Girls in Youth Gangs in Central America

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Abstract

Youth gangs, so-called Maras, in Central America have for a long time been one of the major factors contributing to the great amount of organized crime and violence in the Central American countries. The citizens in this region are exposed to violence and other crimes from the gangs on a daily basis. The vast amount of teens joining but also being forced to join the gangs is due to the high levels of poverty in the countries. Becoming a member in a gang is often seen as the only option to make a living.

The study focuses on three countries in Central America: El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. The reason why the author chose these three countries is because they are the ones with the highest youth gang activity in the region as well as the ones who have faced and still are facing high levels of violence and corruption. They have all faced political, economic, and social challenges after civil wars and increasing drug trafficking in the region. The method used in the study is qualitative through an analysis of secondary sources on young women in youth gangs. The material is analyzed from a gender perspective and also power and social control theory.

The maras mainly recruit teen boys, but also young girls and women. Teen girls are in some cases forced to join the gangs but many times they join the gangs as self-protection from other local maras. The young girls are used for different tasks and duties while in the gang, but also face abuse by being taken advantage of in a male dominated environment.

The essay focuses on the role of young women in gangs. The research questions are: why the young girls join the gangs? What are their roles in the gangs? Are their roles differentiate to the mens? It is important to observe how the youth gangs function, reflect the patriarchal structures of society in general which has created differences between the sexes where males are seen as superior to females, which also is evident in criminal youth gangs.

The essay shows that the main reasons why young women join gangs are because they are looking for a safe environment due to lacking support and safety at home. The young women’s roles in the gang differentiate from the men in the way that they are assigned tasks according to
traditional gender roles where the women are expected to do domestic tasks and excluded from some of the gang activities because of their gender.

Keywords: Girls, Youth Gangs, Central America, Violence, Gender, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras
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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

In Central America there is an ongoing battle with state corruption, poverty and social inequalities, but also the great amount of organized crime in the region. Central America has the highest homicide rate in Latin America (Rodgers 2009:2). The criminal youth gangs, in the Spanish language are referred to as maras and pandillas, have a very powerful role in communities and cities, creating and spreading fear with their dominant and dangerous behavior wherever they are located. The tremendous amount of fear and impact the youth gangs have made in the different areas, have caused them to be able to create new “laws” and rules in their own territories and manipulate the citizens to get what they want. The local citizens have to obey the gangs’ rules and commandments to avoid future consequences. If one confronts or interferes in the gangs’ activities or disobey their unofficial rules, the consequences can be deadly. The people who are most affected by youth gangs are the working and middle class, mostly people living in conditions of poverty. Meanwhile, the upper class often live in gated communities with security and guards that keeps them from being exposed to the gangs (CNN Brice 2011).

According to previous research and experts in the field, these three countries have also been a center of attention for the past decades for their political conflicts. The political chaos has created an ongoing battle between social classes due to inequalities in society (Elliot 2009:6). The economical struggle for many living in poverty takes a great toll in their personal lives in different ways and in these countries the majority of the citizens do live in poverty (ibid). People living in poverty and tougher neighborhoods have been faced with discrimination and disappointment from political institutions and the state. This leaves many citizens with a lack of trust towards the state, taking matters into their own hands. For example, as citizens lack support from the state and high rates of unemployment, many seek income in different and sometimes illegal ways (ibid).

The upper class elites live a very different life compared to the other classes, which causes them to not experience the seriousness of the problem with youth gangs, distancing themselves from the problem (CNN, Brice 2011).

There is an ongoing war between the different gangs in the three countries also involving the drug trade. In the violent confrontations of the gangs, regular citizens can become innocent victims caught between the bullets. However, the main targets for the youth gangs are often other young gang members (Salama 2008:12-22 and Lesser 2006:204). The rivalry between the different gangs has made the rest of the society, who are not gang members, be exposed and victims of something they are not part of.
Many researchers and studies affirm that overall in Latin America most of the societies have a patriarchal way of thinking and behaving, and women are not being taken in consideration as much as men. For women it is especially hard living in a male-dominated and patriarchal society. Women are expected to work and provide for the family, but also keep taking care of the household.

The dictionary’s definition of “patriarchal” is “a characteristic of a form of social organization in which the male is the family head and title is traced through the male line” (definition taken from the Dictionary). Another way to explain what a patriarchal society is, can be the one by explained by Hunnicutt, were she stated “social arrangements that privilege males, where men as a group dominate women as a group, both structurally and ideologically—hierarchical arrangements that manifest in varieties across history and social space.” (Hunnicutt 2009:5). Patriarchy can be viewed in different ways, it can be seen from a macro level which includes areas such as religion, laws and government and on a micro level focuses on areas like families, relations, and organization (ibid).

1.2 Research Questions and Objectives

This essay will focus on young women in illegal youth gangs in three specific countries in Central America: El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. The reason why the research will focus on these three countries is because they are the ones that are most affected by illegal youth gangs and violence compared to the other countries of the region, which also have active gang activity and membership is decreasing in the rest of the Central American countries (ERIC 2004:17 and Millett 2015:213-227). These three countries have for an enduring time been known for their high levels of homicide, violence and poverty. The gangs are contributing to urgent public issues such as organized crime, violence and corruption (ibid:31 and ibid).

This research will be focusing especially on young women who are or have been youth gang members, their roles and experiences in the gangs. The objective of the research is to get a better understanding of young women in youth gangs and how their roles within the gang reflects the surrounding environment, family household and society.

Research Questions
The main questions that the research will be answering through the essay will be:
• Why do women join youth gangs Maras and Pandillas in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras?
• What are some of their roles in the gangs? Are their roles different from the men?
1.3 Disposition

The essay is divided into four different chapters. The first chapter introduction to the essay explaining the subject and objectives and how I, the author, am going to try and answer the research questions, it also explains my personal interest towards the subject. The research questions and the definition of the gender perspective, definitions of power and social control theory, and how the gender perspective and the theories are relevant to the research, along with the methodology, are part of the first chapter.

The second chapter is about the impact of youth gangs in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. The chapter is divided into four parts; 1. a general background on what the gangs do and who are the most likely to join the gangs, 2. the similarities and differences in gang activity and membership in the three countries. It is important to get a better understanding on how the youth gangs have such great control in the countries, by adding some statistics of the gangs’ activity, there is a clearer understanding of the similarities between the countries.

The third chapter focuses on the women in the youth gangs, understanding their wishes of joining the gangs, their family backgrounds and sexuality. In the third chapter I discuss the relevance of gender issues in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras in order to be able to understand the role of women in gangs.

1.4 Relevance of the study

The reason behind why I wanted to focus the study on young women in youth gangs in Central America is because the topic of women in gangs is not talked and written about in the same extent, compared to how much attention has been given to young boys and men in the illegal youth gangs. The men are the ones who are referred to when talking about youth gangs, leaving the women in the background, which can be a reflection of hierarchal positions in the gang and also reflects society in general (Sida 2008:42, 65-69). There is a vast amount of studies about men in gangs, but there is not the same amount of studies that are just about the women. In previous research about youth gangs there are often just a few pages or a paragraph about the women, explaining their roles and background. Therefore, I thought it would be interesting to research for information that focuses only on the women. As expected there was not as much information about them as there was for the male members. Being a woman myself, there is a great interest in this specific topic. Since I have lived and studied in Central America, it is clear that the impact that gangs have, in the three specific countries, is exceptionally serious and affects people and society to a high extent.
1.5 Methodology

Throughout the essay the research will be based on qualitative research. The reason why a qualitative method is suitable for this research is because it is more focused on the analysis of previous research. The previous research are findings and descriptions of young women in youth gangs, their roles and situation as women that cannot easily be quantified with numbers and data.

In this study I will be reading and analyzing previous research, studies and literature on the topic written and published by different authors and experts. I will not be able to do my own primary research, since I’m not specifically located in the specific countries and therefore will not be in contact with female gang members. Primary sources in this research would mean that one-self would have to gather information through interviews and local observations of women in youth gangs. Since it was not possible to travel, I had to work with secondary sources.

Most of the literature used focuses on the secondary source, focused on the specific subject of youth gangs, the challenges will be finding literature that specifies mainly on just the young women in youth gangs. Secondary sources are information and data gathered by other researchers in previous studies on the subject, who are located in the areas and gathered information through observations and communication (Bryman 2011:300). Through previous research done by others on the topic, it will hopefully answer my research questions through their findings on their own investigations. The most important secondary sources have been the authors Miller (2001), Hume (2007), Peterson (2010), Connell (2009), Schalet (2003) and Lesser (2006), because they analyze the issue through a gender perspective and use primary sources such as surveys and their own field work. Schalet 2003 and Miller 2001 were used to analyze the women’s roles and discrimination and tough conditions, the gender perspective specifically (Connell 2009 and Peterson 2010) and youth gangs in general (Hume 2007 and Lesser 2006).

Qualitative method also gives an understanding of social reality on its own terms, comprehensive description of human beings and their interactions in the natural situation. The researcher must therefore be close to the situation, observing, interviewing and analyzing the subject of research to get a better grasp of the topic. Another tradition in qualitative research is to have an understanding of how the social order is created and shaped through conversations and samples, it digs into the experiences and personal record on the specific topic on people's real life experiences (ibid:340-341).

To make it more clear, the qualitative research puts its emphasis on understanding the social reality on the basis of how the participants in a particular environment interprets this reality (ibid). Qualitative research
can be interpreted to some as an emotional way to research a topic, because it is the efforts that require you to show or restrain their emotions in order to demonstrate the scope and the facial expressions that create a desired inner state of the other people (ibid:349). Digging into the women’s lives in the gangs and family situation and get an understanding of their reality, can probably give a clearer understanding to why they have decided to join a youth gang.

Even though there are limitations when doing a qualitative research on the topic of women in youth gangs, however those limitations are not vast in the way that will affect the essay to a great extent. It is not a great limitation using previous research from other authors and investigations, since their findings are similar, and therefore can be analyzed to make a conclusion on the subject. Qualitative research and secondary sources is a great way to research on a subject when not being able to be there physically, because oneself can analyze the findings and read about different perspectives other researchers have on a specific topic, which is rewarding.

A little background information on the authors used in the gender perspective explanations starting with Peterson. V. Spike Peterson is a professor in the Department of political science in Arizona, and is an affiliate in the Department of Gender and Women Studies, institute for LGBT studies and international studies. The research used by Peterson in this research is called “Global Gender issues in the New Millennium”, from 2010, was used when analyzing the gender perspective in the theoretical framework. It goes in depth about what gender is and how it has changed throughout time, sexuality, feminist perspective, but also goes into detail about gender and world politics. It also touches the subject of how both international and nationally policy making, which is a gain for women, but also the achievements and setbacks women have had to be able to achieve the social equality and justice.

Raewyn Connell is an Australian sociologist who is also a professor at the University of Sydney, also known for work including social theory, gender relations, sexuality and is also an advisor to men and boys and masculinities to gender equality. The literature of Connell was also on gender, providing a clear understanding of gender and providing different examples where clear gender norms can be seen, as well as providing and citing other authors from different eras and how gender perspective has changed and grown throughout time. The specific book referred to is called “Gender, Introduction” from 2009. Connell was useful in this research in the area of gender perspective, it made it possible to explain as well as use the perspective during the research.

Jody Miller’s research was made in Ohio, USA, on young women in youth gangs there. Her report is called “Young women and gang violence; gender, street offending and violent victimization in gangs” from 2001.
The reason why I decided to still use Millers research, even though it was about young women in the U.S.A, I felt that it was relevant to women in general in youth gangs. Since there are bits of the research that analyses women and gender in general in youth gangs, it is later on when she interviews the young women, it is when it becomes more noticeable during her interviews with the women, that there is a difference. Her research was a great asset to this research since it describes the differences between the men and women in the gangs, their roles, and gender, how the women are victimized, early life, competition between the girls, sexual victimization but also the risks of joining a gang compared to not joining. Even though the research was not done in any of the three countries in Central America, but in the U.S.A., the information is still relevant to the topic. While reading the research it became noticeable that there living situations and backgrounds are similar to the young women in the three Central American countries.

Taryn Lesser’s research was used in my studies due to the fact that there are many different topics about other troublesome situations in Latin America which impact the countries greatly, such as emigration north, deportation, drug and human trafficking etc. that are contributing actors to social class division, inequality and social discrimination. The report is called “Intra-Caribbean Migration and the Conflict Nexus” from 2006. I consider that it is important to mention the fact that this book shows how society and globalization has had an effect on Latin America, in both negative and perhaps also in a positive way, the changes affects society and citizens have to adapt to new changes. The constant change is very important but also the countries past, will for a very long time, have its marks on people, therefore I believe that social theory is relevant in all the subject mentioned above. It also has sections on youth gangs and gang activity, how they are feared and what an impact they have made on the region. It gives an explanation on how poverty and exclusion in Latin America and the impact it has on the people, how the lack of assistance from authorities and government has created division and chaos in parts of the countries. The section goes into more detail on what the gang member actually do and how they use their profit and that through time they become more and more professionals in crime. This section in the book was a great help in my investigation, it covered very important details all the way from why they join, the origins of the gangs and how it ends for most members, but also how the society is dealing with corruption and injustice, police and military brutality.

Mo Hume’s article is about the situation in El Salvador, and how the state has tried to combat the issue of gang activity in the country. The specific article is called “Mano Dura: El Salvador responds to gangs, Development in Practice” from 2007. In researching the topic, Hume claimed that there is often a lot of attention on the negatives in the country, which is about the violence and crime rate in the country but also in general in Latin America, and writes that it is not often one talks about the things being
done in the countries to prevent the gang violence. Even though this article focuses on El Salvador, it was relevant for Guatemala and Honduras. The article goes in depth on how even though there has been an increase on the amount of gang members who are put inside prisons, there are innocent youths who are getting locked-in without any legal justice. Mano Duras method was created by a rightist government, and the methods used are questionable to the human rights, since it encourages the use of violence and force, and that many youth are incarcerated for years without any actual evidence towards them (Hume 2007:739). Hume argues that the youth gangs aren’t the main ones contributing to the violence in injustice in the countries. However she claims that, yes, they are a big part of it, there is a reason why the youths are forced to become delinquent, one being that the government, which is continuing the cycle of violence in their methods (ibid).

Amy Schalet research was also based in the U.S.A., but together with Millers research, it is also very relevant to my investigation. The article is called “Respecability and Anatomy – the articulation and meaning of sexuality among the girls in gangs” from 2003. Schalet goes more in depth about how society’s interpretations or belief on what a female youth gang member is. This research also focuses on the women’s sexuality, how people often interpret the women in the gangs as being sexual object to the men or believing that she is a tough woman who is “one of the men”, which some interpret as a lesbian woman. Schalet goes in more depth on how the women themselves feel about sexuality, how some women are seen as less worthy for being sexed-in the gangs, being looked down upon by the rest of the gang members. How many of the young women in the gangs have been exposed to sexuality at an early age and how that has had an effect on the women, but also the men. This research was relevant to the investigation to observe how women treat each other in the gang and how men treat them but also societies view on the women in the gangs. The sexuality and hierarchal dominance of the men in the gangs is also relevant in the gender perspective.

Since the research is focused on El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, there will be an overview on how the countries are mainly similar when it comes to the problem of youth gangs, even if there are minor differences between the countries. One interesting difference is the percentage of female members in youth gangs. An overall review of the gang situation in the countries will be a way for the reader to get a better understanding of the situation of each country.

1.6 Theoretical framework
1.6.1 Introduction

The theoretical framework will be touching on the perspective that will be used to understand the women in society, but most importantly for this topic, the women in youth gangs. The gender perspective is useful to
understand why women’s position in society and stigmatization has impacted the life of women, but also how the changes in society and patriarchy. The main authors to explain and analyze gender perspective are: Connell (2009) and Peterson (2010), however throughout the essay Schalet (2003) and Miller (2001) go in depth about the gender differences in the gangs. The theory’s that are going to be used are the power control theory and also the social control theory. Society has an impact on the beliefs and knowledge of the citizens, both in households and outside the household. The main researchers in this essay to explain what power control theory is and its arguments are: Singer (1988) and Heimer (1996). The social control theory is explained by the most famous researcher to the topic which is Hirschi, however the information about his research is taken from another researcher explaining Hirschis theory, which is Agnew (2006).

The gender perspective is appropriate for this study since it is focused on young women and the relationship between young women and men in youth gangs. It is also useful since these gangs are part of a patriarchal society. Power control theory and social control theory are relevant to the research since it also tackles the different gender roles in society, how society affect an individual, but how uprising in the households also contributes to a person’s future.

The sources used throughout the essay are from authors who have investigated in Latin America, such as the three countries in this study, others are located outside of the region, their research were also made in the U.S.A. Even though all the information that will be used in the theoretical area is not from Latin America, the information gathered from females in youth gangs and the different theories are relevant to the three Central American countries. The areas in the essay which are not directly from Central America, are the theoretical and method parts.

1.6.2 Gender perspective

According to Raewyn Connell, the gender perspective goes in depth, that being a man or woman is not a pre-determined state but instead it is a becoming, a condition actively under social construction (Connell 2009:3). A person is not born with the different gender roles, the roles are created in society, men are not born masculine, but instead become it, the same goes for women and femininity (ibid).

V. Spikes Peterson, who researches global gender issues, claims that there are characteristics associated with femininity and masculinity, and that depending on the culture, race, class and age group, there are different ways to interpret the meaning of the words (Peterson 2010:60). Men may be characterized as feminine and a woman might be characterized as masculine, whereas some would characterize the feminine male as a gay man, and the masculine female as a lesbian (ibid).
Peterson states that: “There is no official generic woman and man; our gender identities, loyalties, interests, and opportunities are affected by the countless dimensions of “difference”, and especially those associated with ethnicity, class and sexual identities. Acting like a “man” or a “woman” means different things to different groups of people (ibid).

The main principles for gender perspective are the questioning and investigations of the gender divisions of labor, ideologies of womanhood, strategies of change in gender relations, the institution of the family, criticizes society perspectives of gender (ibid:45). The gender perspective is also important and useful in the feminist thoughts.

1.6.3 Power control theory

Power control theory and gender perspective go along with each other since they criticize the differences between the genders in society as well as the way gender roles and norms are set in early life. Creating a more gender equal environment can have a great impact on the future life of someone but also the rest of society. Being brought up in a gender equal society is different compared to one that is not, for example comparing a more gender equal country to a country which is very patriarchal, there are noticeably different.

Power control theory’s main argument is that the relationship between gender and delinquency is connected to the power and control one is raised in, within the family (Singer 1988:627). Another argument for power control theory is: when arguing why women differentiate from males when it comes to delinquency, it comes from the parents, parents reproduce the gender inequalities in the labor markets and others, within their own families (Heimer 1996:40). The theory also states that the daughters in a household are more controlled than the sons while the sons are freer to leave the household and take more risk.

The patriarchal system and institutionalization of patriarchal ordering, for example positioning males as heads of the households or police and military authorities, have become normalized in social formations in some countries (Peterson 2010:66). Peterson also touches the subject of heterosexism, which is described as the belief in heterosexuality as the only “normal” mode of sexual orientation, in family life and social relations. When going through the power control theory, it was also be visible that it was referred to as heterosexual relations when explaining households.

The theory is divided into two categories of household representing two different outcomes on the way the children grow up to be. The first category is a patriarchal household, which consist of a father figure who has a great amount of control and authority and is the breadwinner while the mother in the family is unemployed and has no mayor authority in the
family, creating an unbalanced household (Singer 1988: 627-628). In the second category, the household shares an equal amount of authority, both parents work or share the amount of control, demonstrating that to the children, creates a balance in gender. When a household is balanced, egalitarian, meaning equal and democratic, opinions towards the control of the sons and daughter should succeed in the way of creating stability and equality between the two children, but also there should be less difference in the delinquent conduct (ibid).

1.6.4 Social control theory

Social control theory is mostly used in the field of criminology. This theory argues that the social environment can explain why a person becomes involved in delinquency. Hirschi has become one of the most famous researchers when using this theory to understand the causes behind delinquency. Hirschi argues that a person becomes involved in delinquency due to four main social connections, if one of the connections is not stable or present in a person’s life there is a higher risk of them becoming involved in delinquency (Agnew 2006:47). The different connections that are decisive in a person’s life are: (1) attachment, (2) commitment, (3) involvement and (4) belief (ibid). The way these four categories will be used throughout the essay will be noticeable when describing the common social backgrounds of youths in gangs. They are usually lacking at least one of the four social connections.

Through briefly explaining the different connections, one understands why these four connections are important in a person’s personal life. Attachment (1), which relates to affection and respect, are necessary features both towards others but also something one has to receive back. In a stable upbringing, the first ones to provide these connections are parents and other family members, teachers and friends (ibid). When someone has a lot of affection and care in their lives the risk of them becoming involved in illegal activities is less than someone who is lacking these social connections. One reason behind why those who have more affection become less likely to be involved in delinquency, is because they do not want to disappoint their loved ones, cause or expose them to any harm. For the next connection which is (2) commitment, Hirschi argues that when a person is involved in for example school or work, it becomes a motivation for a person, creating a reputation for oneself. If a person is lacking commitment to something, they are also in a higher risk of being involved in delinquency since they believe there will not be risks of losing anything. Thirdly, (3) involvement refers to different educational activities a person can be involved in, such as being invested in school or work, people who do their assignments are too busy and stable enough to not become a delinquent. Finally, (4) belief, in this case refers to that if someone agrees and believes that the society they are living in has proper and fair societal norms and values. If someone believes that there is inequality and that the laws are dysfunctional and should not be followed,
they are more likely to break the rules since they believe it is not correct and lack trust in society (ibid).

When one of the four connections above is missing, it affects someone in different ways. It can have a domino effect in the sense that if one becomes delinquent it affects family life which ends up affecting attachment, which also leads to lack of commitment to finishing school or whichever occupation they have. When there is a lack of motivation or not sufficient commitment from oneself to finish something or to succeed, then that leads to not having anything to believe in or anything to keep oneself occupied (ibid:48).

The theories will be used to analyze how the social inequalities and social norms, in the countries, have affected youth. The majority of the youths that join gangs have been affected by the lack of control and stability in society as well as in their own household. The majority of the youth come from a troubled household and in many cases they are school drop-outs. The desire to commit crime, according to social control theory, is due to the fact that the needs of a person are not being fulfilled, therefore the person has to fulfill them in other ways. Joining a gang become an option. By using these theories and perspective, which are: gender and power, social inequalities and the way the youths are brought up in the gangs. The theories will also be used to understand why youths decide to join gangs, which has to do with family background and social status, how the roles between men and women has to do with the gender norms and strong patriarchal belief and how it has affected women, but also the social aspects in society such as injustice and corruption, affecting society also.

1.7 Limitations

There are a few limitations that will be encountered during the research of this essay. One of them being the fact that I am not locally based in any of the three different countries, neither do I have personal contact with the different gangs. Another limitation is that I have not had any personal contact with different organizations working with the rehabilitated gang members to gain some personal experiences and stories from different gang members. Not using primary sources is another limitation.

Another major limitation is the fact that there are not many studies focusing on the role of women in gangs, while there is plenty of information on gangs in general. When analyzing articles, most of the information is on youth gangs in general or will be about the boys and young men in youth gangs.

The final chapter analyses the information gathered throughout the previous chapters and makes some conclusions regarding the research questions.
2. Youth gangs in Central America

2.1 Background information about youth gangs in Central America

It is estimated that there is a total of between 50,000 to 100,000 active gang members in Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala (ERIC 2004:31 and Millett 2015:216-222). Honduras is the country with the most active young gang members with an estimation of about 35,000, Honduras and Guatemala are the countries who currently are facing an increase of gang members, while the rest of the Central American countries are decreasing in gang membership (ibid:17-31 and ibid). Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama have an estimate of about 5,000 members each, which is a great difference compared to the three other countries (ibid, ibid). Honduras is the country with the most active young gang members with an estimation of about 35,000, Honduras and Guatemala are the countries who currently are facing an increase of gang members, while the rest of the Central American countries are decreasing in gang membership (ibid:17-31, ibid).

El Salvador was the first country which reacted to the major problem of gangs in the country. The reason was probably due to both the post-conflict situation after the civil war in combination with high migration to the U.S.A. and close contacts with youth gangs in Los Angeles and elsewhere (Millett 2015:216-222). Small neighborhood gangs controlled by kids and men who were survivors after the guerilla war in the country, these youths got together to establish the different gangs, their main goals were to establish order in their neighborhoods after the war, which later on spread to Honduras and Guatemala (ERIC 2004:279 and ibid). Youth join maras and pandillas to find a comfort that they haven’t experience in an early life. Many come from troubled families as well, domestic violence, drug abuse, lack of adults in the house, the loneliness of being at home, can push them out to seek acceptance and belonging somewhere else, finding other young people who are going through the same situation becomes a place of comfort and a refugee, having support and protection is a big factor in someone’s life (Lesser 2006:209-212). However some youths join a gang to be able to receive protection and personal safety, however it has been shown that they are actually in a higher risk of danger and death well in the gang than outside (SIDA 2008:14-15).

Most Central American countries have a tough social environment and inequality for youth, which leads the young people to search for the gangs for protection and income since the community and family has been unable to provide them this (ERIC 2004:277-278). Gaining respect in the community is satisfying since living in poverty and not being seen as “important” due to their social class and family background, comes with a lot of discrimination, by being someone feared by most in society, it is a
recognition to themselves, acting out in violence is the way they get to express frustration and discontent (Rodgers 2009:86).

In general, in a gang, the young members are faced with violence and vast amount of brutality both when doing their duties but also the social problems in the gang as well. Violence plays a great importance in the gang, violence is used to control the members to create fear and respect amongst each other, therefore there are strict rules and if broken, they make sure to punish the members (SIDA 2008:52). The most common punishment is a brutal beating from the rest of the gang inside a circle, which is referred to a “chequeo”, which translates to “check”, both men and women are punished with this method (SIDA 2008:52).

What perhaps is seen as something glamorized to be part of a gang, before actually becoming a member, can escalate to a lot of fear well in the gang, being faced with brutal environments and dangerous situations, and a high risk of being murdered at a young age. However, it is important to mention that the youth gangs spend a lot of their times in the houses with each other, they are not always out committing murder and other crimes. The members, other than dedicate themselves to illegal activities, spend most of their day trying to kill time through being with each other, playing, watching television, smoking and drinking etc. since they do not spend the whole day committing crimes or carrying out gang duties, it is not always full of action and deaths which is a common stereotype people have of youth gangs (ibid: 13).

It is hard for youth who are gang member to get out in the world if they do decide to leave or have an extra job on the side, their tough image facilitated by their tattoos and character means that society perceives them as a threat and seek to distance themselves from them, the communities deny them opportunities for rehabilitation and social inclusion (ibid: 14-15), which causes them to provide income in another ways such as robbery and selling drugs (ibid: 13). When they do have the chance to get a job, it is often jobs such as: selling clothes, carpentry, painting, brick-laying and small jobs in shops (ibid: 14).

Today however, the customs and norms of the gangs are changing, the gangs are not as motivated to create friendships and brotherhood and a place for belonging anymore, now they are more involved in the use of drugs and alcohol but most importantly the economic growth in the different gangs (Hume 2007:743). Recently there has been even more rivalry between the two biggest gangs, the different gangs were known for their activities, for example the MS13 was known for being the ones who would dominate and take care of the drug trade, while Barrio 18 would be the ones handling the extortions in the cities, then Barrio 18 wanted to be more involved in the drug trafficking creating conflicts with MS13 (InSightCrime 2015:39).
The amount of gang activity is massive in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, therefore the countries have had to receive international support to try to prevent the gangs from growing and gaining even more control. One of the helps from the outside is the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and other specialized police forces to try and solve the problem through different federal methods (Hume 2007:745). The international support can be seen as both something positive and negative. It is positive in the way that since the state and police in the countries have not been able to handle the gang violence, they have received outside input from more advanced police and investigation forces. It can be seen as negative in the way that the countries are being dependent on outside assistance and that this assistance lacks the knowledge of the specific situation in the country. Also, when asking for international assistance, the governments in the countries show that they cannot solve the problem by themselves.

Today there are problems in the countries with the incarcerated gang members. Many have argued that the prisons are not doing their jobs on making the prisoners lives hard when incarcerated, but instead they argue that many of the prisoners probably are living in better conditions in the prison compared to how they were living on the outside. The prisoners smuggle electronics, therefore they can still operate and make decisions in the gang while still being locked in. However, it is the higher ranked prisoners who have a high and more important position in the gang, they are the ones who are provided with the contrabands and luxuries in the prisons, the others prisoners are faced with overcrowded and unsanitary prisons (ibid).

2.2 Gang violence in El Salvador

El Salvador is the smallest country in Central America, with its small surface it is the most densely populated country, it has approximately 6 million citizens (Olate 2012:383). El Salvador borders Guatemala and Honduras, Guatemala in the north and Honduras to the east. El Salvador, together with Guatemala and Honduras, are referred to as the north triangle of violence, due to the highest murder and organized violence rate in the region (ibid:384).

The first Salvadoran youth gangs controlling neighborhoods were former guerrillas and demobilized soldiers, disappointed in their expectations for better living conditions and social recognition (Valencia 2008:93). During the civil war, there were many cases of torture, murder, rape and disappearances, which generated people victims of war, and has remained in the life of many Salvadorians which has created the culture of violence (Gaitan 2013:26).

Together the soldiers in El Salvador created the two different maras and pandillas, which today are the biggest gangs in the world. The two maras
who have the largest number of followers and members are the Mara Salvatrucha (MS13) and Mara Diesiocho also referred to as Barrio 18 (M18) which are also the biggest in Honduras and Guatemala, its most active members and their leaders belonged to Latino gangs in Los Angeles, the gangs are subdivided into local cliques (Valencia 2008:94). Like the rest of Central America, there are other local gangs but they are gradually disappearing and absorbed by the large gangs, causing the big gangs to become even bigger and more powerful and intimidating to the society (Valencia 2008:94).

From the beginning of gang activity until today, all Central American gangs have flourished under the protection and mercenary by the larger criminal networks like the different mafias and cartels in the region, the basis of this is the illegal drug trade. Central America spends about 75% of the cocaine entering the United States (ibid). The gangs have become true criminal, with well-established structures. Principally engaged in trafficking of arms and drugs, constitute transnational character grouping with its own codes and rules (ibid:92). Recently the maras have incorporated human trafficking as a way of income, which they can earn about 4,000 to 5,000 dollars per trip (ibid:94). The human trafficking usually comes from people caught by the gangs during the trip north to the United States, kidnapping the victims and extorting their families for money in exchange for their release.

In El Salvador, in the late 90s some 20,000 young people belonged to gangs, in the years 2000 there were approximately 30,000-35,000 with the new trend of young men and women, and by 2006 almost 40,000 (ibid). However, though El Salvador’s two primary gangs are portrayed by the mainstream media as the main factors contributing to high levels of crime and delinquency, gangs are estimated to have accounted for the less than third of the homicide and extortions in El Salvador in 2009 (Olate 2012:384).

Just like the other two countries, the Salvadoran government has launched several anti-gang policies also known as: Mano Dura in 2003, Super Mano Dura in 2004, Proscripción de Pandillas in 2010 (Olate 2012:385). It has had an effect on the violence in the countries both negatively but also positively. One of the negative consequences of these different approaches has been the increase on the incarcerated population especially gang members, which is positive but has also has created overcrowded prisons, creating harsh living conditions in the prisons (ibid). In 2012 officials statistics suggest that there are approximately 8,500 gang members in prison (ibid).

The judicial and prison system do not have the resources and institutional capacity to face the high demand produced by the implementation of the different approaches to stop gang activity, which makes overcrowded prisons a vast problem, creating irritation and frustration amongst the
inmates responding back negatively (ibid). Youth violence, delinquency, and gangs present serious challenges to Salvadoran society in terms of individual, family, and community well-being and national development (ibid:394).

2.3 Gang violence in Guatemala

Guatemala has a population of approximately 15 million citizens. Together with El Salvador and Honduras, the country is facing problems with high levels of organized crime and state corruption making them some of the world’s most dangerous countries (The Law Library of Congress 2012:1). Guatemala shares its northern border with Mexico, and south borders El Salvador and Honduras which exposes it to ongoing drug cartel wars. There is an estimate that there are about 8,000-14,000 gang members in Guatemala, however there are about 30,000 sympathizers of the gangs (GHRC 2011). Like in El Salvador and Honduras, the dominant gangs are the Mara Salvatrucha (MS13) and Barrio 18 (M18), which make up approximately 95% of the gangs in the country, and the other 5% are other smaller gangs (ibid). There are approximately 340 gangs in the country (The Law Library of Congress 2012:1-2).

Bordering Mexico, Guatemalan gangs cooperate with the cartels from Mexico, the cartel most visible in Guatemala is one from Mexico, which is called Zetas, who are mostly found in the northern parts of Guatemala, and they operate in about 75% of the country, increasing the violence (CNN, Brice 2011 and GHRC 2011). The drug cartels provide the gangs with weapons and drugs which they later on distribute and make profits, the cartels provide the gangs with the more advanced and the latest weapons (ibid). The gangs are not just involved in the drug trade, they are responsible for some of the robberies, abductions, extortions, money laundering, human trafficking, and the ongoing fight for territory with the other rival gangs in the country (ibid and ibid). During recent years, the cartels have been using gang members to perform different task such as extortion (GHRC 2011).

The easy access to weapons in the country also contributes to the high levels of violence. There are between 1.2 million to 1.8 million weapons in use in the country (CNN, Brice 2011). While there are approximately 22,000 police officers in Guatemala, and according to the UN Development Programme (UNDP) there are about 73 different security companies, which makes about 120,000 bodyguards and private security agents, but there are also 60 different gun shops (CNN, Brice 2011). In 2011 there were 5,681 homicides, which is approximately 39 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants (The Law Library of Congress 2012:2).

Guatemalan government argues that the Mano Dura has not proven to be sufficient help or has not shown good enough results to want to imply it in the country, but also question the way police operative since they are
corrupt and use violence such as killing (The Law Library of Congress 2012:1). Unlike El Salvador and Honduras, Guatemala has not yet passed any anti-gang policies as this is believed to be unconstitutional and ineffective.

The corrupt judicial system caused the country in 2010 to have 95% impunity (ibid:2). To try and reduce gang activity there are 4,000 troops wandering around in the streets in the more troubled neighborhoods (ibid).

2.4 Gang violence in Honduras

Honduras has a population of approximately eight million citizens. It has for consecutive years, since 2011, been given one of its biggest cities the title of being the murder capital of the world outside of a war zone, according to the Citizen Council for Public Security, Justice and Peace, with an estimate of about 6,000 murders a year (CCPJH 2013, The Guardian, Carroll 2010). According to the Violence Observatory at the National Autonomous University in Honduras (UNAH), the homicide rate for men between the ages of 20 and 30 is 270 per 100,000 (InSightCrime 2015:13-16). The UNAH has calculated that 18.5% of the crimes were interpersonal fights, 14.4% score setting, 6.7% were robberies, 3.7% soccer hooligans related, 2% extortions, and the rest of the 49.2% of the crimes were unsolved (InSightCrime 2015:13-16).

The violence in the country started increasing during the 80s and 90s, during the civil wars in El Salvador and Guatemala, but also when the gangs and others involved, started taking a bigger part in the drug trade from South America to the United States (The Guardian, Brodzinsky 2013). Today, about 80% of the cocaine from South America enters and passes through Honduras (The Guardian, Brodzinsky 2013).)

Besides high murder rates, Honduras faced political instability in 2009 when there was a political coup. The political instability lead to an increase in human rights violations (The Guardian Brodzinsky 2013). During that same time there was an increase in deportations of gang members from the jails in the United States back to Honduras, therefore the country was faced with political conflict but also the new deported gang members caused the gangs to increase their gang activities such as the drug market and the extortions increased (The Guardian, Brodzinsky 2013). Equal with El Salvador and Guatemala the government and police force have introduced different operations anti-gangs, to fight against the youth gangs to try and obtain control and safety in the countries. In Honduras between 1999 to 2014, the number of people who are incarcerated has grown by about 50%, and the country’s different prisons are at the point of overpopulation, the inmates inside the prison are mostly there with no official verdict, waiting for trial (InSightCrime 2015:6).
Honduras at the moment is facing difficulties with the huge amount of gang members who are incarcerated, the prisons are getting overpopulated, but the major problem is the fact that it is the prisoners inside who are controlling the prisons and the officials. The prisoners are running goods which are prohibited in prison, they receive mobiles, video games, weapons, drugs, food, etc. from the outside easily, since the officials are too afraid to restrict them (InSightCrime 2015:6-7).

The country has local police forces and militaries cruising around on the streets, but they are one of the roots to the problem, since many of the officers are corrupted, they contribute to the extortions, theft, but also kidnapping and murder of people, instead of creating safety they are also feared by the community, with very little trust from them (The Guardian, Brodzinsky 2013).

2.5 Summary

When comparing the three countries, they are similar in many ways. All three countries have for the last decade had political instability, especially in Guatemala and Honduras, causing great amount of social issues and frustration, the people most affected however are the working class and people living in poverty.

The political and social instability also affects the youth in these countries. It is harder for youth to obtain jobs, causing high unemployment rates among youths. When there is no financial income, there is more personal desperation and frustration, causing more violence (Frühling 2003:104). If the country has a violent political past the people only know how to act out in violence to get a message across since that is what they have seen in the past. Comparing the three countries to each other, the countries that are facing the most problems with the gangs seems to be Guatemala and Honduras, due to the vast amount of members but also the countries are as a result of political instability and social instability, and Guatemala sharing borders with Mexico, high levels of violence becomes awfully chaotic.

The youths who decide to join gangs are for the most part from rough backgrounds and tough neighborhoods in the big cities, often from areas which are forgotten or the institutions have distanced themselves from it due to the danger. There is little to no economic stability but also many of the teens come from abusive household. Joining a gang in the local area is an escape for these youths, fast money and companionship. However, the harsh living situation was perchance not expected before joining the gang. There is more exposure to danger and death inside the gang.
3. Girls in youth gangs

3.1 Girls in youth gangs in Central America

This part of the essay will focus on the young women who are becoming gang members, as well as their roles within the gangs. It has become more evident that the number of women in the gangs are noticeably increasing, (Valencia 2008:95). According to Esbensen and Heidensohn, women have become more violent and more crime orientated as gang members. However, this is not certain due to the fact women’s criminal statistics has not always been taken in consideration, as the women were not seen or heard in the same extent as the men (Esbensen 1999:33 and Heidensohn 2006:5).

According to a Sida study from 2008, the more dominant gangs, MS and M18, in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras have both men and women as members(Sida 2008:65-67) . There are gangs that only have male member, and even some with only female members, but these are small and uncommon (ibid). The female members are significantly less than the men, it is estimated that the woman are approximately 20-40% of the gangs (ibid:65). In El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras there is a difference in the estimation of how many female gang members there are. In Guatemala it is estimated that about 20% are female, in Honduras it is about 28% and finally in El Salvador it is estimated that 30% are females (ibid:66-68).

There are many stereotypes and judgments of the women who are gang members, the most common being either that the woman is a tomboy or a sex object for the male members (Esbensen 1999:28 and Dukes 2003:417). As mentioned in the theoretical section by Peterson and Miller, the interpretation or when some means “tomboy”, can be interpreted in different ways depending on the cultures etc.

The way the women in gangs are being treated inside the gang is under patriarchal standards, there is a hierarchy system in the sense that they stand “under” the males (Sida 2008:42, 65-69). Being treated differently and having rules that only can affect them for being women, there are also rules that women have to follow, but not the men. The difference can already be seen in the beginning of the gang affiliation, women, but not men, can be introduced to the gang in a way that males can not, which is by being “sexed-in”, which later on affects the way she is perceived in the gang.

Through Millers research, while interviewing young women in gangs, showed that sexual relations with multiple male members of the gang, increases their chances of mistreatments which lead to stigma , the stigma could extend to the other female members in general, creating sexual devaluation that all girls have to contend with (Miller 2001:445). The research also led to understanding that the stigma can lead to
ongoing mistreatment at the hands of other gang members, because gender constructions defined young women as weaker than young men, young women were often seen as lesser members of the gangs (ibid:446). In general women are not as active as the men are in the delinquent and organized crime area, they are not always allowed to participate in the activities that the men have in the gang (ibid:441). Girls are excluded from most of the economic criminal activity (Steffensmeier 1996:464).

Male members in previous research’s suggested that not only were girls excluded from planning of delinquent acts, but when girls unexpectedly showed up at the locations of a planned incident, it was frequently postponed (Miller 2001:433). The gender differences is so strong that it is believed that being involved or becoming involved in a gang, that there is a greater chance of being exposed to gender inequality, compared to not being in a gang (ibid).

Miller, through doing surveys with gangs members and researching gangs, reflected the following, of girls in gangs: “Girls exclusion from some gang crime may be framed as protective, but it also served to perpetuate the devaluation of female members as a less significant to the gang- not as tough, true or "down” for the gang as a male member” (ibid:443-444).

3.2 Roles and duties as female gang members in Central America

The life of a female gang member is different compared to a male member. She will be exposed to more threats and punishment from her own gang and have to deal with being controlled by the vast amount of men who are constantly watching over her. What perhaps was seen as something glamorous and empowering before joining the gang becomes different in the gang. The young women in the gangs, in the countries but also in the rest of the world, have different tasks compared to the men, divided in gender roles: seducing males, concealing weapons, and instigating fights between rival male gangs (Esbensen 1999:29). Women have occupied three different functions in the gangs: providing sexual company for gang members, working as collaborator and link to the outside world, and as a female bandit (Sida 2008:66).

The males in the gangs set the domestic tasks which are expected to be done by the women, such as: washing, cooking, cleaning and serving the men. If a woman refuses to do her tasks, she will be punished with violence which sometime can go to the extent of murdering her for not obeying (ibid:67-68).

When it comes to marriage of the gang members, in Central America most gangs suggest that it is permitted to marry someone outside the gang. However, this depends on what clique and gangs it is, because some strictly prohibit the marriage if it is not with another gang member (ibid). The women are expected to take responsibility for the babies born into the
gang and kids who are brought into the gangs. The female gangs members, in the Central American countries, say that it is usually the gangs which takes responsibility to provide for the baby, they unite together to provide for the babies needs and equally for the kids who are a little bit bigger (ibid:26-27). The women are important to the gangs since they are the ones who will be carrying hopeful future members, which is positive for them since that means that the gang will keep on growing and live through generations.

Even though the life of a female gang member is not an equal and positive experience, many do not see another way of living as many come from tough backgrounds and any escape from the past can be an accomplishment. Though young women in gangs in general, not just in the Central American countries, believed that they had traded unknown risks for known ones that victimization at the hands of a friends, or at least under specified conditions, was an alternative preferable to the potential of a random unknown victimization, meaning that they prefer to be mistreated by someone they know who is close to them compared to having a stranger mistreat them (Miller 2001:448). There is evidence that young women around the world, not just in Central America, turn to gangs as means of protecting themselves from violence and other problems in their families and from mistreatment at the hands of men in their lives (ibid:430).

3.3 Gender violence in society and youth gangs

Most, if not all, the young women who decide to join a gang come from a troubled background where there was no stability for her to feel secure and provided for. Just like the male members, the females for the most part grew up in low income communities, with lacking support from family and malfunctioning social and political institutions. Some girls around the world today continue to solve their problems related to gender, race, and class by joining a gang (Steffensmeier 1996: 463). Many of the young women in the gangs are living in poor neighborhoods, where violence is both extensive and a response to the oppressive conditions associated with inequality, segregation, and isolation in the society (Miller 2001:430-431).

Sexuality

Just like the male members, the females for the most part grew up in low income communities around the world, where in the absence of support from family and parents are often overworked or otherwise absent or lack of functioning social and political institutions, girls typically experience premature sexualization by boys and men who are often significantly older than they are (Schalet 2003:114 and Dukes 2003:419). A consequence of this is that girls come to see themselves in a sexual sense before they experience a more internal and self-generated interest in sexuality (ibid:}
The patriarchal society has created an image that a woman has to be or have the appearance of sexual purity, exclusivity, and virginity in order to attain the “good girl” status in Hispanic communities (ibid: 116-117). A female gangster is seen either as a tomboy or a sex object. The judgment of women in the gangs not only comes from the men, but is sometimes even harsher from the other women.

Young women in gangs decide to join gangs to solve their personal problems of gender, race and class (Steffensmeier 1996:463). In the gangs, there are constant judgments of the women, from both men and the women in the gangs, but there is harder critique from women by other women. Women’s sexuality in the gangs, confront tensions between establishing their independence from the men and their toughness and negotiating and accommodating norms regarding femininity (Schalet 2003:109). Theorist on gender argue if and how sexuality can be seen as a source of empowerment or victimization for women (ibid:112). Some argue that in the field of sexuality, women experience a great deal of violence and disempowerment, both physical and symbolic (ibid). On the other hand, it is argued that sexuality is potentially a powerful source of pleasure, self-knowledge and empowerment (ibid). The social world of adolescence is highly gendered, relationships increase in significance for youths, and this is magnified, especially for girls, self-consciousness and sensitivity to others perceptions of them (Miller 2001:431).

3.4 Violence against young women in the gangs in Central America

The male dominated gangs in Central America are notably tough with the women in the gang, by having brutal punishments if the woman challenges one of the males in the gang. The punishments are often very sexualized, for example by forcing multiple males on a woman. Sexual violence is used to punish a woman who disobeys the males in the gang or who does not fulfill her task in the gang (Hume 2007:742). The male members use sexual violence to demonstrate their aggressiveness and dominance as males. In cases of infidelity, only the women are punished. Men do not get punished for not completing domestic work and tasks, and women barely take part in the decision making on topics involving gang activity (Sida 2008:66). They are seen as weaker members of the gang, and seen as gossips on what goes on in the gang, but also outside in the local neighborhoods (ibid). Being seen as gossips can also be a gender discriminating opinion, since they believe that women only talk and cause trouble.

Unfortunately, the women in the gangs are often afraid to talk about the violence they face and it could be seen as a culture of silence when it comes to gender violence (ibid). Most of the women who have joined the gangs come from troubled backgrounds, and it is not unusual that they have experienced sexual abuse in the home. Previous research has shown that female gang members are likely to have experienced sexual abuse by
family members (Schalet 2003:114). Being sexually abused at a young age is a major factor for girls to join gangs as they seek out shelter and protection from the abuse in their homes, hoping that the new gang family will treat them differently (ibid). However, the gang turns to being another abusive environment.

The women in the gangs are also tough amongst each other, judging and looking down on the women who were introduced to the gangs by being “sexed-in”. Instead of uniting as women in the gangs, they compete with each other, and contribute to the abuse of the other women. Girls in the gangs actively spread double standards in the way that they are putting down other girls and labeling them. Girls who avoided being sexually abused when introduced to the gangs see themselves as more powerful and honorable, and as “one of the boys” (Schalet 2003:116). The way a young woman chooses to be introduced and officially becomes a member therefore affects how she is seen later on. However, not all women have the chance to choose the way they become members. The way she is introduced will be a big part of how the other members will perceive her in the future and the violence she will encounter in the gang (ibid:115).

3.5 Summary

To conclude this chapter, it is safe to say that a woman does not receive the proper care and protection from the gang she was expecting when she first joined. Since the gangs are male dominated, the rules and tasks the woman have to follow are almost always made according to traditional gender roles. Living in a country and region that is vastly patriarchal, women are often exposed to a great deal of judgment and constantly under surveillance from men, controlling their behavior and appearance. This is enhanced within the gang environment.

When a young woman does not follow the patriarchal views on how a woman should present herself, which involves a traditional and domestic role, she is faced with a vast amount of critique from society. At the same time there is a double standard, since the Latina woman has for a long time had the reputation of being “sexual and exotic”. The women are therefore often labeled as either completely pure or too sexual, there is not often an in-between. The majority of the women are searching for an escape from this pressure. Like male members, females also want to escape their poverty and in cases of abuse.

When joining a youth gang, which is lead and controlled by strong macho men, it is even tougher for young women to gain respect and trust from the men and not just be seen as just sexual objects. The life for the women in gangs is unfortunately very similar, if not much worse, than the life outside that they wanted to escape from.
4. Analysis and Conclusion

4.1 Analysis

4.1.1 Introduction

Analyzing the information obtained throughout the research, there is a better understanding on the specific topic of girls and young women who decide to join youth gangs. The norms in society and the way women are looked upon in a patriarchal society is one of the major impacts to some of the women being oppressed by men.

In the beginning of the research there were some limitations that were pointed out, such as the lack of studies on the specific subject. Even though this limitation was there, the research questions were still possible to answer. Overall the study was very educational and the topic, in general, was an interesting study. Since it is still an ongoing and major problem in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, the information and knowledge of women situation in youth gangs is very relevant.

Throughout the research, the theories and perspective used were: power and social control theory and gender perspective. During the research the theories were convenient in the way that, all the three countries are battling social inequality, high levels of poverty and the mistreatment of women and their roles in society and households.

4.1.2 Youth gangs, violence and crime

The gangs in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras are having a major impact in the countries youths by creating fear in society. The fear has caused some youths to join gang to feel more secure and “protected” by the gangs, which was mentioned previously in the text. Seeking protection and comfort is relatable to social control theory. The way safety is related to social control theory is in the way that feeling safe is a natural instinct that comes from us humans. Having for example a parent or a household which is stable can create a safety net for youths, however if a youth does not have someone or somewhere where they feel nurture and comfort they continue to seek it, which can lead to joining the gangs. The gangs are full of youths who are also seeking for an escape from previous abuse, together they have tried to create a safe place for other youths. Even though they have created trust and safety within each other everyone else in society goes unsafe.

Acting out in violence can also be related to a natural instinct, reacting in violence to protect oneself. Previously mentioned in the essay, when one of the four points in the social control theory is missing, it automatically affects the rest of the points. Acting out in violence can have a connection with the points of belief and commitment. When there has not been
affection from anyone in the life of youth anger and frustration can come naturally. The belief that there is no social justice or a youth that has been a witness to violence and impunity, the belief and trust towards the state is minimal leading to more frustration. If we relate violence with power control theory it would be that violence started and was seen by the kids in the house and therefore believe that it is something common or a way to resolve problems, and continue to use violence in their own social life.

4.1.3 Impunity and corruption

There is still an ongoing growth in gang membership in the three Central American countries, especially in Guatemala and Honduras, where the amount of gang members keeps increasing (ERIC 2004:17-31 and Millett 2015:216-222). Analyzing the factors to why there is an increase in the two countries, it is due to the high levels impunity and state corruption (ibid). If there is no urgent solution, the amount of violence and corruption will keep increasing affecting everybody in the countries, especially working and middle class. The mistrust in the institutions and governments is a lack of “belief” from the people. When people lack trust in the institutions due to the fact that they are corrupted, it creates frustration and chaos. When year after year the corruption keeps going, the working and middle class are the most affected since they are already struggling for example economically and safety. Therefore some from these two classes take matters into their own hands by committing crimes, protesting or being active in illegal activity to get a message across to the elites or simply be able to provide for their families. If we could relate corruption and class inequality with power control theory and gender perspective, it could perhaps be seen as the elite men or the “head” in society, have for a long time been the ones who are most seen in decision making in the countries, with a small percentage of women. The military and police fore are also dominated by males with conservative patriarchal views. The military in these three countries are present in the countries out in the streets and politics but are also involved in the crimes and murder of citizens (CNN Brice 2011, The Law Library of Congress 2012:1)

4.1.4 Drug trafficking

Being closely connected to Mexico and the United States, the countries are being affected by the drug trafficking from South America. To get to Mexico and the United States the drugs have to pass through the countries that are located just in the middle of the path to the north, which are El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. The Mexican cartels are cooperating with the local youth gangs for support, in exchange, the gangs get part of the incomes from the drugs and weapons. The drug cartels provide the gangs with weapons and drugs which they later on distribute, the cartels provide the gangs with more advanced as well as the latest weapons which has caused the gangs to become more advanced
and professional (CNN, Brice 2011). Amongst the three countries, Guatemala however is the one with the most presence of the Mexican cartels.

The gangs are not just involved in the drug trade business. To maintain the economic growth and profit they dedicate themselves to robberies, abductions, extortions, money laundering, human trafficking, and the ongoing fight for territory with the other rival gangs (CNN Brice 2011 and GHRC 2011).

During the last decades the structures and activities for the youth gangs have changed, before they were focused on the brotherhood and family like environments, while today they have orientated themselves to become more violent and use more extortion, but also becoming more involved in the use of drugs and alcohol. Most importantly is the economic growth in the different gangs (Hume 2007:743).

The history of civil wars with a lot of weapons and killings, also leading to high illegal migration to the U.S.A. during the wars and the post-conflict situation due to lack of opportunities, is one of the root which has caused the present violent and illegal youth gangs (Millet 2015:216-222). The U.S.A is also contributing with police forces to try and help the situation of the gang activities, as well as other countries with expert police forces (Hume 2007:745).

Since the majority of the youths in the gangs come from high levels of poverty, their ability to make “fast money” is something that can benefit the neighborhoods and family households. The local gangs protect their neighborhoods from other gangs in the areas, since they are protecting their local streets and the families who live there. While helping the neighborhood with local protection and some economical support, it is something positive in the short term, there are serious negative sides to the "fast money" they obtain from illegal activity. One of them being the fact that it is due to illegal activities, and the neighborhoods becomes more controlled by the gangs and organized crime.

Hume however argues that it is not just the youth gangs people should be blaming when it comes to the constant crime in the countries, but the government and police force are just as guilty. Being corrupted and performing methods to get rid of gang members in ways that are not reasonable, such as previously mentioned in the text, sustaining someone under arrest for just looking like a gang member without any evidence that proves that they actually are one.

I have used social control theory to point out and explain some of the reasons why youths decide to act out in violence due to injustice. The reason why the youths are acting out in violence is because they are not satisfied and pleased with the injustice and social inequalities in the
country. Acting out in a delinquent behavior is something that can come natural as a way of getting what they want. According to social control theory, when someone is missing safety, income, occupation and support from society, the person will try to get it, even though it is not always in the right way. Since most of the gang members come from unstable households with a low amount of affection and appreciation towards them, the rest of the gang becomes their “affection” and gain respect within the group. The lack of affection can also be noticeable in the way the gang members treat each other, it is a tough and harsh environments, and violence amongst each other is something common as seen in the research above. Living in conditions with a lot of violence creates a hard surface in someone’s life, when one is used to violence and injustice, seeing it every day, becomes something normal. Other than missing affection in their early lives, youth gang members are almost all school drop-outs, due to different reasons, one being economical, meaning that family was not able to pay for their education, the other reason is the decision to drop out to become a gang member.

Having no education, it becomes harder for the youths to obtain a job, not having a job affects their personal life. Not being able to provide for themselves also result in living under poor circumstances. As mentioned previously in the text, when a gang member does decide to leave a gang, the harsh reality hits them, in the way that not many people are willing to hire an ex-gang member due to fear (sida 2008:14-15). Social exclusion for the youths becomes frustrating, not having a job attracts the idea of earning money in any way possible to be able to provide for their families.

Analyzing the study through a power control theory, which argues that gender inequality starts from the household, being raised up in an equal and balanced household between the couples, creates an example for the children who later on grow up knowing that there should be equality between the genders. Growing up in a society and household that lacks gender equality affects the people living there, since it is something one is brought up with for years it has become normalized to think that either there should be gender inequality, or the belief that men and women should be treated differently. Throughout the text the gender norms is something that is set at an early age of the youths from the households and society. In a patriarchal society, and which has been patriarchal for many centuries, changing the views of people about gender roles would be hard, especially for patriarchal men, to change their behavior and thoughts about gender equality. If men and women were given the same opportunities in these societies, it would have a great positive impact in the countries. The power control theory and social control theory is visible in the youths life in the way that their personal needs, such as affection or occupation, is missing or that violence was taught at an early age either at home or is something that has become normalized in society. The social injustice in the countries, can be a reason to why some of the point from the social control theory are missing in the youths lives. Hirschi suggest
that it only takes the lack of one of the four point of the social theory, to cause frustration in someone’s life.

### 4.1.5 The gender perspective

The rivalry between the women in the gang can be an interpretation of the gender inequality, girls violence towards members is the result of the inequalities, the frustration they feel inside makes it hard for the girls to express their anger towards the men, and therefore take out the anger on the girls who are a little “under” them (Irwin 2008: 843).

The youth gangs are male dominated, with macho personalities, with the idea that a woman is delicate and should be someone to provide and assist for the men. Both the men and women, have lacked a male figure in the household or simply any positive male figure in their lives, the only male presence was abusive towards the rest of the family, acting out in violence is something that was perhaps seen as a way to resolve conflict or get someone’s attention (Frühling 2003:103). Not having the knowledge or simply not having the interest in resolving problems without violence can be hard for some of the youth male members since it is something that has been taught to them at an early age. Acting out in violence towards women is something they have caught on in the society and family households.

There are clear differences between what the women are forced to do compared to what the men do. The stereotypical gender roles also implies in the gangs, the women are the ones who mainly have to deal with the domestic jobs and taking care of the men, while the men are the ones controlling the women and being served. Gender perspective is relevant to the gender assigned tasks, being brought up with seeing gender difference in households and society, affect the inequality between the females and males in the gangs which becomes part of the power control theory also. Dividing the different task in the household, and outside the house, divides the genders, rather than uniting together to achieve equality or changing the gender roles and norms.

Through a gender perspective one can get a better understanding on how a patriarchal society has excluded women. This is especially important in areas where there is a lack of social and political institutions and a lack of opportunities. Besides the lack of help for young women who are living under abuse is limited, there are also more stigmatizations towards women.

### 4.1.6 Girls and young women in gangs in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.

The youth gangs are also very male dominated reflecting the patriarchal society. The majority of the youth gangs are formed by young men, it is a
very masculine and macho environment, and the recognition and acceptance from other male members is a very important aspect (Rodgers 2009:86-93). Nevertheless, there are also girls in the gangs, however the girls are not as many as the men, they also participate in the gang’s illegal activity, however are excluded from some of the activities (Miller 2001:441).

Women taking part of organized crime and violence can perhaps be seen as women taking more space and control in society compared to before. It could be one of the reasons why men, in some cases, are accepting women in their male dominated territory (Dukes 2003:416-417). However there is no clear evidence that women are more violent now or are participating more, since before the women’s arrests or criminal statistics weren’t taken in consideration as much as the men’s (Esbensen 1999:33 and Heidensohn 2006:5).

The three countries of the study; El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras have many similarities when it comes to the girls and young women in youth gangs but there is more women in the youth gangs of El Salvador and Honduras (30%) than in Guatemala (20%) (Sida 2008:66-68). The reason for this difference is hard to understand and there is nothing in the previous research that explain why there are less women in youth gangs in Guatemala. Still it is worth mentioning this difference between the three countries.

4.1.7 Different roles between women and male members

The superior lifestyle of being in a gang to gain more respect in the community is appealing, but in the gang being a girl or a young women equals rough living environments. Analyzing the roles and task that the women have in the gangs, the male dominant and macho structure is very clear since the women barely are part of the decision making and they are the ones who have to take care of the men and the living environments (Miller 2001:441). If a woman does get the approval of the males in the gang to be more “superior” than the rest of the girls, she won’t be more dominant than the males, and from a gender perspective it can be interpreted as that the men will not obey or take orders from a woman because that will make them weaker as a macho tough male.

The research above indicates that it will take a very long time before the mindsets of the young males and men in the gangs can become more accepting of the women in the gang as equals, as an equal potential to participate more in the gangs decision making and leadership roles.

As Miller and Schalet researched, the women in the gangs are prone to victimization from the male members but also the other women. They point out the fact that there is constant judgment of the young women, at home, in society, and in the gangs. There is constant pressure on the
young women. There is constant pressure and dominance from the rest of the gangs. Schalet point out that being exposed to sexualization at an early stage of a person’s life, affects them in the future, by being forced to conduct sexual acts as punishments can show the toughness and dominance of the males in the gangs to prove to the women that they are "above" them.

Power control theory points out that when a household is dominated by the male member of the house, the women are the ones who stay at home and take care of the household, while the males go out and provide for the families (Singer 1988:627-628). If the male presence in the household is violent or there is a clear difference between the genders, the children observe it and become custom to being the males who are the ones in charge. In the youth gang that is noticeable, since the women are controlled by the males.

4.2 Conclusion

By using gender perspective and power and social control theory, I have attempted to answer the research questions of this essay. Through doing research on the topics of youth gangs in the three Central American countries and more in depth about the women in the gangs, the research above has helped answer the research questions asked at the beginning of the essay. It was important to add background information about the youth gangs and their impact in the three different countries so that the reader can get a better overview on how serious the problem is. The focus of the research was to answer three major questions.

The research questions this essay wanted to answer were:
• Why do women join youth gangs Maras and Pandillas in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras?
• What are some of their roles in the gangs? Are their roles different from the men?

To answer the first question of why women do decide to join a gang, a simplified answer would be because they together with the male members, are looking for belonging, support and stability that they lack in their life outside the gang.

Living in a society where a woman is seen as a second class member in society, there will be a great deal of judgment and inequality because of her gender. The majority of women who joins a gang, came from an abusive household, whether it is physical or physiological abuse, therefore getting together with other women and young men who also come from abusive environments seems to be something positive, a group that will supposedly provide comfort and safety.
Another reason why they are in the gangs can be the fact that they are together with a gang member or have a child with a gang member which automatically makes her associated to the gang. There is disappointment when there is constant abuse towards the women inside the gang also, therefore the constant abuse continues outside the home. There is also competition between the women in the gangs. Constant abuse from male but also from other female is quite common. The conclusion is that women join youth gangs Maras and Pandillas to find protection, social acceptance, trust and friendship, but the life in the youth gang many times seems to be tougher than the previous experiences they have of violence and abuse outside the gangs. Therefore, it is not a solution, but there are few alternatives for girls and young women living in poverty and tougher neighborhoods. This is probably the reason why so many girls and young women become members in youth gangs.

The second question was about the women’s roles in the gangs and if their roles are different from the males, the answer to the last question would be that their roles are very different to the males. The roles the women are assigned to in the gangs are often the domestic ones, for example the cooking and cleaning, but there are cases were they are allowed to participate in the illegal activities, however not to the great extent as male members. Traditional gender roles remain the same in this sense, the men go outside to work while the women stay home and take care of the household.

The conclusion is that the roles that women have in the gangs are similar to the roles women have in the general society. The patriarchal structures are the same in the gangs as in the general society, but made worse by more abuse and violence. Meanwhile, even if the main roles of women is in gangs is tradition, such as doing domestic tasks and serving the male members, to the outside (non-gang world) they can be perceived as tougher, dangerous and intimidating.

4.3 Possibilities for future research

Since this study has been done through literature studies and therefore built on secondary sources it has its limitations. For further knowledge and understanding it would be necessary to conduct in-depth interviews with female gang members. Even if the difficulties to visit these countries due to distance, time or security reasons could be solved, it would be even more challenging to get in contact with the women in gangs. Getting in contact with organizations that work with rehabilitation of former youth gang members would be a suitable way and possible solution to get more insight information.

Another difficulty and limitation during the research was to find information that was just about the women in youth gangs. There are loads of articles and books on the men in youth gangs, but there is just a
few on just the women in the gangs. A theory of why there is limited access to information or research about the women in gangs is probably because they are harder to reach out too, due to the fact that the men are the ones who handle the interviews and reports to represent the gangs, and probably not very accepting of the women talking to researchers or media. It should be interesting to continue the studies and include the possibility to interview women members in youth gangs in these three countries; El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.
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