

FACING VIOLENCE

STORIES OF RESILIENCE IN CENTRAL AMERICA

For years Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador have been showing the highest rates in world homicide figures. These rates have been up to twenty times higher than those for Europe and twice as high as those for countries at war like Syria or Afghanistan. Violence in the Northern Triangle is an endemic problem related to drug trafficking and conflict over land but, particularly with the maras. This situation emerged some thirty years ago and has worsened with the strengthening and expansion of these criminal organizations.

Extortion, rape, kidnapping, murder, and disappearances have become part of everyday life for most of the population, especially for collectives in vulnerable situations. In neighbourhoods marked by poverty and social exclusion, violence has become routine. The different governments have opted for *mano dura*: harsh, repressive pol-

icies that have immersed these countries in spirals of violence from which it is very difficult for them to escape. El Salvador has even imposed a state of emergency. Although homicide rates seem to have decreased in 2022, massive human rights violations and the severe undermining of democracy standards associated with the repressive regime have set alarms ringing.

Nevertheless, in this hostile situation, some men and women are engaged in initiatives to combat violence with very different tools: transformative education, consciousness-raising among the population, solidary activities, and social reintegration. These brave people are showing that history is still to be written and that there is an extraordinary potential for moving in the direction of peace in this small region of the world.

ICIP

The Institut Català Internacional per la Pau (International Catalan Institute for Peace) is a public institution that promotes peace in Catalonia and in other parts of the world through action, research, and educational outreach. Its perspective on constructing peace includes a focus on gender and attention to diversity, while promoting nonviolence, human rights, and human security, as well as drawing attention to civil society initiatives that foster peaceful coexistence. This exhibition is part of its area of work on violence in non-war settings.

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BRUTAL, HIDDEN VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

In Central America, abuse of and aggression against women are frequently overlooked, especially if they occur in close-knit or family circles. A highly patriarchal culture makes it difficult to report such violence, and even more difficult to ensure that it is investigated. The saturation of the system resulting from violent crimes linked to maras (gangs) and narcos (drug traffickers) means that cases of gender-based violence are kept in the background.

Nevertheless, what the figures show is brutal.

In Guatemala, a country with a population that is one third the size of Spain's, there are 159 reports of sexual violence every day. Amnesty International has described El Salvador as being one of the most dangerous countries in the world for women, and especially for underage girls: the victims in 74% of the reports of sexual violence in this country are girls aged under eighteen. Honduras has one of the world's highest murder rates for transgender people: 325 members of the LGBTI community have been murdered in the last decade.



1 Vicky is one of the most famous LGBTI activists in Honduras because of her work denouncing aggression against members of sexually diverse groups. After being attacked and beaten, she decided to leave the country.



2 A prosecutor specialising in exhuming corpses in El Salvador cleans the bones of what he suspects is the body of a woman who was murdered and thrown into a well on the outskirts of El Salvador.



3 A woman and her children have been blindfolded before being taken to a shelter for victims of family violence in Guatemala City. This procedure is followed in case the victim changes her mind and tells the aggressor where they are staying.



4 Police cells for the exclusive use of women and adolescents in the Mosquito Coast region of Nicaragua.



5 A woman cries when the forensic medical expert's vehicle leaves with the corpse of her husband who was murdered in Soyapango, El Salvador.



6 Two young transsexuals walk along a Tegucigalpa street at night. Violence against transsexuals and homosexuals has reached extreme levels in Honduras.

“Violence against women becomes a message and their bodies objects.”

MORENA HERRERA

— El Salvador

Defender of women’s rights



Morena Herrera first became a guerrilla fighter during the years of El Salvador’s armed conflict from 1979 to 1992. She was a member of the Resistencia Nacional (RN – National Resistance) which, with the end of the war, became the FMLN (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front), one of the parties that signed the peace agreements. During this process, Morena became aware of the conditions of inequality faced by women in Central American societies. For many people, she is the most widely recognised defender of women’s rights in El Salvador today.

“I remember a massacre during the war in which they killed many women. But first they raped them, after which they dismembered them. Violence against women is a specific kind of carnage. It becomes a message and their bodies objects.”

El Salvador’s civil war is long finished but some of its mechanisms are still being repeated.

Morena is now president of the Agrupación Ciudadana por la Despenalización del Aborto (ACDA – Citizens’ Association for the Decriminalisation of Abortion) and also a founder of the NGO Colectiva

Feminista (Feminist Collective), one of the country’s most consolidated feminist organisations.

“The worst situations are usually suffered by girls over ten years of age and teenagers. Violence against girls tends to be sexual in nature. Two of the girls we are looking after were assaulted by family members aged over seventy who raped them and got them pregnant. In other cases, the perpetrators have been neighbours, partners, teachers, or gangs.”

The Feminist Collective deals with cases of domestic violence, offering emotional support and legal advice, while also fostering a programme of family solidarity networks that provide temporary homes for women who, when fleeing situations of violence, have nowhere to go. However, the organisation’s most visible work is its struggle for decriminalisation of abortion in this country where the abortion laws are among the harshest in the world. In recent years, 17 women have been sentenced to up to 30-year imprisonment for homicide after having an abortion.



1 Scene of a murder on the outskirts of San Salvador. In May 2019, the owner of a bar was killed because she didn’t pay the extortion money demanded by the gang that controlled the area.



2 The partner of Carlos, a member of the Barrio 18 gang, weeps after he was shot dead by El Salvador police. She was eight months pregnant.



3 Inside one of the cells of Ilopango, El Salvador’s main women’s prison, one of the most overcrowded in Central America.



Gladys ha llenado su casa de salmos bíblicos desde que perdió a sus dos hijos. En la ciudad de San Pedro Sula, Honduras, miembros del crimen organizado los secuestraron y hace años que no sabe nada de ellos.



Un grupo de familiares llora en el momento en el que aparece el féretro de un joven transexual asesinado en el centro de Tegucigalpa, capital de Honduras.

CENTRAL AMERICAN MARAS: YOUNG PEOPLE ARE TURNED INTO MONSTERS

Since the 1990s, the maras (gangs) have been the main security problem of Central America. The gangs Barrio 18 and Mara Salvatrucha, born of urban tribes of young Latin Americans in the streets of Los Angeles, have become violent, transnational mafias. And also a way of life.

Many young people without opportunities are attracted by the maras' promise of security in a hostile, poverty-stricken environment. Seven out of every ten young gang members come from broken families with monthly incomes of less than 250 US dollars per month. The gang gives them a chance to grow, to earn the respect of their peers,

earn easy money, and become a somebody.

In the territories they control, the maras impose the law. The population is subjected to extortion and the people are in constant danger of being accused of collaborating with a rival gang, a suspicion punishable by death. It is estimated that, in the Northern Triangle, approximately 60,000 people are members of maras, in addition to an extensive network of family members and local residents who work closely with them. This is an army of young people who, having been abandoned by the system, are willing to kill and die for their new family.



1. Forensic doctor Eduardo Abullarade studies the scene of a murder near La Campanera neighbourhood of Soyapango, El Salvador.



2. On 20 May 2019 sixteen shots were heard in the town of Colonia San Antonio, El Salvador. Later, the body of a young man was found. He had been subjected to extortion by one of the gangs in the area.



3. Two men with machete wounds in the Traumatology emergency room of the Mario Catarino Rivas Hospital in San Pedro Sula, Honduras.



4. The marginal zone of "El Esfuerzo" Community in the centre of Guatemala City, a few minutes from the country's highest skyscrapers, is controlled by the Barrio 18 gang.



5. A young member of Los Tercereños gang has been caught red-handed in the Rivera Hernández neighbourhood, which is considered to be the most dangerous in San Pedro Sula, Honduras.



6. The Mara Salvatrucha and Barrio 18 gangs lay down their arms in the central square of San Salvador as a symbolic action in the process of ending the violence that began in 2012.

«Cuando abandonas la banda te encuentras con muchos obstáculos, empezando por la sociedad misma, que ni cree ni perdona»

WILFREDO GOMEZ

— El Salvador

Antiguo miembro de las maras
y fundador del programa Huellas de Esperanza



Desde los catorce años, Wilfredo Gómez fue miembro activo del Barrio 18, una de las bandas más violentas y que más se ha extendido en Centroamérica. Después de haber estado a punto de morir de tuberculosis en la cárcel de Quezaltepeque, empezó a replantearse la vida y emprendió un camino que lo llevó de ser miembro de una mara a ser pastor evangélico.

En América Central está totalmente prohibido desertar de las bandas y a quien lo hace se le castiga con la muerte. Una de las poquísimas excepciones que se hacen es con aquellos que deciden integrarse, como él, en un ministerio evangélico cristiano.

«Cuando abandonas la banda te encuentras con muchos obstáculos, empezando por la sociedad misma, que ni cree ni perdona.» Wilfredo fundó el programa Huellas de Esperanza, cuyo fin es ayudar a los jóvenes que desean salir de la banda a encontrar segundas oportunidades. El programa, que también funciona como ministerio evangélico, ha conseguido trabajo a varios jóvenes en dos panaderías situadas en barrios

con fuerte presencia de maras. Wilfredo es enfático al mencionar que la única ayuda que han recibido siempre ha sido de otras organizaciones sociales, nunca del gobierno.

Según él, todas las acciones gubernamentales están destinadas al fracaso porque intentan solucionar el problema desde fuera cuando lo que es necesario es hacerlo desde la raíz, los mismos jóvenes: «La campaña política de cualquier gobierno se basa en la represión, pero el proceso de entrada a una banda es un proceso de identidad de un joven que busca que lo escuchen en un espacio marginado».

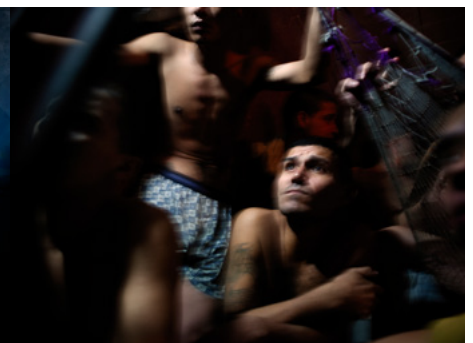
La labor de Wilfredo le ha hecho ganar enemigos en las maras, en el gobierno y entre la población. Pero él cree que la importancia de su causa es mayor que las consecuencias que podría sufrir: «Cada vez que recuerdo lo que yo experimenté, me motivo. Hay gente que está esperando esta puerta de salida y si yo puedo ser parte de esta opción, lo seré. Prefiero morir luchando que seguir permitiendo que la misma autoridad me humille y me pisotee cuando estoy intentando cambiar».



1 Panel rudimentario para controlar la ubicación de los presos en el interior de Izalco, cárcel exclusiva para miembros del Barrio 18 en El Salvador.



2 Jorge Yahir de León Hernández, conocido como «El Diabólico», es el líder nacional de la organización criminal Mara Salvatrucha-13 en Guatemala. Actualmente, reside en la cárcel de máxima seguridad de Fraijanes II, en Ciudad de Guatemala.



3 Antigua biblioteca de la cárcel La Esperanza, en El Salvador, ahora habilitada como celda de aislamiento. A los 20 confinados en este pequeño espacio solo se les permite salir al patio veinte minutos al día.



Members of the Barrio 18 gang move the body of a fellow member, nineteen-year-old Carlos, who was killed by a policeman in the town of Ciudad Delgado, El Salvador.



A member of Mara Salvatrucha in the prison of Ciudad Barrios. In El Salvador, there are separate prisons for the different gangs because of internecine bloodshed and violence against the civilian population.



The prison for members of the Barrio 18 gang in Cojutepeque, El Salvador. Central America has one of the world's most overcrowded prison populations.

A NEW GENERATION AT RISK

Growing up surrounded by violence is not only dangerous but it also conditions any life project. At best, children of Central America will be affected in their performance at school, their future opportunities, and their mental health. At worst, they will be recruited by gangs when they are adolescents or will end up as their victims.

The civil wars of the 1980s and 1990s in Cen-

tral America left a traumatised population. Their impacts have been passed down from generation to generation, and even affect young people who were not born when the armed conflict ended. The proliferation of the maras (gangs) is not unrelated to this legacy of violence. Thousands of boys and girls are presently at risk of suffering the terrible consequences.



1. In the Ilopango prison for women El Salvador, there is a special section for mothers and young children, many of whom have been born within its walls and have never seen the outside world.



2. A group of children watch the arrival of the forensic doctor's van in the outskirts of Soyapango. In the more violent zones of El Salvador, children know that the arrival of this vehicle means that someone has been murdered.



3. A policeman informs a woman that her husband has been arrested in a police operation against the gangs and that he is to be charged with murder.



4. A boy works clearing away weeds in an African palm plantation in the Bajo Aguán zone of Honduras.



5. Children looking into an open coffin at a funeral vigil in the town of Tocoa, Bajo Aguán, Honduras.



6. Two girls play in the Acelhuate River, the most contaminated in El Salvador. The river is in the municipality of Nejapa, a zone with a strong presence of the Barrio 18 gang.

“We work for the development of children’s personalities, friendship, empathy, and to reduce violence.”

MARISA MARTÍNEZ

— El Salvador

Defender of children’s rights, and founder of CINDE



The life of Marisa Martínez has been marked by two political poles. On the one hand, she is the sister of Roberto d’Aubuisson, founder of the far-right party Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA – Nationalist Republican Alliance) and considered to be the instigator of the murder of Monsignor Romero, the “Saint of El Salvador”. On the other hand, she was one of the people closest to Romero and is known as a social worker linked with the left.

In 1989, when her third child was born and the war in El Salvador was nearing its end, Marisa founded CINDE (Centros Infantiles de Desarrollo – Child Development Centres). At the time, she was living in the town of Soyapango, one of the most dangerous in the country. On her way home from work she had to go past the market and she noticed the conditions in which the children of the stallholders were living.

“I saw children in boxes, under the tables. I remember one boy who was tied to the table so he wouldn’t escape into the street. While my children were at home, there were others in the middle of all

the smoke and noise and I wondered, “What kind of adults are being forged in these conditions?”

She opened the first children’s centre in the centre of Soyapango, opposite the market. It began as a space for first aid and basic education at a time when preschool education was not public. The project immediately earned the trust of women and in less than a month the number of children enrolled went from six to seventy-five.

“We work for the development of children’s personalities, friendship, empathy, and to reduce violence. It is necessary to understand the environment they live in because these are very violent neighbourhoods”, Marisa says.

One of CINDE’s early projects was school support, giving backup classes to children in mathematics, language, and science, together with education about nonviolence. The programme grew and was able to offer scholarships for children in primary and secondary education. Some even received CINDE support for completing university degrees.



1. A student walks past the body of an eighteen-year-old youth who was shot dead outside the school of the Cabañas neighbourhood in San Pedro Sula, Honduras.



2. A six-year-old boy witnessed a group of policemen kidnapping his sixteen-year-old brother. The two boys live in the Bajo Aguán zone of Honduras where there is ongoing conflict among farmers, the authorities, and powerful landowners over control of the African palm plantations.



3. Two small boys walk alone at night in the streets of San Pedro Sula. In 2014, this Honduran city was declared to be the most violent in the world.



A group of students look at the blood left by the body of another student who was murdered in the town of Soyapango, El Salvador.



A bullet hole in a wall where children play in Bajo Aguán, Honduras, is a reminder of the violent conflict over access to land involving farmers, police, and powerful landowners. As a result, 128 people were murdered between 2008 and 2013.



A boy plays with a toy pistol at a grocer's shop in Bajo Aguán, Honduras.

“I wanted to offer a space where migrants could stay, rest, and eat, as well as receiving psychosocial, legal, and medical attention.”

MAURO VERZELETTI

— Guatemala

Founder and director of Casa del Migrante (Migrant House)



Mauro Verzeletti arrived in Guatemala from Brazil in 1998 as a missionary, when he travelled there to help with reconstruction after the damage caused by Hurricane Mitch, which devastated much of the region. The hurricane was just one of a series of problems that forced Central Americans to flee their countries.

Mauro saw that many migrants were concentrated in Guatemala as a point of connection from which to cross into Mexico and eventually reach the United States. He therefore decided to open Casa del Migrante (Migrant House) in Guatemala City. “I wanted to offer a space where migrants could stay, rest, and eat, as well as receiving psychosocial, legal, and medical attention.”

In October 2018, thousands of people from the Northern Triangle came together at different points of the region to set out together on the route to the United States. They believed that travelling in caravan would be a good way to avoid the many dangers of going alone or in smaller groups. It was also a strategy aimed at pressuring the United

States government to let them in. In more than thirty years of work, this is the event that has had the greatest impact on the life of Mauro Verzeletti. “I’d never seen so many people leaving their countries like that. I remember that people from the media phoned me to ask how many migrants were coming. We expected thirty or fifty, but we attended to more than 15,000 people. We calculate that about 30,000 people came to the Tecún Umán border, where we have the other house, because people from Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala joined forces there”, Mauro says.

Among his most powerful memories is that of a woman in one of the caravans who gave birth in Casa del Migrante. “One started to think about the future of that baby who didn’t even have a house to be born in with dignity.” In most cases, Mauro has had no news of the people who have passed through his shelter. He offers them some help, trying to make the way easier for them and hoping that they will be lucky in their exodus.



1. Posters showing migrants from El Salvador who disappeared on their way to the United States. More than 3,000 people have died or disappeared on this migrant route since 2014.



2. In the town of Lourdes near San Salvador whole neighbourhoods have been emptied of families who had to flee because of the strong presence of gangs in the area.



3. A member of the Mara Salvatrucha gang is arrested during a police operation. He is accused of having evicted a family from their home and moving in there himself.

CENTRAL AMERICA, A REGION ON THE RUN

For many families from Central America, migration is a matter of life or death. In the last decade, in addition to displacement caused by natural disasters and the consequences of climate change, poverty, and absence of expectations of a future, violence has become the main reason for migration. Traditional migrants are now refugees. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), some 580,000 people from Central America are seeking asylum around the world.

The route of approximately 4,000 kilometres from the Northern Triangle is the scene of a humanitarian crisis that is both serious and little known. In addition to the risk of being arrested, the people making the journey have to confront, on a daily basis, all kinds of abuse and the danger of being kidnapped, tortured, raped, or murdered, especially by members of organised criminal gangs. The numbers of people who have disappeared in these circumstances have risen in recent years.



1. A woman from Central America walks with her daughters to the wall that separates Mexico from the United States in the Tijuana zone in their attempt to cross the border.



2. A temporary shelter located in an industrial building in Tijuana, Mexico, where hundreds of Central Americans took refuge at the time of the migrant caravan in 2018.



3. A little girl crosses the border at wall between Mexico and the United States through a hole her parents have dug.



4. A man climbs the border wall in the Tijuana zone in an attempt to cross. During the caravan of 2018, despair drove many migrants who crossed to surrender immediately to the U.S. border patrols.



5. Meeting of a group of U.S. border patrol officers.



6. A twenty-five-year-old Honduran waits for the best moment to get past the wall erected by the United States. Trying at night is more dangerous but there are fewer chances of being detained.



These children are play fighting next to the wall separating Mexico from the United States in the Playas de Tijuana zone.



Misael, an undocumented man from El Salvador, prays before dinner in a community dining hall of the Dolores Mission in Los Angeles. Many undocumented Central Americans end up living on the streets after arriving in the United States.

THE NORTHERN TRIANGLE OF CENTRAL AMERICA

Central America is one of the areas with more violence in the world. During 2009-2019, intentional homicide rates have been particularly alarming in the Northern Triangle countries.



According to official data from 2019, more than 12,000 people from the Northern Triangle applied for international protection in Spain. That year, the Spanish government recognised the refugee status of, and granted asylum to only 478 people from these countries.

Sources:
Own preparation based on recent data on intentional homicides elaborated by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. Data on international protection in Spain come from its Home Ministry.