison are family members who do not traffic these items, some do. According to some sources who work with young women in rehabilitation programmes, some young women entering prisons are victims of sexual exploitation and trafficking which has been rendered invisible under the overriding focus on security issues, during which visitors are treated with suspicion and derision.

TRADITIONAL ROLES PERSIST

In general, although women have increasingly started to carry out tasks which were traditionally performed by male gang members, this has not led to a breakaway from the traditional roles assigned to them by the patriarchal system of domination. In addition to their role in committing criminal acts, in many cases they continue to play a key role in maintaining family bonds and caring for others. This parallels the double role that women generally are expected to fulfil in these societies of both participating in the productive economy and shouldering the primary responsibility for the family and the household.

POSSIBILITIES AND REASONS FOR LEAVING A GANG

Loyalty and faithfulness are essential to gangs. It is therefore not easy for any member – male or female – to leave. Without the gang's approval, members who try to leave are seen as traitors and their lives are often in danger.

PREGNANCY

Usually, there are two main reasons for a female gang member to leave a gang. Firstly, many women express their wish to leave the gang when they become pregnant. The desire to take care of their children and to provide them with affection is an important stimulus. Gang members generally take care of and protect pregnant women; however, women want to offer their children better life conditions than those experienced in gangs, where danger seems permanent.

RELIGION

The second reason to leave a gang is religion. This option is open to both men and women. In general, gangs respect the decision of members to join a church and actively participate. Many young people seek spiritual and social support in religion as a way out of the gang. Referring to this, one of the women interviewed said that God gave her another opportunity to leave (the gang). Usually, getting close to religion stems from a gang member's painful or tragic personal experience, such as murder of one of his/her close relatives.

FEAR CONTROLS THE WISH TO LEAVE A GANG

Any other reason for leaving the gang is often considered treason, which evokes fear in women and prevents them from making the decision to leave the gang. As in other abusive relationships, men use the threat of violent reprisals to keep women from leaving the gang. Fear and violence are elements which contribute to standardised cohesion and control in these groups, but they are exercised in different ways over men and women. Control of women is framed within the genderised role of women as sexual partners whose fidelity is required.

Dying is not important, the problem is who kills you.

FORMER GANG MEMBER

Women can't go with anyone else even when you're dead.

GANG MEMBER

LACK OF SUPPORT TO REINTEGRATE INTO SOCIETY

It is deeply concerning that young men and women wanting to leave *maras* and gangs generally do not receive any state or social support to reintegrate into society. There are very few state and civil society programmes which offer protection and services for gang members wanting to leave and change their lives. As a result, many young men and women go to the churches looking for help to meet their basic needs for work, social connection and emotional support.

A TOUGH LIFE OUTSIDE THE GANGS

Life outside gangs is also not easy. Female gang members continue to face discrimination and social stigmatisation by public institutions and by communities. Indeed, even though they have left the gang, many women continue to feel a certain affection for it and stay in touch with some of its members. Some of the interviewed women said they identified with the gang because it was their family; they also said they occasionally gave some help to those members still in the gang. Programmes or security policies which require or expect former members to sever these relationships often backfire for women who are willing to end their participation in criminal activity but maintain emotional bonds, and cannot, or are unwilling to, relocate to areas where there is no gang presence. Women who manage to leave gangs 'never [truly] stop being a gang member', as was pointed out by several of the interviewed women. This identity forever permeates the body and life of the women. Leaving the gang means leaving behind certain violent practices and insecurity, but it does not guarantee that women will no longer be subject to the male power and domination in their private and public lives.

3. GENDER AND POWER RELATIONS IN GANGS

MALE DOMINATION

DOMINATION BY MALES REMAINS THE TREND

Male domination and the reproduction of the patriarchal model reach exaggerated proportions in gang culture. Male domination is present in all gang activities. As previously stated, this is demonstrated, for instance, during the initiation stage where sexual intercourse is one of the options for women to enter the gang. In addition, while men perceive infidelity and the possibility of having more women as a way to reinforce their domination and their masculinity, they strictly prohibit women the same liberty.

WOMEN ADAPT MALE BEHAVIOUR AS A WAY TO GAIN RESPECT

In the gang world, the feminine model is seen as a sign of weakness, a lack of security, cowardice and inferiority. Because of this, in order to earn themselves greater respect and a better situation or position in the inner circle of the gangs, women must take on male behaviours in the way they dress, their verbal and body language, as well as in their interpersonal relationships. To gain respect, women gang members dress in the same way as their male counterparts: jeans or denim, trainers, loose t-shirts or tops.

HOMOPHOBIA EVIDENT IN LANGUAGE

The devaluation of the feminine model is also expressed in the way gangs seek to offend a rival gang or a member of their own gang whom they consider to be weak. To insult an enemy or ridicule someone they use terms such as “queer”, “poof” or “bum bandit”. These insults are not exclusive to gangs, but are insults used by society in general and which reflect homophobia among men and women alike.

MEN DOMINATE THE DECISION-MAKING

Male domination is also reflected in gangs’ decision-making processes. Usually, female gang members have limited rights and are considered unreliable for activities outside those traditional roles assigned to women by society as a whole.

MEN RETAIN CONTROL

Female gang members are under the constant control of men, even when they are in prison. In this case, they control women by both caring for them and keeping them under surveillance in their neighbourhoods and daily activities. If it is the women who are imprisoned, they also have a person to watch over them inside the prison. This consideration of women as an object belonging to them is the same in all social groups where the system of patriarchal domination is practiced to an extreme, both inside and outside the prison.

GENDER-RELATED VIOLENCE

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN MANIFESTS ITSELF IN MANY FORMS

Physical, psychological and sexual violence against women is a common practice in street gangs. Many female gang members live in constant fear due to permanent threats from their partners and other gang members. The men regularly denigrate the women and share a macho motto of abuse and domination towards them, elements which form part of the vicious domination-subjection spiral in which many women find themselves.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN NOT EXCLUSIVE TO GANGS

This display of strength and power against women is common in all systems of patriarchal domination. This is not only limited to gangs but indeed society as a whole.

It would be lovely to see something good happen to women, but not just in the gangs, because if you go with a policeman, he wants sexual favours; it's the same in prison and nearly everywhere else. We suffer in silence and we are the ones who pretend.

FEMALE INTERVIEWEE

VIOLENCE IS OFTEN SEEN AS CENTRAL TO GANG LIFE

Violence is one of the main vehicles through which masculine power is legitimised, hierarchical relations are established, corrective punishment is applied (when the sanctions are minor), and extreme violence (murder) is exercised (when there is no pardon for the act committed). The use of violence is also a mechanism which guarantees security, as well as the imposition of respect and control over both male and female members of the group. It is the manner in which the gangs can control both the urban territory of the communities in which they operate, as well as women's bodies, a territory where they also exercise this domination.

WOMEN RECEIVE UNEQUAL TREATMENT WITHIN GANGS

Gender differences and disadvantages for women in gangs are made evident in situations such as the existence of unjust rules, inequality and unfairness. This can be seen, for example, in the fact that men are not punished for sexual infidelity, whereas women are (sometimes even with death). Women, both gang members and partners of gang members, report living under constant suspicion of infidelity with a particular threat/fear attached to the possibility of their engaging in a relationship with a rival gang member. Other conditions of subordination are exposed in decision-making mechanisms, where women have a limited role. For instance, there are very few examples of women who have gained a lot of power inside their organisations; where this has happened, it was achieved through great difficulty, suffering and pain.

REPRODUCTION AND THE PATRIARCHAL MODEL

TREND IN THE TIMING OF THE DESIRE TO HAVE CHILDREN BY MALE GANG MEMBERS

As previously mentioned, the patriarchal system is exponentially reproduced and manifested in gangs. This can be seen in the widely expressed desire for men to impregnate women and have children. This is particularly visible when men are threatened with imprisonment. At this moment, many of their girlfriends become pregnant. It is also not unusual for young women to become pregnant during conjugal visits. This illustrates how important it is to ensure continuity for male gang members, a common trait outside of the gang, but strongly felt among these men who, in other terms, live at the extreme margins of society.

ATTITUDE TO WOMEN'S BODIES IS ONE OF "AN OBJECT"

According to the patriarchal model, women's bodies are considered as an object for domination, biological reproduction and for pleasure. On many occasions, women accept this situation due to the lack of information on their rights, low self-esteem and the acceptance of abuse against women which prevails in society.

STRONG RIVALRIES BETWEEN WOMEN

Women are also divided amongst themselves. In patriarchies, the motto "divide and conquer" has made many women see each other as rivals in the fight over a man; hence, they are permanently divided, which makes them easier to control. The generalised hierarchy within society is reinforced and reproduced in the gang. It is further divided into fine distinctions which women, who find themselves on the lowest rungs, make among themselves — elevating the position of women who have children with a man or are married legally over those seen as "lovers" or "interlopers".

"GOOD" VS. "BAD" GIRLS

Women live on a pendulum, stuck between a duality: as members of the patriarchal system they must assume the subordinate and life-protecting roles determined by the macho society in which they live. Inside the patriarchal ethos of gangs, women are divided into a symbolic universe of two groups: "the bad girls" and "the good girls".

The first group are unfaithful and 'those who would let you die', as expressed by a young male gang member. The second group matches the social and cultural model of the woman as a protector and generator of life.

WOMEN ACKNOWLEDGE THE ROLES OF MEN

Many women not only acknowledge this role assigned to them but also use their natural attributes, as well as the image of defencelessness, which the patriarchal macho ethos has historically built and assigned to them. This means that female gang members can be used for smuggling drugs, carrying weapons, getting information, and delivering messages with little risk compared to their male counterparts⁴. The key ideals of this exacerbated macho culture are assumed as natural and, up to a certain point, they are reproduced by the actual women who endure the violence. There is an attitude of 'I deserve this punishment for having disobeyed my man.'

INSECURITY IS HIDDEN BEHIND THE STRONG FACADE

On the exterior, young male and female gang members present themselves as hard and violent subjects, but inside they are extremely fragile and have low self-esteem. The violent image they project makes society build a social illusion of threat and danger around them, which makes their reinsertion into the social dynamic difficult.

THE VICIOUS REPRODUCTION OF THE SOCIAL SYSTEM

Women's accounts of their love lives stem from the position of a victim of gender-based violence. Psychological, verbal, material and spiritual abuse is common. The female partners of gang members are generally long-suffering women who have endured and forgiven their men time and time again, because socially the man has the right to exercise violence against them. In the collective imagination and within the social codes of these societies, women have no right to leave or abandon the home. Many female gang members are themselves responsible for social violence, but they are also victims at the same time as being victimisers, given that they reproduce the precarious, violent and marginal social system to which they have been exposed. They live on the streets to survive and compete for space and power.

FOR ACCEPTANCE INTO THE GANG STRUCTURE WOMEN MUST BE INVENTIVE

The women who want to survive in this world of gangs have to invent strategies and adopt dominant macho attitudes, which are similar or equal to those of the men, in order to confront, the world of violence and, therefore, they have to act on the basis of and for this patriarchal, homophobic and macho logic in order to be accepted and recognised. It seems to be the only way to legitimise themselves in front of this group.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUNDING AND POLICY IN RESPONSE TO THIS STUDY

This preliminary exploration of the experiences of women inside Central America's gangs gives rise to a number of recommendations for preventing both the violence which they have generated, as well as the violence to which they have overwhelmingly been subjected as children and young people.

The following recommendations are directed at preventing this violence. These are suggestions based on both the stories these women have told, as well as studies of the factors which relate to their socioeconomic conditions:

- Targeted programme in high-crime areas to address the particular reasons why young women drop out of school.
- Primary-school-based programmes to detect and intervene when young girls show signs of family violence, participation in or exposure to violence, or drugs and criminal activity.

4 This is because both the police and members of rival gangs do not always suspect women, or not very often, although this has started to change: women are starting to be considered a threat by the police. Especially in El Salvador, women have been subject to violations of their rights on the assumption that anyone related to a gang member is involved in criminal activity.

- Specialised training for teachers, healthcare workers and law-enforcement officers to address the psychological effects of violence and abuse on the lives of girls and young women.
- Creation and expansion of programmes for girls and young women in high-crime areas to provide real opportunities for building self-esteem, identity, employment, non-violent conflict management and human rights. These programmes will be most effective if they include recreation, sports, arts and culture with methodologies designed for young women.
- Sexual and reproductive health programmes should include strategies to reach women in marginalised areas, family members and partners of men in prison, and women who are serving time.
- Programmes designed to holistically address the needs and rights of teenagers and women in conflict with the law. These programmes, whether under the juvenile justice system or the adult criminal justice system, should include the development of staff and specialists to deal with both the traumatic histories of women in conflict with the law, as well as the reality which awaits them upon returning to society.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper illustrates the difficult experience of girls, teenagers and young women inside and outside the *maras* and other gangs. Their experience is marked by violence, domination by and fear of their male counterparts. Additionally, these young women suffer permanent social discrimination because of their sex, their poor class and their gang membership; very often they must also endure abuse from the police and prison guards when detained or imprisoned.

Gangs are structures which are increasingly closed, discriminated against and marginalised. Their internal rules and strategies for survival have evolved over time as a direct consequence of the persecuting and repressive policies adopted against them. Although it is estimated that the number of gang members has fallen considerably, one can also note an increase in gangs' criminal activities and greater links with organised crime.

Very few teenage and young women become members of *maras* and gangs, as they continue to be predominantly male groups. The main reasons for young women to join these groups are the need to belong to a group, the search for protection and affection, the need for money, and the desire for recognition and to escape a conflictive and violent family environment. The most common method of joining a gang is through courtship: women generally have a previous relationship with a gang member, who then helps them enter the gang.

In the gang, women are restricted to fulfilling traditional roles imposed by the patriarchal model. However, their role has evolved to also include surveillance duties, acting as drug mules, hiding weapons, collecting extortion money and conveying information by taking advantage of their "innocent" image.

The main reasons why women decide to leave gangs are pregnancy and maternity, although many of them continue to be linked to gangs when they have had their children or form a family. Another route for women to leave gangs is through religion, i.e. when they join a church. However, in these cases they must receive approval from the gang. Nevertheless, as a rule, the gangs demand life-long loyalty from their members; leaving the gang is considered treason and can cost members their lives.

Male domination in *maras* and gangs forces women to be faithful to their partners; females may only have a boyfriend or partner within the gang, but not outside, while the men can have girlfriends outside the gang and engage in sexual and emotional relationships with multiple partners.

Women are under the constant control of men inside and outside the gang. They are considered dependent subjects inside the gang, under the logic of a patriarchal system of domination, which is also reflected outside gangs in the general societal environment.

The interviews proved that that women did not feel completely happy in gangs; however, they were neither happy before joining, nor after leaving.

Many female former gang members continue to suffer discrimination for having belonged to these groups, and there are few social support programmes to help them.

They [women] have a lot of aspirations, enthusiasm, dedication, broken dreams and a lot of potential, but they are prisoners inside a structure of control which prevents them from moving around freely.

SOCIAL RESEARCHER

Marked by histories of abuse and pain, women are both perpetrators and victims of violence. They reproduce the violence of the histories of abuse and mistreatment which are written on their bodies. Women's bodies — by being used for pleasure, for carrying weapons, for giving birth, “paying for favours”, for being abused — are in some way the territory on which the patriarchal phenomenon is written and rewritten in gangs.

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c/o International Alert

205 Rue Belliard, B-1040 Brussels Tel: +32 (0) 2 234 5792 Fax: +32 (0) 2 234 5799
ifp-ew@international-alert.org www.ifp-ew.eu



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