

# Mobilizing Change in Central America

## Fostering Women's Networks to Combat Gang Violence

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Mobilizing Change in Central America  
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*Growing gang influence in Central America's Northern Triangle contributes to failed states, the internationalization of gang violence, and the flow of refugees into the United States. Gang activity threatens Central American women with kidnapping, sexual assault, and murder, which confines them to their homes. In the past, women's networks have played a critical role in fostering political change and conflict resolution in Latin America. However, Central American governments have largely failed to include women in crafting anti-gang policies. Such exclusion prevents these policies from adequately addressing the needs of half the population they are affecting, and wastes the proven potential that female perspectives can provide. The United States should promote women's capacity to combat gang violence through the use of mobile phone technology that encourages the development of women's political networks.*

## **Introduction**

Gangs in the Northern Triangle of Central American (NTCA) have increasingly targeted women through kidnapping, sexual assault, and murder to assert their political control.<sup>1</sup> Violent conditions create an environment that severely restricts women's ability to safely travel, confining many to their homes.<sup>2</sup> Historical precedent suggests that, when left unaddressed, gang violence against women will lead to escalating gang-related homicides across all genders.<sup>3</sup> Growing Central American gang aggression also has the potential to threaten U.S. security by contributing to state failure, the internationalization of gang violence, and the flow of refugees over the U.S. border.

Although there are many proposed solutions to mitigate NTCA gang violence, all have failed to consider the unique contributions that Central American women can provide. The inclusion of women in conflict resolution has helped to facilitate peace in countries such as Liberia, and a robust legacy of women's activism in Central America suggests women can be powerful allies in combatting gangs.<sup>4</sup>

Despite women's restricted movement within gang territories, cell phone technology can provide Central American women with a form of "immobile mobility" that surpasses physical and cultural boundaries. Access to mobile phones can help Central American women safely create anti-gang political violence.<sup>5</sup> To combat gang violence, the United States should encourage the development of women's political networks through the use of mobile phone technology. In so doing, policymakers can both empower marginalized Central American women and enhance current policies aimed at disrupting gang activities.

## The Effect of NTCA Gang Violence on U.S. Security

Persistent gang violence in the NTCA adversely affects U.S. security interests. First, the growth of NTCA gangs contributes to a cycle of regional instability that could result in failed states. Second, as gangs expand, their international networks will gain further influence in the United States. Third, gang violence serves as a prominent regional push factor that increases illegal immigration into the United States.

### *The Potential for Failed States*

Gang activities stunt state development by hindering economic, social, and political progress. Limited economic opportunities and high rates of police corruption spur an increase in gang membership and reduce state capacity.<sup>6</sup> Unaddressed, these factors can contribute to the collapse of state governments, leading to greater gang dominance and regional instability.

- *Limited economic opportunities.* According to the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), gang violence in Latin America costs the region approximately 14.2 percent of its GDP.<sup>7</sup> Within the NTCA, gang-related activity in Guatemala is estimated to cost the state approximately 1.87 percent GDP per year, and in El Salvador approximately 9.16 percent GDP per year.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, high threat levels resulting from gang violence dissuade foreign corporations from engaging in the region. As of February 2016, globalEdge business risk assessments rate Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala as high-risk states and indicate that these economies are unfavorable for commercial activity due to criminality attributed to gangs.<sup>9</sup>

By denying potential financial growth, violent gang activity limits upward mobility and exacerbates preexisting regional income inequalities.<sup>10</sup> As a result, growing numbers of young men see gangs as their sole opportunity for socioeconomic advancement. In many cases, gang members function as breadwinners in their families.<sup>11</sup> Such financial dependence leads families to support gangs in order to survive, leading to greater gang authority.<sup>12</sup>

- *Increased government corruption.* Poor financial conditions in the NTCA leave law enforcement more susceptible to corruption. Gangs commonly confront public officials with the option of “*plata o plomo*” or “silver or lead,” forcing them to cooperate with local gangs by accepting bribes or risk being shot.<sup>13</sup> When underpaid government officials are confronted with the choice between either easy money or violent death, they generally opt for the former.<sup>14</sup>

High rates of NTCA government corruption are reflected in 2015 rankings from Transparency International, an organization that measures perceptions of state corruption on a scale of 0 to 100. Within the NTCA, all three states received poor rankings: Guatemala scored a 28, Honduras a 31, and El Salvador a 39.<sup>15</sup> These rankings place

NTCA states in the same league as notoriously corrupt states such as Kazakhstan (which scored 28), Mozambique (which scored 31), and Panama (which scored 39).<sup>16</sup> High levels of corruption erode public trust in government institutions, weakening state institutions from within and contributing to further violence.

- *Reduced government capacity.* NTCA gang activity consumes valuable resources and threatens regional rule of law. Efforts to combat gang violence consistently divert investment from other crucial developmental sectors such as healthcare, education, and public utilities.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the majority of state programs to combat gang violence allocate resources towards punishing gang members, but fail to invest in gang prevention and intervention.<sup>18</sup> For example, while the 2015 Salvadoran budget increased funding to state justice and security by \$19.6 million, \$18 million of those funds were directed towards strengthening the prison system.<sup>19</sup> Due to this narrow focus on security, citizens are vulnerable to other security threats such as extortion, human trafficking, and kidnapping.<sup>20</sup>

Coupled with the public sector's negative reputation for corruption, government impotence weakens citizens' confidence in the state. In comparison to states' limited resources, NTCA gangs have enough money, organizational infrastructure, political influence, and ammunition to destabilize Central American governments.<sup>21</sup> This disparity has led to the rise of "ungoverned spaces," where gangs provide an alternative form of governance by offering services and protection in exchange for loyalty.<sup>22</sup> In turn, these ungoverned spaces function as logistical hubs for the deposit and storage of illicit cargo destined for foreign markets, allowing gangs to further expand the scope of their influence.<sup>23</sup>

### *The Internationalization of Gang Violence*

Many NTCA gangs are not bound by regional borders, but supported by gang networks that extend into the United States. The connections between these transnational networks are complex and have existed for decades. For example, Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) was founded in Los Angeles during the 1980s by immigrants fleeing El Salvador's civil war.<sup>24</sup> Its leaders applied lessons learned from the Salvadoran conflict to the streets of Los Angeles, earning MS-13 the reputation as one of the most ruthless street gangs in the United States.<sup>25</sup>

The organization now exists in at least 42 states and has up to 10,000 members nationwide.<sup>26</sup> In the past, U.S. authorities have linked MS-13 to a variety of crimes including murder, kidnapping, prostitution, drug smuggling, and human trafficking.<sup>27</sup> Generally, these incidents have occurred where there are substantial Salvadoran immigrant populations such as Southern California, Washington D.C., and Northern Virginia.<sup>28</sup> Although U.S. authorities have tried to reduce MS-13's domestic influence by deporting gang leaders to Central America, these tactics have backfired and resulted in a "networked criminal diaspora" of transnational gangs.<sup>29</sup>

In recent years, transnational gangs in the United States such as MS-13 have become more organized, sophisticated, and geographically diffuse.<sup>30</sup> Foreign NTCA gang leaders serve as

mentors for MS-13 affiliates in the United States by directly influencing strategic decisions, such as moving into new territories and recruiting members.<sup>31</sup> In return, money generated by U.S. MS-13 affiliates is funneled to the group's leadership in Central America, strengthening their criminal alliance.<sup>32</sup> Given this symbiotic relationship, if regional gang violence in the NTCA continues to grow, Washington can expect similar violent patterns to spread to U.S. affiliates.

### *The Growing Refugee Crisis*

*Today the world is witness to a global refugee crisis of proportions not seen since World War II. But while most of the international media attention is on the refugees arriving in Europe – from countries such as Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan – there is another protection crisis unfolding in Central America.*

-- António Guterres, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, 2015<sup>33</sup>

Nearly a quarter of illegal immigrants to the United States are from Central America. According to the Migration Policy Institute, following Mexico, illegal immigrants are most likely to originate from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras.<sup>34</sup> However, the influx of individuals from NTCA states can more appropriately be described as a refugee problem, rather than an immigration problem.

Although some NTCA emigrants leave the region due to push factors such as rampant poverty, data from the Latin American and Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) suggests that individuals are more likely to seek refuge in the United States when they are directly impacted by gang violence.<sup>35</sup> NTCA gangs threaten citizens for a variety of reasons, such as bearing witness to a crime, attempting to leave a gang, or failing to pay an extortion fee.<sup>36</sup> Since 2008, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has reported a nearly fivefold increase of asylum seekers from the NTCA.<sup>37</sup>

Until effective and comprehensive anti-gang policies are implemented, refugees will continue to leave the NCTA in record numbers.<sup>38</sup> During the summer of 2014, the United States witnessed the damaging effects that this ongoing trend can have when roughly 52,440 unaccompanied minors and 61,973 family units fled from the NTCA to escape gang-related violence.<sup>39</sup>

Since 2014, U.S. officials have cited decreasing numbers of NTCA refugees apprehended at the U.S.-Mexico border as proof that a refugee crisis no longer poses a significant threat.<sup>40</sup> Several factors suggest that this decline is temporary:

- *Mexico as a buffer state.* Although fewer NTCA refugees entered the United States in 2015, this decrease does not mean that the 2014 surge of Central American refugees has subsided. Instead, the majority of these refugees are now apprehended by Mexican officials through the Southern Border Program, an effort aimed at decreasing migration flows from Central America.<sup>41</sup> Since this program's implementation, Mexico's growing share of apprehensions in the region has obscured the urgency surrounding NTCA's refugee crisis from U.S. officials.

While Mexico apprehended roughly 20 percent of NTCA refugees bound for the U.S. before and during the 2014 surge, its share of apprehensions has more than doubled to about 42 percent since the start of the Southern Border Program.<sup>42</sup> As a result, during the first seven months of fiscal year 2015, while U.S. authorities only detained 70,448 Central Americans at its border, Mexican authorities detained 92,889.<sup>43</sup>

- *Re-emerging refugee trends.* While there was a decrease in NTCA refugees entering the United States during most of 2015, by the end of the year these numbers began to spike once again, suggesting a resurgence in NTCA refugee flows.<sup>44</sup> This upswing is due in part to intensifying regional push factors, such as gang-related violence. For example, following the 2014 dissolution of a truce between rival gangs in El Salvador, the country's homicide count climbed in August 2015 to the highest monthly total since its civil war.<sup>45</sup>

With these increasingly dangerous conditions, Central Americans are more desperate to flee the region. Despite new U.S. and Mexican policies aimed at deterring potential NTCA migrants from entering North America, Central Americans have adapted to increasing Mexican border apprehensions by choosing new routes into the United States.<sup>46</sup> While the majority of NTCA refugees who entered the United States during the 2014 surge were apprehended in the U.S. Border Patrol's Rio Grande Valley Sector, increasing numbers have been intercepted in the adjacent Laredo and Del Rio sectors since spring 2015.<sup>47</sup>

## Attempts to Combat NTCA Gang Violence

As NTCA gang-related violence continues to escalate, the need for effective and comprehensive anti-gang policies is increasingly clear. Currently, NTCA officials are at a crossroads in deciding whether to continue emulating past *mano dura* ("iron fist") policies or to adopt a more popular citizen security approach.

### *Mano Dura Policies*

In the early 2000s, El Salvador, Honduras, and, to a lesser degree, Guatemala began enacting *mano dura* policies in response to escalating NTCA gang violence. Often compared to zero tolerance laws, *mano dura* policies enhance police authority by allowing officers to incarcerate gang members for "illicit association" and impose harsher prison sentences for gang-related crimes.<sup>48</sup> However, such aggressive tactics have ultimately increased gang violence for several reasons.

- *Increased gang membership.* Rather than reducing gang recruitment, *mano dura* policies have led to growing gang numbers. Arrests under *mano dura* policies have stigmatized already marginalized communities and led at-risk youths to view the state with greater suspicion, accelerating gang recruitment.<sup>49</sup> Many youths who had been wrongfully

arrested for gang involvement chose to join gangs while in prison to seek protection from fellow inmates.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, news coverage surrounding *mano dura* policies that demonizes gang activity has functioned as free recruitment advertising and builds the perceived status of gang members.<sup>51</sup>

- *Strengthened gang organization.* High gang incarceration rates from *mano dura* policies have allowed gang leadership to consolidate and organize their power through prison networks. Safe from their enemies and criminal prosecution, incarcerated gang leaders had the ability to organize, reinforce old gang protocol, and recruit.<sup>52</sup> Gang members' access to prison cell phones has facilitated these efforts by allowing gang members to coordinate between different prisons.<sup>53</sup>
- *Expansion into additional criminal territories.* Under *mano dura* policies, gangs have not only become better organized, they are also more sophisticated in their efforts to avoid detection by authorities.<sup>54</sup> As a result, gangs have expanded into contract killings, extortion, and human trafficking.<sup>55</sup> These illicit activities have been primarily orchestrated by incarcerated gang members, with an estimated 84 percent of gang extortion operations originating from inside prisons.<sup>56</sup>

### *Citizen Security Policies*

Whereas *mano dura* policies address the symptoms of gang violence through harsh law enforcement, citizen security policies focus on its underlying causes and effects. While citizen security policies still include measures aimed at punishing gang members, they also incorporate measures aimed at empowering citizens through efforts such as judicial reforms, community policing, youth and gender violence reduction, and preventative measures to reduce threats to citizens.<sup>57</sup>

The citizen security model emphasizes the belief that citizens are the best advocates for their own communities and encourages community organizations to participate in formulating better-targeted security strategies.<sup>58</sup> As a result, many view this approach as a strategy that can be used to both combat gang violence and improve the poor state-citizen relationships that have resulted from government instability.

Citizen security policies have had a positive impact in Latin America. A 2011 World Bank report credits citizen security initiatives for lower homicide rates in Bogota, where the rate fell from 80 murders per 100,000 people in 1993 to 28 per 100,000 people in 2004.<sup>59</sup> The IDB also cites citizen security policies as crucial in reducing Medellin's 1991 homicide rate of 381 murders per 100,000 people by more than 80 percent.<sup>60</sup> These results have caused many development banks, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and private sector institutions to begin directly funding citizen security efforts, and led the United States to adopt these methods for combatting Central America gang violence.<sup>61</sup>

## *The Future of NTCA Anti-Gang Policies*

In recent years, Latin American leaders have hired foreign consulting firms to advise their administrations on security issues. Overall, proposals have emphasized “destroying gangs” through harsher measures, while failing to address the structural causes of gang violence.<sup>62</sup> Several law enforcement officials have criticized these recommendations as too similar to *mano dura* policies, pointing to a wider debate in the policy community between *mano dura* and citizen security advocates.<sup>63</sup>

For citizen security policies to be fully effective, two key factors are required to ensure success. First, citizens must be proactively engaged and invested in creating a secure environment. Second, states must be responsive and accountable by providing reliable services to support citizens’ organizing efforts.<sup>64</sup> Without a strong relationship between citizens and the state, efforts to prevent gang violence will likely fail.

Although local communities and public authorities are divided, women’s inclusion in shaping anti-gang policies can help bridge this gap. Regardless of which policies NTCA governments have adopted to combat gang violence, all have lacked a crucial component—female input. Despite distinct differences between gang aggression against women and men, Central American anti-gang policies have treated citizens as a homogenous population. The failure to consider the gender-specific dimensions of gang violence has been further exacerbated by the lack of women included in the discussion, formulation, and implementation of security programs.<sup>65</sup>

By including women’s voices in initiatives to reduce gang violence, policymakers can strengthen the security sector’s capacity to respond to the multiple ways gang violence affects Central America’s different populations.<sup>66</sup> Until anti-gang policies acknowledge gendered variations in gang violence and involve women as part of the policymaking process, efforts to combat gang violence will remain ineffective.<sup>67</sup>

## **Women as a Source of Change**

While several solutions have been proposed to mitigate NTCA gang violence, they have failed to consider how women can contribute to anti-gang efforts. Women’s political empowerment can help resolve conflicts, and peace tends to last longer if negotiators regularly consult with or include women’s rights groups during peace negotiations.<sup>68</sup> For example, in 2003, protests by the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace pressured warring factions to participate in peace talks and ultimately brought an end to the Second Liberian Civil War.<sup>69</sup> NTCA women, in particular, can help end gang violence by building on prior Latin American women’s activism, past gendered approaches to ending gang violence, and aspects of *machista* culture.

- *Powerful Latin American legacy.* In Latin America, women historically have been considered essential to a wide range of political movements.<sup>70</sup> During the 1970s, Latin American women’s groups advocated for victims of torture and political suppression during the region’s “dirty wars.” Through public demonstrations, women’s networks such

as the Argentinian Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, Salvadoran CO-MADRES, and Guatemalan CONAVIGUA garnered international attention and held corrupt administrations accountable for their human rights abuses.<sup>71</sup>

- *Effectiveness in responding to and preventing gang violence.* Women's networks have continually proven their ability to combat gang violence. During the 1970s, Chicago mothers seeking to reduce increasing urban violence and reform former gang members created Mothers Against Gangs (MAG).<sup>72</sup> The organization saw success in Chicago and expanded nationwide. MAG's most notable results emerged from a chapter in Phoenix, Arizona that served more than 9,000 former gang members per year through a gang rehabilitation program and was upheld as a model to be emulated by other crime-ridden cities in the Americas.<sup>73</sup>

In the late 1990s, multiple women's groups in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico mobilized in the response to growing gang-related femicides, garnering international attention.<sup>74</sup> These women's organizations later formed alliances with other groups to create the Coordinadora en Pro de los Derechos de las Mujeres (CDPM), a coalition that enabled a constructive dialogue dedicated to ending gang violence against women.<sup>75</sup>

More recently in 2014, the UN awarded the Nansen Refugee Award to a Colombian women's group, Red Mariposas de Alas Nuevas Construyendo Futuro, for advocating on behalf of Colombian women victimized and displaced as a result of gang violence.<sup>76</sup> Since forming in 2010, the Mariposas have staged public demonstrations, organized meetings with politicians aimed at increasing more government attention towards women's rights, and have helped more than 1,000 women and their families recover from gang violence.<sup>77</sup>

- *Dynamics of machista culture.* Latin American *machista* culture divides men and women into separate public and private spheres, emphasizing that men must display aggressive *machismo* and women must display submissive *marianismo* in order to gain respect.<sup>78</sup> Although these gender roles can be culturally restrictive, *machista* culture's prescribed social expectations can also be used to shame gangs and offer female activists a form of political protection unavailable to men. Under *machista* culture, *marianismo* defines women as having cultural, spiritual, and moral superiority to men.<sup>79</sup> Thus, as both caretakers and citizens, women are also considered responsible for ensuring that their family members do not become threats to national security or become victims of such threats.<sup>80</sup>

In many cases, women have entered politics as an extension of their traditional roles as caregivers and homemakers by adopting the role of *supermadres*, who translate gendered expectations of the domestic sphere into the public sphere.<sup>81</sup> The concept of *supermadres* became dominant throughout Latin America during the 1970s and 1980s in tandem with the mobilization of women's groups such as the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, CO-MADRES, and CONAVIGUA.<sup>82</sup> Although employing motherhood as a form of political discourse can be limit women to traditionally "feminine" issues such as welfare, if framed strategically, it can also grant women political authority. Since *marianismo*

already has publicly recognized legitimacy, governments, politicians, and authorities are predisposed to pay more attention to demands couched in these gendered terms.<sup>83</sup>

## **Women’s Networks in the Digital Age: Mobile Phone Advocacy**

With mobile phone technology, activists are able to more easily coordinate mass movements through the potentially viral effects of forwarding messages.<sup>84</sup> For women in the NTCA, mobile phones can also reduce the risks associated with meeting in person by providing a form of “immobile mobility” that allows organizers to globally and locally connect without leaving their homes.<sup>85</sup> In the past, women’s organizations such as the Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET) have successfully used mobile phone technology to organize and publicize women’s rights campaigns.<sup>86</sup> As a result, a program aimed at promoting NTCA women’s mobile phone advocacy can enhance women’s ability to join in the fight against gang violence.

### *High NTCA Mobile Phone Penetration*

While the NTCA continues to have relatively low internet availability, the region benefits from widespread access to mobile phones. As of 2013, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras have mobile penetration rates of 140 percent (1.4 phones per person), 99 percent (almost 1 phone per person), and 96 percent (a little less than one phone per person), respectively.<sup>87</sup> The prevalence of NTCA mobile phone ownership reflects the region’s shifting cultural landscape and suggests that the new digital age can provide a secure channel for the formation of women’s networks.

Efforts such as the Seguridad Inalámbrica Project, a United States Agency for International Development (USAID)-Qualcomm partnership in El Salvador, have already capitalized on high NTCA mobile penetration rates to combat gang violence. Through this collaboration, the project has developed a wireless mapping and crime reporting system that enables law enforcement in six municipalities to track, report, and analyze real-time crime data. As of 2014, 588 law enforcement agents had been trained and more than 11,000 total reports had been submitted under this system, with 97 percent of these submitted reports reviewed and approved by website monitors in each municipality.<sup>88</sup>

Additionally, unlike other developing regions that have experienced rapidly growing mobile penetration, but suffer from a gender gap in mobile phone ownership, the gender gap in Latin America is nearly non-existent.<sup>89</sup> For example, whereas East Asian women are 17 percent less likely to own mobile phones than men, Latin American women are only 1 percent less likely to own mobile phones than men.<sup>90</sup> As a result, many Latin American women are likely to already own or have experience in operating a mobile phone.

### *Texting as a Tool of Resistance*

Despite widespread mobile phone availability, less than 30 percent of Central American residents own smartphones.<sup>91</sup> While low smartphone ownership limits NTCA women's ability to use the social media platforms that have served as major catalysts in recent movements such as the Arab Spring, basic mobile phone technology such as Short Message Service (SMS), or texting, comes with its own advantages. Unlike social media or apps, SMS messaging requires a lower level of digital literacy and allows women without internet to participate.<sup>92</sup> Furthermore, political organizers have used SMS technology to a powerful effect throughout the world.

On January 20, 2001, text messages were used to mobilize thousands of Filipino protestors at Manila's EDSA Shrine and topple President Joseph Estrada's corrupt administration in an event known as the People Power Revolution II.<sup>93</sup> On March 11, 2004, when Spain's ruling People's Party falsely blamed Basque separatists for terrorist attacks in Madrid, citizens used texting to organize a spontaneous protests demanding transparency in front of the Party's headquarters. These protests ultimately resulted in the Party being voted out of power three days later in an electoral upset.<sup>94</sup> Furthermore, as recently as 2015, text messaging has been attributed to aiding anti-austerity protests in Europe.<sup>95</sup> These events demonstrate how mobile phones' revolutionary SMS capacity can be applied to women's fight against Central American gang violence.

In addition, as mobile phone technology has evolved, new programs have been developed that can further enhance activists' ability to organize via text message. Through FrontlineSMS, organizers can send out mass text messages to contacts without internet access, and through MXit, organizers are able to use an instant messaging service that allows them to engage with their community independent of location and time.<sup>96</sup> Both programs can be downloaded for free, offering NTCA women a cheaper, more efficient way to collaborate and reach broader audiences.<sup>97</sup>

### *Expanding U.S. Mobile Phone Initiatives*

*Women have used mobile phones to organize, advocate change, and participate in civic and community affairs. Mobile phones also support women's network building outside their immediate families, and their participation in public affairs.*

-- "Empowering Women Through Mobile Technology," U.S. Department of State, 2010<sup>98</sup>

Efforts to empower NTCA women using mobile phone technology can build on current U.S. mobile phone initiatives aimed at reducing gender-based inequalities.<sup>99</sup> In 2010, Washington launched the mWomen Program, now referred to as Connected Women, to increase mobile phone access for women in developing countries in conjunction with the Groupe Speciale Mobile Association (GSMA).<sup>100</sup> This partnership has largely been spearheaded by the U.S. Department of State's Office of Global Women's Issues and USAID's Digital Development Lab.<sup>101</sup>

As of March 2016, Connected Women has awarded eleven grants to help operators and NGOs in developing countries fund projects that increase women's access to and use of mobile phones for

a variety of services, ranging from mobile banking to education and skills training.<sup>102</sup> However, these grants have been exclusively awarded to projects in Asia and Africa.<sup>103</sup> While the program's narrow regional focus is partly due to the higher gender gaps in mobile phone ownership that exist in Africa and Asia, Connected Women's absence in Latin America may prevent women from reaping the full benefits of mobile phone ownership. By building on Central America's preexisting high rates of mobile phone ownership among women, Connected Women can provide the necessary financial and institutional support needed to empower NTCA women against gang violence. As a result, the U.S. government should expand Connected Women's efforts to include women's NGOs in Central America.

Although Connected Women has primarily focused on improving women's socioeconomic opportunities through mobile money and financial banking, it also recognizes the impact that mobile phone technology can have on increasing women's civil participation and activism.<sup>104</sup> Connected Women is currently funding mobile phone efforts by the Human Network International (HNI) to tackle gender-based violence in Madagascar, suggesting the potential for a Connected Women partnership when using mobile phones to enhance NTCA women's activism against gang violence.<sup>105</sup>

Potential NTCA Connected Women partners may include Salvadoran organizations such as the Asociación de Mujeres por la Dignidad y la Vida (Las Dignas), which emphasizes political activism and preventing violence against women; the Asociación Movimiento de Mujeres Melida Anaya Montes (Las Melidas), which views women as catalysts of change when empowered; and Colectiva Feminista para el Desarrollo Local, which addresses violence against women, citizen security, and political participation.<sup>106</sup>

## **Conclusion**

If policymakers hope to successfully combat NTCA gang aggression, women must be included as part of the process. Growing rates of gang-related femicide, rape, and sexual assault signal the beginning of escalating violence that has the potential to destabilize the region, strengthen transnational gang activity in the United States, and lead to a refugee crisis that threatens to overwhelm U.S. officials. Yet, although gang violence against women plays a crucial role in entrenching gang influence, women also have the potential to disrupt this authority.

Historical precedent has demonstrated the strength of women's networks in successfully resolving conflict created not only by gangs, but militaries and corrupt government regimes. Within the context of Latin America, there is already a cultural legacy of women's participation in civil society, enabled by the role of female leaders as *supermadres*.

Through fostering the development of NTCA women's networks with mobile phone technology, policymakers have the potential to both empower marginalized Central American women and combat gang violence. By serving as a safer, more easily accessible method of political organization, mobile phone technology will allow for women to include their voices in conversations about gang violence and enhance the effectiveness of NTCA anti-gang policies.

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<sup>1</sup> Gurney, Kyra. "Report Details how El Salvador Gangs use Rape as Weapon." InSight Crime. Accessed November 7, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/el-salvador-gangs-rape-sexual-violence-femicides>; *El Salvador: Violence Against Women, Including Non-Domestic Sexual Violence, Legislation, State Protection and Support Services*: Canada: Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2015.; Ibid. "Femicide: A Global Problem." *Small Arms Survey Research Notes* no. 14 (2012): 1-4. For the purposes of this paper, femicide will be defined as "the intentional murder of women based on gender."

<sup>2</sup> McEvers, Kelly and Jasmine Garsd. "The Surreal Reasons Girls are Disappearing in El Salvador: #15Girls." NPR. Accessed October 9, 2015. <http://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2015/10/05/445985671/never-leave-your-house-survival-strategies-for-el-salvador-s-15girls>.

<sup>3</sup> Staudt, Kathleen and Zulma Y. Mendez. *Courage, Resistance & Women in Ciudad Juraez: Challenges to Militarization*. Austin, TX: The University of Texas Press, 2015. Already, increasing gendered gang violence in the NTCA mirrors patterns from the 1990s-2000s in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico that served as the antecedent to skyrocketing murder rates across the general population, and led ethnologists to observe a linkage between violence against women and hyper-homicide rates.

<sup>4</sup> Roth, Kenneth. "UN must make Good on its Resolution to Protect Women Against Wartime Violence." The Guardian. Accessed 11/20, 2015. [http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/nov/09/un-must-make-good-on-its-resolution-to-protect-women-against-wartime-violence?CMP=share\\_btn\\_link](http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/nov/09/un-must-make-good-on-its-resolution-to-protect-women-against-wartime-violence?CMP=share_btn_link).

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