

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Women and 'New Wars' in El Salvador

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The most violent countries in the world are increasingly countries considered 'at peace'. From Honduras to Mexico to South Africa, armed violence, often by gangs, has led to high levels of casualties. Disruption of daily life due to armed violence is similar to the challenges experienced during wartime, though often without the markers or recognition associated with war. With gang violence primarily viewed as a domestic criminal issue, external support for conflict mitigation and humanitarian assistance is often low. Yet the disruptive impact of such high rates of violence is significant, and the humanitarian impact is severe. New theoretical frameworks are needed to better problematize extreme armed violence in 'peacetime' states. This article seeks to bring an understanding of the severity of armed violence in states such as El Salvador into engagement with the critical and theoretical foundations of the women, peace and security (WPS) field. Gendered dynamics shape gang violence in El Salvador, and a gender lens helps reimagine its impact. Aligning critical theory with the lived experience of this subset of armed conflict allows new directions for engagement and, in particular, offers the opportunity to re-examine long-standing assumptions of what initiates, maintains, and challenges armed violence by non-state actors in communities considered 'at peace.' This article seeks to encourage greater debate and scholarship to inform our understandings of armed conflict and gender in communities affected by gang violence, such as those in El Salvador. In these communities, the level of violence often replicates the experiences of war, and thus a WPS lens is a critical tool for analysis.

Introduction

Gangs in El Salvador have disrupted the political, economic, and social processes of the country, resulting in institutional instability and societal insecurity amid widespread violence. With an entrenched architecture that can reach even into the functioning of the state, gangs in El Salvador can be considered political actors with the capacity to exert economic and social power. Violence perpetrated by gangs – and by state forces

responding to gang presence – has contributed to El Salvador having the second-highest rate of violent death in the world (Mc Evoy and Hideg 2017). An armed conflict framework of analysis is useful to address the breadth and severity of this violence, allowing for a broader mapping of gang activities and points of entry for addressing and mitigating it. Gang violence often manifests in similar ways to more 'traditional' conceptions of conflict, with similar ramifications for affected communities. Applying a 'new wars' conflict framework allows for a more intensive examination of gang operations and relationships between gangs, communities, and the state – thereby expanding the

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potential for the peacemaking efforts necessary to rebuild Salvadoran communities.

Further, a gendered 'new wars' framework allows for deeper analysis of the issue and provides new entry points to understand intervention by explicitly including the roles and experiences of women and men. This article highlights the roles women play in gangs and in communities affected by gang violence – an often overlooked issue that expands both the 'new wars' and WPS frames of analysis. Women are gang members and they play crucial support functions for gangs; women are also seriously affected by gang violence and may serve as disruptors of gang activity. Understanding these elements is crucial for addressing the political, economic, social, and humanitarian impacts of gang activity.

As an exercise in re-examining theoretical frameworks – and due in part to a feminist analytical approach – this article draws upon literature from peer-reviewed journals and public-oriented publications, including investigative journalism, magazine coverage, and news reporting. We first define the theoretical frameworks used and briefly discuss their implications. The article then examines El Salvador's recent history and briefly covers the rise of the gang presence. Within this context, we then engage with the possibility of framing El Salvador's experiences with gangs as a 'new war.' Finally, the article presents an overview of women's experiences in and around gangs and aligns the experiences of this 'new war' with the tenets of the WPS agenda.

This article drew upon academic literature, reports by international organizations, investigative journalism, and news reporting to understand the roles that women play in gangs and in communities affected by gangs. Our literature review focused specifically on literature that addresses women's experiences in or with gangs, rather than on gang violence as a broader phenomenon or literature that discusses the inner workings of gangs but does not address women. Due to the limited resources available on women's

roles in gangs in El Salvador, we included literature that discussed women's roles in gangs in the Northern Triangle of Central America.

This article serves as an exploration of how a gendered 'new wars' framework offers room for new engagement on the topic and opens the opportunity to redesign intervention. The depth and severity of armed violence in Salvadoran communities and elsewhere requires a broader, stronger, and more inclusive approach to human and community security.

Critical Frameworks

The 'new wars' framework of armed conflict creates a distinction between traditional warfare and modern armed conflict. The term was coined in the late 1990s by Mary Kaldor, writing about the end of the Cold War and the rise of more diffuse dynamics of mass violence. Like other authors writing about the rise of intrastate violence following the Cold War (see Fearon and Laitin 2003; Kalyvas and Balcells 2010; and Blin 2011), Kaldor explored the spectrum of violent activity and the distinction between types of warfare. Her original definition relied on four main characteristics of 'new wars': they are fought by state and non-state actors; their motivations derive from identities, seeking 'to gain access to the state for particular groups...rather than to carry out particular policies or programmes in the broader public interest'; fighting is waged via targeting civilian populations; and they are financed primarily by external actors seeking economic gains, not by states (Kaldor 1998). Given these complexities, these wars are also extraordinarily difficult to end. Christine Chinkin and Kaldor describe the context that emerges within a 'new war' as 'a predatory set of social relations that are difficult to contain in space and time' where the 'distinction between conflict and post-conflict and the distinctions between political, criminal and gender-based violence are blurred' (Chinkin and Kaldor 2017).

The 'new wars' framework has been critiqued by scholars (see Kalyvas 2011 and Newman 2004) who argue that there is little difference between 'new' and 'old' wars and that a greater analytical focus on 'old' wars and filling the information gap on 'new' wars will show little difference between the two. However, the 'new wars' framework is particularly apt for understanding the gendered violence in El Salvador because it seeks to encompass a wider range of conflict than that perpetrated by armed state actors and, in doing so, reflects how armed conflict is actually experienced in most settings today.

Emerging around the same time as the 'new wars' framework, the WPS agenda also seeks to provide an alternative lens to understand how modern conflict is perpetrated and whom it affects. While critical feminist theory and the broader women's rights agenda has a longer history, the WPS agenda took official form in the United Nations Security Council Resolution on Women, Peace and Security (UNSCR 1325) in 2001. UNSCR 1325 calls for the increased participation of women in decision-making in conflict prevention and resolution efforts at the national, regional, and international levels, highlights the gendered aspects of armed conflict, and calls for international organizations, states, and local actors to adopt a gender perspective in peace and security processes. WPS efforts have typically been grouped into four pillars: participation, prevention, protection, and relief and recovery. The WPS field recognizes that women's participation is critical to ending conflict and achieving peace, given that women contribute to conflict as violent actors; that women are affected by conflict differently than men; that women often lead peace movements; and that excluding women from post-conflict reconstruction limits the effectiveness of recovery endeavors. As a crosscutting lens for analysis, the WPS framework is iterative in nature, evolving alongside changing conceptions of peace and conflict. WPS often encompasses more than 'traditional' conceptions of conflict and crisis and is at the forefront of incorporating

violent extremism, climate and environmental issues, and economic participation into notions of security. As new issues emerge in the conflict and security sphere, gendered analyses remain relevant to ending violence and promoting peace.

The WPS agenda is not without its critics. While it is not possible to summarize all of the thoughtful critiques here, the 1325 agenda has been criticized for lacking implementation (Tryggestad 2009 and True 2013), for marginalizing anti-militarist feminism and normalizing violence (Pratt and Richter-Devroe 2011), for being an agenda promoted largely by countries in the Global North (Tryggestad 2009 and Pratt 2013), for being too state-centric, taking an essentialist view of women (Kirby and Shepherd 2016), and for being heteronormative (Hagen 2016). These critiques are well-reasoned and are important considerations for the future of the 1325 agenda. However, this article focuses on 1325 and the WPS agenda as a framework because it remains a central focal point for gendered security considerations. As Paul Kirby and Laura Shepherd argue, 'the creation of Resolution 1325 should not be viewed as the origin point for global gender politics but as a mark of its arrival in the highest political forum, with consequences to be debated' (Kirby and Shepherd 2016: 252). This article seeks to engender discussions of gang violence as a phenomenon within the WPS field.

Critical theory on 'new wars' and the field of WPS have in common a mandate to re-examine long-standing assumptions about what brings people and societies to conflict and what brings people and societies to peace. In El Salvador, attempts to address the structural failings that led to a widespread gang presence in the country must incorporate women's needs, experiences, and abilities in order to be effective.

The Rise of Gangs in El Salvador

El Salvador's recent history is marked by civil war, repressive regimes, and inequality. Since the end of the civil war in 1992, attempts at

stability have been severely undermined by the presence and activities of transnational gangs. Otherwise known as *maras*, the gangs, their rivalries, and their interaction with state forces have led to El Salvador's ranking as among the most violent 'peacetime' countries (World Bank 2016). In 2015, El Salvador reported a homicide rate of 104 per 100,000 residents (Associated Press 2017), exceeding Colombia, Venezuela, and South Africa, and the highest in the world for a 'peacetime' nation.

Yet the gangs mostly originated outside the country. El Salvador's twelve years of civil war displaced approximately 25 per cent of the population, mostly to the United States (Gammage 2007). Many Salvadorans migrated to Los Angeles, where settling in amongst a complex patchwork of immigrant neighborhoods created significant tensions (Garsd 2015). Living adjacent to the thriving culture of Korean, Cambodian, and African American gangs, many young men and women turned to Salvadoran gangs to protect their community and to assert their dominance over other groups. The most established *maras* are *La Mara Salvatrucha* (MS-13) and *Barrio 18* (M-18) – the numbers indicate the original territory they controlled in Los Angeles, 13th Street and 18th Street, respectively. US officials responded to increasing violence in Los Angeles by deporting gang members.

Upon return to El Salvador, gang members found a post-civil war environment strained by economic stagnation and infrastructure deficits. Highly fragmented communities provided fertile ground for the gangs' evolution into transnational organizations. During the civil war, small gangs (*pandillas*) had emerged in many of the neighborhoods of San Salvador, the capital, and in a few outlying towns (Farber 2016). These *pandillas*, however, lacked the connection and large-scale organization of gangs like MS-13 or *Barrio 18* (Farber 2016). They were mainly small-scale, neighborhood-based groups running petty crime schemes (DeCesare 2007; Farber 2016; Garsd 2015). The Los Angeles

gang members quickly assimilated the *pandillas* into their complex ecosystem of gang membership, leadership, and rivalry. Over the years, the transnational gangs gained members and increasingly asserted control in El Salvador.

As gangs gained power, the government's primary response was the repressive *Mano Dura* (Iron First) policy of the mid-2000s. While the initiative led to widespread arrests, it was marred by extensive human rights violations by El Salvador's security forces (Farber 2016). As the gangs resisted, violence skyrocketed, and has continued to escalate in the decades since. Arnulfo Franco, a former guerilla combatant for the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) during the war, said in a 2016 interview: 'this is worse than the war' (Farber 2016). Indeed, while the FMLN had approximately 9,000 troops during the height of the civil war, a 2011 assessment of gang members found that there were 9,000 members *in prison* plus an additional 27,000 members on the streets (Farah and Lum 2013). Although the civil war officially ended in 1992, violence still permeates Salvadoran communities. El Salvador has shifted from a civil war to a 'new war.'

Gang Violence as a 'New War'

In international humanitarian law, non-international armed conflict (NIAC), armed conflict between governmental armed forces and non-governmental armed groups or between non-governmental armed groups, is defined in common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and Additional Protocol II (APII). In order for violence to be considered 'armed conflict' rather than a less serious form of violence, Article 1(2) of APII excludes internal disturbances and tensions from being considered as NIAC. Two criteria are used to determine whether a conflict reaches the appropriate threshold to be considered armed conflict: the hostilities must reach a minimum level of intensity, as when the conflict is of a collective nature or when the government must use military force rather than police forces

against the non-government group; and the non-governmental groups must be considered 'parties to the conflict' in that they possess organized armed forces. APII, which imposes a stricter standard than common Article 3, specifically states that the non-government groups must be 'under responsible command' and able to 'exercise such control over a part of its territory as to enable them to carry out sustained and concerted military operations and to implement this Protocol.' Even under this more rigid definition, this article demonstrates that gang violence in El Salvador matches the level and organization required to be considered armed conflict (ICRC 2008).

However, a rigid typology of violence makes understanding gang violence difficult. A more flexible approach is needed, such as the 'new war' classification that allows for diffuse dynamics of mass violence. As described by Kaldor, 'new wars' are 'mixtures of war (organized violence for political ends), crime (organized violence for private ends) and human rights violations (violence against civilians)' (Kaldor 2013). Gang violence in El Salvador increasingly blurs political and private acts, with a significant toll on civilians. Gangs hold informal and increasingly formal decision-making power from their interventions at the national and community levels – political control gained, in part, from organized violence and organized suppression. Gang violence can be considered an armed conflict – and specifically, a 'new war.'

Scholars have argued that gangs should be considered in the same way that traditional political actors are, such as insurgents. Max Manwaring argues, 'Rather than trying to depose a government with a major stroke (*golpe* or coup) or in a prolonged revolutionary war, as some insurgents have done, gangs and their allies (the gang phenomenon) more subtly take control of a territory and people one street or neighborhood at a time (*coup d'street*) or one individual, business, or government office at a time. Thus, whether a gang is specifically commercial or ideological or a criminal or insurgent type organization

is irrelevant. Its putative objective is to neutralize, control, or depose governments to ensure self-determined (nondemocratic) ends.' He continues, saying that while insurgency is generally considered a military activity, gangs are considered a law enforcement issue. 'Yet, all these actors are engaged in a highly complete political act: "political war." This type of conflict is often called "irregular war," "insurgency war," "asymmetric war," "fourth-generation war," and "a complex emergency.'" Manwaring argues that gangs often evolve from opportunistic criminal organizations to organizations that are political, 'at the three-way intersection among crime, war, and politics.' He argues that this is the case in El Salvador (Manwaring 2007).

In fact, in order to engage in criminal acts, *maras* are engaged in a political struggle to gain control over territory and population – one of the defining characteristics of a 'new war.' Gangs' economic gain often occurs through committing violence against civilians and undermining state institutions meant to maintain state control of the country (Lakhani 2016). MS-13, for example, has waged a bloody campaign to control key routes for illicit trade in cocaine, weapons, cash, and people (Farah and Babineau 2017). Gangs provide few services and rarely reinvest in communities; the wealth amassed from illicit drugs and extortion benefits gang members but yields little other economic benefit. The vast extent of gangs' extortion activities enables this process. An estimated 70 per cent of all businesses in El Salvador are 'taxed' by gangs, with extortion 'virtually institutionalized' in sectors such as transportation (Martínez et al. 2016; Avelar 2016). The omnipresence of extortion grants gangs significant control of public space – in other words, of territory (Ellis 2015). According to an analysis published in *The New York Times*, since 2010, gangs have killed a staggering 692 transportation workers, a much higher figure than the reported 93 police officers killed (Martínez et al. 2016). The targeting of the transportation sector is a formidable strategy: it restricts freedom of mobility for

citizens and grants gangs near total control of the daily flow of goods, services, and people. In a 'new war,' violence is perpetrated against civilian populations to gain political control.

Further, while El Salvador's gangs are non-state actors, corruption and coercion allow them to undermine the state. Locally, gangs also subvert political processes by influencing mayors and local officials – using money or force (Ellis 2015). Gangs negotiate with municipal candidates, supplying votes or temporarily reducing violence in certain neighborhoods and then maintain leverage over elected officials (Clavel 2016). At the national level, gangs have infiltrated the police force and, to a lesser extent, the military, by sending gang members to enlist as new recruits (Toledo 2017). Additionally, gangs work across the licit and illicit economies. In 2016, Salvadoran law enforcement discovered 157 legitimate businesses owned by gangs, worth millions of dollars (Farah and Babineau 2017).

Manwaring and Tom Bruneau identify characteristics of gang violence that constitute a political threat to the state, and these characteristics align with the tenets of the 'new wars' framework. In 'political war,' Manwaring argues 'there are no formal declarations or terminations of conflict...no single credible government or political actor with which to deal; and no guarantee that any agreement between or among contending protagonists will be honored. In short, the battle space is everywhere and includes everything and everyone' (Manwaring 2007). Bruneau identifies the national security challenges associated with transnational gangs: they strain government capacity through violence; they challenge the legitimacy of the state; they act as surrogate or alternate governments in some areas, and they infiltrate police and nongovernmental organizations to further their goals (Bruneau 2005).

Oliver Jütersonke, Robert Muggah, and Dennis Rodgers critique Manwaring's arguments as 'overstated,' arguing that gangs are primarily involved in localized crime.

However, they do acknowledge that gangs in El Salvador – and Guatemala and Honduras – have become involved in collective extortion and territorial control and as the gangs' territorial control has grown stronger, they work more actively to subvert the state (Jütersonke, Muggah, and Rodgers 2009). As Muggah noted, while gangs 'may not seek to usurp the state, as in conventional civil wars, but they often successfully co-opt it' (Cawley 2014). Gangs also send members to train as lawyers and accountants (Ellis 2015), suggesting further that gangs seek political power to exert control and protect their economic operations.

Actions to subvert the state are boosted by the gangs' significant territorial control. As R. Evan Ellis, a professor of Latin American studies at the US Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, writes, 'gangs are coming to overshadow the government with respect to the exertion of effective control over national territory' (Ellis 2015). Not only do gangs employ violence, 'in an increasing number of neighborhoods throughout the country, the gangs control who enters and leaves, and engage in criminal activity at their discretion' (Ellis 2015). Those in the neighborhoods who are not in gangs '[believe] that the temporary intervention of authorities will not protect them from the permanent gang presence that surrounds them' (Ellis 2015). The gangs' territorial control grants them the ability to carry out traditional criminal activities and activities of the state: levying taxes, determining election outcomes, and controlling mobility.

The typology of violence in which insurgents are considered 'political' actors but gangs are considered 'criminal' actors obscures analysis on what is happening in communities affected by gang violence. Deconstructing this typology is key to a greater understanding of gang violence. Dennis Rodgers and Robert Muggah argue that gangs are often excluded from policy and theoretical debates on 'non-state armed groups,' and that this term is usually confined to groups such as rebel opposition

groups, guerrillas, localized militia, or civil defense or paramilitary forces. Rodgers and Muggah also point out that there is a tendency to focus on 'non-state armed groups' in war or post-war contexts, when there is evidence that these groups – and specifically Central American gangs – are also a threat in non-war situations. They argue, 'the proposition that gangs be seen as non-state armed groups is clearly supported by the fact that the presence of gangs more often than not leads to violent state reaction, which effectively treats them as an enemy "other" in a manner very similar to its treatment of more conventional rebels or insurgent organizations' (Rodgers and Muggah 2009). In El Salvador, this clash has contributed to the country having the second-highest rate of violent death in the world, behind only Syria and higher than Afghanistan (Mc Evoy and Hideg 2017).

Indeed, the Salvadoran government increasingly treats gangs as political entities in a 'new war.' In 2012, the government entered into a formal negotiation process with many of the most prominent gangs in the country. During the negotiation, the government offered better conditions for gang leaders in prison, if the leading gangs would sign a truce (Umaña, de León, and Táger 2014). Although a short-lived and tragic failure that eventually led to a surge in violence against civilians, the negotiation demarcated gangs – once considered mostly as criminal enterprises – as non-state actors entering into formal dialogue with the state. These negotiations also supported the consolidation of gangs' financial power; the Funes government paid US\$25 million to MS-13 to reduce the homicide rate, and this money was ultimately used as seed money for the gang's proliferation of businesses (Farah and Babineau 2017). In 2014, the interior minister, Aristides Valencia, offered MS-13 US\$10 million in micro-credit (Farah and Babineau 2017).

Following the failure of the truce, the government has increasingly interacted with the gangs as a more conventional enemy. In

August 2015, Attorney General Luis Martínez announced that his office would use a 2006 law against terrorism to capture and prosecute gang members, formally likening gang members to terrorists (Lohmuller 2015). The same year, the Supreme Court declared gangs and their financiers to be terrorists, in part because the gangs' behavior constituted the taking of power that belongs to the state (VOA News 2015). These legal shifts also made it easier for the state to escalate action and violence against the gangs. In 2016, the government deployed a force of 1,000 military members with armored cars and military-grade weaponry to fight gangs in rural areas (BBC News 2016). A national newspaper, *El Faro*, found that over the course of eight months, 'for every police officer that died in a gunfight, 53 suspected gang members were killed' (Ahmed 2017). The force of these actions demonstrates the threat gangs pose as a non-state armed group.

As gangs extort neighborhoods and infiltrate state institutions, they increasingly control territory and yield political power. As non-state armed actors bent on undermining the state for their own gain and political purpose, they are increasingly engaged in a 'new war.' Responding to this 'new war' requires new interpretations of the societal conditions under which it has flourished. Although men may appear as the prominent actors in gangs and in the state response, women play critical and unique roles as members of gangs, in communities in proximity to gang activity, and in responding to gang violence. To develop comprehensive and creative solutions to the widespread political violence of gangs, it is necessary to critically examine strategic engagement points – including how women participate in, shape, and are affected by gangs.

Women and Gangs as Points of Engagement for Addressing a 'New War' Gang Violence Phenomenon *The WPS Agenda as a Critical Lens*

The adoption of UNSCR 1325 acknowledged that conflict and peace are gendered, and that women's voices and experiences

must be incorporated into decision-making on these issues. The literature on the WPS agenda is rich and detailed; scholars have delved into the gendered processes and impacts involved in issues such as post-conflict reconstruction, gender mainstreaming to create institutional reform, peacekeeping, transitional justice, security sector reform, countering violent extremism, and humanitarian responses. However, gang violence has yet to be meaningfully addressed via a WPS lens. Additionally, while gang violence in El Salvador has been well-studied, it is rare for literature to discuss it as a gendered phenomenon. The literature that does (see in particular the work done by Mo Hume) often focuses on the important issue of violence against women, but not necessarily on women as leaders or decision-makers in peace and security issues. It is not possible in this article to address all gendered security aspects of gang violence broadly or in El Salvador specifically, but we call for additional scholarship on these critical issues.

In El Salvador, women's lives are deeply impacted by violence, whether women are active members of gangs or live in proximity to gang activity. Any attempt to address the structural failings that led to widespread gang control of the country must incorporate women's needs, experiences, and abilities in order to be effective.

Women are active participants in peace and security processes, and a growing body of literature documents that women often promote dialogue, bridge divides and mobilize coalitions, raise issues that are vital for peace, and broaden societal participation in peace and security mechanisms (O'Reilly 2015: 5–10). Women's empowerment and gender equality are associated with peace and stability (Caprioli 2000; Caprioli and Boyer 2001; Regan and Paskeviciute 2003; Hudson et al. 2012), and a study of 40 peace processes shows that when women's groups were able to influence a peace process, an agreement was almost always reached. Once an agreement was reached, the influence of women's groups was also associated with higher rates

of implementation (O'Reilly, Ó Súilleabháin, and Paffenholz 2015: 1). Furthermore, when women participate in peace processes, peace is more likely to last at least 15 years (O'Reilly, Ó Súilleabháin, and Paffenholz 2015: 12).

Women play critical roles that allow gangs to function, and they are also powerful actors in combating gang violence. Women are not a monolithic group; among others, race, ethnicity, religion, cultural background, sexual orientation, gender identity, and economic status shape women's priorities and agendas (Chang et al. 2015). Understanding the roles women play in gang-affected societies like El Salvador creates new points for intervention and disruption of gang activities. Women are required for the operations of gangs, and they are also required for building a more peaceful El Salvador.

Women's Participation in Gangs and Support for Gang Activities

Women perform a wide range of functions related to gangs in El Salvador. Gangs are often conceptualized as male spaces, but women are active as gang members and provide support critical to the daily functioning of gangs. Because gangs do not exist in a vacuum, community members who are not fully initiated may still play important roles in their daily operations. Understanding these relationships provides new points for engagement when working to prevent and mitigate gang violence.

Why Women Join

The extent of women's participation in gangs is often contested. A study conducted by the Swedish International Development Agency in 2008 states that between 20 and 40 per cent of gang members in Central America are women, while also indicating that there may be some *maras* with only women members (Frühling 2008: 13). Another study found that while 90 per cent of gang members in Guatemala are male, 40 per cent of those interviewed who claimed to be members of a gang were women (Negroponte 2009). This shows a sense of pride among women

who see themselves as being affiliated with a gang. While women sometimes assume that they are members of a gang due to personal associations, the study found that the full duties and recognition associated with membership were not automatically transferred to these women (Negroponte 2009). This is indicative of the ambiguity of women's roles related to gangs; while many do become official members, the definition of membership may be applied differently to women and men, and women may act on behalf of a gang without having gained an official role. Farah and Babineau argue that men ascend within the hierarchy of MS-13, acting as lookouts, providing security, and dispensing cocaine, until they are considered full members; each step requires carrying out specific tasks, including murder, to prove their loyalty to the organization. However, young women who enter the gang, either by choice or by force, are known as *jainas* and are largely relegated to the role of sex slaves' (Farah and Babineau 2017). Women's roles in gangs are thus challenging to define, as they are not as closely tied into the hierarchy as men's roles.

Women may join gangs for many of the same reasons that men do, such as a need for a sense of belonging, economic survival, and protection from violence, but they may also be pulled in ways that are unique to women. Diana Lurge argues, 'When appropriately contextualized, young women's choices to join gangs often appear to be practical (albeit temporary and limited) solutions to the multiple problems and limitations they face in their homes, schools, and communities' (Lurge 2003: 178). Like men, women in El Salvador join gangs to address challenging economic, personal, or social situations, such as experiences with poverty, unemployment, and violence by authorities. Younger women may join gangs to cope with child abuse, dropping out of high school, and sexual violence. A study found that women gang members more frequently experience violence within the family and have more often been exposed to other traumatic circumstances compared to men who are members

(Frühling 2008: 24). Joining a gang may be a strategy to manage this violence, especially given that gangs can provide easy access to weapons and drugs.

Importantly, many women, like men, also choose to join gangs for reasons unrelated to trauma – in order to belong to a group, and gain protection, affection, recognition, and financial support (Umaña and Ridders 2012, 10). Isabel A. Umaña and Jeanne Ridders (2012) found that one of women's three primary motivations for joining gangs was an interest, curiosity, or liking for this type of group (the other motivations included dysfunctional relations and dynamics within families and seeking revenge or retaliation against an aggressor, especially for sexual violence). Women are also influenced to join by friends, boyfriends, husbands, and brothers who are gang-affiliated. Broadly speaking, gang membership may provide both security and a measure of independence for women.

While women often choose to join gangs for similar reasons as men, women's roles tend to be much less defined. Many women, especially those in relationships with gang members, do not officially become gang members themselves because women often face different – and harsher – requirements for joining. Initiation for men joining either MS-13 or *Barrio 18* involves a beating by gang members, but women must choose either a beating or to have sexual intercourse with gang members (Umaña and Ridders 2012: 10).

Women's Roles in Gangs

Once women have committed to the gang, their experiences and roles remain deeply gendered. They are often not consulted during decision-making processes and are never accepted as leaders with the ability to command male members. The overwhelming majority of women gang members have a husband or partner within the gang, and approximately one-third of the children born within the gang continue to stay with their parents and the group (Frühling 2008: 13). This means that women are key to the

intergenerational growth of gangs; whether a child is raised within a gang or outside by family members, the influence of the gang is strong across generations (Frühling 2008: 13). Women's roles in maintaining the biological line of gang 'families' should not be underestimated. In El Salvador, members assume a new identity upon entering a gang, a 'tag' given to them by other members of the gang, symbolic of relinquishing membership in their families to become part of the MS-13 or *Barrio 18* 'family' (Santacruz Giralt and Ranum 2010: 131).

Due to the symbolic importance of their biological role in growing gangs, women in Central American gangs have historically served as care providers for the group. This means that they often did not participate in the gang's activities and served instead as a bridge between the gang and the broader community. They performed duties that are traditional Salvadoran women's tasks, such as home-making and cooking (Santacruz Giralt and Ranum 2010: 222). However, women have become increasingly involved in gangs' criminal activities, carrying out activities in which they take advantage of their non-threatening appearance in order to avoid detection by police or victims of crime (Umaña and Ridders 2012: 11). Some gangs use women for tasks related to transporting weapons or drugs, either because the risk of being arrested is greater for a man or fewer women have criminal records (Santacruz Giralt and Ranum 2010: 222). Women gang members in El Salvador are often involved in smuggling cell phones and drugs into prisons and supporting kidnapping activities by luring or tricking victims (Wolf 2012: 92).

Women play active and irreplaceable roles in gangs, directly contributing to the ability of the gang to function economically and politically. They provide the labor that allows gangs to profit and to expand their areas of control. However, women's power within these gangs is limited. While it is possible for women to achieve a leadership role in MS-13 and *Barrio 18*, they face challenges from men and women who would rather be

under the leadership of a man (Santacruz Giralt and Ranum 2010: 217). Understanding the nuance of these experiences provides key points of entry for dismantling the structures that allow gangs to maintain dominance in the communities in which they operate.

The Prevention and Reduction of Violence against Women

The prevention and reduction of violence against women — especially sexual and gender-based violence — must be a key tenet of addressing gang violence. While the prevalence of violence against women in El Salvador is generally very high, it is exacerbated by the intentional use of sexual violence by gang members to force women into submission, to create a culture of fear, and to punish those who defy the gang. Violence against women in this context is pervasive — women within gangs experience violence frequently, as do women who live in communities affected by gang activity. Women's bodies are used to grow gangs (by having children within the gangs) and to control the population (by being targeted for sexual violence). Addressing this type of violence is key to promoting community security and rebuilding local governance structures; improving the security of women is an essential step toward improving the security of the entire community. Women's safety and control over their own bodies is key for women's participation in and the growth of a vocal and inclusive civil society.

Between January and August 2015, the National Civilian Police of El Salvador registered an average of five cases of sexual violence against women per day (Albaladejo 2016). While in the past it was more common for sexual violence to be committed by a family member, rape and sexual assault committed by gangs and security forces now account for an increasing amount of the violence (Albaladejo 2016). Gangs frequently rape and violently murder young girls; they also claim young women as *novias de las pandillas*, or 'girlfriends of the gang' — and the young women have no recourse to resist. In

many gang-controlled neighborhoods, rape, abduction, and murder of young women are common, and there is often pressure for young women to become pregnant with their boyfriend in order to avoid being claimed by a gang member (Albaladejo 2016).

Women gang members also face serious physical violence from fellow gang members (Umaña and Ridders 2012) as well as from rival gangs or police (Santacruz Giralte and Ranum 2010). This violence is linked to a greater pattern of control over women's bodies and agency. Umaña and Ridders (2012) argue that in gangs, women's bodies are seen as objects for domination, biological reproduction, and male pleasure. For example, while male member of gangs can have non-gang partners, women may not, and women are punished for sexual infidelity, while men are not.

The widespread use of violence against women is a specific tactic for gangs – and reveals a broader pattern of control of women's bodies that is necessary for gangs to function. After all, the unofficial motto of MS-13 is 'Kill, Rape, Control' (Wilber 2010). Women's bodies are used to initiate new gang members (via sex or birth); to strategically eliminate strict boundaries between gangs and communities (when neighborhood girls are taken as *novias*) in order to lessen local resistance; and to humiliate communities into submission (via widespread sexual violence). Women's bodies become integral to the political economy of a gang, from how it gains power to how it maintains dominance. Dismantling this system of control over women's bodies is key to dismantling the structures of gangs.

Humanitarian Crisis

In conflict settings, displacement and migration have a significant impact on women, given their usual roles as caretakers for families. Traveling with children or the elderly, women embark on challenging journeys to escape violence against them and their families. In El Salvador, those fleeing lack the protection of the state – as it is undermined

by corruption and subverted by the gangs' influence – and must be considered in any response to the political violence.

Gang-related violence in El Salvador contributes significantly to the flow of migrants. Given the dominance of gender-based violence specifically, many women and children attempt to flee the country. Many first try to find safety in different neighborhoods or towns but continue to experience violence and threats (UNHCR 2015: 5). In 2016, El Salvador opened up the first camp for internally displaced people since its civil war – for an entire community forced to flee from gang retaliation (Lakhani 2016). The creation of this kind of camp is uncommon, however, and most Salvadorans do not have access to such protections.

In recent years, the number of people seeking asylum elsewhere has increased sharply (UNHCR 2015: 2). In the United States, tens of thousands of citizens from El Salvador and other Northern Triangle countries sought asylum in 2014, while in that same year, the number of women crossing the US border was nearly three times higher than in 2013 (UNHCR 2015: 2). Furthermore, the numbers of those fleeing may be underreported. In conventional conflict, displacement is often measured and addressed on a mass scale, as entire communities flee bombs or advancing armed forces. The displacement occurring in El Salvador and other Northern Triangle countries is also occurring *en masse*, but happens at the individual or family level (Cawley 2014).

The journey for asylum seekers is long and perilous. Women are at risk for extortion, physical and sexual harm, kidnapping, and trafficking, and many make the difficult choice to leave one or more children behind when fleeing (UNHCR 2015: 43; Fleury 2016). After arriving in their destination country, women continue to face extreme hardship. In Mexico, for instance, migrant detention centers are rife with poor conditions, and migrant women are particularly vulnerable to abuse and violence (Fleury 2016: 7). The condition of detention centers in the United

States is 'similar, if not worse' than the conditions in the refugees' home countries (United States Commission on Civil Rights 2015: 2). The prevalence of gang violence has a deep impact on women's lives as they seek to find a safer environment.

Protection and Participation of a Vibrant Civil Society

Gangs are political actors that work to gain and maintain dominance over resources and communities. This is inherently connected to closing community spaces and limiting the ability for civil society to act. Closing this space is a political act in and of itself, and civil society activists – particularly women civil society activists – who work to create space for alternative voices are also engaged in political contestation. Civil society is often a space in which women organize, build connections, and mobilize to provide services or work for change. Located outside of traditional domains of power – the dealings of the state and business institutions – civil society is often a refuge as well as a source of influence for the traditionally marginalized. Particularly for women – long excluded from formal institutions – civil society organizations (CSOs) are a means to find community and to mobilize (Skåre 2012). As such, gang violence threatens civil society and constrains women's mobility and decision-making.

Gang activity and violence pose a serious threat to civil society, though civil society can play a significant role in revitalizing and developing community connections (Paffenholz and Spurr 2006). Widespread violence, extortion, and fear are major limitations on the agendas of CSOs. Freedom of movement, freedom of assembly, and freedom of speech are key to carrying out the organizing of people and rallying around ideas, but gangs undermine the spaces in which those activities can be conducted. Neighborhood associations have had 'increasing difficulties in mobilizing support for community projects because people were afraid to attend meetings in the evenings

because of *maras* in the neighborhood' (Cosgrove 2010: 158). In El Salvador, public spaces are increasingly not civic spaces, but contested grounds where citizens have limited rights.

The destruction of communal space and the burdens placed on CSOs impacts women in particular. As mobility grows increasingly constricted – and there are fewer opportunities to join community institutions – women gradually become confined to their homes. In a country so tightly controlled by gangs, and where women cannot gather freely, women are forced to retreat from public spaces. Isolation enables survival. Civil society networks are often a key mechanism through which women participate in political and social life, and the silencing of civil society presents a real threat to women's ability to create change as well as to national and regional stability.

Conclusion

In El Salvador, traditional conceptions of gang activity no longer apply. A new understanding of gang violence as a 'new war', however, offers the potential to find creative and comprehensive solutions that address the root causes of gang violence instead of solely targeting gangs as criminal actors. Resolving such a challenging security situation requires valuing women's experiences, voices, and abilities. The WPS framework of analysis used in this article, which emphasizes the participation of women in gangs, preventing sexual and gender-based violence, addressing humanitarian crises, and protecting civil society, provides crosscutting ideas that bring a new perspective to addressing the persistence of gangs. The gendered 'new wars' framework has the potential to reframe how academics and policy-makers grasp the issues at hand, explore possible solutions, and provide meaningful and effective solutions for peacebuilding. Including women in long-term efforts to dismantle gangs and rebuild Salvadoran society is key to building safer communities.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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