

Unbearable levels of violence



The main obstacle to sustainable development in Honduras is violence, which affects almost every stratum of society, in both urban and rural areas. People in general, and women in particular, are overwhelmed by a seemingly unstoppable wave of violent crime that has given the country the highest murder rate in the world. Despite other urgent issues, including environmental degradation, economic inequality, poor school performance and limited access to health services, priority must go to reducing the staggering levels of violence. Since the majority of victims are women, a gender-sensitive approach is imperative.

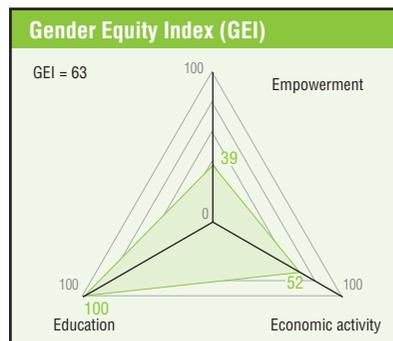
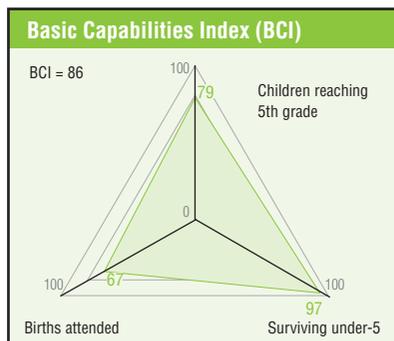
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Before 2009, Honduras was making steady, if rather slow, progress in reducing poverty levels. In 2005, 63.7% of households were living in poverty, and by May 2009 this had been brought down to 58.8%. A major factor in the economy is remittances from migrant workers, and for many households this is the main source of income. In 2009 remittances amounted to 21% of the country's GDP, contributing more than exports, maquiladoras (export, processing enterprises in tax free areas) and tourism combined. Further progress on poverty reduction, therefore, depends on sustaining foreign remittances, which may not be possible if the US economy remains stalled.

In addition to this economic uncertainty, the biggest problem Honduras is facing is the high level of violence. The 2009-2010 Human Development Report shows that in Central America as a whole, the murder rate is 44 per 100,000 people, 11 times higher than the world average of only 4 per 100,000.¹ But in Honduras the murder rate in 2010 was 77.5 per 100,000 inhabitants. While the World Health Organization has said that 9 murders per 100,000 people can be considered normal, a rate of 10 or more is considered an epidemic.²

If there is to be any hope of sustainable development in the future, in 30 years or however long it takes, the first step must be for the people of Honduras to stop the hatred and murders that take place daily.

The political coup that took place in June 2009 has exacerbated the country's endemic violence. After President Manuel Zelaya was forcibly removed from office gender activists from six countries in the Americas united in the Feminist Observation Group (Observatorio Feminista) reported "massive women's participation in demonstrations" against the de facto government in Tegucigalpa. They reported that many women who were arrested during these protests were "sexually abused" by army personnel



and that demonstrators were "hit with truncheons on various parts of the body, particularly the breasts and the buttocks" and "verbally abused" with insults like, "Go on home, you whores."³

Some women who were subjected to repeated intimidation even went so far as to move away from their families "to protect their children and to save their homes from being ransacked." This was especially true in the departments of Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula. Another aspect of this cruel scenario is that "femicide got much worse": 51 women were murdered in one month after the coup, and this was in a country where the horrifying average was already one woman killed per day.⁴

The current president, Porfirio Lobo Sosa, came to power in widely discredited elections on 29 November 2009, after which the situation of women continued to deteriorate. On 16 May 2010 a coalition of organizations called Feminist Resistance (Feministas en Resistencia) reported that "there has been an increase in violence against people's full enjoyment of rights established by [both] international institutions and our own Constitution".⁵ One year after the coup, the Honduras human rights organization Centro de Estudios de la Mujer (Women Studies

Center_CEM-H) confirmed seven specific cases of women murdered while demonstrating against the dictatorship.⁶

A bloodstained country

In January 2010 a Government committee submitted to the National Congress its *Vision of the Country 2010-2038 and National Plan 2010-2022*,⁷ highlighting a series of problems that the Government will have to tackle in order to move towards sustainable development. Among these are high levels of extreme poverty, poor school performance, high unemployment, increasing informality in the labour market and serious vulnerability to natural disasters. The report is a brave effort: it presents facts and figures and sets realistic middle and long term targets to reach its vision of long-term change. Yet it also reflects a great deal of wishful thinking, declaring for example:

"By 2022, the security policy will have completely changed the public safety situation in Honduras and will have brought the murder rate per 100,000 inhabitants, the murder rate in robberies, the rate of drug traffic crimes, the rate of sexual offences and the rate of deaths in traffic accidents down to average international levels. In addition, social conflicts will be reduced by 75% as a result of ongoing citizen participation processes and a general improvement in the country's economic and social situation, which will have a positive impact on the

1 UNDP. *Central America Human Development Report 2009-2010*. <www.pnud.org.gt/data/publicacion/IDHAC%202009-2010.pdf>.

2 WHO. *World report on violence and health: summary*, (2002). <www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/world_report/en/summary_es.pdf>.

3 Observatorio Feminista, "Semana de los Derechos Humanos de las Mujeres en Honduras," (Tegucigalpa: 20 August 2009), <www.cemh.org.hn/images/stories/COMUNICADOS_2010/comunicados_2009/Comunicado_20_AGOSTO_Observatorio_Feminista_de_DHH.pdf>.

4 Ibid.

5 Feministas en Resistencia, "Ante el agravamiento de la represión en Honduras," (16 May 2010), <www.cemh.org.hn/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=91:comunicado-de-las-feministas-en-resistencia&catid=40:noticias-cem-h&Itemid=55>.

6 CEM-H, *Pronunciamiento público: A un año del golpe de Estado las mujeres seguimos resistiendo*, (Tegucigalpa: 28 June 2010), <www.cemh.org.hn/images/stories/COMUNICADOS_2010/Pronunciamiento_2_CEMH-MMM-28_de_Junio.pdf>.

7 See: <www.enlaceacademico.org/uploads/media/VISION_DE_PAIS.pdf>.

underlying factors that generate lawlessness. Honduras will have attained good levels of citizen security that will translate into peace and healthy coexistence and that will generate a favourable situation for domestic and foreign investment.⁸

As well as taking many victims, violence in Honduras also has many causes. There is frequent fighting between rival gangs (*maras*) and their battles are absolutely savage. According to Human Rights Commissioner Ramón Custodio, the *maras* even go so far to cut people's heads off, and "this is now very common whereas before it hardly ever happened. This shows that every day we are getting more and more used to acts of aggression against the human body."⁹ Between 2005 and 2010, 24,674 people died violent deaths, and 19,640 (80%) of these were caused by firearms.¹⁰

Violence against peasants and femicide

Another disturbing trend is an alarming increase in violence against peasant communities in recent years. From January 2010 to the beginning of October 2011, a total of 40 people with links to peasant organizations in the Bajo Aguán valley region were murdered.¹¹

There is also a worrying increase in attacks on transsexuals, as has been reported by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights¹² and by Human Rights Watch.¹³

Even worse, femicide is also increasing. In the period 2003 to 2010 some 1,464 women were killed, 44% of them aged 15 to 29. In 2010 alone 300 women died violent deaths but in only 22 of these cases (7.3%) were the perpetrators brought to justice.¹⁴ From 2008 to 2010 there were 944 murders of women but the legal system only managed to punish 61 of the murderers (6.4%).¹⁵

The only way to reduce or contain this violence is to adopt a gender approach, not just because women are the main victims but also because they are subjected to other more oblique forms of violence. Women make up 51.7% of the population and 41% of the economically active population, and in addition they do 91.1% of family domestic work. For various reasons, official unemployment among women (3.7%) is less than that among men (4%).¹⁶ Unemployment is highest among the young: of the country's 101,296 unemployed some 52.6% are under 24 years old.¹⁷ However, people between 20 and 59 are more likely to be poor, especially in rural areas, where 68.5% of women are living in poverty. 40% of households are headed by women, 40% of which live in extreme poverty, compared to only 35% of male-headed households.¹⁸

Gender discrimination in the labour force

Women in the labour force are more likely than men to be clustered in part time and temporary jobs which are viewed as 'women's work' and less well paid than 'men's work.' Most women are working in the informal economy, where they lack all social benefits. They also make up the great majority in sectors like social, personal and domestic services, but these kinds of jobs usually involve more than the regulation eight hours per day and very often involve health and safety risks, low pay and temporary employment periods.

Most of the workers in the maquiladoras are young women aged 17 to 25, working long hours in precarious conditions. Since the start of the global financial crisis in 2008, which resulted in a 10% drop in textile and clothing exports, the maquiladoras have been systematically cutting their workforce. To make matters worse, a large amount of planned investment was cancelled due to the political crisis, which has also had a negative impact on women in the labour force.¹⁹

Problems in education, justice and health services

Some 15.6% of the population over 15 years old is illiterate, with little difference between the rates among men (15.8%) and among women (15.5%). In recent years the educational situation has improved but there are still huge problems like the very high cost of transport, uniforms and school materials. Girls do better in the system, they spend an average of 7.1 years in education as against 6.8 years for boys, and the girls' repetition rate is 8.8%, considerably lower than the boys' rate of 12.3%.

The Supreme Court estimates that an average of around 20,000 cases of domestic violence are reported per year, and women aged 19 to 30 account for 41.5% of the total. This aggression against women is very often unreported because in it is seen as "an internal problem in the relationship."

Morbidity rates among women are high, which reflects serious deficiencies in sexual and reproductive health services. The maternal mortality rate is currently 110 per 100,000 live births, and in 2006 only 66.9% of births were attended by skilled health personnel.²⁰ This is a crisis and it should be tackled as such, especially in view of the fact that (in 2001) some 38% of adolescent girls became mothers at or before the age of 19.

Access to resources

Yet another area of gender discrimination is in access to land. From February to August 2010 the authorities issued 1,487 independent land ownership deeds, but less than a third of these (482) were awarded to women peasants. At the same time there were 150 cases of women receiving ownership rights for agricultural land, 28.40% of the total issued, while 528 deeds (71.60%) went to men. Because women are denied access to and control of these productive resources, in most cases they are unable to obtain credit.

The situation with regard to housing is similar. According to the National Conditions of Life Survey (ENCOVI), in 2004 some 86.2% of housing in urban areas was rented.²¹ Increasing migration from the countryside to the cities has led to an enormous growth in places like San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa, where according to the National Statistics Institute, the shanty town population increased from 900,000 in 1990 to 1,283,843 in 2010. Most of these buildings do not meet minimum standards and are vulnerable to landslides, floods and collapse caused by severe weather. ■

8 Ibid.

9 El Informador, "Violencia en Honduras ha alcanzado niveles de epidemia. Derechos Humanos," <www.informador.com.mx/internacional/2011/309257/6/violencia-en-honduras-ha-alcanzado-niveles-de-epidemia-derechos-humanos.htm>

10 See: <www.conadeh.hn/Joomla/index.php/component/content/article/463-derecho-a-la-vida-y-la-seguridad>

11 La vía campesina, "Honduras: Violencia extrema contra comunidades campesinas en el Bajo Aguán," <viacampesina.org/sp/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1266:honduras-extrema-contra-comunidades-campesinas-en-el-bajo-aguan&catid=19:derechos-humanos&Itemid=40>

12 "CIDH observa con profunda preocupación asesinatos de integrantes de la comunidad transgénero en Honduras," <www.cidh.org/Comunicados/Spanish/2011/4-11sp.htm>

13 Human Rights Watch, "Se Exhorta al Presidente Porfirio Lobo Sosa Investigar Muertes Recientes de Mujeres Transgénero en Honduras." Available at: <www.hrw.org/es/news/2011/01/31/se-exhorta-al-presidente-porfirio-lobo-sosa-investigar-muertes-recientes-de-mujeres>

14 CEM-H, "Día de la Mujer Hondureña: Más que una celebración exigimos una patria libre," (Tegucigalpa, 25 January 2011).

15 Estadísticas de las Unidades de Delitos contra la Vida de las Mujeres, de la Fiscalía Especial de la Mujer, (Tegucigalpa: 2010).

16 Programa de Cooperación Internacional de la Junta de Andalucía, *Programa Operativo País Prioritario Honduras 2010-2011*, (Tegucigalpa: 2010).

17 Encuesta Permanente de Hogares de Propósitos Múltiples. EPHPM, INE, (May 2009).

18 Programa de Cooperación Internacional de la Junta de Andalucía, op cit.

19 Honduran Private Enterprise Council (COHEP) and Tegucigalpa Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CCIT), report that from 2008 to September 2009 nearly 120,000 jobs were lost due to the global financial crisis, a minimum wage increase and the country's 2009 political crisis. They estimate that the political upheaval caused losses of 439 million lempiras per day due to marches and roads blocked by demonstrators, and 32 curfews that were imposed. *Honduran economy 2009 and prospects for 2010 Data and perceptions*. UPE/UNDP.

20 ECLAC Data Base and Statistical Publications, <www.eclac.cl>

21 Millennium Development Goals, (Honduras: 2010), Third report on the country.