

Patriarchal Power and Gender-Based Violence in Guatemala and El Salvador

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Abstract

This article explores the relationship between the mindset of machismo found in the Central American countries of Guatemala and El Salvador and how that patriarchal power perpetuates violence towards women. The aim of the article is to find the foundation of cultural constraints in Guatemala and El Salvador and to explain how institutions have neglected women. It interprets the differences and similarities between the consequences of the gender-based violence in the two countries. Some of the consequences that will be discussed include femicide and domestic violence. The article also provides some ideas that illustrate how Guatemala and El Salvador can change the course of gender-based violence.

I. Introduction

From whimsical and wild woodlands to shimmering seas, the countries of Central America have captivated people for centuries. But the lush landscapes cannot conceal the vicious volatility and violence that Central America has experienced throughout its history. Periods of such disorder and discord have plagued Central America and set the stage for the patriarchal persecution of women.

Having the presence of machismo in these male-dominated societies has produced issues of inequality between genders. Therefore, traditionally, most institutions, including government, have ignored the interests of women. As women have little power or importance in society, their lives are not valued, which manifests itself in femicides and incidents of domestic violence. Like a cycle, the previous violence that Central America experienced creates violence against women.

This article concentrates on gender violence in two Central American countries, Guatemala and El Salvador. Following a brief literature review and some empirical background, the article discusses some of the origins of violence against women, the many ways women's lives are violated today, and some suggestions of what can be done to transcend patriarchal power and transform the lives of women. A collection of different data will be provided to demonstrate the progress that Guatemala and El Salvador have made and the problems they still face.

II. Brief Literature Review

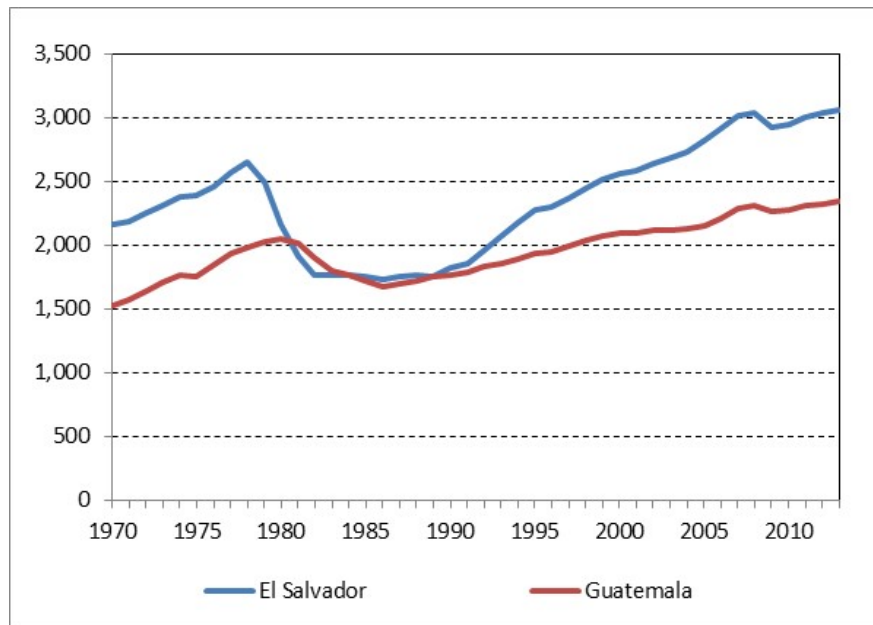
Given the amount of violence against women in Guatemala and El Salvador, there is a relatively large literature analyzing the ancestry of patriarchal power in relation to gender-based violence. Looking at Guatemala and El Salvador as examples of Central America, these publications demonstrate an understanding about a relationship between patriarchy, power, and violence. Many publications also explore the effects of gender-based violence on women and the manipulation of gender dynamics by men. Most publications also provide some suggestions on how to convert and change the gender-based violence in Guatemala and El Salvador to empower women.

- Carey and Torres (2010) contend that the current epidemic of femicide in Guatemala is an extension of the civil war that haunted the country for decades. Although Guatemala has one of the highest homicide rates in Latin America, Carey and Torres claim that the violence against women has become routine. Carey and Torres write that images of women lying in the streets do little to incite the imagination to action. Therefore, as Carey and Torres say, femicide is blurred into the homicide rate and given little attention. For Carey and Torres, gender-based violence and femicide is intrinsically political. Carey and Torres assert that gender-based violence allowed for patriarchal institutions to remain in the dictatorships and democracies of Guatemala. According to Carey and Torres, the past relationship of violence and patriarchy dominate the social relations of women in Guatemala.
- Hume (2008) examines the combination of public and private that collaborate to make violence against women possible in El Salvador. According to Hume, by authorizing violence as a component of male identity, violence has become a tool for terror. As Hume claims, the structure of Salvadoran society, in allowing men to have power and privilege, has constructed gender inequalities on political, social, and economic scales. Hume also analyzes domestic abuse as a cycle of punishment and the psychological impacts of such violence on the psyches of women. Such violence, Hume claims, is used to define the identities and behavior that men think women should have. Hume maintains that a movement to encourage men to not use violence and taking apart patriarchal systems promote an end to gender-based violence.
- Leslie (2001) discusses the importance of increasing awareness of gender-based violence for thinking about development. The article examines that although women are needed and necessary for sustainable development, their participation is often overlooked. Drawing upon the past dictatorships that have plagued Latin America, Leslie asserts that the participation of women in social movements upset patriarchal attitudes that then result in their rapes, assassinations, tortures, and disappearances. Focusing on her experience in a Salvadoran NGO, Leslie demonstrates that violence against women can be healed through reestablishing women to think of themselves as citizens of their country.
- Sauer (2005) looks at the implications of the misogynistic culture in Guatemala and what that means for the lives of women. Because of gang violence, Sauer claims, women cannot walk freely at night for fear of being targeted. According to Sauer, violence against women developed as women gained political power in Guatemala. Victims of violence, Sauer argues, are typically young and from rural and urban areas. Sauer discusses the lack of support offered to women by officials and how women in Guatemala have used demonstrations and protests to insist the importance of ending gender-based violence.

III. Empirical Background

It is useful to get some idea on the economic development of Guatemala and El Salvador over the last few decades. Hence, Figure 1 shows the GDP per capita (in constant 2005 US dollar) from 1970-2013. It shows that despite some progress in the early and mid-1970s, the civil wars, which started in El Salvador in 1979 and intensified in Guatemala in the early 1980s eroded much of the earlier progress. El Salvador's GDP per capita started to rise again since the early 1990s, while that of Guatemala started to rise in 1986, though far more moderately than that of El Salvador. However, El Salvador and especially Guatemala are still some of the poorest countries in Latin America.

Figure 1: GDP per capita (constant 2005 US\$), 1970-2013

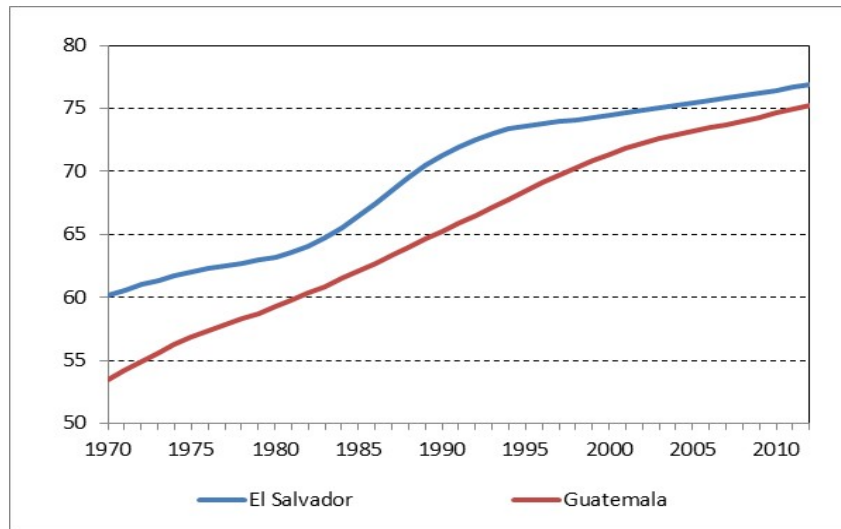


Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2015).

To better understand the prevalence and predicament of gender violence in Guatemala and El Salvador it is also useful to briefly review the progress made in the health sectors of these two countries. This Empirical Background section therefore also reviews the available data on female life expectancy, health expenditure per capita, and maternal mortality.

Figure 2 shows the life expectancy at birth for females in years from 1970-2012 for El Salvador and Guatemala. Both countries show steady increases throughout the whole period and from year to year, though especially in the case of El Salvador, progress has been far from even. In any case, the impact of the civil wars is far less reflected in the female life expectancy data than it was in the GDP per capita data shown in Figure 1 above.

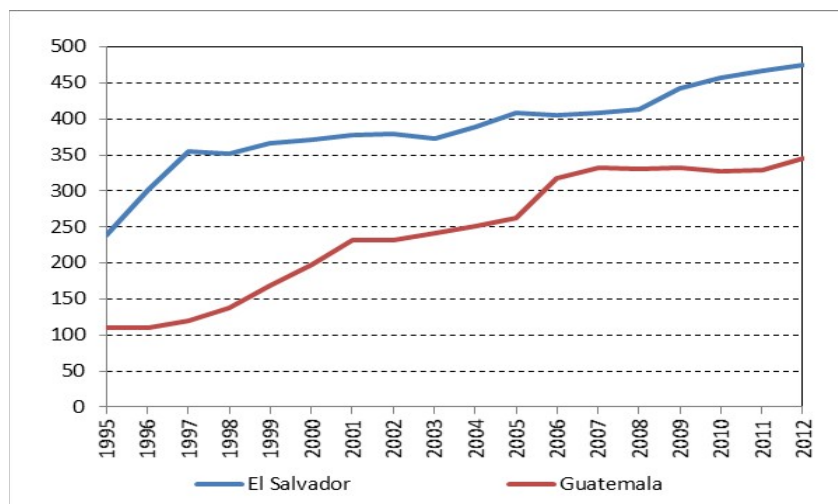
Figure 2: Female Life Expectancy at Birth (years), 1970-2012



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2015).

Figure 3 shows PPP-adjusted health expenditure per capita in 2005 international dollars for Guatemala and El Salvador, which unfortunately is only available from 1995-2012. The figure shows that El Salvador increased its health expenditure sharply from 1995 to 1997, but that the increases have been moderate since. Guatemala experienced sharp increases in health expenditures per capita from 1997 to 2001 and then again from 2005 to 2007, but mostly stagnated during the other periods. In 2012, El Salvador's per capita health expenditure stood at \$475 (measured in constant 2005 international \$), while that of Guatemala stood at \$346. Overall, the different levels of health expenditures between El Salvador and Guatemala mirror the difference in GDP per capita between the two countries.

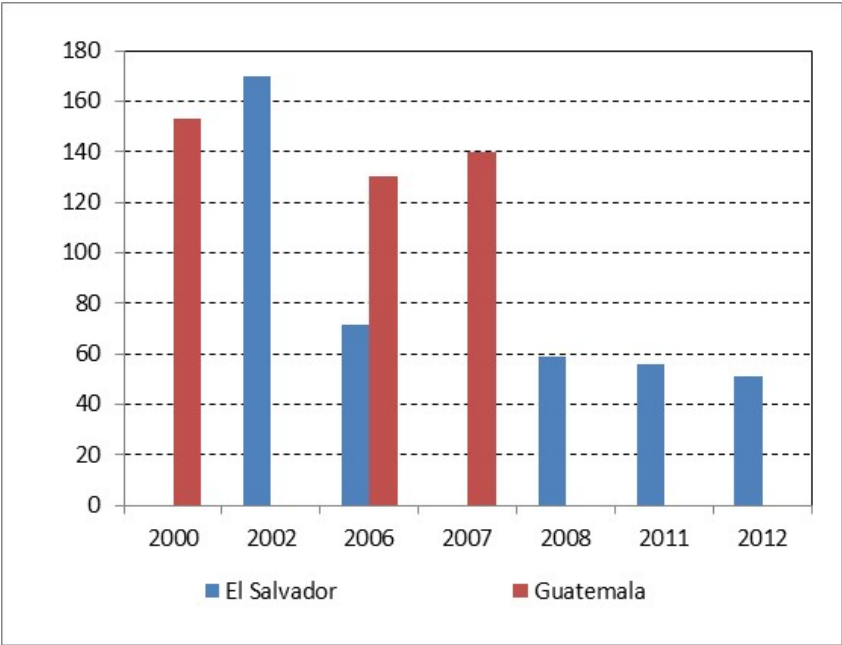
Figure 3: Health Expenditure per capita, PPP (constant 2005 international \$), 1996-2013



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2015).

Figure 4 depicts the maternal mortality ratio per 100,000 live births based on all available national estimates. This ratio is a useful measure reflecting the importance society puts on ensuring that women receive quality healthcare and can lead healthy lives. Though El Salvador had a higher maternal mortality ratio in 2002 than what Guatemala had in 2001 (respectively, 170 deaths per 100,000 live births versus 153 deaths per live births), El Salvador has drastically reduced the maternal mortality ratio by 2006, while Guatemala had made only limited progress. Following 2006, El Salvador has continued to make progress with moderately decreasing its maternal mortality ratio, while the ratio has slightly increased in Guatemala in 2007 (which is unfortunately the last national estimate available for Guatemala). Considering that maternal mortality ratios are in single-digits in most industrialized countries, both countries still have much to do to improve the health of women.

Figure 4: Maternal mortality ratio (national estimate, per 100,000 live births)



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2015).

As promising as most of the above data looks, the progress made for the lives of women in Guatemala and El Salvador does not diminish the violence that surrounds women. In the discussion that follows, gender-based violence has direct and devastating results on the security and safety of women in the two countries. But the current course of violence in Guatemala and El Salvador does not have to end with despair; each country can provide ways to protect and promote women.

IV. Discussion

Enhancing the role and rights of and empowering women proves to be a challenging task. Patriarchal attitudes have shaped how men validate violence against women in Guatemala and El Salvador. Nevertheless, violence against women establishes inequalities in the identities of women, as they are treated viciously and vehemently. This discussion section presents the origins

of present trends toward violence against women and the experiences of continual violence that women face in the two countries. The section concludes with concerns and considerations that could be taken into account in alleviating violence against women in Guatemala and El Salvador.

IV.1. Women at War and the Growth of Gangs

Guatemala and El Salvador have dealt with the violence of civil wars that have lasted decades; the civil war in Guatemala happened from 1960-1996 and El Salvador's from 1980-1992. Table 1 shows the number of people killed during the civil wars in both countries. As the table illustrates, 200,000 Guatemalans and 75,000 Salvadorans died during the wars.

Table 1: Wars in Central America

Country	Years	Dead
Guatemala	1960-1996 (36 years)	200,000
El Salvador	1980-1992 (12 years)	75,000
Nicaragua	1972-1991 (19 years)	60,000

Source: Leggett (2007), p. 35.

Although the conflicts ended nearly two decades ago, negative consequences exist even to this day. The violence seen throughout the wars in Guatemala and El Salvador made people become accustomed to violence. As Leggett (2007, p. 14) claims, “‘Cycles of violence’ can infect communities as victims vent their rage and reclaim their agency by becoming perpetrators, and volleys of retribution attacks can resound for years.” While the civil wars in Guatemala and El Salvador concluded, ideas about violence persisted and produced a perception about how violence can be used. The terror tactics that were used in the wars included public massacres of civilians, disappearances, death squads, torture and mass rape (Leggett, 2007, p. 14). Rape, used as a weapon of psychological warfare, targeted women during the civil wars (Leggett, 2007, p. 35). The remnants of violence seen through the civil wars in Guatemala and El Salvador would not wither, however, and instead would reappear, this time especially against women.

Although the end of the civil wars in Guatemala and El Salvador created a hope for change that was quickly “dimmed by another plague: a torrent of crime and violence” (Serrano-Berthet and Lopez, 2010, p. 1). A wave of violence sweeping the two countries introduced a new threat: gang violence. Both Guatemala and El Salvador have some of the highest rates of gang membership in Central America, seen in Table 2. As Table 2 presents, Guatemala leads El Salvador in gang membership as it has 14,000 members across 434 gangs compared to El Salvador's 10,500 members in 4 gangs. It is important to note, however, that an analysis on gang membership depends on the definition of a gang or gang member, meaning that the numbers could be significantly higher (Serrano-Berthet and Lopez, 2010, p. 15). Anyway, having gangs as such a staggering force sets

off damaging and deadly forms of violence. Mirroring the cruelty of the civil wars in Guatemala and El Salvador, gangs instill fear that vibrates to women, who bear the scars of such violence.

Table 2: Estimates of Gang Membership by Country

Country	Gang Members	Number of Gangs
Honduras	36,000	112
Guatemala	14,000	434
El Salvador	10,500	4
Nicaragua	4,500	268
Costa Rica	2,660	6
Panama	1,385	94
Belize	100	2
Total	69,145	920

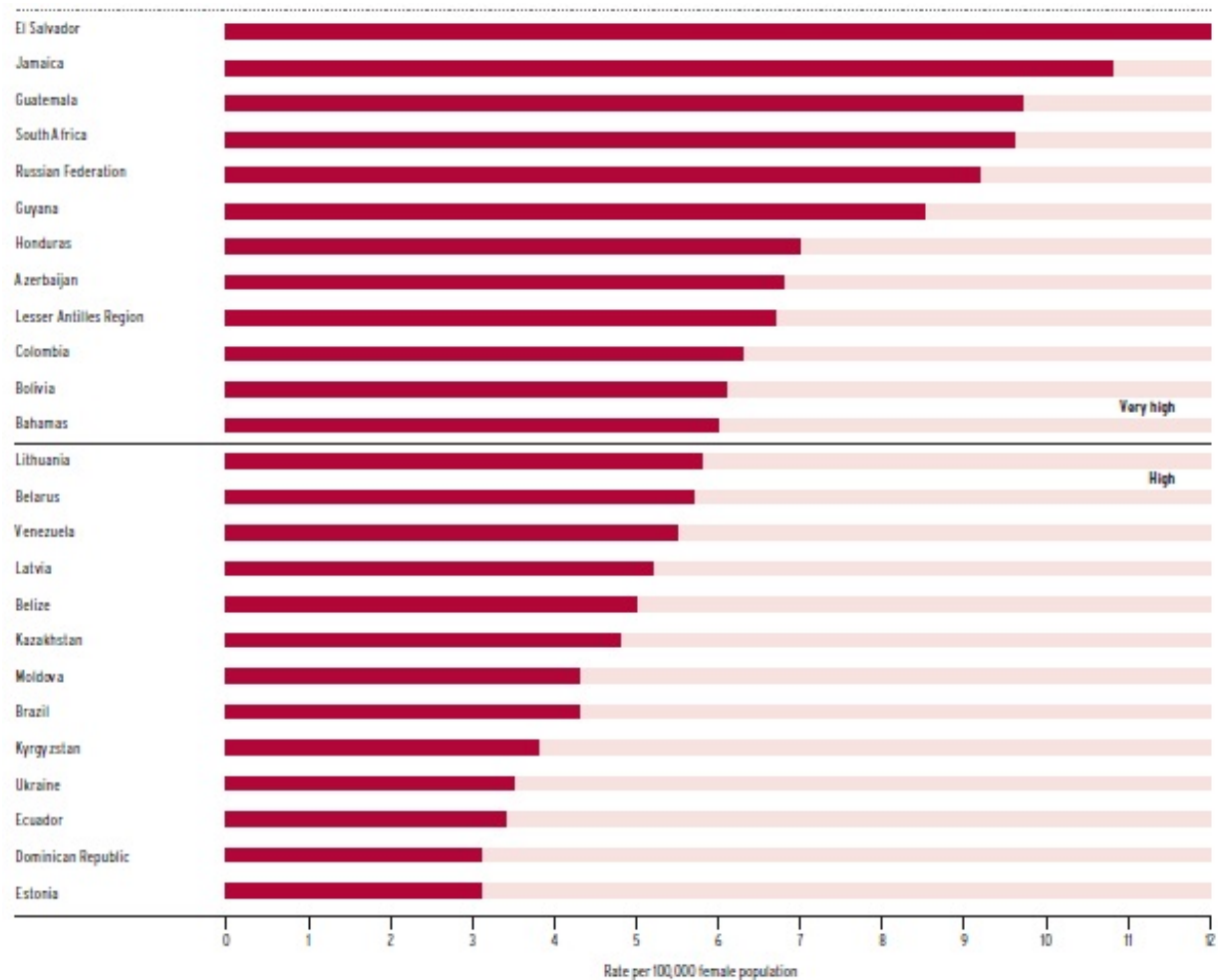
Source: Central American and Caribbean Commission of Police Chiefs

Source: Serrano-Berthet and Lopez (2010), p. 15.

For Guatemalan women, the fear of growing gangs makes them afraid to walk out at night (Sauer, 2005, p. 36). The fear of gangs also involves the understanding by women in Guatemala that they could be attacked and assaulted. Femicide has become a considerable concern. As Sauer (2005, p. 37) asserts, “women are specifically targeted and tortured, beaten, raped, and killed by men.” Furthermore, according to a report by Amnesty International (2006), since 2001 more than 2,200 women and girls have been killed in Guatemala and the femicides have been characterized by exceptional inhumanity as victims are subjected to sexual violence, mutilation, and dismemberment. Such atrocities demonstrate how little value is placed upon the lives of women in Guatemala.

In Nowak (2012, p. 3), Guatemala’s femicide rate per 100,000 females is 9.7, the third highest with the highest rate of femicide belonging to El Salvador. Figure 6 shows that El Salvador’s rate is slightly higher than Guatemala’s at 12. El Salvador suffers from similar gang influence on the lives of women as Guatemala. In El Salvador, only three percent of femicides are committed by a past or present intimate partners; women are attacked in public, including by gangs and organized criminal groups (Nowak, 2012, p. 3). Like in Guatemala, the lives of Salvadoran women are clouded by gangs in a continual violence. But the rates of femicide in the two countries suggested that an underlying issue exists to make violence against women acceptable. Examining the patriarchal power in Guatemala and El Salvador explains the consequences of violence against women and enlightens on how women see themselves.

Figure 5: Average Femicide Rates per 100,000 Female Population in 25 Countries and Territories with High and Very High Rates, 2004-2009



Source: Nowak (2012), p. 3, who refers to Alvazzi del Frate (2011, p. 120).

IV.2. Surviving in a Storm of Violence

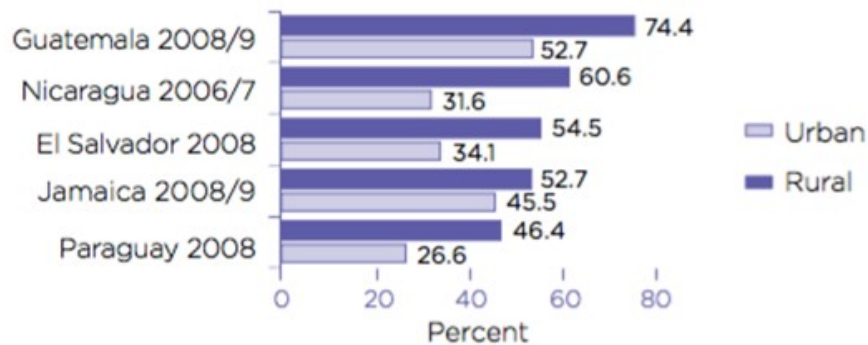
Throughout Guatemala and El Salvador’s history, violence against women has been “used to re-inscribe patriarchy and sustain both dictatorships and democracies, gender-based violence morphed into femicide” (Carey and Torres, 2010, p. 142). Therefore, the rates of femicide in Guatemala and El Salvador can be seen as extensions of male dominance. Furthermore, as Sauer (2005, p. 38) maintains, men treat women according to a subordinate status, creating street harassment, pressure to have sex by men, and occasional physical assault. The pronouncement of patriarchy, however, prolongs further into places where women should feel protected. For the women of Guatemala and El Salvador, violence surrounds their existence even in their homes, which should represent a haven for them. Domestic violence continues a legacy of patriarchal power and suppress women to prescribe to predetermined roles.

As Hume (2008, p. 65) asserts, male identity in El Salvador centers around the “exposure to and use of violence. Men are taught at an early age that they should not express emotion. They should

‘be firm.’ The old adage ‘Boys don’t cry’ is central to what Salvadoran society expects from men.” Since men are held to such behavior, they use violence to assert themselves. By following a set of standards, men in El Salvador, too, expect women to follow certain views of what a woman should do. If women wander from acceptable constructions of femininity, the popular belief in El Salvador is that men have the right to punish them (Hume, 2008, p. 68). Similarly, in Guatemala, as women leave the home and gain more independence, men feel a resentment as believe that a woman belongs in the home (Suarez and Jordan, 2007, p. 4). As Suarez and Jordan (2007, p.4) explain, “therefore, men use violence to force women back into limited roles in the home and society.” The conceptions of men and women’s role leads to incidents of domestic violence that haunt women and shape their perceptions of themselves.

Bott, Guedes, Goodwin, and Mendoza (2012) conducted research on violence against women in Latin America and the Caribbean. Interviewing thousands of women, including in Guatemala and El Salvador, Bott, Guedes, Goodwin, and Mendoza (2012) found information regarding the violence that women face throughout the region. Their research provides evidence of how male dominance has shaped how women see themselves and the violence that women have experienced. Figure 6 provides a glimpse into how women follow the patriarchal attitudes, choosing to obey their husbands. As the figure shows, the adherence to gender roles transcends urban and rural areas, as women agree in both areas. In Guatemala, an overwhelming amount of women, 78 percent in rural areas and 52.7 percent in urban areas, believe that women should follow the orders of their husbands. In El Salvador, 54.5 percent of wives in rural areas and 34.1 percent in urban areas believe that even if they disagree with their husbands, they should obey them anyways.

Figure 6: Women’s Agreement with Traditional Gender Norms: Wives Should Obey Their Husband, even if They Disagree, Among All Women Aged 15-49 Years

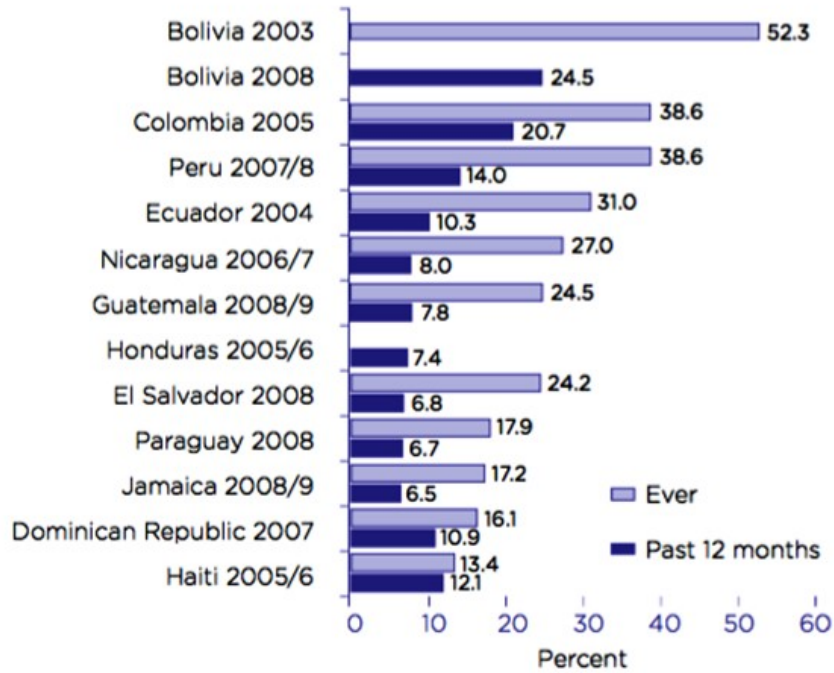


Source: Bott, Guedes, Goodwin, and Mendoza (2012), p. 97.

The collection of data from Bott, Guedes, Goodwin, and Mendoza (2012) also presents the physical violence that women face in Guatemala and El Salvador. Measuring both married women and those in relationships, the research by Bott, Guedes, Goodwin, and Mendoza (2012) demonstrate that women can experience violence throughout their lifetimes at the hands of their partners. Figure 8 displays the physical partner violence that women endured either ever or in the past 12 months. In Guatemala, the women interviewed reported that 24.5 percent had suffered physical violence by a partner in their lifetime and 7.8 percent had experienced it in the last year.

The women in El Salvador had similar figures as Guatemala, with 24.2 percent reporting that they had experienced physical violence and 6.8 percent in the last 12 months. Figure 7 indicates the prevalence of physical violence. Such physical violence stems from how men see women. In Guatemala and El Salvador, men feel that women must conform with traditional values, if they do not, they must face the consequence of physical violence.

Figure 7: Physical Partner Violence, Ever and Past 12 Months, Among Women Ever Married or in Union Aged 15-49 years



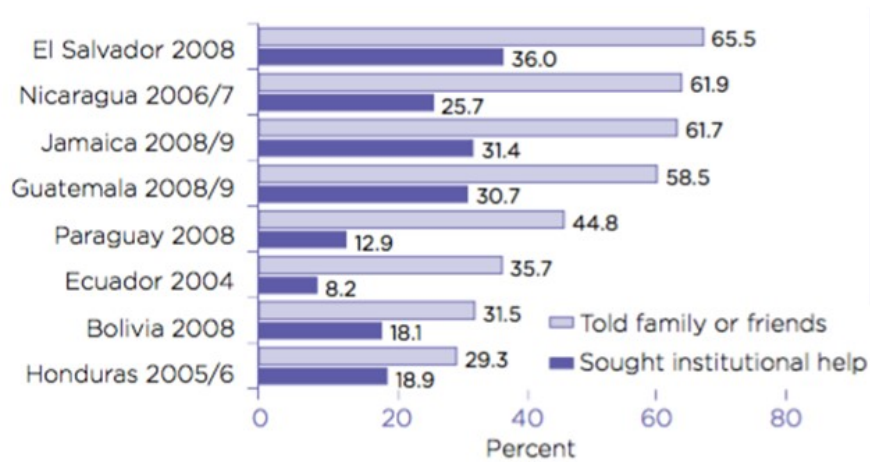
Source: Bott, Guedes, Goodwin, and Mendoza (2012), p. 20.

Although women suffer the scars, shock, and shame of domestic violence, their silence secures that the cycle of violence continues. As Hume (2008, p. 66) claims, “Silencing women’s experiences of violence strengthens patriarchal structures and ensures their reproduction.” In El Salvador, patterns of aggression by men such as intimidating women with more violence to silence them and threatening them with the local gang establishes a fear of reporting violence (Hume, 2008, p. 67). Likewise, for Guatemalan women, another factor in femicide is domestic violence, as women who have reported domestic violence have been killed before they can escape or flee their homes (Suarez and Jordan, 2007, p. 4). Furthermore, the women of Guatemala do not recognize the abuse as domestic violence and fear more violence; this fear empowers their abusers to express emotion through violence (Suarez and Jordan, 2007, p. 4).

The research by Bott, Guedes, Goodwin, and Mendoza (2012) illustrates the extent of how women avoid seeking help for domestic violence. Figure 8 expresses that in Guatemala, only 30.7 percent of women sought institutional help and in El Salvador, the percentage is 36 percent. Furthermore, as Figure 8 demonstrates, the women in El Salvador and Guatemala rely on telling their families

or friends about the violence; in El Salvador the percentage is 65.5 percent and in Guatemala, 58.5 percent. The percentages confirm a reluctance by the women of the two countries to report the violence inflicted upon them. As the women feel threatened for their safety and security, they do not seek out help, which allows their abusers to hurt them again and again.

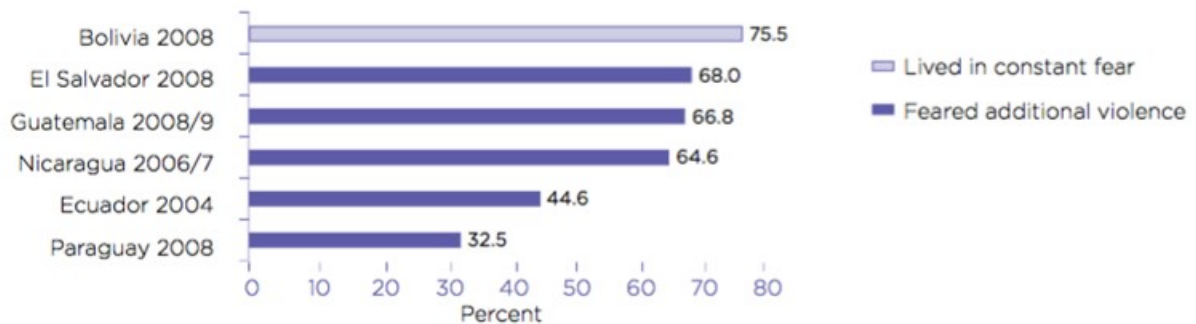
Figure 8: Help-seeking for Intimate Partner Violence in the Past 12 Months, Among Women Ever Married or in Union Aged 15-49 Years



Source: Bott, Guedes, Goodwin, and Mendoza (2012), p. 59.

The fear of additional violence also manifests in the psyches of the women of Guatemala and El Salvador. Figure 9 indicates that the women interviewed lived in fear after incidents of domestic violence. In El Salvador, 68 percent of women who experienced violence by their partners feared additional violence. In Guatemala, 66.8 percent of women feared additional violence. Certainly the patriarchal power that enables domestic violence also breeds into fear into women about their partners and whether or not to report the violence that they have experienced.

Figure 9: Lived in Fear as a Result of Partner Violence in the Past 12 Months, Among Women Ever Married or in Union aged 15-49 Years



Source: Bott, Guedes, Goodwin, and Mendoza (2012), p. 56.

In both Guatemala and El Salvador, women encounter violence that diminishes and dwindles their control. From femicide to domestic violence, the women in the two countries experience violence both inside their homes and outside in the streets. Compromising the safety and security of women, violence arises from patriarchal attitudes about how men and women should act. Despite all the darkness, there are ways for Guatemala and El Salvador to allow women to rise above the violence.

IV.3. Resisting Violence and Resolving Injustice

The violence found in Guatemala and El Salvador against women is both mind-boggling and eye-opening. In the two counties, women deal with violence throughout their daily lives. The intersection of violence, from femicide to domestic abuse, engender women to have fear and can directly cause their deaths. So much despair and destruction provokes a sort of apathy to violence. As Carey and Torres (2010, p. 142) depict, “Their bodies litter city streets, urban ravines, and the imagination of the media. Images of murdered women and girls are so commonplace that each new death risks becoming a footnote to illustrate a rising death toll.” Ignoring the issue of gender-based violence, however, does not make it disappear. Instead, Guatemala and El Salvador must look at finding solutions to mitigate violence against women.

Leslie (2001) offers some framework for how to approach women who have experienced gender-based violence in El Salvador. Women who are victims of gender-related violence should be treated for their trauma and allowed to heal, through psychological treatment; the women should be made to feel guilty for the violence (Leslie, 2001, p. 54). Furthermore, creating safe spaces for women to express themselves and testify to their experiences can empower women, as they are challenging the power structure of patriarchy (Leslie, 2001, p. 55). Leslie (2000, p. 54) proposes that women should join social movements to elaborate on their violent trauma; the movements could also heal women as they are part of a broader community. Such suggestions for Salvadoran women give them a sense of power as they are not defined by the violence that was inflicted upon them.

In Guatemala, similar steps to help survivors should be implemented. A report by Amnesty International (2006) found that judicial measures should be considered to allay violence against women. Amnesty International (2006) identified four key concerns about what has led to the killings of women: continued impunity for perpetrators, flawed investigations, negligence by the state in prevention, and the invisibility of gender-based violence. The combination of these factors, according to Amnesty International (2006), has contributed to the number of femicides and domestic violence seen in Guatemala. But the report also highlights recommendations that could change how gender-based violence is seen and treated in the country. Amnesty International (2006) recommends that a search mechanism should be in place for missing women and girls, a zero tolerance policy for gender violence by the government, improved quality and examination of investigations, and that more data be collected to show the extent of violence against women. Such policies would help in El Salvador as well. Having the two countries resist violence against women and resolve the injustices of women who have experienced such violence would assist in assuaging the problem of gender-based violence.

V. Conclusion

Although Guatemala and El Salvador have enhanced their health expenditure and augmented women’s access to healthcare, women in the two countries sustain the wounds of violence against them. Through much bloodshed, Guatemala and El Salvador have seen themselves become

impassive to violence against women, ignoring the rates of femicide and domestic violence that women face. By having patriarchal values dictate the duties of women, men use violence to control them and prevent them from seeking assistance. Guatemala and El Salvador must not only acknowledge and understand the problem, they must present projects to support women and restrain violence against women.

Guatemala and El Salvador must realize the important role that women play in society. More than just caretakers, women represent a possibility that could alter the course of the two countries. Suppressing women through violence does not develop unity within a country, but rather generates a divide between genders. Although ideas of patriarchy have pervaded the history of the two countries, Guatemala and El Salvador have a chance to change their futures. Having men repeat the same behaviors to women for generation after generation prevents Guatemala and El Salvador from reaching their potential. Allowing violence has severe costs that transcend not only to the women affected, but the whole country. Guatemala and El Salvador must understand that wanting women, from grandmothers to mothers to daughters, to be able to dream and fulfill their futures will not lead to ruin but rather to a better and brighter experience for all.

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