



Childhood Cut Short: Sexual and Gender-based Violence Against Central American Migrant and Refugee Children

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Executive Summary

Since 2011, the number of unaccompanied Central American children arriving in the United States and Mexico has increased dramatically. The number of unaccompanied children apprehended in the United States increased 272 percent from 2011 to 2016,¹ and the number of unaccompanied children deported from Mexico increased 446 percent during the same period.²

This trend has been accompanied by a significant increase in the number of girls migrating alone. The percentage of unaccompanied girls in U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) custody rose from 23 percent in 2012 to 34 percent of all unaccompanied children in 2014, and has remained at around 33 percent through the 2016 fiscal year.³ The percentage of Central American migrant girls deported from Mexico rose from 17 percent to 25 percent during the same period.⁴ Girls make up a significantly higher percentage of younger Central American unaccompanied migrant and refugee children—since 2013 over 40 percent of unaccompanied children ages 0-11 deported from Mexico have been girls.⁵

A growing body of research indicates that many of these children are forced from their homes due to violence.⁶ However, less is known about the specific role of sexual and gender-based violence in driving child migration from Central America. With funding from the Oak Foundation, Kids in Need of Defense (KIND), in partnership with the Human Rights Center Fray Matías de Córdova (CDH Fray Matías) undertook a study of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and migration of unaccompanied Central American children. To better understand the relationship between violence and child migration from this region, this study documents the occurrence and forms of sexual and gender-based violence that children face in their countries of origin and during migration, as well as access to justice and protection for child survivors of SGBV in these countries.

This study draws on the cases of 96 Central American migrant children, including those gathered through interviews conducted by KIND and CDH Fray Matías, and analysis of key documentation from KIND client case files, as well as 78 interviews with government and civil society representatives in the region. Analysis of children's cases provides insight into the forms of violence that children

face, as well as the ways in which these experiences of violence shape their decision to migrate. Interviews with government and civil society experts and analysis of secondary sources provide information on violence in Central America and Mexico, access to justice and protection, and child migration trends in the region.

Key Study Findings

Sexual and Gender-based Violence and Lack of Access to Protection in Countries of Origin

1. Sexual and gender-based violence forces Central American children to migrate.

Study participants who experienced SGBV in their countries of origin reported that this violence, combined with a lack of options for seeking protection, led them to leave their countries in search of safety. For many other children, including study participants, fear of SGBV, especially by gang members, propels them to leave their countries before they are victimized. Of the 30 study participants who experienced SGBV in their country of origin, 21 reported that they migrated to flee SGBV.

2. Children in Central America, especially girls and LGBTI children, suffer multiple forms of SGBV in their homes and communities.

SGBV against children in Central America takes on a range of forms, including sexual violence by gangs and other organized criminal groups, forced or coerced intimate relationships, sexual violence in the workplace, human trafficking, and sexual abuse by family members. All children are vulnerable to violence, but girls and LGBTI children and youth are the most frequent victims.

3. Gang-based SGBV, including sexual harassment, rape, and forced sexual relationships, is widespread in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala.

Sexual and gender-based violence perpetrated by gangs and other organized criminal groups is increasingly common and extremely brutal, and was the form of SGBV most commonly disclosed by participants in this study. Several study participants were raped by gang members, and one was kidnapped by gang members and subject to ongoing sexual abuse for a period of months. Multiple study participants were targeted to become the “girlfriends” of gang members, which generally implies

a forced sexual relationship with the gang member. Most faced threats of harm to themselves and families if they did not comply and some were raped or otherwise victimized when they resisted.

4. The threat of sexual violence by gang members forces children to stop attending school.

Schools are principal sites of gang recruitment and violence in communities; children often experience threats of violence by gangs at schools or on their way to or from school. Girls who participated in this study who live in gang-dominated areas or had to cross through gang controlled areas to get to school reported living in constant fear of violence. In some cases girls who faced harassment or threats from gang members dropped out of school and limited their movements and activities to avoid continued threats and violence.

5. Sexual violence by family members is extremely widespread. Children are often very young when violence begins and experience ongoing abuse over an extended period of time.

Interviews with experts in the region confirm that in a large number of cases of SGBV against children, the perpetrator is a member of the child's family. Nine girls who participated in this study experienced sexual abuse or rape by family members, including step-fathers, grandfathers, and uncles. The average age of these children when they first experienced abuse was nine years old, and two children were raped by a family member when they were six years old. In some cases sexual abuse continued over the course of months or years.

6. Children are often caught in cycles of vulnerability that expose them to multiple forms of violence.

Many children face multiple forms of violence including sexual abuse in the home, intimate partner violence, gang-based SGBV, and human trafficking. In some of these cases children flee one form of violence and then find themselves in an equally dangerous situation. For example, girls subject to violence in the home may move in with older partners to escape that abuse. Girls in relationships with older partners are vulnerable to domestic and/or sexual violence, and those who fled abusive families have no family to whom they can return. LGBTI children are especially vulnerable to cycles of violence and exploitation, due to discrimination and lack of support within families and state institutions. Poverty often contributes to cycles

of vulnerability, as children are forced into situations of violence and exploitation to meet their basic needs.

7. Victim-blaming is widespread and prevents many children from disclosing sexual abuse to their family or other adults and from receiving support or protection from adults.

The cases of study participants as well as interviews with experts in the region indicate that many Salvadoran, Honduran, and Guatemalan child survivors of sexual abuse do not tell anyone about the abuse, in some cases for many years, because of fear and shame or because of direct threats of harm from the abuser. When children do disclose violence to a family member or other adult, they are frequently blamed for what happened to them, discouraged from reporting abuse to the authorities, and forced to continue to live with or have contact with the abuser. Child survivors of SGBV rarely report violence to the authorities due to lack of trust in them and fear of retaliation by the abuser. In cases of gang-related violence, reporting puts victims and witnesses at great risk, as gangs commonly punish those who report their activities with violence or death.

8. Ineffective judicial systems in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala lead to high rates of impunity and lack of protection for survivors of SGBV.

Victims who report SGBV face a number of obstacles in accessing justice, from slow and burdensome judicial processes to discrimination and re-victimization by officials who lack appropriate training and sensitivity. Combined with ineffective investigation and prosecution, these factors contribute to the extremely small percentage of cases that reach legal resolution. Even when a sentence is reached, victims rarely have access to the protection and assistance that they need to rebuild their lives.

9. Child protection systems in the region fail to adequately protect children who are victims of SGBV or provide them appropriate services. This failure is especially apparent in cases of gang-related SGBV against children.

Child protection systems in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala are severely underfunded, and lack capacity to provide necessary services to child survivors of SGBV, including protection from ongoing violence as well as adequate shelter, psychological support, and social and economic assistance. Child protection systems generally lack the capacity to provide protection in cases in which

children are targeted by gang members, and in some cases officials cannot enter gang-dominated areas to respond to cases of child abuse or neglect, regardless of whether the perpetrator is a gang member. When girls refuse to become the “girlfriends” of gang members, often their entire families are threatened with violence, yet families under threat of gang violence have nowhere to turn for shelter or security due to a complete dearth of programs or services to assist this population.

Sexual and Gender-based Violence during Migration and Lack of Access to Protection

10. Unaccompanied children, especially girls and LGBTI children, often endure multiple forms of sexual violence during migration.

When children migrate alone, often fleeing violence in their countries of origin, they are frequently subjected to SGBV during their journeys through Central America and Mexico. This study documents multiple forms of violence against children in transit, including sexual harassment, rape, human trafficking, and coerced survival sex. Perpetrators of violence include organized criminal groups, smugglers and traffickers, immigration officials and other authorities, and other migrants.

11. Migrant and refugee children in Mexico, including SGBV survivors, risk deportation to danger.

Extended periods of detention as well as lack of information and legal representation deter children fleeing violence, including SGBV survivors, from applying for refugee status in Mexico. Those children who do seek refugee status in Mexico confront a system that, while improving, does not yet have the capacity to adequately adjudicate their cases. Without meaningful access to international protection, children are deported back to their countries of origin and risk being harmed or forced to flee yet again.

12. Children who flee SGBV or experience SGBV during migration have limited access to justice and assistance in Mexico.

Migrant and refugee children who are victims of SGBV in Mexico rarely report these crimes to authorities because they fear detention or deportation and do not trust authorities. This fear or mistrust stems in part from the fact that in some cases, authorities have extorted migrants or have been involved or complicit in acts of violence

against migrants. Many children are also isolated during the migration journey and rarely access government, civil society, or private shelter services. This isolation creates another barrier to reporting violence and often results in survivors not receiving the medical or psychological attention they need.

Sexual and Gender-based Violence After Repatriation and Lack of Access to Protection

13. Most often girls, and some boys, face discrimination and stigma within their families and communities following repatriation to countries of origin.

Some returning girls suffer discrimination within their families and communities based on the assumption that they were raped or engaged in sexual relations with men during their journeys, or in the United States. Some returning boys and girls are accused of having picked up “malas costumbres” (bad habits). Peers and other community members sometimes ostracize or reject returning migrant children as a result of these judgments and assumptions.

14. Returning children who are SGBV survivors rarely receive the support necessary to reintegrate into their families and communities, and in many cases do not receive adequate protection and assistance.

Most child SGBV survivors repatriated to their countries of origin from the United States or Mexico do not receive the support services they need to reintegrate into their communities in a safe and sustainable way. There is an almost total lack of specialized medical and psychological services for this population, especially for those returning to rural and marginal urban areas, where government services are extremely limited. Additionally, weak child protection systems in the region often fail to identify and provide adequate protection for repatriated children who migrated to escape SGBV, leaving them vulnerable to the same violence they fled.