INVISIBLE THREADS

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

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Executive Summary

Executive Summary

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 Ana, a 19-year-old young woman from the outskirts of Antigua. Emerging from a childhood shaped by poverty, crime, and violence, Ana 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, Ana 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, Ana sees a new future for herself and has chosen to stay, aspiring to be a change-maker in her community.

The experiences of Ana, 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.

Introduction

Introduction

In March, 2022, U.S. Customs and Border Protection reported that the number of migrants arriving at the southern border was the largest in years.[1] Border officials encountered more than 221,000 people that month—higher than any monthly total in recent history. In recent years, a growing proportion of these migrants 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.

This report focuses specifically on Guatemala, where underinvestment in women and girls contributes to many of the complex challenges that drive migration. Part 1 explores issues that are frequently cited as factors that drive migration—a changing climate, food insecurity, poverty, inequality, crime, violence, and demographic pressures—and highlights ways that the lives of women and girls are intertwined with these issues. Part 2 takes a deeper look at persistent challenges to the health and well-being of women, girls, and other marginalized groups in Guatemala, with a particular focus on the needs of youth.

These issues come to life in Part 3, which shares the stories of young women impacted by intersecting challenges and highlights innovative programs and strategies that can serve to empower individuals and strengthen communities. The final section of the report offers recommendations for strengthening policies and programs that seek to address the root causes of migration through the incorporation of interventions that empower women and girls.

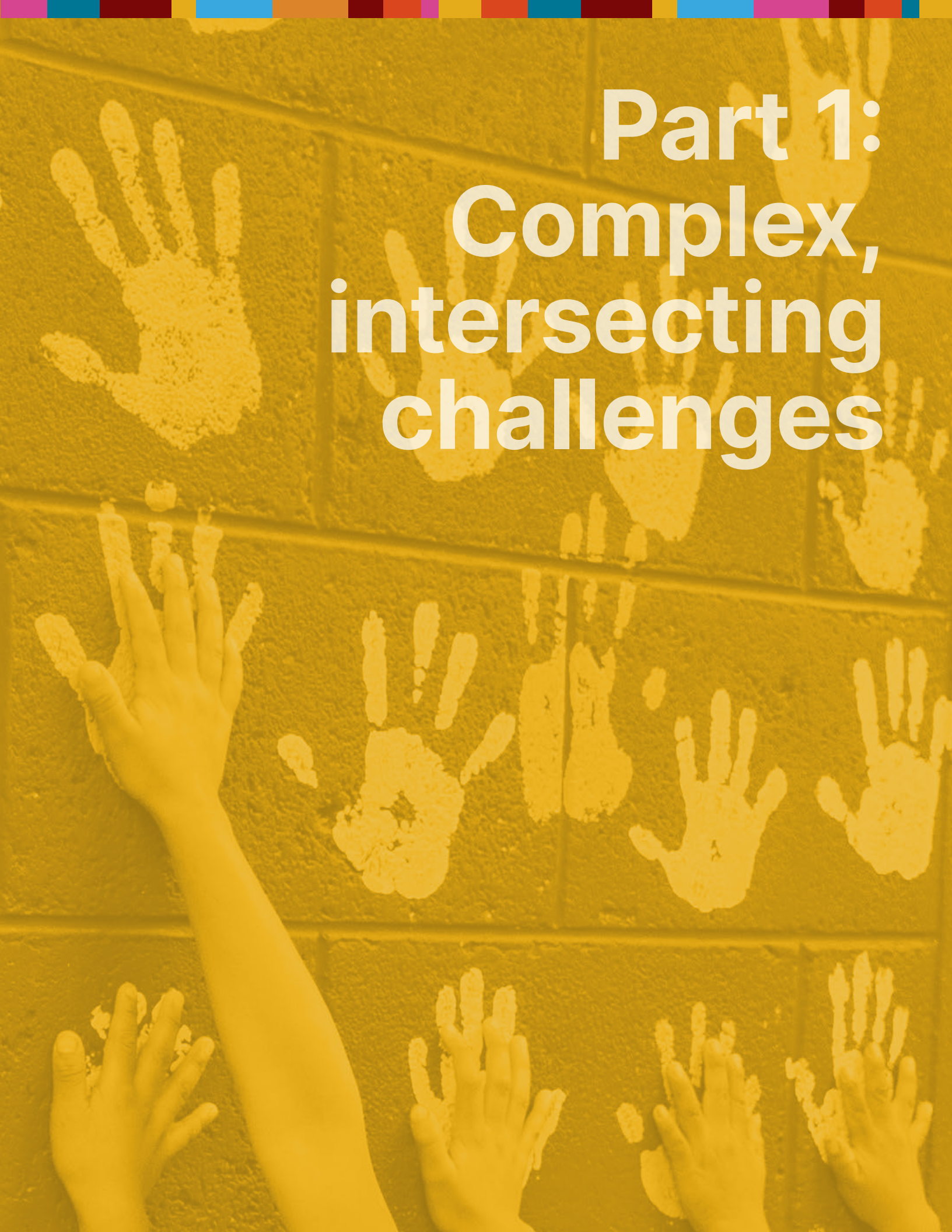
THE "ROOT CAUSES" STRATEGY OF THE US GOVERNMENT

In July, 2021, the Biden/Harris administration released the broad outlines of a strategy for addressing the root causes of migration from Central America.[2] The strategy identifies objectives and lines of effort in areas that link to root causes of migration, including economic insecurity and inequality, corruption and governance, human rights, crime, and gender-based violence. A key component of that strategy is *Centroamérica Local*, an initiative of the US Agency for International Development (USAID) announced in November 2021 that intends to invest up to $300 million toward engaging, strengthening, and funding local organizations to implement programs to advance sustainable and equitable economic growth, improve governance, fight corruption, protect human rights, improve citizen security, and combat sexual and gender-based violence.[3]

While it is too soon to measure the impact of these efforts, an early assessment of funding flows by the Root Causes Initiative, a network of faith-based organizations from Central America and the US, found modest shifts in US funding to the three Central American countries in fiscal year 2021, with a largest share going to humanitarian assistance for disaster relief and COVID-19, an increase to international NGOs, and a decrease to international for-profit organizations.[4]

THE "THREE NORTHERN COUNTRIES OF CENTRAL AMERICA" RATHER THAN THE "NORTHERN TRIANGLE"

Many people in North America and beyond refer to El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras collectively as the "Northern Triangle," a term that was popularized through the countries' participation in regional trade agreements beginning in the 1990s. However, many in the region are uncomfortable with this nomenclature, as it evokes military terms that were used during the civil war in Guatemala. The Ixil Triangle, for example, is a Maya region that was severely impacted by the conflict, with a dark history of genocide and "scorched earth" policies perpetrated against the local population.[5] To move away from this association, civil society organizations in Guatemala and elsewhere prefer to refer to the region simply, and accurately, as the three northern countries of Central America.



Part 1: Complex, intersecting challenges

Part 1: Complex, intersecting challenges

1.1 An Evolving Migrant Profile

According to the International Organization for Migration's (IOM) Data Portal, international migrants from Guatemala totaled nearly 1.4 million in 2020.[6] The migrant profile is mostly male, between 15 and 45 years old, from rural areas, with an average schooling of six years.[7]

But this profile is changing. The numbers of families and children arriving alone are growing. In 2018, U.S. Customs and Border Protection apprehended more than 38,000 unaccompanied children from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. Fifty-eight percent of the unaccompanied children and 49% of the families were from Guatemala.[8]

The backgrounds and motivations for people within this migratory flux have become increasingly diverse. It includes workers in the informal economy, women, indigenous people, victims of trafficking and exploitation networks, minors fleeing criminal and domestic violence and different forms of abuse. It includes those searching for family reunification and economic opportunities, those persecuted for their sexual orientation and identity, and people displaced by criminal violence, climate change, megaprojects like mining and hydroelectric plants, and massive agricultural export schemes, such as palm oil plantations.[9,10]

Policies and programs to address root causes of migration will be most effective when they recognize the diversity and complexity of this migrant profile and the wide range of both push and pull factors at play. Part of that effort needs to include identifying vulnerable populations across the region and seeking ways to guarantee their safety and rights.

Assessing and addressing patterns that lead to circular migration is also critical. Each year, tens of thousands of migrants return to Guatemala.[11] For many, migration becomes a circular strategy in which deportees migrate again at the first opportunity.[12] While Guatemala's Human Rights Office recognizes some progress in

POLICIES AND PROGRAMS TO ADDRESS ROOT CAUSES OF MIGRATION WILL BE MOST EFFECTIVE WHEN THEY RECOGNIZE THE DIVERSITY AND COMPLEXITY OF THIS MIGRANT PROFILE AND THE WIDE RANGE OF BOTH PUSH AND PULL FACTORS AT PLAY.

addressing the needs and rights of people on the move,[13] civil society groups have drawn attention to the need for more inclusive policies that directly address factors that could facilitate the reintegration of returnees, including humanitarian aid, human rights protections that are sensitive to the diverse migrant profiles, and the impacts of COVID-19 on families and communities (see box).[14] Civil society groups have noted, in particular, the need to address the trafficking of women and girls, as well as a concerning uptick in gender-based violence that has coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic and contributes to forced displacement.[15]

COVID-19 AND PEOPLE ON THE MOVE

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the vulnerabilities and deepened inequalities that already existed among migrant populations. According to Guatemala's Human Rights Office, there are three interrelated crises for people on the move associated with the pandemic: sanitary (lack of hygiene items, no water or alcohol, access to health facilities, etc.), socioeconomic (low or no income, lack of resources, etc.), and social and civil protection (border closures, restrictions on movement, no guarantee of human rights, different forms of abuse from national security forces and trafficking networks, etc.).[16] In this context, Guatemala faces the challenge of increased public debt to finance COVID-19 related programs, which requires reinforcing tax payments to be sustainable.[17]

1.2 The Changing Climate

Increasingly, the impacts of climate change are playing a powerful role in people's decisions to migrate. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Central America has emerged as a prominent climate change hotspot. Most climate models project a consistent decrease of precipitation, which, coupled with hotter temperatures and extreme weather, will continue to pose significant challenges for agricultural productivity, livelihoods, and human safety.[18]

Agriculture is a critical component of Guatemala's economy, employing roughly one-third of the labor force and representing 14% of GDP.[19] But with changing climate conditions, farming has become more and more precarious. More than 70% of agricultural activity in Guatemala is rain fed, and fields are commonly in steep, mountainous terrain, making it highly vulnerable to drought and soil erosion that can come with extreme weather events.[20]

Although a substantial future decrease in rainfall is the most likely scenario, predictions of rainfall change for Central America range from between a decrease of 22% to an increase of 7% by 2100. Warming conditions combined with more variable rainfall are expected to reduce maize, bean, and rice productivity; rice and wheat yields could decrease up to 10% by 2030.[21] Nearly 90% of the agricultural production used for internal consumption is composed of maize (70%), beans (25%), and rice (6%).[22]

Already, small scale farmers have suffered from deep and prolonged drought. An El Niño event, which began in 2015, compounded atypical regional dryness and led to consecutive years of crop failures.[23] In 2016, the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) of the United Nations reported that the Dry Corridor in Central America, in particular Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, experienced one of the worst droughts of the last ten years with 50% to 90% loss of crops and over 3.5 million people in need of humanitarian assistance.[24]

FOR MANY IN THE REGION, THE IMPACTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE HAVE PLAYED A ROLE IN THEIR DECISIONS TO MIGRATE.

In addition to subsistence farming losses, cash crops are also threatened by climate change because of drought, heat stress, and alteration of the current array of plant diseases. For example, the Central American coffee leaf rust epidemic that began in 2012 is estimated to have resulted in a 16% drop in employment,[25] and outbreaks of the fungus are becoming more frequent with rising temperatures. By 2050, as much as 50% of tropical areas currently suitable for growing Arabica coffee—commonly referred to as the "bean belt"—could become unsuitable due to climate change.[26]

For many in the region, the impacts of climate change have played a role in their decisions to migrate.[27] This is particularly true for rural, smallholder farmers whose household income and food security have been affected by climate variability. A survey conducted by the IOM in the departments of Alta Verapaz and Hueheutenango, for example, found that in 15% of households displaced by hurricanes, at least one family member migrated or attempted to migrate in the past five years, with natural disasters and climate change cited among their top five reasons.[28]

WOMEN IN THE AFTERMATH OF ETA AND IOTA

In October 2020, tropical storm Eta swept through the northern regions of Guatemala, dumping nearly eight inches of rain in a 24-hour period and causing widespread flooding and landslides. Two weeks later, tropical storm Iota followed, inflicting further damage to property and crops, and leaving many remote communities inaccessible for weeks, especially in the departments of Izabal and Alta Verapaz.[29]

"After the heavy rains wiped out all our crops, we only had enough to survive for a few days," reported Herlinda Caal, a smallholder farmer from a Q'uqechi' community in Alta Verapaz.

For women farmers, inequities in access to land and economic and social resources can make the recovery from extreme weather events particularly challenging. To address this concern, the World Food Programme (WFP), in partnership with the insurance company Aseguradora Rural, launched an insurance program that targets the needs of women farmers in indigenous communities.

Caal is part of a cooperative of a dozen women who grow maize and raise pigs and poultry. With an annual fee equivalent to US$23, they are guaranteed payouts of up to around US$309 in case of drought or rains. "This insurance is a great benefit," said Caal. "This way we can move forward and have something for our children to eat."[30]

1.3 Growing Food Insecurity

The impacts of extreme weather and drought on crop yields have deepened the challenge of food security in the region, with devastating impacts. According to the World Food Programme (WFP), nearly 50% of families in Guatemala cannot afford the cost of a basic food basket. Childhood stunting, a key indicator of malnutrition, occurs when a child's height is significantly below average for their age. The prevalence of childhood stunting in Guatemala is higher than anywhere else in Latin America and the Caribbean, with nearly 50% of children under five years of age stunted. In the communities experiencing the deepest food insecurity, this prevalence rises to 90%.[31]

For many families living in poverty, food comes from multiple sources. In rural areas, many families grow food for household consumption, and supplement that by purchasing food with wages earned through work on coffee farms or other seasonal employment. In addition, families rely on hunting, fishing, and other nature-based sources to meet their food needs. Climate variability and environmental degradation can destabilize all three of these sources, heightening food insecurity and leaving families with few good options.[32]

Emergency food security assessments by the WFP, FAO, and the area's national governments during the last quarter of 2018

AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION SERVICES AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE HAVE LARGELY FAILED TO REACH WOMEN IN RURAL AREAS.

confirmed that 1.4 million out of the 2.2 million people living in the Dry Corridor (the tropical dry forest region extending along the Pacific coast of Central America) urgently needed food assistance. In March 2019, WFP and FAO reported prolonged droughts and heavy rain destroyed more than half of the maize and bean crops of the subsistence farmers along the Dry Corridor, leaving them without food reserves and affecting their food security. A survey found that up to 82% of families had sold their farming tools and animals to purchase food.[33]

Through WFP and FAO, the international community is seeking to address growing food insecurity throughout the Dry Corridor by providing support for programs to create and restore productive assets, diversify subsistence farmers' source of income, establish social protection safety nets, and strengthen farmers' resilience in the face of future climate-related events. In Guatemala, the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, and Food is working specifically with rural women and indigenous communities, though support for these programs remains limited.

THE FEMINIZATION OF AGRICULTURE IN GUATEMALA

When male heads of households migrate, most farming households continue their agricultural activity. This was borne out in a 2016 study of two departments in southeastern Guatemala, which found that more and more women face greater responsibilities in agricultural production and decision-making, yet they reported a need to learn *how* to farm after their husbands migrated.

Unfortunately, agricultural extension services and technical assistance have largely failed to reach women in rural areas. Despite these challenges, the study found that relative to other groups, households with a male partner who has migrated have the highest level of food security and food diversity. Remittances received by these households tend to go directly to women, and as demonstrated by research findings, money controlled by women is more likely to be allocated toward family nutrition than money controlled by men.[34] This suggests that greater empowerment of women—in terms of their ability to access household financial resources and agricultural extension services—can yield dividends for family well-being.

1.4 Poverty and Inequality

The Guatemalan economy is the largest in Central America. Guatemala is considered an upper middle-income country, measured by its GDP per capita (US$4,603 in 2020).[35] This status, however, has not translated to meaningful reduction in poverty and inequality. Today, more than half of Guatemala's population lives below the national poverty line, with 23% of the population living in extreme poverty. The burdens of poverty are borne disproportionately among individuals belonging to indigenous groups, 40% of whom live in extreme poverty.[36]

Economic inequality is a persistent challenge, with the richest 20% of the population responsible for more than 50% of the country's overall consumption.[37] This inequality is exemplified in the agricultural sector, where land is highly concentrated among a small number of landholders: the largest farms—about 2.5% of farms in Guatemala - occupy nearly two-thirds of the country's agricultural land, while 90% of the farms are squeezed into just one-sixth of agricultural land.[38]

A large informal sector in Guatemala's economy leaves many workers without protections (unemployment, health, and other benefits) and also leads to low central government revenues. This limits public investments and constrains the quality and coverage of basic public services, including health care and

vital infrastructure.[39] As is the case across much of Latin America, women in Guatemala face educational and occupational inequities, which prevent them from gaining skills that are valued in the labor market and creates "glass ceilings" that limit their ability to progress in professional hierarchies. Only 37% of women in Guatemala—little more than one-third—participate in the labor market. This is the lowest proportion in Latin America. When women are able to enter the labor market, they tend to be employed in lower-paying jobs compared to men.[40]

In this context, successful out-migration has been an economic boon for many families. Guatemala is the top remittance recipient in Central America, with inflows equivalent to two-thirds of the country's exports and about a tenth of its GDP.[41] In 2021, remittances to Guatemala reached US$15 billion, an increase of more than 35% over total remittances in 2020.[42] At the household level, remittance income has been demonstrated to ease poverty and lead to improved health outcomes; households that receive remittances also tend to invest more in education, enabling families to pay school fees and diminishing the need for children to leave school in order to contribute to household earnings.[43]

THE ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS OF COVID-19

According to one estimate, the COVID-19 pandemic was responsible for contracting Guatemala's GDP by 1.5% in 2020, ending three decades of GDP growth. The poverty rate grew from 48% of the population in 2019 to 52.4% in 2020, threatening to reverse decades of development gains. GDP made a rapid recovery in 2021, posting an 8% growth rate, but appears to slowing once again in 2022,[44] raising questions about the prospects for more inclusive growth strategies.

1.5 Crime and Violence

In Guatemala, as in other countries in Central America, crime and violence are significant and destabilizing forces in society. A decades-long civil war that ended in 1996 left a legacy of criminal violence and corruption in Guatemala, as illegal armed groups utilize tactics of intimidation and sexual violence. While the COVID-19 pandemic and associated government lockdowns had the initial effect of disrupting criminal activities throughout the region, evidence suggests that gangs and trafficking groups quickly adapted, compelling many of those most vulnerable to migrate.[45] Indeed, one recent study found that in the average municipality in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, every 10 additional homicides across the years 2011–2016 caused six additional unaccompanied children to be apprehended at the US border.[46]

Guatemala also continues to experience widespread sexual and gender-based violence. The rate of femicide is among the highest in the world. Based on figures from the country's National Institute of Statistics, between January 2000 and May 2018, more than eleven thousand women and girls were murdered in Guatemala.[47] A common view is that wartime practices amplified preexisting violence against women, with sexual violence wielded as a systematic tool of governance,[48] and that ongoing gender inequality has enabled a culture of impunity for such crimes.[49] Recent spikes in violence against women and girls—and perceptions of government inaction to address gender-based violence—have sparked demonstrations across the country.[50]

ONLY 37% OF WOMEN IN GUATEMALA—LITTLE MORE THAN ONE-THIRD—PARTICIPATE IN THE LABOR MARKET. THIS IS THE LOWEST PROPORTION IN LATIN AMERICA.

AND NOW IT IS THE DRUG TRAFFICKER WHO ARRIVES, NOT THE STATE

"On average, Guatemala is not a poor country—it is a middle-income country. In Guatemala, there is money, and a few people are rich. Inequality is a huge problem. So, Guatemala is not a poor country, but it is full of people living in poverty. But these rich people don't pay their fair amount of taxes, so the government lacks fiscal capacities to do what is meant to do. To make things worse, corruption makes the few fiscal resources even more ineffective. There are places in Guatemala where the State is totally absent. There is no school, no hospital, no police, no roads, no drinking water, no retail store, and people survive out of nothing. They only remember the presence of the State when the army arrived during the Civil War. And now it is the drug trafficker who arrives, not the State. People really don't have an opportunity for a good life. Thus, migration looks like their only hope. Walls don't stop them. **What might stop them is an opportunity here in Guatemala: A school with a teacher; a hospital with nurses, doctors, and medicines; a road to trade their products; employment.** Those are the things that might stop them, neither a wall nor militarized border." — *Comment from a faculty member of IDGT Universidad Rafael Landivar, Grupo Articulador de Sociedad Civil en Materia Migratoria, 2021*

ENGAGING WOMEN IN EFFORTS TO STRENGTHEN THE RULE OF LAW

In their case study examining the role of women in Guatemala's 1996 peace accords, the Council on Foreign Relations found that the participation of women in negotiation teams, diplomatic commissions, and civil society resulted in a broader negotiation agenda to address issues that were central to the country's decades-long conflict: land tenure, economic opportunity, return of refugees, and gender-based violence.[51]

Women were key organizers of marches to demand progress on negotiations and led efforts to build consensus. Women were also instrumental in developing strategies for the social and economic reintegration of former combatants. While the after-effects of the conflict still reverberate today, the study found that the presence of women in negotiating and implementing the peace accords was linked to the durability of peace, and that their ongoing participation in efforts to improve the rule of law will strengthen efforts to address the underlying causes of Guatemala's instability.

HALF OF GUATEMALA'S POPULATION IS UNDER AGE 22, MAKING IT THE YOUNGEST POPULATION IN LATIN AMERICA. THE CHOICES MADE BY THESE YOUNG PEOPLE—AND THE INFORMATION, SERVICES, AND OPPORTUNITIES AVAILABLE TO THEM—WILL DETERMINE THE FUTURE PATH OF POPULATION GROWTH IN GUATEMALA.

1.6 Demographic Pressures

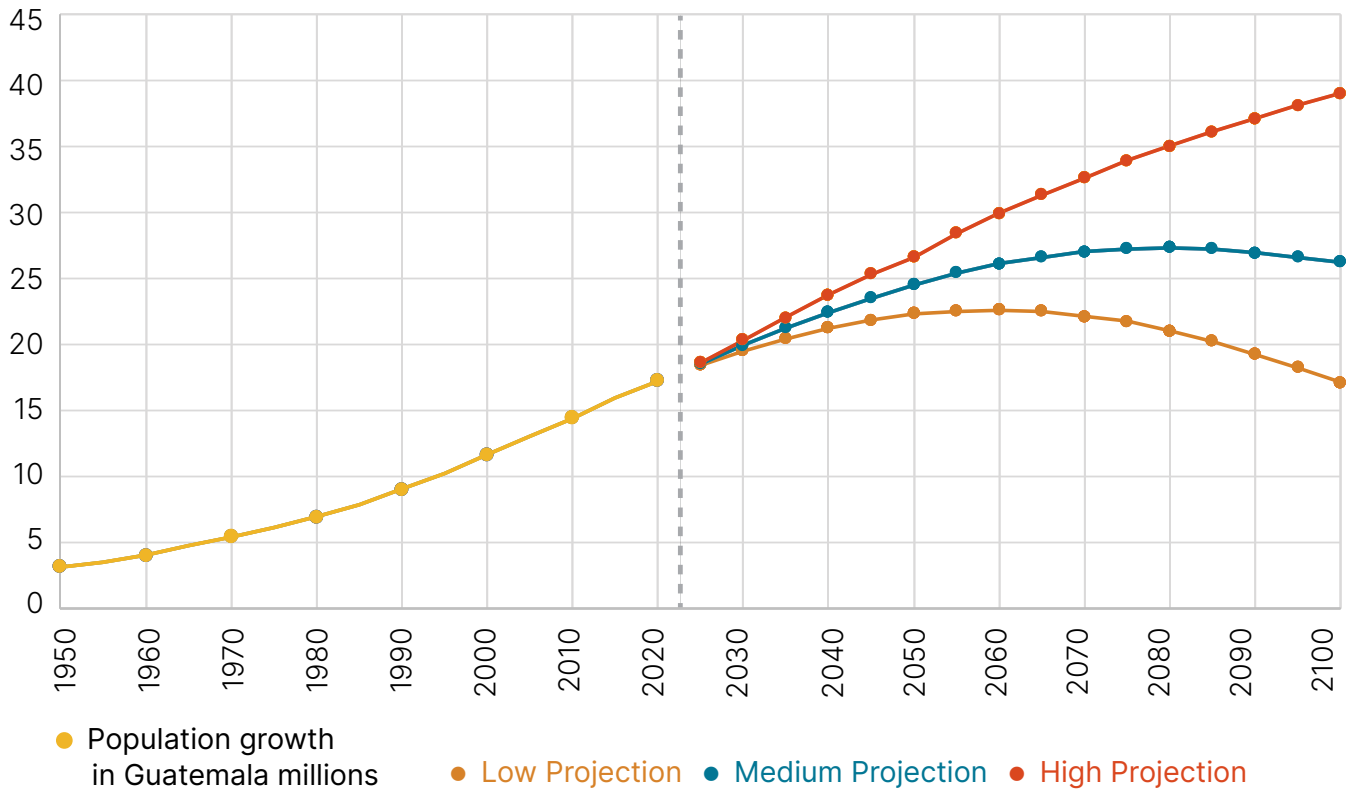
With approximately 17.5 million people, Guatemala is the most populous country in Central America. Demographic trends have played a role in shaping society in recent decades, with a period of rapid growth that has significantly expanded demands for agriculture, schools, infrastructure, health care, housing, power supply, public safety, and jobs. And with the highest population growth rate in Latin America, demographic trends will continue to interact with the multiple factors that influence migration.

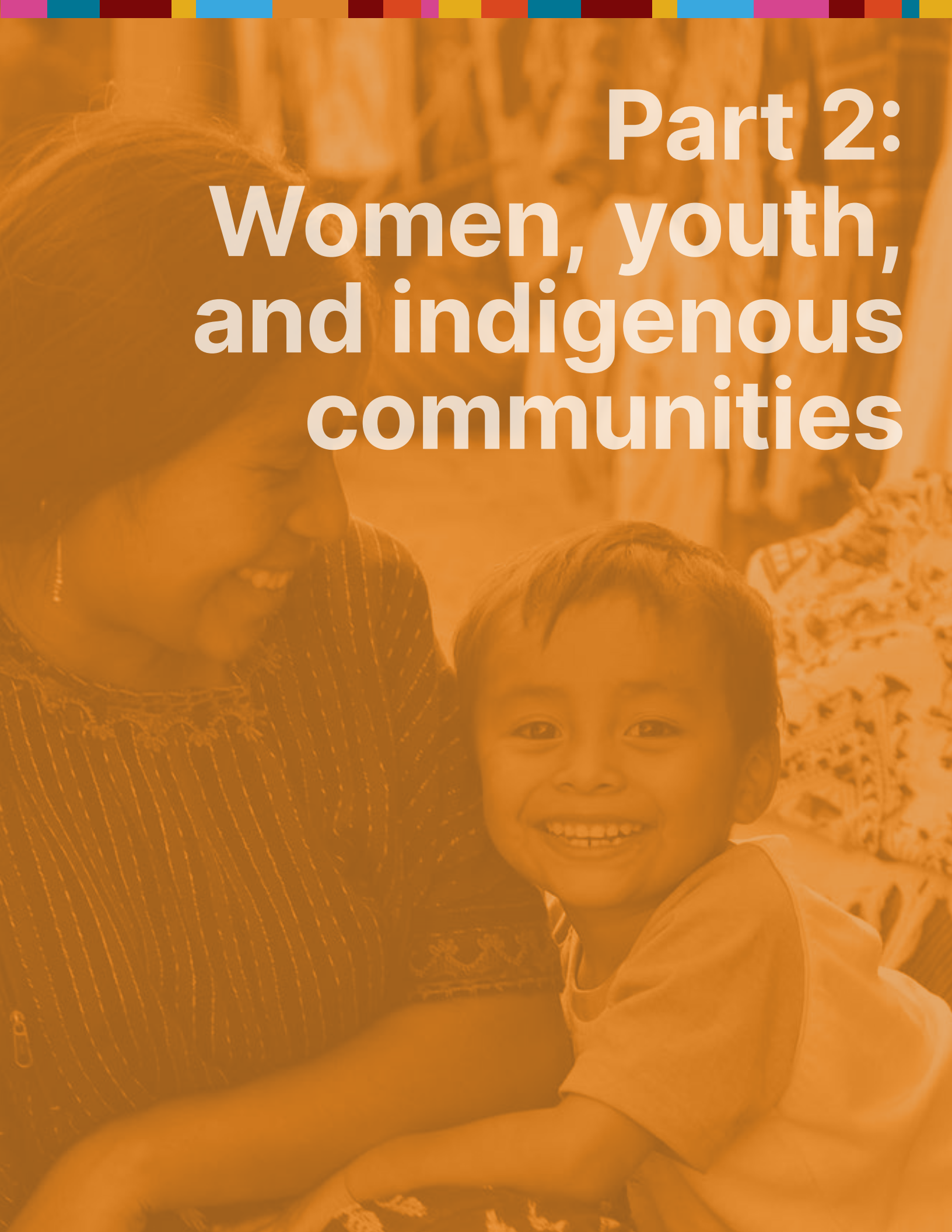
If Guatemala's population were to follow the UN Population Division's high fertility projection, for example, today's 17.5 million people would grow to 26.9 million by 2050, and 39 million by 2100.[52] Such growth would be significant in further straining limited arable land, tenuous water supplies, and the government's ability to provide basic services.

The future path of population growth will be driven in large part by the fertility rate, or the average number of children per woman. While the fertility rate in Guatemala has slowly declined in recent decades, the current average of 2.6 children per woman is the highest in Central America.[54] 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 a high unmet need for family planning services.[55] As a result, it is estimated that one in three pregnancies among women in Guatemala is unplanned or unintended.[56]

Half of Guatemala's population is under age 22, making it the youngest population in Latin America. The choices made by these young people—and the information, services, and opportunities available to them—will determine the future path of population growth in Guatemala.

Guatemala's historical and projected population growth from 1950 through 2100, with low, medium and high variants[53]





Part 2: Women, youth, and indigenous communities

Part 2: Women, youth, and indigenous communities

2.1 The Health and Well-being of Women and Girls

Like invisible threads, the lives of women and girls are woven throughout the intersecting issues at the root of current migration pressures. The unique challenges facing women and girls in Guatemala, particularly related to their reproductive health and rights, limit their potential to contribute to long-term solutions.

Maternal health

Although Guatemala is classified as a "middle-income country," this designation masks significant inequalities within the population, particularly related to women's health. Health indicators among rural indigenous populations are as bad as in many least developed countries: maternal mortality rates among indigenous women are three times higher than for non-indigenous women, and can reach up to 221 deaths (per 100,000 deliveries) in some regions.[57]

The lack of adequate access to emergency obstetric care, lack of medical assistance at birth, and the lack of access to family planning information and methods are key factors contributing to this high mortality rate. Only 19% of pregnancies and deliveries receive professional medical attention among rural indigenous women, and indigenous midwives continue to be excluded from the official health system despite their role as essential health workers. Malnutrition rates among children under five can reach up to 70% in certain indigenous regions of the country,[58] and 20 out of 1000 children die every year before their first birthday, due to infections, diarrhea, and other preventable diseases.[59]

Remote rural communities (some of which are located within protected areas), in particular, suffer from rural

isolation, poverty, low visibility, and low institutional support from health institutions. As a result, people in the departments of Huehuetenango, Quiche, and Izabal present some of the worst indicators at the national level. Indeed, maternal and infant health indicators plummet even further in these most isolated regions.

Reproductive health and well-being of girls

Guatemala has one of the highest teen pregnancy rates in Latin America and one of the few that is on the rise. The average age at first birth is 20, and 21% of young women ages 15–19 are pregnant or parenting. In rural areas, this percentage rises to 24%.[60] Pregnancy among the youngest girls has become common enough that civil society pushed the government's statistical agency to create a new statistical bracket in order to register pregnancies among girls between the ages of 10 and 14. Sadly, more than 4,000 girls under 15 years old were pregnant during 2020,[61] which is considered sexual violence under Guatemalan law.

These figures are driven by insufficient education, outreach, and services to teens related to their sexuality and reproductive health. The gaps in supporting teenage girls are particularly severe. Surveys indicate that 22% of teen girls have an unmet need for contraceptives, which means that they are at high risk of becoming pregnant. Far fewer teen girls used a condom in their last sexual act (31% of teen girls 15–17 years of age, compared to 67% among teen boys). Often, there is a power dynamic at play: 10% of teen girls who have been sexually active in the last year had sex with a man 10 or more years older.[62]

These figures correlate with troubling trends in education and early marriage for girls. At the national level, the 2014–15 National Demographic Survey (ENSMI) reports that 46.7% of adolescent girls ages 15–19 have not completed secondary school, and close to 21% reported being married before age 20—which includes different forms of consensual and early and forced unions. According to a report from Plan International (2017) on child, early, and forced marriage and unions (CEFMU) in Latin America, Guatemala ranks fifth in the prevalence of CEFMU in the region (30%, along with Guyana).

The unique challenges facing indigenous women and girls

Guatemala's indigenous people account for 44% of the population.[63] To date, most indigenous communities, particularly those who endured forced displacement during the armed conflict (1960–1996), face exclusion from essential services and challenging access to entitlements across areas: education, health, reproductive health services, social protection programs, and decent and safe employment opportunities.

Among indigenous communities, girls are the most disadvantaged group, as consistently shown in the national indicators for education since the early 2000s.[64] In Guatemala, marriage before age 18 is associated with lower rates of school enrollment and educational attainment for females. Age at marriage in Guatemala is even younger for indigenous than for non-indigenous women, and ethnic disparities begin to appear around age 15.

SURVEYS INDICATE THAT 22% OF TEEN GIRLS HAVE AN UNMET NEED FOR CONTRACEPTIVES, WHICH MEANS THAT THEY ARE AT HIGH RISK OF BECOMING PREGNANT.

Because most fertility in Guatemala occurs within marriage, out-of-wedlock childbearing is not a likely cause of early school dropout.[65] The risk of child marriage increases through various pathways, including poverty, social and economic exclusion, and in the current context, school closures and interruptions in services. Although there is clear evidence that education is a protective factor against child marriage,[66] efforts from the government to design and implement programs for youth perpetuate exclusion by treating youth as a homogenous group, neglecting the intersection of age, gender, and ethnicity. Adding to the gaps in policy design, conservative positions from government limit access to comprehensive sexuality education and reproductive services for adolescents and youth.

2.2 The Needs of Youth

According to the last national census, Guatemala is a young country: about 63% of its population is under 30 years of age.[67] What this means in terms of public policy and development outcomes is not necessarily straightforward. Some publications focus on Guatemalan youth as a potential "demographic bonus," and argue that immediate investments in young people could improve development outcomes.[68]

But this optimistic outlook often overlooks the depth and complexity of current development gaps faced by children, adolescents, and young people in Guatemala. In 2014, about 68% of children and adolescents lived in poverty, while almost 55% faced multidimensional poverty, meaning that in addition to living in households with a consumption value lower than the poverty line, they also experience multiple deprivations of rights.[69] In 2018, while most children and adolescents lived in formal dwellings, their living conditions were still precarious. About one-third lived in houses with dirt floors, almost 50% did not have access to indoor plumbing, and 60% of their homes did not have access to a sewage system.[70]

Many young people in Guatemala carry adult responsibilities from an early age, either doing formal work to support their families or having families of their own. Data on high school graduates show that more than a third of them have to juggle work with school in order to finance their studies.[71] As a result, while most children attending elementary school are within the expected age for this level (94%), less than half of youth enroll in middle school (49%) and high school (26%).[72]

Historical and anthropological studies highlight how public narratives of youth in Guatemala overlook them as active agents in society, and instead portray them as either social deviants or people-in-the-making.[73] These studies also show that public representations of youth are highly romanticized depictions of a subject who embodies the hope for a better future, usually carrying aspirations of a male, urban, and non-indigenous person.

To the extent that young people are seen through a lens that homogenizes their life experiences and their hopes for the future, development strategies are often standardized in the same way. An example of this can be found in the logic of articulating education and sports as the main strategies to address two dreaded assumptions: youthful idleness and

ALTHOUGH THERE IS CLEAR EVIDENCE THAT EDUCATION IS A PROTECTIVE FACTOR AGAINST CHILD MARRIAGE, EFFORTS FROM THE GOVERNMENT TO DESIGN AND IMPLEMENT PROGRAMS FOR YOUTH PERPETUATE EXCLUSION BY TREATING YOUTH AS A HOMOGENOUS GROUP, NEGLECTING THE INTERSECTION OF AGE, GENDER, AND ETHNICITY.

their propensity to fall into violent gangs. Thus, promoting "healthy" lives becomes the objective for many administrations.

Unfortunately, these approaches—which largely exclude young women and girls, indigenous youth, and LGBTQ youth—lose sight of who is the most vulnerable among young people. Therefore, development programs tend to concentrate on urban areas and focus on subsets of young people who already have a broader scope of opportunities.

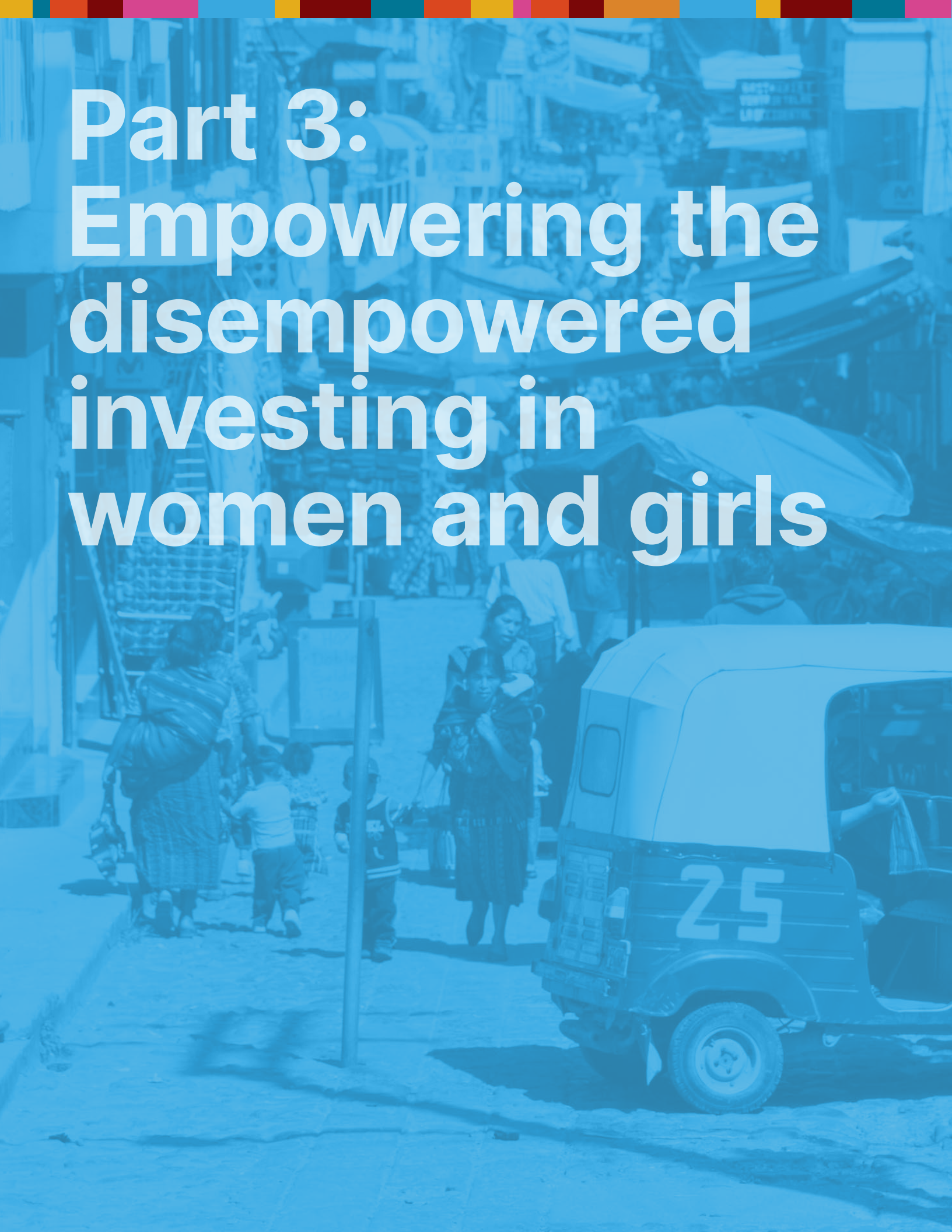
Even the definition of who is considered "youth" is mismatched across national policies, further obscuring the needs, experiences, and legal status of young people at different stages of their lives.[74] According to the Decree 27-2003, known as "*Law for the Comprehensive Protection of Children and Adolescents*" (PINA—Ley de Protección Integral de la Niñez y Adolescencia), childhood comprises ages 0–12 while adolescence corresponds to ages 13–17.[75] Meanwhile, the bill "*National Youth Policy 2012–2020*" (PPNJ—Política Pública Nacional de Juventud) frames youth between ages 13–29, establishing adolescence from ages 13–18, and youth between 18–29 years of age.[76]

HISTORICAL AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDIES HIGHLIGHT HOW PUBLIC NARRATIVES OF YOUTH IN GUATEMALA OVERLOOK THEM AS ACTIVE AGENTS IN SOCIETY, AND INSTEAD PORTRAY THEM AS EITHER SOCIAL DEVIANTS OR PEOPLE-IN-THE-MAKING

The overlap of ages between policies creates uncertainty regarding the delegation of responsibilities within the government. The National Human Development Report 2011/2012 found that programs focused on adolescents and youth were found in more than 15 agencies of the State's three branches.[77] Overall, with these different understandings of "youth" in state policies and the many initiatives dispersed between agencies, it is difficult to trace what efforts are implemented by the state to advance a public agenda that benefits Guatemalan youth.

Photo courtesy of the Population Council

Part 3: Empowering the disempowered investing in women and girls



Part 3: Empowering the disempowered: investing in women and girls

Photo courtesy of WINGS

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.

The stories and initiatives highlighted here demonstrate how a deeper understanding of the intersecting challenges and opportunities facing women and girls can strengthen policies and programs designed to address the root causes of migration.

3.1 Ana's Story

Antigua is a majestic colonial city in the department of Sacatepéquez, located about one hour from the capital city. A former capital itself until a series of earthquakes prompted its near abandonment in the 18th century, it is one of the most important tourist attractions in Guatemala, visited by millions every year.

Ana is a 19-year-old young woman who was born and raised in a small town in the outskirts of Antigua. She can´t remember a happy childhood, a story that is very similar among the people she knows. She doesn't know any happy family "like the ones you see in movies." Her father abandoned her and three other children when Ana was three. Her mother, perhaps out of necessity or habit, began another relationship almost immediately with a man who, according to Ana, did very bad things.

"He always was good to us, he gave us food, but he did very bad things and my mother took the same path. We grew up believing that this was normal—we didn't think it was bad—but as we got older we realized that this wasn't good," she said.

This man ended up in jail. When he returned after several years, he was murdered only two weeks later. "This happens if you took the wrong way

and do bad things," Ana said. It was hard to lose someone who treated her well.

Ana lived in a very small place, overcrowded with 4 other families. "Our walls were curtains put up with ribbons. As a result, I experienced things that a child shouldn't see and hear. I was too young to understand it, but it was horrible. It wasn't easy to suffer psychological and economic violence," Ana said. Her mother had multiple partners. "Thank God they never did anything to me, as has happened to many acquaintances," she said, referring to sexual violence.

Ana and her siblings struggled. There was little money, and she remembers coming home only to sleep. The public-school kitchen lady gave them *atol* (a traditional cereal based drink) and fruit, the only food they had access to in a day.

Her life changed one day in March 2020, when her mother's psychological abuse went too far. She got tired of the abuse and sought help from the person in charge of the youth program at WINGS, a Guatemalan non-governmental organization (NGO) focused on youth and reproductive health (see box). She was placed in a private foster home, and Ana thought her life was finally in better hands. At first, everything seemed fine. That was until she realized the mistreatment in the form of reduced food portions, lack of study possibilities, and being obliged to clean all day long. She felt like a prisoner, a person without rights. Since then, she has been living irregularly with family, friends and institutions, but her friends belong to that world of crime and vice from which she has tried so many times to escape.

"Despite everything, we have succeeded. My sister and I graduated from high school and my brother will do so next year. I am afraid of what may happen to us, not only because of the lack of opportunities but because of the environment in which we have been living. One day I want to be independent. I definitely don't want children. Someday, when I'm ready, I want to adopt."

When asked what she would like to do in the future, she jumped up from the chair and, without hesitation, said, "*Education!*" She believes it is the key to individual and community development.

What is different in Ana´s life? She has had access to educational opportunities. Belonging to the "los patojos," an educational project that provides opportunities to young people with challenging home life, has been crucial. She has learned to express herself through art and wants to be someone in life.

"If I don't speak up, they will never listen to me," Ana said with admirable strength. She has become increasingly involved in movements and demonstrations in favor of human rights, feeling empowered and thinking, "Here is where I belong."

In WINGS, Ana found support, help, and guidance. She felt, for the first time, listened to and valued, like she had discovered a place where she could form a bond. Every time she attended a meeting of the program she thought, "Today I'm going to eat delicious food and learn something new. I will be able to express myself and I will have a friendly, safe space, something I've never had."

"OUR WALLS WERE CURTAINS PUT UP WITH RIBBONS. AS A RESULT, I EXPERIENCED THINGS THAT A CHILD SHOULDN'T SEE AND HEAR. I WAS TOO YOUNG TO UNDERSTAND IT, BUT IT WAS HORRIBLE. IT WASN'T EASY TO SUFFER PSYCHOLOGICAL AND ECONOMIC VIOLENCE."
— ANA

OPENING DOORS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE: WINGS

WINGS is a Guatemalan NGO, primarily funded by US-based foundations and individual donors who have a deep connection with Guatemala. The primary purpose of WINGS, the second largest non-governmental contraceptive service provider in the country, is to provide high-quality family planning and reproductive health services throughout its programs. Currently, coverage is provided in 16 of Guatemala's 22 departments. Services are focused on women living in rural and indigenous areas characterized by low income and limited access to such services.

Among the key programs offered by WINGS is one for youth, 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.

Stories like Ana's are common throughout Guatemala, where social and economic inequality and the lack of education and opportunities fracture families and entire lives, preventing the individual and collective development of our societies. Violence, drugs, and abuse are part of their daily lives, which lead youth to make extreme decisions like leaving the country to seek a better world they can't find in their own land.

Many emigrate based on a rational decision to flee a hopeless future in search of survival. Others decide to stay, aspiring like Ana, to become change-makers in their communities. When asked if she would go to the United States illegally, she immediately replied: "I would never go and put myself in that risk. I don't want those terrible things that women suffer to get there. I don't want to die, either. Guatemala has very talented people! But sometimes people don't value local talent, and we don't have opportunities. If I go to the United States, it will be by plane and as a tourist," showing a big smile with that powerful phrase.

Neither national nor local governments have demonstrated political will toward improvement in key indicators for development (e.g., health, education, penal prosecution, etc.). This, in association with a long history of corruption and high rates of impunity, is, overall, the leading cause of poverty and low development of the Latin American countries.

Ana´s story is a living example of how services that empower those in need can mitigate parallel issues such as unnecessary emigrations to richer countries and family separations.

MANY EMIGRATE BASED ON A RATIONAL DECISION TO FLEE A HOPELESS FUTURE IN SEARCH OF SURVIVAL. OTHERS DECIDE TO STAY, ASPIRING LIKE ANA, TO BECOME CHANGE-MAKERS IN THEIR COMMUNITIES.

3.2 Supporting Women's Clinics in Isolated Communities within Protected Areas: FUNDAECO

FUNDAECO´s innovative model breaks traditional barriers among disciplines. It ensures service delivery to indigenous women in isolated communities by combining modern healthcare with traditional indigenous knowledge. It empowers and supports traditional midwives and links them to the public health services. The model ensures sustainability of women´s clinics through self-management and user fees, focusing on creating demand with a culturally pertinent perspective among rural youth, and links sexual and reproductive health with sustainable rural development and biodiversity conservation.

The methodology and service delivery models are simple and yet effective for the context: to start, initial contacts with community authorities and midwives allow for a community level acceptance and endorsement of the project—by both men and women. Midwives convey and create a "women´s health committee," which oversees the project and manages the clinic. A professional nurse implements a training program for midwives and local health facilitators, and FUNDAECO and the community mobilize matching resources for the construction of the clinic. FUNDAECO provides an initial endowment of equipment and supplies for the clinic, and then the clinic is officially delivered to the "women´s association" and service delivery begins. FUNDAECO also works to certify and register community midwives in the Ministry of Health, for emergency referral

purposes and to be recognized as health service providers.

During the whole process, FUNDAECO carries out an intensive outreach and education program for women and girls on sexual and reproductive rights, self-esteem and sexual education. Over time, the project becomes self-sustaining: the sale of methods and small service fees ensures the creation of an administrative fund for the maintenance and continued operation of the clinic, which is fully administered by the committee, and rapidly becomes a "secure space" for women and girls. FUNDAECO—which has a long-term institutional commitment to work in each targeted region—ensures continued training and support to the clinics, as well as trucks and "mobile clinics" that can provide transportation when referrals to hospitals are needed. Finally, the organization's network of nurses, midwives, and local *promotoras* also supports referrals to the legal system in cases of sexual violence or child pregnancies.

Critically, FUNDAECO's program extends beyond the health clinic in addressing the intersecting challenges facing girls. The program operates a modest scholarship program that supports girls in advancing and completing their formal education. Every year, FUNDAECO supports approximately 65 girls, and to date, more than 20 girls have completed high school and many are advancing in technical or university studies. These girls participate in a leadership program that provides technical training and leadership skills that help to grow women´s participation in community decisions. These girls become leaders in their communities and share their knowledge regarding women´s rights, inspiring other girls to study.

ONCE WOMEN HAVE ACCESS TO HEALTH AND FAMILY PLANNING SERVICES, AND THEY ARE EMPOWERED IN THEIR RIGHTS, IT IS A NATURAL NEXT STEP THAT THEY ARE WILLING TO PARTICIPATE IN NATURAL RESOURCES MANAGEMENT AND INCOME-GENERATION ACTIVITIES.

Finally, FUNDAECO seeks to ensure access to income generation for women through sustainable management of natural resources. Once women have access to health and family planning services, and they are empowered in their rights, it is a natural next step that they are willing to participate in natural resources management and income-generation activities. FUNDAECO is increasingly integrating women in agroforestry systems management by training and hiring women for specific activities, such as establishment of tree nurseries and harvesting processes. Also, FUNDAECO is supporting women groups in the establishment and strengthening of small business including handicrafts, bread production, and a small restaurant, among others. To date, over 150 women have increased their income with the program´s support.

Other important elements of FUNDAECO´s methodology that contribute to address the underlying causes of the current situation are the following:

- Through the establishment of a network of reproductive health clinics in communities surrounding protected areas, FUNDAECO is bringing together the concerns for women´s rights, for sustainable community development, and for biodiversity conservation.
- By emphasizing "cultural pertinence" of reproductive health activities, fully integrating and supporting indigenous midwives, and promoting their recognition by the health authorities, FUNDAECO is contributing to the recognition of Guatemala´s multicultural reality and fighting racial and ethnic discrimination.
- The participatory management of the clinics by local midwives and women's groups ensures their empowerment and increases their sustainability.
- The design, establishment, and operation of local reproductive health clinics has become a vehicle for women´s leadership and their increased participation in all aspects of community life, including the improved management and protection of natural resources and respect for nature.

MAYRA: A GIRL FIGHTING FOR HER RIGHTS AND HER DREAMS

Mayra is a Maya Q'eqchi' girl from the China Cadenas Community, in Livingston Izabal. She was 14 years old when she entered FUNDAECO's Scholarship Program.

However, the rumors about young girls being given in marriage to older men from her community became her own story: she was to be given in marriage at the age of 15. FUNDAECO provided support and established coordination with the staff from the Ministry of Education and the General Attorney´s Office. During the hearing, the Judge was highly impressed by Mayra's level of empowerment, and by the fact that she was the first indigenous girl to denounce this type of crime in the community. She was clear in expressing her feelings: "I don´t want to be given to a man. My dream is to study, it is my right." And she succeeded in having her rights respected.

Mayra was granted a scholarship to complete her high school education at the San Jose Ecological School, and later started the Environmental Engineer career at the Rural University at Petén. She also became the President of the Young Women Organization from the community, promoting income generation through handicrafts so other girls can pay for their studies.

Mayra also became the local promoter for the new Women´s Clinic that was established in the Carmelita Community in Peten. She provides women´s rights information to women and girls from the community. In 2020, she was interviewed by many international news media outlets; she shared her story and emphasized the importance of education for women claiming their rights, as a basis for their sustainable development.

3.3 Creating Opportunities for Young Indigenous Women: *Abriendo Oportunidades*

As a response to the exclusion of indigenous girls, the Population Council has applied a targeted, evidence-based approach to partner with indigenous communities to expand the *Abriendo Oportunidades* (AO) program since 2004. To date, AO has trained over 400 young indigenous women as mentors and reached close to 24,000 adolescent indigenous girls in 350 communities. The program identifies young indigenous women, ages 18–35, who are trained to serve as mentors for girls, who meet regularly in safe spaces designated by community leaders (usually a classroom or a community hall). AO organizes girls into age-appropriate groups, sensitive to their school-going and marital status, as the foundation to build their life skills and improve their social outcomes. AO mentors are instrumental in transforming social norms that allow girls to stay in school and encourage communities to support their life plans. Mentors exercise agency by advocating for written commitments from local authorities to enforce laws that prohibit child marriage.

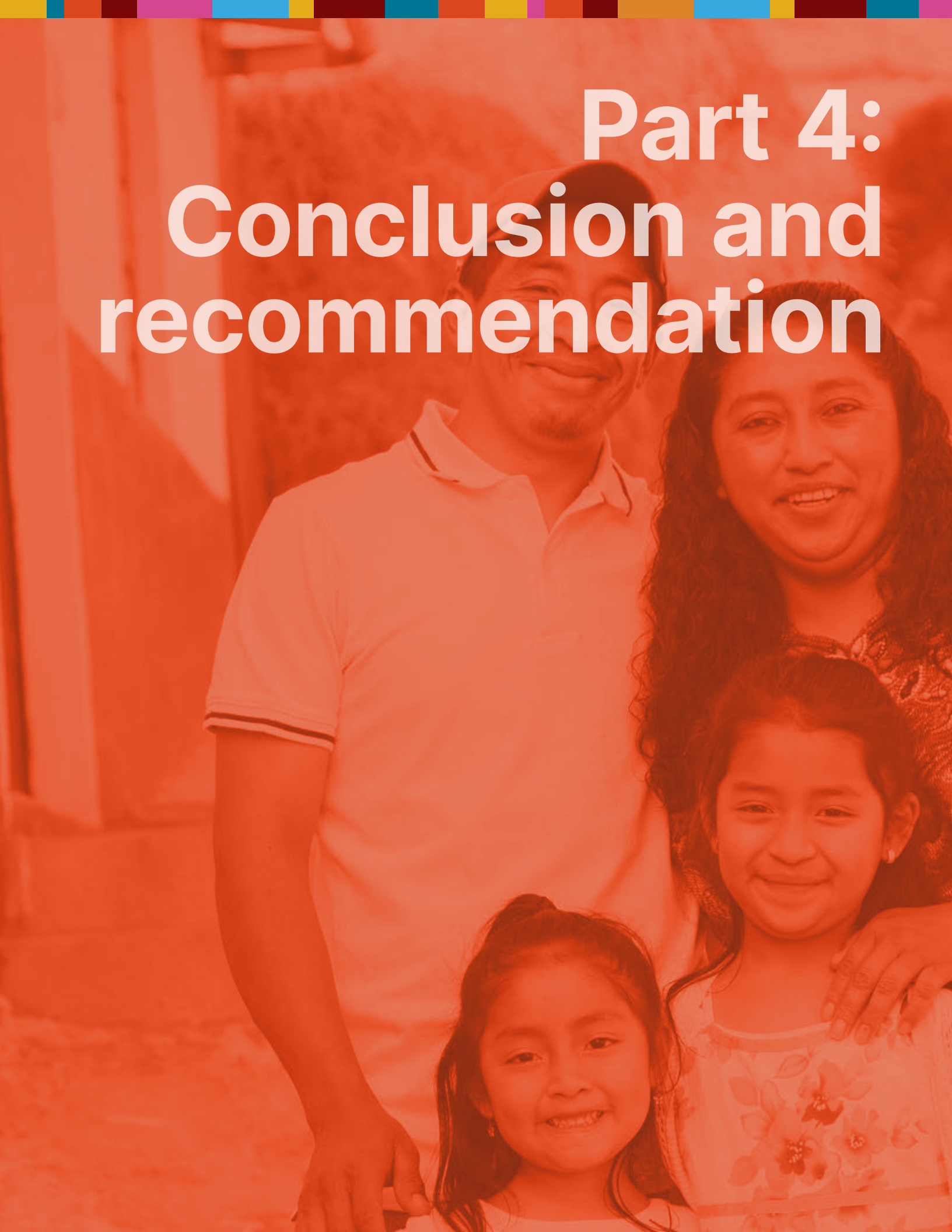
The Council's experience working with indigenous girls and female mentors demonstrates that community-based approaches are essential to fix the exclusion that affects them and their communities.[78] The experience of AO also shows that programs tailored to the needs of indigenous girls should begin before puberty.[79] In addition to poverty-reduction programs, government efforts should fund secondary school coverage and scholarships more widely, because parents cite poverty as the main reason for not enrolling children in school. Evidence also shows that expanding access to intercultural bilingual education in the early grades reduces grade repetition and dropout rates among indigenous children.[80]

AO MENTORS ARE INSTRUMENTAL IN TRANSFORMING SOCIAL NORMS THAT ALLOW GIRLS TO STAY IN SCHOOL AND ENCOURAGE COMMUNITIES TO SUPPORT THEIR LIFE PLANS.

Investing in young indigenous mentors has also proven to be a key strategy to sustain the impact of programs like *Abriendo Oportunidades*. In the region of Chisec, Alta Verapaz, the Council supported the creation of a local network of mentors as the means to identify pathways to secure sustainable livelihoods and food sovereignty for mentors and girls, including a poultry and vegetable farm, *Casa Productiva*. In addition, the Council is currently providing information about the perspectives and needs of indigenous communities in the context of COVID-19, and in the years to come, will continue to expand access to education and pathways for social inclusion for indigenous girls and women.

As Guatemala faces the disproportionate challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic has on indigenous communities,[81] the national government should be equipped to integrate intercultural approaches to national vaccination plans and long-term response strategies. To this effect, investing in strengthening connections between indigenous midwives and young female mentors will be a key to render effective results. Midwives, young female mentors, and their adolescent mentees have provided rapid responses by delivering information and key resources to the most in-need households and the most marginalized girls (including girls with disabilities and LGTBQ indigenous youth).

THE COUNCIL IS CURRENTLY PROVIDING INFORMATION ABOUT THE PERSPECTIVES AND NEEDS OF INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19, AND IN THE YEARS TO COME, WILL CONTINUE TO EXPAND ACCESS TO EDUCATION AND PATHWAYS FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION FOR INDIGENOUS GIRLS AND WOMEN.



Part 4: Conclusion and recommendation

Part 4: Conclusion and recommendations

As the data and stories in this report illustrate, the status, health, and well-being of women and girls are deeply connected to the intersecting challenges at the root of migration from Guatemala. Greater investment in women and girls—particularly in their sexual and reproductive health and rights—will advance the health and well-being of families and contribute to lasting progress on the country's intersecting challenges.

Young people will shape Guatemala's future, but they are not a homogenous group. The experiences of early teens and young adults, of girls and boys, of rural and urban, of indigenous and non-indigenous are very different, and policies and programs will be best positioned to succeed when the diversity of their contexts and experiences are reflected in design and implementation.

The stories and programmatic approaches shared in Part 3 of this report offer hope: they serve as models in bringing focalized solutions to many of the structural problems associated with poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation and can be replicated across the country and the Central American region. By engaging marginalized populations and young people, such approaches address immediate needs while increasing demand for and access to underutilized services and facilities such as schools, health services, municipal venues, and finance cooperatives.

Now is the time to reinvest in holistic approaches to address converging challenges in Guatemala, with women and girls at the center. 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 lives of women and girls are woven throughout the intersecting issues at the root of current migration pressures. 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.

When women are able to access health and family planning services, they become more empowered in their rights, which will serve to strengthen the health and well-being of families and contribute to lasting progress for Guatemala's intersecting challenges. To date, public institutions and expenditures have been insufficient to meet the needs of Guatemala's growing population, particularly rural and indigenous communities and other marginalized groups. Private initiatives, mostly driven by foreign aid, are fundamental

to provide adequate services to those in need. Investing in meeting these needs will also establish conditions that will result in slower growth of Guatemala's population over the long term, enhancing prospects for lasting development.

Foster greater coherence in strategies to engage youth, with attention to the needs and experiences of the most vulnerable, including indigenous people, 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. Ultimately, in addition to private initiatives and foreign assistance, Guatemala needs more robust public expenditure for childhood and adolescence that recognizes the many facets of Guatemalan youth, so the State's actions can focus on the most vulnerable populations and thus create a wide space of opportunities for the younger generations.

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

Migrant flows from Guatemala take place in the context of a broader migration context. 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, human rights-based strategy.

This is particularly important in advancing the needs and rights of women, girls, indigenous populations, and other groups that have been overlooked or further marginalized by migration policies. Violence and lack of opportunities for these groups need to be addressed by regional policies that prepare authorities and institutions engaging with migrants on the move through Central America, Mexico, and the US to employ a gender perspective that is responsive to their needs for protection and rights, particularly in asylum and refugee cases. In this context, 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 platforms and networks.

GIVING VOICE TO CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

Multiple civil society organizations and alliances are engaged in efforts to address challenges facing migrants, returnees, and would-be migrants. Their knowledge of on-the-ground realities is vital in the development of a meaningful regional governance approach to migration that is based in human rights. Here are just a few:

Red Jesuita con Migrantes de Centroamérica y Norteamérica (RJM):[82] Created in 2000, RJM prioritizes accompaniment and advocacy concerning migrant fluxes from Central America and Mexico, especially for those most vulnerable. RJM also works to address structural causes of forced displacement. RJM was established by Jesuit-based organizations in Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, Mexico, USA and Canada, with a strong network for humanitarian aid and human rights advocacy.

Mesa Nacional para las Migraciones (MENAMIG): MENAMIG was established in 1999 and includes 14 civil society organizations and government institutions. MENAMIG provides information to migrant populations throughout Guatemala, and coordinates with organizations in Mexico, Honduras, and El Salvador.

Alianza Americas:[83] This civil society alliance includes Latin-American and Caribbean migrant organizations. Alianza Americas facilitates dialogue, promotes human rights for migrants in transit and at destination, and advocates for migratory reform. With an established record of coordinating transnational initiatives in Mexico, the alliance has begun to extend its work in El Salvador and Guatemala. The alliance was established in 2004 and is based in Chicago.

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