GUATEMALA
WOMEN IN GANGS

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INTRODUCTION

This research paper will focus directly on the role of women within the hierarchies of the gang system in the Northern Triangle. The paper will be studying the factors of violence, victimization, integration in gangs, state response, and reintegration into society. Although the paper specifically focuses on the female gender role, the influence of the male gender within the gangs, forms part of the investigation.

First, will start with the patriarchal system that has been implemented in the countries of Central America. Second, we will study the behavior and abuse found within the household of teenage girls and young adults. Lastly, we will examine the replica of the sexist model found within women's households and society, reintegrated into the hierarchy of the gang system.

There are many gang groups found in Central America, though only two of the most recognized groups will be taken into account for this study – La Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18. Even though the research focuses on the North Triangle, investigations concerning psychological and behavioral observations have been considered from gang studies outside of the triangle.

Before diving into the research paper I have added a brief history of the evolution of gangs in Central America.

HISTORY OF GANG FORMATION IN CENTRAL AMERICA

WHEN DID GANGS INITIATE?

Jose Miguel Cruz explains in his investigation of Central American Maras 2010 that gangs in the Northern Triangle (Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras) existed long-before the initiation of various civil wars in these areas and before the updates of the American immigration policies that led to massive deportations of various illegal aliens inside of the United States. There are registered records of gangs in the 1950's, 60's and 70's in the Northern Triangle before the widespread of the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18 (B-18) in Central America.

A few names to mention are Stomperis, Los Panudas (Andino, 2016) in Honduras and Mara 5, 33, Capitols (Levenson, 1988) in Guatemala, and Mara Morazán, Mara Gallo, Mara Quiñónez, Mara AC/DC, Mara No-se-dice, Mau-Mau (Cruz. 2010) in El Salvador.

HOW DID THEY INITIATE?

In the early 1980's there was a strong military influence in Central America which led to various Civil Wars – 36 years of war in Guatemala starting in 1960 (Eckhardt. 2006) and a 12-year war in 1979 in El Salvador (Mason. 1999). Many Central Americans decided to migrate to the United States as refugees– targeting Los Angeles, California as one of their main destinations (Cruz.2010). The LA street gangs, including Barrio 18, brought a sense of identity and support to many young adults and teenagers who had suffered from neglect in their households. During the final years of the 1990's a high rate of deportation of Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Salvadorans were sent back to their home countries. Gang members who were deported played an important

role by establishing "local city networks" and readapting the gang culture as it was originally handled in LA and implementing it into the Northern Triangle (Cruz.2010).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Two theories will be illustrated in this section of the paper to help answer the research question. The theories are based on qualitative data collected by other scholarly journals. A note for the reader to take into consideration – for better acquisition and further understanding of these theories it is suggested to consult the listed sources on this paper.

WOMEN VICTIMS OF GANGS

An observation suggested by the study case of Nelly Rivera in her investigation "Women, Gangs, and Violence in Guatemala" suggests to the reader that one of the prevailing factors that affects most women in society is their unperceived and recurring role of constantly becoming victims. The variables of neglect, phsyical, and/or sexual abuse intially occur within the household. This same behavioral sketched is taken into account again - specifically at the integration stage of women who have decided to form part of the gangs. Women are crudely criticized by society when they decide to form part of gangs not taking into consideration that it is a form of survival for girls who come from broken-homes (Rivera.2017).

SEXISM IS A BIG INFLUENTIAL FACTOR

Guatemala is a culture composed of violence and offers impunity for the most corrupt - it is an atmosphere that has adopted the patriarchal system as a "norm" (Ruiz.2018). The same behavior that infiltrated Guatemala during the 1960's, has been replicated over and over again creating a *machista* community. This patriarchal replica is the same approach that has been observed within

the hierarchy structure of the gangs as well as being embraced by the Guatemalan society. The reintegration process into society is a long-road for women who decide to leave the gang life.

RESEARCH METHOD

The principal research method of this investigation will be responded through secondary literature based on case studies, articles, and interviews.

CASE STUDIES

The gender of interest for this study is teenage girls and women who form part of gangs within the Northern Triangle. Gangs in the triangle (Guatemala, El Savador and Honduras) are mostly composed of men, though over the years the participation of women has become an important factor for the operation of tasks. Updated facts in 2020 from Demoscopía (2007) show that 20%-40% of women form part of gangs.

Information of women forming part of gangs has been extracted from the following investigations to reinforce the research method taking into consideration a timeframe between 2012-2020.

- Violent Women and Violence Against Women (Aguilar & Rikkers.2012)
- Barrio 18 Strategies (Bonilla.2014)
- Gangs and Women in Central America (Rosado et la. 2020)

Women found in these studies meet the following criteria: 1) women with no criminal background; 2) women with a criminal background; 3) victims who have been displaced in their communities; and 4) women who live in the community and are revictimized (Rosado et la. 2020) .

ARTICLES - HOW THE HIERARCHY WORKS

The hierarchy of the gang system has distinctions when it comes to men and women. Even women who do have equal tasks assigned similarly to men - only reach the bottom part of the hierarchy chart (Bonilla.2014). Women comply with two roles inside of the system.

<u>Men</u>

1. *Ranfleros Jefes de Cicla* - Known to be at the head of the pyramid and are in charge of giving out orders.
2. *Llaveros de Ciclas* - Second in command, known to be the right hand of the Ranfleros.
3. *Homies* - Have earned this position due to a certain number of criminal acts.
4. *Chequeos* - Recruiters of new members for the gang.
5. *Paros* - Lowest position of the hierarchy and are given random tasks to complete.

<u>Women</u>

1. *Homie Girls* - Have earned their position due to the number of times they experienced physical abuse and have been assigned to drug distribution and criminal acts.
2. *Domestic Girls* - Have been selected as sexual objects and are assigned at home tasks like cleaning, making food, and taking care of the members of the gang.

INTERVIEW

There are many factors that impact the decision of teenage girls and young women to form part of the gang life. The variables that are going to be mentioned were determined by the case study of the Latin American Council of Social Sciences - social inequality, sexual abuse, child abuse, dropout, unemployment, substance abuse, protection, the need for money and the desire for recognition. The following quote - is extracted from an interview conducted from Interpeace, associated with the filed case of a female ex-gang member in Guatemala.

"I formed part of Barrio 18 at the age of twelve years-old, because my mother made me give her money and could care less of where I got it from. It was my obligation then, to obey her orders. I can say that I learned everything on the streets. "

This is a clear example of the mentioned variables concerning unemployment and child abuse. The lack of money due to unemployment on behalf of the minor's parents weighs the obligation on the minor as a supplier for the household leading to child abuse and/or exploitation.

DISCUSSION

The following discovery concerning the female role inside of the gang system shows that positions are assigned from the beginning process of admission for women. The process determines the role that the teen or young adult will be integrated based on her decision of admission.

THE ADMISSION PROCESS

There are higher admission requisites required in women than there are in men to join part of the group. Women involved in the MS-13 gang from El Salvador, according to an interview conducted by *Abusers or Abused*, stated that the simple fact of being part of the female gender created an automatic response of distrust.

Men are physically beaten for 13 to 18 seconds by the whole group – to initiate their admission. Women have more tasks to prove than men in order to join a gang. An important observation between men and women entering gangs is that women are offered an alternative way of entry: sex (Rodriguez & Curry. 2006). The choice women make based on their admission (either through physical or sexual abuse) – has long-term effects on their assigned roles. For example, men tend to respect women more, when they choose physical abuse over sex. Physical abuse represents a replica of the male model and dominance - an aspiration of women following into the men's footsteps is portrayed as a sign of respect, courage, and honor. Women who opt for sex instead are discredited, disvalued, and have a harder time incorporating into the group – specially by the rejection that they face from the members that choose physical abuse (Rosado et la. 2020).

GENDER ROLES

The traditional role for women in Guatemala, is composed of a social structure from a patriarchal view of women's duties, that include – cooking, looking after men's basic needs and satisfying their partner's sexual demands. The main construction of this system is rooted through a sexist culture that defines "good women" as supportive, accepting, and faithful allies regardless of any situation (PeaceWomen. 2017).

GANG GIRLS

The role of women inside of the gangs has evolved from becoming stay at home mom's and girlfriends to becoming part of the hierarchical chain of distributors (Rosado et la. 2020). Women have come to represent the face of the gangs under disguise. Most women are less likely to be targeted as initial suspects from either authorities or other gang groups. (Bravo. 2013). Women who have demonstrated their loyalty to the group earn a role outside of their stay-at-home position. Rather these women are assigned to the same criminal acts that men do daily. The "homie-girls" as they call them, are given tasks as spies (obtaining information from enemy groups), participating in kidnaps, distributing drugs around the area, and visiting gang members in prison pretending to be a family member. These women are considered women who *form part of* a gang group.

VICTIMS

Now, for women who have initially opted for sex as their entry ticket to the gang - face a different role in the system. Even if a woman has decided to use her sexuality as a way of being admitted, most of them enter knowing that the abuse will be a repeated action – categorizing them as victims. The role of these women is very simple, it is not really related to crime though it means having the house clean, preparing the men food three times a day, and being prepared to look after the wounded members (Aguilar & Rikkers.2012).

WOMEN: THIRD-PARTIES

Concerning third-party gender roles within the system two groups were taken into account as an influential factor over men. This is an interesting view, since it is the first influence of the female gender we see over the male gender.

1) Romantic Relationships: Even though the wives or girlfriends of gang members do not participate in crime activity - they are under strict surveillance. The first factor is due to security reasons and the second factor is the distrust of infidelity. Infidelity is punished severely within the group. The characteristics of most of the women who have a romantic relationship with a gang member - related to rape consumed at the initial stages of the relationship (Rosado et la. 2020).

2) Family Members: Moms, sisters, aunts, and grandmothers are considered as the family nuclei of the original model of the female role. Of all the women that gang men can encounter, the highest influence comes from women at home. Most of these women justify criminal acts by stating that it is a survival method for the family to receive a source of money and food (Rosado et la. 2020).

CONCLUSION

As the researcher of this paper, I would like the reader to consider an important factor for this study. The factor that influences most of the Central American community and culture comes from *sexism*.

A question implemented from the beginning of this paper was - what is the role of women within the gang hierarchy system of the North Triangle?

The study was careful to describe the function of the patriarchal system, implemented by many governments due to its exposure of dictatorship and militarism. This same idea has bled over the Guatemalan, Salvadoran, and Honduran community into believing that women have to be submissive. Any female who believes or acts otherwise (even for her own sake of survival) is harshly critiqued and rejected.

Finally, I would like the reader to consider the fact that men are mostly blamed for reinforcing the sexist culture – when their biggest role model and influence is at home. Mothers, sisters, and aunts fall into a trap of promoting sexism as something so normal.

I will implement in this section a few suggestions to find solutions to this problem:

· Involving as a community that wants to help victims that are under constant threat.

· Being inclusive of women who break stereotypes and want to reintegrate back into a community or culture.

· Find multiple solutions as a community. Institutions and governments have their own ideas – but creating multiple ways and solutions to approaching this problem is fundamental.

· Prioritizing authorities to find a pacific method to approach problems when handling women involved in crimes.

· Understanding the root problem concerning disciplinary action against corruption.

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