



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Invisible Threads

Addressing the root causes of migration from  
Guatemala by investing in women and girls

This Executive Summary is drawn from the full report of  
*Invisible Threads*, available at [www.populationinstitute.org](http://www.populationinstitute.org)



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Photo courtesy of the Population Council

***The issue of large-scale migration across the southern border of the United States is among the most divisive the country faces today. Some believe it could tilt the balance of national political power in the next few years. Every migrant endeavoring to make this crossing is an individual whose human rights and dignity deserve respect. For a multitude of reasons, each is willing to risk the hardships of a dangerous journey and an uncertain future in the hopes of a better life.***

In recent years, a growing proportion of migrants at the US southern border have come from Guatemala,

El Salvador, and Honduras. The surge of migrants from Central America has prompted the US government to seek to better understand and address the root causes of migration from the region. As this strategy is further elaborated, a deeper look at human lives in the context of the forces shaping migration is warranted.

Factors affecting migration from this region are dynamic, complex, and interrelated. This report focuses on factors that are driving migration from Guatemala—and in particular, the lives of women and girls in the context of these factors.

## **Climate change**

Decreases in precipitation, hotter temperatures, and extreme weather will continue to pose significant challenges for agricultural productivity, livelihoods, and human safety in Guatemala. For women farmers, particularly in rural areas and indigenous communities affected by land displacement, inequities in access to land and economic and social resources can make the recovery from extreme weather events particularly challenging.

### Food insecurity

The impacts of climate change on agriculture, persistent poverty, and the COVID-19 pandemic pose mounting challenges for food security in Guatemala. The prevalence of childhood stunting, a key indicator of hunger and malnutrition, is higher than anywhere else in Latin America and the Caribbean, with nearly 50% of children under five years of age stunted. In the context of out-migration, more and more women face greater responsibilities in agricultural production and decision-making, yet agricultural extension services and technical assistance have largely failed to reach women in rural areas.

### Poverty and inequality

While Guatemala's economy is the largest in Central America, nearly half of Guatemala's population lives below the national poverty line, with 23% of the population living in extreme poverty, and overall poverty rates are expected to be exacerbated by the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The burdens of poverty are borne disproportionately among individuals belonging to indigenous groups, 40% of whom live in extreme poverty. A large informal sector in Guatemala's economy leaves many workers without protections, and the proportion of women participating in the paid labor market is the lowest in Latin America.

### Crime and violence

Crime and violence are significant and destabilizing forces across Guatemala, with gangs and trafficking activity compelling many of those most vulnerable to migrate. Guatemala also continues to experience widespread sexual and gender-based violence,

with the rate of femicide among the highest in the world.

### Demographic pressures

With half the population under 22 years of age and the highest population growth rate in Latin America, demographic trends in Guatemala will continue to interact with the multiple factors that drive migration. While the fertility rate has declined in recent decades, the current average of 2.6 children per woman is the highest in Central America. Unmet need for family planning and reproductive health services contributes significantly to higher fertility, and while progress has been made in extending reproductive health care to women and families, that progress has been uneven, with indigenous women and women in rural areas reporting the highest unmet need for family planning services.

Like invisible threads, the lives of women and girls are woven throughout the issues at the root of current migration pressures. The status, health, and well-being of women and girls are intertwined with many of the challenges driving migration from Guatemala, yet they face persistent inequality in education, the labor force, health care, and family life. Limited investment in sexual and reproductive health, in particular, has stalled meaningful progress in the realization of rights and opportunities for women and girls.

This point is underscored by the story of Esther, a 19-year-old young woman from the outskirts of Antigua. Emerging from a childhood shaped by poverty, crime, and violence,

Esther crossed paths with WINGS, a Guatemalan NGO whose purpose is to educate young people on sexual and reproductive health, to empower them to access services, and to help them prevent unwanted pregnancies. With tailored support from WINGS, Esther was able to pursue a formal education; and while many of her peers make rational choices to flee a hopeless future in search of survival, Esther sees a new future for herself and has chosen to stay, aspiring to be a change-maker in her community.

The experiences of Esther, WINGS, and other initiatives highlighted in this report demonstrate how a deeper understanding of the intersecting challenges and opportunities facing women and girls will strengthen policies and programs designed to address the root causes migration. In this context, policymakers and program implementers should:

### Ramp up investment in programs that advance the health, rights, and well-being of women and girls.

The unique challenges facing women and girls in Guatemala, particularly related to their reproductive health and rights, limit their potential and their ability to contribute to long-term solutions. While there have been significant advances in extending reproductive health services to women across much of Latin America, too often the poorest and most marginalized communities—especially indigenous women and girls—have been left behind. Advancing reproductive health and rights will strengthen the health and well-being of families and contribute to lasting progress for Guatemala's intersecting challenges.



**Foster greater coherence in strategies to engage youth, with attention to the needs and experiences of the most vulnerable, including indigenous people, people with disabilities, rural communities, girls, and LGBTQ youth.**

A strategy to capitalize on Guatemala's youthful population for the purposes of national development requires an approach that reflects not only the multicultural experience of childhood, adolescence, and youth but also how inequality is intrinsically woven into it. Innovative programs such as those led by WINGS, FUNDAECO, and Population

Council's *Abriendo Oportunidades* demonstrate the effectiveness of intersectional approaches for reaching youth in varying circumstances across Guatemala.

**Engage civil society in regional approaches that advance the needs and rights of women, girls, indigenous populations, and other marginalized groups.**

As caravans draw migrants from multiple countries and encounter border control and security forces from multiple jurisdictions, regional coordination between governments and civil society organizations is needed to develop a coherent,

gender-responsive, human rights-based strategy. The US government can and should join regional platforms to strengthen regional development initiatives, contribute to the establishment of regional migration programs, and regularly engage with civil society.

In Guatemala, as in every country in Central America, women and girls are critical agents of change in their families and communities. Investing in them—in efforts that boost their rights, their options, and their choices—will yield dividends.

