

# Children Who Survived: An Examination of the Effects of and Responses to Armed Conflict in Guatemala and El Salvador

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**CHILDREN WHO SURVIVED:**  
**An Examination of the Effects of and Responses**  
**to Armed Conflict in Guatemala and El Salvador**

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## **Introduction**



In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, conflicts in Latin America between government armies and guerrilla groups escalated into devastating civil wars. During these wars, the armed forces frequently classified children as enemy targets. This paper will discuss the civil wars waged in Guatemala from the 1960s to 1996, and in El Salvador, between the years of 1979 to 1992. Similarities and differences between the conflicts in these two nations will be examined to explore the use of violence against children in Latin America, including how they were tortured, killed and forced to join guerilla or government forces. An analysis of these two wars reveals the government and army's intention to destroy community, trust, culture, and every aspect of normal life.

## Chapter 1



### Background

#### Guatemala

The civil war in Guatemala represents one of the worst tragedies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with approximately 200,000 killed and upwards of 40,000 disappeared.<sup>1</sup> Analyses confirm multiple sources of this conflict including the socio-economic discrimination and racism practiced against the Mayans, or indigenous peoples of Guatemala, and other poor peasants. In the 1960s middle-class intellectuals and students formed the Partido Guatemalteco del Trabajo (PGT - Guatemalan Labor Party) and began an insurrection against the dominant and repressive military-controlled government. These guerilla groups emerged in response to the government's lack of respect for human rights, and refusal to implement liberal economic reforms. In response to demonstrations by this group the army, aided by the United States, launched a brutal campaign to stop the uprising.<sup>2</sup> Guatemala's army crushed the rebels with excessive force as the guerrilla groups never had the military potential to pose an imminent threat to the State.<sup>3</sup>

In Guatemala the UN negotiated Peace Accords, which ended the civil war on December 29, 1996, established the Historical Clarification Commission (Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico, CEH) to investigate the conflict and the human rights

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<sup>1</sup> Guatemala Memory of Silence, Report of the Commission for Historical Clarification Conclusions and Recommendations, 17.

<sup>2</sup> "Guatemala." *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

<<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/701217/Guatemala>>. March 4 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Guatemala Memory of Silence, 22.

violations that had occurred. The Commission sought to disseminate the facts in “hope[s] that truth would lead to reconciliation . . . truth is of benefit to everyone, both victims and transgressors”.<sup>4</sup> The CEH investigated the history of Guatemala in order to aid the nation in its efforts to restore and enhance social, political and economic order. Many argued that the lasting effects of the gross violations of human rights, especially the genocide against the Mayan population, would hinder the progress of Guatemala towards democracy, peace, and prosperity. The details and impact of the CEH and other truth commissions will be discussed later in this paper.

The Commission for Historical Clarification charged the Guatemalan State with genocide, arguing that the state had responsibility for 93% of all human rights violations and acts of violence, and the guerrilla forces had responsibility for 3% of such violations.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, the commission found that, 83.33% of victims from 1962 to 1996 were of Mayan ethnicity.<sup>6</sup> The evidence found by the Commission establishes the fact that the Guatemalan State committed acts of violence against the excluded, the poor, and especially the Mayans. According to the data compiled by the Recovery of Historical Memory Project (REMHI), a project of the Catholic Church and Archdiocese of Guatemala, the government-controlled army committed human rights violations against around 47,004 victims, almost 90% of the total.<sup>7</sup> These numbers are staggering, especially when one considers the enormous disparity between accountability for

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<sup>4</sup> Guatemala Memory of Silence, 12.

<sup>5</sup> Guatemala Memory of Silence, 86.

<sup>6</sup> Guatemala Memory of Silence, 85.

<sup>7</sup> Guatemala Never Again!, Recovery of Historical Memory Project The Official Report of the Human Rights Office, Archdiocese of Guatemala, 290.

destruction involving the army and that concerning the guerrilla groups.<sup>8</sup> The vast majority of victims were not combatants in guerrilla groups, but civilians. During the civil war the Guatemalan army used indiscriminate violence against indigenous children as part of a carefully designed strategy to defeat the guerrilla forces. The CEH documents that “large numbers of children were among the direct victims of arbitrary execution, forced disappearance, torture, rape, and other violations of their fundamental rights”.<sup>9</sup>

To understand the conflict in Guatemala and its effects one must pause briefly to describe the majority population, the Maya community. Mayan culture has many important traditions such as worship of one god whose entity is the sun, respect of nature and rejection of technology and other forms of modernization.<sup>10</sup> As essential aspects of Mayan culture, family and community foster a strong sense of obligation and commitment to others and to a common good.<sup>11</sup> Resistance to progress and attachment to community will prove important in this paper’s review of recovery efforts in post-conflict Guatemalan society. *Ladinos*, or wealthy landowners, discriminated against and abused the Mayans, using them as a source of cheap labor and repressing their culture.<sup>12</sup> One Mayan ethnic and linguistic group, the Quiché suffered 45.52% of human rights violations and acts of violence during the civil war.<sup>13</sup> Nobel Peace Prize winner and

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<sup>8</sup> Guatemala Memory of Silence, 86.

<sup>9</sup> Guatemala Memory of Silence, 23.

<sup>10</sup> Rigoberta Menchú, and Elisabeth Burgos-Debray. *I, Rigoberta Menchú: an Indian Woman in Guatemala*, 57.

<sup>11</sup> Guatemala Never Again!, 42.

<sup>12</sup> Rigoberta Menchú, and Elisabeth Burgos-Debray. *I, Rigoberta Menchú: an Indian Woman in Guatemala*, 25.

<sup>13</sup> Guatemala Memory of Silence, 84.

political activist, Rigoberta Menchú, is of the Quiché ethnic group. Her life and contributions to Guatemala will be discussed later in this paper.

In total the conflict in Guatemala left over 100,000 children orphaned.<sup>14</sup> Children were not part of the threat posed by the guerrilla movement; they became victims as part of the army's efforts to destroy the traditions, values, and practices of the Mayan communities. Guatemala: Never Again!, the Recovery of Historical Memory Project of the Archdiocese of Guatemala describes how, "soldiers or patrollers frequently refer to the killing of children as a way of eliminating the possibility of rebuilding the community and of circumventing the victims' efforts to attain justice".<sup>15</sup> This substantiates the claim that Guatemalan leaders decided to wage a genocidal assault on the indigenous communities of their nation. By killing children the army was attempting to carry out its goal of eradicating aspects of the Mayan communities' culture and limiting any chance at collective recovery.

A strategy employed by the Guatemalan army which aimed to create substantial losses for future generations was the "scorched-earth" policy. By destroying the land and crops of the Mayan people, the Guatemalan army devastated their primary means of survival. Fire has symbolic value and some Maya believe that "the burning of everyday objects linked to human life also destroys their *mwel* or *dioxil*, the principle underlying the continuity of life, among other things".<sup>16</sup> Destroying material resources was also an indirect manner of causing harm to children because it destroyed their future sources of

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<sup>14</sup> Bazy Derrill, Cultural Survival, "Guatemalan Refugee Children: Conditions in Chiapas", 14 April 2010, <http://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/guatemala.html>, 1.

<sup>15</sup> Guatemala Never Again!, 31.

<sup>16</sup> Guatemala Never Again!, 40.



food and income. This demonstrates how the Guatemalan State in its efforts to defeat the guerrilla enemy also attempted to, “destroy the cultural values that ensured cohesion and collective action in Mayan communities”.<sup>17</sup>

One of the many horrifying examples of brutal treatment of children by the Guatemalan army occurred in March of 1982 at Río Negro, Baja Verapaz, an area of where a total of 28 massacres were carried out over the length of the war.<sup>18</sup> The army and the Patrulleros de Autodefensa Civil (PACs), the local civilian defense patrols, murdered approximately 70 women and 107 children, in an act of mass destruction against the indigenous population. After committing the massacre, the soldiers celebrated with a party and made the survivors listen and watch. Eighteen survivors were forced to live for two years with the same military who murdered their family and neighbors. The soldiers forced the children living with them to work doing domestic and agricultural jobs. While it was typical for young children in rural Guatemala to go to work for their families due to economic need, the jobs that the children were forced to do for the soldiers were extremely difficult for their age. The children were treated very poorly, often being punished physically and fed improperly.

In addition to the physical damage done to the children by forcing them to perform difficult jobs and treating them cruelly, the military inflicted psychological suffering by forcing them to serve their parents’ executioners. The soldiers sought to provoke feelings of guilt in the children and negative thoughts about their parents. These children continued to be affected psychologically even after they were returned to their

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<sup>17</sup> Guatemala Never Again!, 23.

<sup>18</sup> Guatemala Memory of Silence, 83.

families.<sup>19</sup> Sustained threats made it almost impossible for the children to live without fear of the soldiers returning to kill them or their loved ones. Some of the children were babies when taken away, and were not even sure of the true identity of their parents. This was especially difficult for those children who were forced to change their last name to that of the military or PAC officer with whom they lived.<sup>20</sup> It is very probable that the massacre these children witnessed, and the kidnapping that followed altered the development of their personality and identity.<sup>21</sup>

According to the CEH, these unjust acts by the Guatemalan army constituted a violation of the rights of the children to know their family and their community. These are universal rights guaranteed by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which will be discussed later in this paper. Furthermore, “the state of Guatemala infringed their obligation to protect the child civil population during the armed confrontation, did not adopt measures to assure the family and social reintegration of the many child victims of massive human rights violations”.<sup>22</sup> The process of national recovery in Guatemala must take into account the physical and potential psychological trauma inflicted on Guatemalan children from events such as the massacre at Río Negro and the subsequent failure to adequately treat survivors.

Massacres such as the ones that took place at Río Negro display the lack of respect on the part of the Guatemalan army for the lives of indigenous peoples. The fact that the victims were unarmed, innocent women and children confirms the conclusions

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<sup>19</sup> Guatemala: Memoria del Silencio, “Caso Ilustrativo No. 14”, Anexo 1: Volumen 1, 29 March 2010, <http://shr.aaas.org/guatemala/ceh/mds/spanish/anexo1/vol1/no14.html>, 6.

<sup>20</sup> Guatemala: Memoria del Silencio, “Caso Ilustrativo No. 14”, 4.

<sup>21</sup> Guatemala: Memoria del Silencio, “Caso Ilustrativo No. 14”, 7.

<sup>22</sup> Guatemala: Memoria del Silencio, “Caso Ilustrativo No. 14”, 7. Translation by author.

of those who argue that the principal objective of the military was to eliminate all elements of the community. This brutal treatment of the youngest and least directly involved reveals the terrible level of violence that the conflict in Guatemala reached.

Beyond the actual physical violence, children faced other hardships as a result of struggles between the army and the guerrilla forces. Invasion of areas of Guatemala which were mainly occupied by Mayans led many to flee into exile in the mountains and into Mexico or points further north in order to escape persecution. The harsh conditions associated with these flights caused disease and death among children. Massive displacement of Mayan communities often led to family separation, which caused additional suffering for children. It was extremely difficult for small children to flee and many parents found it necessary to abandon their children in order to save themselves. The Archdiocese of Guatemala, in the book Never Again!, details a horrific scene that occurred in Santa Cruz, Verapaz in 1980 where people found babies hanging in cloths from trees.<sup>23</sup> Parents had fled and left their babies hanging in provisional hammocks where they often let them sleep.

As a result of the frequent attacks on communities, collective killings, and the government's "scorched-earth" policy, many people fled their homes and tried to escape to other areas. Out of a population of approximately 8.5 million, it is estimated that there were one million internal refugees, and over 200,000 children lost one or both parents.<sup>24</sup> Mexico provided a relatively safe refuge for those who fled, serving as a home for an

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<sup>23</sup> <sup>23</sup> Guatemala Never Again!, 35.

<sup>24</sup> Margarita B. Melville and M. Brinton Lykes. *Guatemalan Indian Children and the Sociocultural Effects of Government-Sponsored Terrorism*, 535.

estimated 150,000 refugees since 1980.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, 6,000 Guatemalans sought refuge in Belize, 1,000 in Honduras, and between 100,000 and 200,000 in the United States during the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>26</sup>

### **Civilian Self- Defense Patrols (PACs)**

A further important resource to the Guatemalan government's military force was the Civilian Self-defense Patrols (PACs), which had significant influence over the lives of rural Guatemalans. In the early 1980s, the military forced civilian men ages 16-60 living throughout the highlands to participate in PACs. Accurate statistics on the number of children under the age of 15 who participated in PACs are not available; however there are several cases of these abuses documented in the Truth Commission.<sup>27</sup> The purpose of the PACs was to, "ferret out guerrillas by serving as the army's forward line to draw guerrilla fire, as well as control the men who serve in its ranks".<sup>28</sup> The Peace Accord of 1996 demanded that all PACs disband and disarm.<sup>29</sup> However, memories of the civil war and PACs, "still shape perceptions, actions, and social relations . . . these are marked by fear, prejudice, and distrust, thereby creating important impediments for erasing the legacy of violence and building local democracy and civil society".<sup>30</sup>

In 2001 Simone Remijnse interviewed Guatemalans in Joyabaj, to gain an understanding of the role of PACs then and now. She took testimony from

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<sup>25</sup> Bazy Derrill, 1.

<sup>26</sup> Melville and Lykes, 535.

<sup>27</sup> Guatemala Memory of Silence, 27.

<sup>28</sup> Melville and Lykes, 536.

<sup>29</sup> Simone Remijnse. Remembering Civil Patrols in Joyabaj, Guatemala, 454.

<sup>30</sup> Simone Remijnse, 454.

approximately 50 people, both ladinos and indigenous, young and old, men and women. From her study it is clear that memories of past violence, and especially of the civil patrols, have significant implications for reconstruction of Guatemalan society.<sup>31</sup> Joyabaj is a municipality in the southern Quiché region, which experienced a frequent violence during the war. By creating the PACs the army was able to extend its reach into the countryside because, “besides acting as an information network for the military, they were also forced to take over military tasks as sweeping areas for guerrillas and attacking so-called subversive villages”.<sup>32</sup> It is known that members of the PACs, especially commanders, were involved in massacres and other human rights abuses.<sup>33</sup>

PACs were diverse, and differed depending on the region and the background to, function and level of military activity there. In general, the intensity of guerrilla influence in an area determined how extensive and powerful the civil patrol would be. Importantly, there was frequently violence between rival individual civil patrollers. After the creation of the PACs, “violent actions were no longer initiated mainly by the military to combat subversives, but used more and more by individual patrol commanders for their own purposes”.<sup>34</sup> Because all male civilians in a community were forced to serve in PACs, envy, or dislike of a person, or age-old land conflicts could result in violent actions by the PACs contributing to local violence.

Civil patrols in Joyabaj were closely connected with the military through existing relationships between important ladino families and the military prior to the civil war.

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<sup>31</sup> Simone Remijnse, 455.

<sup>32</sup> Simone Remijnse, 456.

<sup>33</sup> Simone Remijnse, 456.

<sup>34</sup> Simone Remijnse, 458.

As a result, when the guerrillas arrived the ladinos felt threatened and called on their ties with the military to request armed presence.<sup>35</sup> When Remijnse interviewed former PAC members they stressed the forced nature of these institutions and insisted they, “only obeyed orders from the military or civil patrol commander and whatever they did when patrolling, it was not of their choosing”.<sup>36</sup> Refusing to obey an order could result in punishment, death, or disappearance. Interestingly, former patrollers, “described their forced participation as merely being present, but not actively participating . . . in their stories it is almost always the others that are doing the burning or the killing”.<sup>37</sup> The abuse of power and excessive violence characteristic of the civil patrols is seen in the massacre in Xeabaj, an indigenous village north of the municipal capital of Joyabaj, where 500 patrollers killed between 50 and 200 men, women, and children.<sup>38</sup>

Viewpoints about the PACs varied greatly between individuals in Joyabaj. It is important to note that the justice system in Guatemala was and continues to be characterized by corruption, bribes and blackmail. For this reason, many people supported the creation of the PACs to keep order and security in the village: “they saw military action, including the installation of patrols as the only solution for and protection against a communist guerrilla threat”.<sup>39</sup> A large number of people did not remember or did not want to express their views on the PACs. As stated by Remijnse, “it seemed to be a case of social amnesia, not only denying the past but not even

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<sup>35</sup> Simone Remijnse, 460.

<sup>36</sup> Simone Remijnse, 462.

<sup>37</sup> Simone Remijnse, 463.

<sup>38</sup> Simone Remijnse, 463.

<sup>39</sup> Simone Remijnse, 456.

remembering it”.<sup>40</sup> Clearly, the past violence of the PACs has had lasting impact on peoples’ thoughts and behaviors.

Remijnse described three groups of thought among the individuals she interviewed. The first group has confidence that the PACs have been dismantled and disarmed and no longer have power or influence. In their minds’, these events happened a long time ago and things have changed since then.<sup>41</sup> A second group does not believe that PACs exist anymore, but acknowledges that certain individuals from them retain power in the community.<sup>42</sup> Lastly, there is a group that clearly has, “fear of the past and fear of getting into trouble when thinking or talking about this past”.<sup>43</sup> These people do not want to talk about the past and insist, “no quiero problemas”, I do not want problems.<sup>44</sup> Fear persists that the structure of the PACs is still intact and can be revived at will. This fear was stoked by the decisions of the National Reparations Process (PNR) to provide initial monetary reparations to those who participated in the PACs, funds distributed prior to those to victims or their families.<sup>45</sup>

According to Remijnse, “in many areas former patrol commanders still seem to wield a certain amount of individual power, or locals fear a possible revival of the civil patrols”.<sup>46</sup> Anxiety is a common theme where this type of violence occurred and there is lasting impact of old power relations. Notably, when perpetrators of violence were still

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<sup>40</sup> Simone Remijnse, 464.

<sup>41</sup> Simone Remijnse, 465.

<sup>42</sup> Simone Remijnse, 466.

<sup>43</sup> Simone Remijnse, 465.

<sup>44</sup> Simone Remijnse, 468.

<sup>45</sup> Lieselotte Viaene, *Life Is Priceless: Mayan Q’eqchi’ Voices on the Guatemalan National Reparations Program IJTJ (2010) 4(1): 4-25*, December 9, 2009 doi:10.1093/ijtj/ijp024

<sup>46</sup> Simone Remijnse, 454.

present in the town, no one spoke about them in their interviews.<sup>47</sup> From Remijnse's study we see that, "the continuation of social antagonism, fear, anxiety and distrust expresses itself in memories and continues to pose impediments to the reconstruction of society and the creation of new civil structures".<sup>48</sup> These social conditions pose particular challenges for youth seeking to incorporate themselves into local organizations and/or become productive adults.

Guatemalans who were children when the worst of the violations described here took place are now raising their own children in contexts of silence, fear and impunity. An important organization established to confront current problems of the Guatemalan government in dealing with criminal clandestine groups is the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG). These criminal groups have roots in military structures military structures that operated during the civil war and are still allowed to act with almost total impunity. CICIG works to "support, strengthen and assist Guatemalan institutions in identifying, investigating, prosecuting, and ultimately dismantling domestic illegal security apparatuses and clandestine security organizations".<sup>49</sup> Unfortunately, "Guatemalan institutions are unable to address this rampant violence due to lack of resources, intimidation, corruption and infiltration by illegal and clandestine security organizations".<sup>50</sup> Additional aspects of these post-conflict effects of Guatemala's war on children and youth are discussed below.

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<sup>47</sup> Simone Remijnse, 463.

<sup>48</sup> Simone Remijnse, 468.

<sup>49</sup> Andrew Hudson and Alexandra W. Taylor, "The International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala: A New Model for International Criminal Justice Mechanisms." *Journal of International Criminal Justice* Doi:10.1093/jicj/mqq003 8 (2010): 54.

<sup>50</sup> Hudson and Taylor, 56.



According to the CEH, forced complicity in civil patrols “deeply affected values and behavioural patterns, as violence became a normal method of confronting conflictive situations and promoted contempt for the lives of others”.<sup>51</sup> One possible consequence of this is the distrust of outside organizations trying to establish social development programs. It will take many years for the fears and prejudices based on the conflict of the past to disappear, but this is necessary for the modernization of a stable, prosperous nation. Further study of the effects of violence in Guatemala and elsewhere is needed to create long-lasting beneficial programs for recovery.

### **El Salvador:**

This paper will now analyze patterns of violence in another Latin American country. Similar to Guatemala, the civil war in El Salvador involved many uninvolved civilians and, unfortunately, children. Over 75,000 people died in this brutal conflict that lasted more than a decade.<sup>52</sup> Unlike Guatemala, this war did not include genocide of thousands of indigenous peoples. In this case, the Salvadoran government sought to eliminate a perceived communist threat from guerrilla organizations. The conflict in El Salvador was the second longest Central American civil war, after Guatemala’s.

In this war the national army fought against the Farabundo Martí Liberation Front (FMLN), an umbrella organization of five left-wing militias. Social inequalities existed amongst the population of El Salvador and political corruption left few options for members of the poorer class wishing to improve their situation. The conflict ended when the FMLN and government representatives negotiated and signed the Chapultepec

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<sup>51</sup> Guatemala Memory of Silence, 27.

<sup>52</sup> "History of El Salvador." *SalvAide Home Page*. Web. 01 May 2011.  
<http://www.salvaide.ca/elsalvador.html>.

Peace Accords on January 16, 1992. Effects of this terrible war were far-reaching and are felt today in the memories of the people, the halted development of the country, and ongoing violence.

In July of 1992 the United Nations initiated a Commission on the Truth for El Salvador in order to document and expose the atrocities and human rights violations that occurred during the civil war. The goal of the international community in establishing this Truth Commission was to provide a peacemaking strategy, prevent the repetition of this kind of violence and promote national reconciliation. According to the commission, summary killings accounted for 60% of human rights violations, followed by kidnapping (25%) and torture (20%). Of these violations, estimates are that the Salvadoran military committed 60%, military escorts and civil defense units 20%, death squads 10%, and the FMLN 5%.<sup>53</sup> The Commission determined that the army operated under the pretense of “national salvation” to commit heinous crimes against who they identified as political opponents, who they viewed collectively as subversives and enemies. However, similar to the Guatemalan government’s strategy, destroying communities became the primary means of defeating the guerrillas by cutting off their lifeline. As stated in the Truth Commission, “the victims were Salvadorans of all backgrounds and all social and economic classes, for in its blind cruelty violence leaves everyone equally defenseless”.<sup>54</sup> This led to indiscriminate killing of the peasant and urban populations, including children.

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<sup>53</sup> Report of the UN Truth Commission on El Salvador, 47.

<sup>54</sup> Report of the UN Truth Commission on El Salvador, 7.

One example of such gross violation of human rights was the December 10, 1981 massacre committed by the Salvadoran army in a town called El Mozote, in the northern Morazán region of the country. El Mozote, a small municipal center, was not a guerrilla stronghold, at least in part due to the presence of Protestant evangelical resistance. However, the Salvadoran army believed there was a strong guerrilla force and planned to send the Atlacatl Battalion, or Rapid Deployment Infantry Battalion (BIRI), trained and equipped in the United States, to crush it. Their plan, called Operation Rescue, has been described by Salvadoran military officials as a “hammer and anvil” strategy of pushing the guerrillas north and then attacking them with the strongest troops in the Army.<sup>55</sup> This plan was leaked from intelligence sources within the army to the director of *Radio Venceremos*, the underground radio network of the Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP) (one of the five member groups of the FMLN).<sup>56</sup>

The larger strategy referred to as La Limpieza, or the Cleanup, proposed that, “where the ‘infection’ of rebellion had taken hold it must be rooted out, ruthlessly and thoroughly”.<sup>57</sup> The military carefully calculated this strategy of “*quitarle el agua al pez*”, drain the civilian “water” from the guerrilla “fish”.<sup>58</sup> Lieutenant Colonel Domingo Monterrosa Barrios, commander in charge of the troops involved in El Mozote, believed that, “in this bloody war, in the red zones, there was really no such thing as a civilian”.<sup>59</sup> Salvadoran military officers during this time referred to areas where strong FMLN or communist influences had taken hold as “red zones”.

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<sup>55</sup> Mark Danner, The Massacre at El Mozote: a Parable of the Cold War. London: Granta, 2005, 21.

<sup>56</sup> Mark Danner, 21.

<sup>57</sup> Mark Danner, 26.

<sup>58</sup> Mark Danner, 44.

<sup>59</sup> Mark Danner, 41.

At the time of the massacre El Mozote provided shelter for numerous refugees from other towns in addition to its normal population. Villagers knew that the army had a large operation planned for the Morazán area, but were convinced it was safe to remain in the town. When the Army forces arrived in El Mozote they detained the men, women and children of the village in their houses and systematically executed over 200 people.<sup>60</sup> Drawing on testimonies from Salvadoran witnesses, scholar Leigh Binford wrote a collective history of the events surrounding the atrocity of the El Mozote massacre. Binford conducted interviews with survivors from the El Mozote area and analyzed Mark Danner's work on this topic as well as Raymond Bonner's article in the *New York Times*. According to his study, "the guards divided them into two groups: the men and older boys were driven into the church, while the women, girls, and young children of both sexes were interned in the vacant home of Alfredo Marquez, a local merchant who had left the town".<sup>61</sup> The troops violently beat the men of the village, questioned them and demanded information about the guerrillas. Next the soldiers, "selected out older girls and young women . . . raped them over the course of the next twelve to eighteen hours and then murdered them".<sup>62</sup>

The Truth Commission Report details that, "first the men were tortured and executed, then the women were executed, and lastly, the children".<sup>63</sup> Also, the Commission found that, "approximately 85% of the victims were children under 12

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<sup>60</sup> Report of the UN Truth Commission on El Salvador, 114.

<sup>61</sup> Leigh Binford, The El Mozote Massacre. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1996, 20.

<sup>62</sup> Leigh Binford, 21.

<sup>63</sup> Report of the UN Truth Commission on El Salvador, 131.

years of age . . . average age of the children was approximately six years”.<sup>64</sup> The 1992 exhumation of the remains at El Mozote by the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team provided a detailed and accurate analysis of the events that occurred over a decade before.<sup>65</sup> They concluded that, after the Army exterminated the population, they buried the victims in mass graves of over twenty bodies, or threw the bodies in houses and set fire to them.

Survivors requested help from the press and government of the United States and the United Nations in the hopes of mounting a strong propaganda campaign against the Army. Raymond Bonner, a reporter for the *New York Times*, published an article in 1982, shortly after the massacre took place, entitled “Massacre of Hundreds Reported in Salvador Village”. He conducted interviews with people living near El Mozote and “saw the charred skulls and bones of dozens of bodies under burned-out roofs, beams and shattered tiles”.<sup>66</sup> In response to this Salvadoran officials “began a counterattack . . . undermining the reports not by investigating the facts but by casting doubt on their source”.<sup>67</sup> The Salvadoran government insisted that the guerrillas fabricated a story of a massacre simply as propaganda. The Salvadoran government did not take any steps to investigate this massacre, despite protest from witnesses and nearby villagers who knew something awful had taken place. According to the Truth Commission report, “High

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<sup>64</sup> Report of the UN Truth Commission on El Salvador, 135.

<sup>65</sup> Mark Danner, 5.

<sup>66</sup> Raymond Bonner. "Massacre of Hundreds Reported in Salvador Village." *The New York Times* [New York] 27 Jan. 1982: *NYTimes.com*, 1.

<sup>67</sup> Mark Danner, 93.

Command took no steps to prevent the repetition of such acts or undertake any investigation”.<sup>68</sup>

The censoring and manipulative capacity of the Salvadoran government was powerful enough to discredit two eyewitnesses to the El Mozote massacre. Both of these survivors were interviewed by Bonner and quoted in his article. Rufina Amaya, a 38 year-old Salvadoran woman, lost her husband, 9 year old son and three daughters, ages five years, three years and eight months. Mrs. Amaya escaped when the soldiers were gathering women into groups and hid in some bushes where she could hear her son scream “Mama, they’re killing me”.<sup>69</sup> A fifteen year-old boy named Julio escaped the killings by running and hiding in a gulley when he first heard the soldiers approaching. Bonner portrayed the intense difficulties facing this child who lost his entire family saying, “he doesn’t know whether to attend the school for children that is operated by the guerrillas or learn to use a rifle”.<sup>70</sup> Massacres like El Mozote are devastating, and even more so when one considers the hundreds of children whose futures were cut off or destroyed.

The Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team discovery of shocking evidence of a mass murder ten years after its occurrence shows that most of the victims were minors. Exhumation of the remains determined that, “all but 7 of the 143 skeletons for which there was adequate skeletal material for sex and age estimations were identified as children and adolescents between the ages of 0 (newborn) and 16 years.”<sup>71</sup> All the

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<sup>68</sup> Report of the UN Truth Commission on El Salvador, 139.

<sup>69</sup> Raymond Bonner, 2.

<sup>70</sup> Raymond Bonner, 3.

<sup>71</sup> Leigh Binford, 129.

evidence found in the exhumation of the remains of El Mozote indicates a summary execution, not a confrontation between the military and guerrillas. The finding that, “the majority of the victims there were young children, the aged, and the infirm – those least interested in challenging the social order and least able to defend themselves” is of importance to the argument presented here.<sup>72</sup> Salvadoran officials could not justify their actions claiming that El Mozote had been a guerrilla camp and that the victims were FMLN combatants. Forensic evidence supported survivors’ claims that the El Mozote massacre was not a conflict between armed forces but a massacre of civilians and this is a serious violation of international humanitarian and human rights law.

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<sup>72</sup> Leigh Binford, 191.

## Chapter 2



### Psychosocial Effects of Armed Conflict

Identifying human rights violations and understanding the psychological impact of civil war on a nation's children is a first step towards recovery. Recognizing that the problems encountered by children in situations of war and trauma have multiple material and psychosocial effects is critical to transitions towards peace and rule of law. Several studies assert that, "children who have been affected by political violence have been found to have higher levels of insecurity and aggressiveness . . . and problems in developing and sustaining peer relationships".<sup>73</sup> High levels of anxiety have been linked to psychosomatic problems such as headaches, stomachaches, tics, asthma and behavioral issues.<sup>74</sup> Examining psychological theory deepens our understanding of the effects of violence and of the human capacity for survival. The consequence of not helping children deal with these issues may be socially costly and equally costly for transitional government and future peace building. Although still underrepresented, there is a growing literature on children and youth in war and, more specifically, on the psychological and social effects of war. This paper draws specifically on a subset of this work and limits itself to studies that include Guatemalan or Salvadoran children and youth. A review of the entire literature is beyond the scope of this paper.

#### Psychological effects of war

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<sup>73</sup> M. Brinton Lykes. Terror, silencing, and children: International multidisciplinary collaboration with Guatemala Maya communities, 6.

<sup>74</sup> Lykes, 7.



In 1996 psychologist Kenneth E. Miller published a report based on the study of Mayan children living in two refugee camps in Mexico. The fieldwork for his study took place from March to October of 1993, during which time the civil war in Guatemala continued. Participants in his research were indirect victims of violence in Guatemala, have fled their homes with their families as the conflict emerged in surrounding communities. Nonetheless, the civil war has had a profound impact in the lives which,

is evident in the recurrent images of senseless military violence that appear in children's drawings and stories of life in Guatemala . . . in the fear expressed by some children that Guatemalan soldiers might enter the camp at night and kill them, and it can be seen in the vocabulary of the children, who at a young age readily speak of such things as torture, massacres, and war.<sup>75</sup>

The large majority of these children had escaped the suffering that comes with losing a parent, experiencing or witnessing violence first-hand. Thus Miller argues that, a sense of stability is reflected in their lives in the camps, which are characterized by many aspects of the communities they fled including the presence of family and extended community members.

Miller's in-depth interviews with these reveal how growing up in this environment has affected their cognitive development. Of specific importance were the narratives formulated by the children to explain what happened in their home country of Guatemala and why they could not return. Knowledge of their past comes from discussions between their parents and other adults in the community, and from their teachers during social science lessons in school. Awareness of the severity of *la guerra*

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<sup>75</sup> Kenneth E. Miller, "The Effects of State Terrorism and Exile on Indigenous Guatemalan Refugee Children: a Mental Health Assessment and an Analysis of Children's Narratives", Child Development, Vol. 67, No.1, (Blackwell: 1996), 93.

and the trauma of *la salida* vary, usually depending on the openness of the parents in the home. According to Miller, “children expressed a common perception of the violence as a senselessly destructive phenomenon perpetuated by an inexplicably cruel army”.<sup>76</sup> He argues that the children’s understanding of the conflict in Guatemala centers on notions of injustice and state-sponsored violence.

Overall, Miller found no presence of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, depression, or any other serious mental illness among the children of the two refugee camps. A common negative impact felt by the children was fear that the Guatemalan army would invade their camps, or that they would be caught in the violence if their parents decided to return to their home country. The benefits of the social support the children receive from the family and community members is clear from the relatively successful manner in which they have been able to cope with the stress of such a difficult situation. Miller notes that “there is a resilience among the children that appears to reflect a fundamental capacity for survival and recuperation in their families and in the broader community in which they live”.<sup>77</sup> Not surprisingly, the advantages of having strong community and family relationships, as well as the opportunity to go to school, have benefited the children. Cases such as this provide hope for the future of Guatemala when some of these children could possibly play critical roles in the political and social reform of the nation. In fact, some of these refugee populations returned and the results of their reintegration were extremely complex and varied. It would be helpful for future studies to examine the role these children have played in their communities upon returning.

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<sup>76</sup> Miller, 102.

<sup>77</sup> Miller, 104.

For those less fortunate than these refugee children, that is, who are direct victims of war, psychologists Kenneth E. Miller and Lisa Rasco note that, “a critical factor mediating the impact of violence on children, particularly infants and younger children, is the extent to which acts of violence result in the loss or psychological incapacitation of their primary caretakers”.<sup>78</sup> This suggests that healing should focus on the family, with help offered not only for children, but for surviving parents or adult caretakers as well.<sup>79</sup> For children who witnessed massacres and the death of family and community members, there are generally two effects displayed. First, if the child is very young, or re-educated by the army, they distance themselves from the victims. The victim is converted into the “bad guy” in the situation and is seen to have deserved death because they are the enemy.

Alternatively, if the child does have a personal attachment to the victim, the effects become more complicated. In his book *Writings for a Liberation Psychology*, Ignacio Martín-Baró affirms that, “vicarious learning occurs . . . the punishment applied to the victim also serves as a modeled learning situation for the spectator”.<sup>80</sup> In many cases the child learns the value of violence as a means to achieve an end. This is one detrimental effect that Guatemalans must seek to rectify if they want a better future for their nation.

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<sup>78</sup> Kenneth E. Miller and Lisa M. Rasco, The Mental Health of Refugees: Ecological Approaches to Healing and Adaptation, “An Ecological Framework for Addressing the Mental Health Needs of Refugee Communities”, (Mahwah New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004), 13.

<sup>79</sup> Miller and Rasco, 16.

<sup>80</sup> Ignacio Martín-Baró, Writings for a Liberation Psychology, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 163.

One psychological effect that has had detrimental and prolonged consequences is the normalization of violence as a way of life. The Guatemalan civil war began in the 1960's and the official Peace Accords were not signed until 1996 and in El Salvador the civil war lasted over a decade. Despite the official declaration of peace and an end to hostilities, violence persists in both countries today. The psychological effects of this immensely prolonged period of hostilities are extensive. In some cases, as Martín-Baró observes, "repression produces a double incitement to aggression: there is an incitement in the frustration of the aspiration and then a new incitement in the frustration produced by the repressive violence".<sup>81</sup> Thus, repressive violence as a solution to conflict only serves to promote more violence. Continuation of conflict threatens the future of Guatemala and El Salvador as efforts to challenge this norm may be frustrated due to widespread impunity and can potentially decline and eventually disappear due to lack of success.

Pau Pérez-Sales, Spanish physician with extensive work in conflict and post-conflict zones, explores the concept of identity as a framework for understanding the impact of trauma on adolescents. He examines the violence of El Salvador, describing "broken identities, different ways of understanding the 'victim identity', the identities of trauma, the role of transitions, as well as identity dilemmas".<sup>82</sup> He defines identity as the "conscious or unconscious meaning that every person has of his own place in the world; it determines how one interacts in it, the meaning that one assigns to the subjective

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<sup>81</sup> Martín-Baró, 162.

<sup>82</sup> Pau Pérez-Sales. 2010. Identity and Trauma in Adolescents Within the Context of Political Violence: A Psychosocial and Communitarian View, 408.

groups of belonging, and the multiple roles that one plays in each of them”.<sup>83</sup>

Psychologist Erikson “believed that the establishment of a coherent sense of identity . . . is the chief psychosocial crisis of adolescence”.<sup>84</sup> Therefore, studies such as Pérez-Sales’ are particularly important because adolescence is a critical time in identity development, and youth are particularly vulnerable to multiple effects of trauma. As Pérez-Sales states, “traumas may become, especially when they occur in adolescence, the vital center of one’s meaning”.<sup>85</sup>

The identities of children and youth in Guatemala and El Salvador during these years of war were formed in violent and fearful contexts. As suggested above, trauma in adolescence can alter life’s meaning and, “cause a permanent transformation in the image one has of oneself”.<sup>86</sup> This can be especially problematic if a person views themselves as vulnerable. If this results, trauma can create, “relationships based on dependency, demand for help, compassion and complaint”.<sup>87</sup> On the other hand, “the identity centered in trauma, may also serve as [a] source of strength and vindication, providing one with a sense of being the author of one’s life”.<sup>88</sup> By giving a positive meaning to their traumatic experiences, youth can give a positive meaning to their selves.

Effects of the Guatemalan civil war and related trauma on children’s Mayan ethnicity have been studied by anthropologist Margarita Melville and community

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<sup>83</sup> Pérez-Sales, 408.

<sup>84</sup> Steinberg, Laurence. (1952-). *Adolescence* (9<sup>th</sup> ed.). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 325.

<sup>85</sup> Pérez-Sales, 411.

<sup>86</sup> Pérez-Sales, 411.

<sup>87</sup> Pérez-Sales, 416.

<sup>88</sup> Pérez-Sales, 416.

psychologist Brinton Lykes. In this study, 32 children living in Guatemala and 36 exiled in Mexico between the ages of eight and sixteen participated in a series of creative activities and interviews designed to “compare the negative effects of civil war and the adaptive capabilities of children who have experienced the trauma of loss of immediate family members, the witnessing of violent crimes and the displacement from their homes”.<sup>89</sup> An important finding of this study is it extends findings in Miller’s work discussed above, that is, that, “parents and loving caretakers are a moderating influence on the effects of traumatic events on children’s psychological well-being” were they were direct victims of armed conflict as described here.<sup>90</sup> Therefore, children living in orphanages may be particularly vulnerable to the harmful effects of trauma. Significantly, “the disappearance of an individual is particularly disruptive to the web of family and social life because of the uncertainty, fear and near paralysis it creates”.<sup>91</sup> This suggests further that the Guatemalan army intended to destroy Mayan culture and community identification.

When interviewed by Melville and Lykes the children told stories with little emotion, however, “preliminary analysis of the psychological instruments . . . suggest a population that has been deeply affected by these experiences and remains fearful and anxious”.<sup>92</sup> In describing the types of trauma they had experienced, “14 (67%) identified the death of a parent or close relative, 5 (24%) mentioned kidnappings [of family

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<sup>89</sup> Melville and Lykes, 533.

<sup>90</sup> Melville and Lykes, 535.

<sup>91</sup> Melville and Lykes, 535.

<sup>92</sup> Melville and Lykes, 539.

members], and 1 (5%) mentioned hunger”.<sup>93</sup> Children living in Guatemala experienced more difficulties talking about their trauma, than did children in Mexico. Clearly silence within Guatemala was encouraged as, “villagers were experiencing a great deal of fear that did not allow them to speak about their traumatic experiences”.<sup>94</sup> This is potentially disadvantageous because most psychologists argue that children should have outlets to safely express their thoughts and feelings about these experiences to facilitate recovery.<sup>95</sup>

Memories of the violence and fear of their past affect the way these children live their lives. According to Melville and Lykes, “harnessing the natural responses of the members of a community can be important in helping people, and specially youngsters, to recover and grow into healthy adulthood”.<sup>96</sup> Through their interviews they found that children with, “parents or close relatives to see them through the trauma, were, without question, the most helpful for recovery, particularly if they found themselves in an environment where the traumatic events could be discussed and explained”.<sup>97</sup> This means that the children in Mexico, who could speak more openly, had more psychological support. Taken as a whole, this study suggests that opportunities to express emotions in the wake of traumatic experiences, and the maintenance of community and ethnic identity are two essential factors in promoting healthy identity and psychosocial development for child survivors of armed conflict.

In 1994 in El Salvador, a fourth-grade teacher named Maria Luisa Meza encouraged her nine-year-old students to write letters to the future. These letters provide

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<sup>93</sup> Melville and Lykes, 542.

<sup>94</sup> Melville and Lykes, 542.

<sup>95</sup> Lykes, 2.

<sup>96</sup> Melville and Lykes, 543.

<sup>97</sup> Melville and Lykes, 546.

an interesting example of children expressing their identities and desires to live in peace without killing, kidnappings and bombings. A young boy named Alejandro wrote, “we will be able to go alone in the streets and ride our bikes because there will be no war . . . we will be free people”.<sup>98</sup> Claudia imagined, “we will live as if we were in Heaven . . . people will not be scared any more by hearing bombs or bullets”<sup>99</sup> These children expressed fears and sadness about the war, but they also have hope. If only people could follow Sofia’s advice, “El Salvador will be at peace if we love each other . . . peace is loving and caring and that is what I want as a future”.<sup>100</sup>

### **Child Soldiers**

Understanding the experiences of young children who become involved with armed groups as well as the long-term effects of their participation is critical to an exploration of the impact of war on a nation’s child population. In particular, the role of young girl soldiers in armed groups merits a great deal more attention than it has previously been given. Gaining insight into their experiences during war is extremely important because, as argued above, adolescence is a crucial time in life that profoundly affects identity formation. Importantly, both Guatemala and El Salvador, wherein the conflicts discussed here were waged, are characteristically patriarchal societies where gender expectations assign men to roles as soldiers and women to more traditional roles of childbearing and socialization of children. Thus girls who participated actively in armed conflict departed from these expectations. As significantly these young girl soldiers have become adult members of their societies and have a special impact on their

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<sup>98</sup> Maria Luisa Meza. 1994. *Children’s Voices from El Salvador: War and Peace*, 33.

<sup>99</sup> Meza, 34.

<sup>100</sup> Meza, 34.



communities especially because, “women perform unique contributions to a society in that they are traditionally responsible for the socialization of children”.<sup>101</sup> Therefore, girl soldiers influence society not only through their behavior as adult workers, but also through the ideas and models they impart on their children.

Carolyn R. Spellings explored the role of girl soldiers in armed conflicts in her article, “Scratching the Surface: A Comparison of Girl Soldiers from Three Geographic Regions of the World”, which is a review of 48 empirical studies of girl soldiers published between 1999 and 2008. Studies of girls’ experiences in Colombia and El Salvador constituted 16% of the research. Spellings found these studies by searching “girl soldiers”, “girl and political violence”, and “female and political violence” in databases such as PsychINFO.<sup>102</sup> According to her review, for girl soldiers in Colombia and El Salvador “early life experiences tend to be more traumatic for these girls than their war experiences”.<sup>103</sup> As a result, girls view armed groups as an escape from their difficult family situation and home lives. Spellings found this to be true in Latin America and in the South Pacific, but found the opposite in African conflicts where girls become affiliated with armed groups through abduction.<sup>104</sup> On a positive note this means that, “these [Latin American] girls are less likely to experience sexual abuse, and do not experience the same stigmatization from families and communities” as do girls in

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<sup>101</sup> Carolyn R. Spellings. “Scratching the Surface: A Comparison of Girl Soldiers from Three Geographic Regions of the World”. The Center for the Study of Youth and Political Violence, University of Tennessee (2008), 22.

<sup>102</sup> Spellings, 5.

<sup>103</sup> Spellings, 30.

<sup>104</sup> Spellings, 21

other regions of the world.<sup>105</sup> Thus she argues that, girls in Latin America more typically join armed groups to escape earlier harsh family-based treatment and abuse, and not because they are abducted and forced to serve, although the latter does occur in some instances. Some motives for young girls to join the army include,

physical and sexual abuse; abandonment by the family; parental death; divorce of parents; an arranged marriage which a girl does not desire; propaganda from armed groups; desire for societal change; gain wealth and status; revenge; pressure to excel in school; and educational opportunities.<sup>106</sup>

This suggests that additional efforts to prevent girls from joining armed groups should focus on stopping child and domestic abuse and promoting education and positive youth development. Depending on the armed group and the country, the roles that girl soldiers fill vary from fighting in battle to performing domestic tasks. Spellings' research found that, "girls in El Salvador participate in supporting roles . . . cooking, sewing uniforms, nursing, coordinating movement of soldiers, and carrying supplies".<sup>107</sup>

Post-conflict information suggests that, unfortunately, even girls who are taught a skill, like nursing, by armed groups frequently experience difficulties finding employment after the war. Former child soldiers desiring to reenter society as contributing and productive members encounter obstacles such as, "harm from former guerilla and paramilitary groups and inability to find work".<sup>108</sup> The fact that they were once part of an armed group contributes to others' distrust of them and fear of associating with them. For these reasons, promoting female integration into the post-war economy and political sphere is an essential aspect of national recovery. This point is

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<sup>105</sup> Spellings, 21.

<sup>106</sup> Spellings, 29.

<sup>107</sup> Spellings, 29.

<sup>108</sup> Spellings, 31.

well made by Spellings when she states, “these girls’ ability . . . to positively contribute to the functioning of their society and community, either as mothers or workers within the community, could play a major role in the stability and development of their societies”.<sup>109</sup> These studies and their conclusions suggest that promoting the psychosocial well-being of girls with experiences of involvement in armed conflict could have many positive effects on post-war reconstruction.

Forced recruitment was a common occurrence utilized by the military in El Salvador and Guatemala as well as in the creation of the PACs in Guatemala. For example, in El Salvador the armed forces increased in size from 6,000 in 1979 to 39,000 in 1989.<sup>110</sup> Even after the war ended, in June of 1995 the Attorney General’s Office for Human Rights received 596 complaints from young men maintaining they had been recruited by force by the Guatemalan army.<sup>111</sup> Some children were forced to live in army bases or model villages and brought up in an atmosphere of terror and violence. One case study in Guatemala: Never Again! details the suffering of a young boy in Quiché in 1983 who the PACs forced to patrol under threat of death.<sup>112</sup> This boy is reported to have told a gruesome story to his mother about his first experience on patrol and the scarring image of twelve dead bodies.

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<sup>109</sup> Spellings, 31.

<sup>110</sup> “Country Report and Updates: El Salvador | War Resisters’ International” *Notes from the WRI Office | War Resisters’ International*. 30 Apr. 1998. Web. 01 May 2011. [http://www.wri-irg.org/programmes/world\\_survey/country\\_report/en/El%20Salvador](http://www.wri-irg.org/programmes/world_survey/country_report/en/El%20Salvador).

<sup>111</sup> “Country Report and Updates: Guatemala | War Resisters’ International” *Notes from the WRI Office | War Resisters’ International*. 30 Apr. 1998. Web. 01 May 2011. [http://www.wri-irg.org/programmes/world\\_survey/country\\_report/en/Guatemala](http://www.wri-irg.org/programmes/world_survey/country_report/en/Guatemala).

<sup>112</sup> Guatemala: Memoria del Silencio, “Caso Ilustrativo No. 14”, 7.

Forced recruitment provides further evidence for the claim that, “many massacres and other human rights violations committed against these groups obeyed a higher, strategically planned policy manifested in actions which had a logical and coherent sequence”.<sup>113</sup> Results of these strategies included many deaths and intense distress over the injustice of the cruel treatment on the part of the Guatemalan army and government. For survivors, the meaning of life has been totally altered as a result of the collective persecution of their communities. Altered grieving processes, a sense of humiliation, and feelings of powerlessness and uncertainty about the future are just a few of the important possible psychological effects experienced by the surviving Mayan population of Guatemala.<sup>114</sup>

### **Depression and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder**

A recent study by four scholars evaluating previous studies on posttraumatic stress (PTS) provides important evidence to support this paper’s argument. Disasters, both natural and man-made, were found to significantly affect PTS symptoms in children, especially in cases where there was significant destruction, and the child lost a loved one. These scholars compared the results of previous studies on a variety of disasters including hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, tsunamis, terrorist attacks, mass transportation disasters, nuclear waste accidents and others affecting areas all around the world.<sup>115</sup> According to this report, “proximity, perceived threat, and distress at the time

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<sup>113</sup> Guatemala Memory of Silence, 40.

<sup>114</sup> Judith Zur, “The Psychological Impact of Impunity”, Anthropology Today, Vol. 10, No. 3 (Jun., 1994), 16.

<sup>115</sup> Jami M. Furr, Jonathan S. Comer, Julie M. Edmunds, Philip C. Kendall. 2010. Disasters and Youth: A Meta-Analytic Examination of Posttraumatic Stress, 773.

of the disaster evidenced medium-to-large associations with youth PTS”.<sup>116</sup> Degrees of PTS symptoms vary greatly depending on prior vulnerability of the child, aspects of the disaster, and study methodology. Additional studies found factors that contribute to and complicate PTS to include: the intensity of the trauma, duration, frequency, developmental level, coping style, and the level of exposure to death and destructiveness.<sup>117</sup> These studies are important because, “PTS and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are associated with subsequent depression, anxiety, substance abuse, conduct disorder, and impaired quality of life”.<sup>118</sup>

Symptoms of PTS also differ based on how much time has passed since the disaster occurred. Symptoms are stronger in the first year after the disaster, which “constitutes what have been referred to as the recoil, post-impact and initial recovery phases, during which time many children are forced to relocate, change schools, and/or cope for the first time with the loss of a loved one”. The long-term impact of disasters needs additional research in order to assess the rate of PTSD, and other disorders such as depression and anxiety. Assessing PTS after wars or other disasters is essential because, “symptoms are internal phenomena . . . [and] parents of disaster-affected youths are typically coping with the disaster as well, which may encroach upon their ability to reliably report on their child’s symptoms”.<sup>119</sup> Therefore, these studies provide crucial information about post-disaster intervention efforts and resources. Future research on

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<sup>116</sup> Furr et al. 773.

<sup>117</sup> Joan R. Walton, Ronald J. Nuttall, Ena V. Nuttall. 1997. The Impact of War on the Mental Health of Children: A Salvadoran Study, 738

<sup>118</sup> Furr et al. 765.

<sup>119</sup> Furr et al. 774.

this subject must also focus on factors that promote resilience and positive psychological growth after traumatic life events.

A research project that assessed the mental health impact of the Salvadoran Civil War on twelve-year-old children born into the war was done by Joan Riley Walton, Ronald L. Nuttall and Ena Vazquez Nuttall. This study focused particularly on the personal and social impacts of the war. Important findings were that, “children’s intelligence . . . high socioeconomic status and education of parents was related to better mental health”.<sup>120</sup> The following factors were used to evaluate the impact of the war on children:

1. The closeness and chronicity of the war trauma; 2. Personal characteristics of the child, such as competence, social ability, and calmness; 3. Social support systems, such as family, community, church, and international help; 4. Environmental factors such as education, socioeconomic status, religious affiliation, and perspective and understanding of the war.<sup>121</sup>

The conclusion that intelligence influences the ability a child to survive with better mental health merits further discussion. The authors of this study advise parents, teachers and counselors that, “training even very small children to be and to feel competent, to solve problems, and to understand their world may be the most important factor in their resilience to trauma, even years of civil war”.<sup>122</sup> It is crucial that children who experience war trauma to be taught coping skills and receive a good education. Another difficulty faced by these children was, “the inability to tell a story about the future”.<sup>123</sup> As a result, education of these children should include tools and techniques to

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<sup>120</sup> Walton et al. 738.

<sup>121</sup> Walton et al. 739.

<sup>122</sup> Walton et al. 747.

<sup>123</sup> Walton et al. 747.

envision and plan a possible future such as the latter exercise developed by Salvadoran teacher, Maria Luisa Meza reported above.

Carlos Berganza and Guido Aguilar conducted a study with 339 adolescents in Guatemala City during the 1990s using the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale for Children (CES-DC-M) found 35.1% of the children to be depressed.<sup>124</sup> They also found that, “gender was associated with depression: females had higher rates of depression than males” which could be the result of a variety of factors.<sup>125</sup> Specifically, as noted above, Guatemala and Latin American countries more generally are patriarchal and have a strong cultural tradition of *machismo*, or male superiority. According to Berganza and Aguilar, “being depressed is seen by society as an indication of weakness and, therefore, feminine . . . men are less willing to admit to being depressed than are women, resulting in underreporting”.<sup>126</sup> Women may also exhibit higher rates of depression because of differences in social roles and limited opportunities available to them. Studies of depression are crucial because, “adolescent depression may have devastating consequences, such as suicide, chronic or recurrent depression, family disintegration, academic and interpersonal difficulties, substance abuse, and failure to develop an adequate personal identity”.<sup>127</sup> Clearly depression was a very significant factor for the urban school populations of Guatemala City as the country approached the conclusion of nearly four decades of armed conflict.

### **Effects of Impunity**

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<sup>124</sup> Carlos E. Berganza and Guido Aguilar. 1992. Depression in Guatemalan Adolescents, 771.

<sup>125</sup> Berganza and Aguilar, 778.

<sup>126</sup> Berganza and Aguilar, 779.

<sup>127</sup> Berganza and Aguilar, 780.

As part of the terms set out in the 1996 Peace Accords officially ending the armed conflict between the army and the guerrilla forces, the Guatemalan government granted immunity to military officials. Similarly, five days after the release of the Truth Commission in El Salvador an amnesty law was passed preventing any legal action against the perpetrators named in the report. This has had serious negative effects on the survivors of the war and, of interest here, its youngest victims. The systematic failure of the government, the military and the judicial systems to take official responsibility and punish those responsible for the massacres and other gross violations of human rights has institutionalized impunity and contributes significantly to a perpetuation of fear. Anthropologist Judith Zur, in her article entitled “The Psychological Impact of Impunity”, explains,

fear, suspicion and paranoia not only result from impunity but are the psychological mechanisms which help to maintain it . . . the state’s purpose in creating such a situation is to maintain the regime’s dominance over people who are made silent and subservient . . . to prevent permanently the acknowledgment of the violence perpetrated by the state, and by evoking extreme fear through the threat of further violence.<sup>128</sup>

This idea is also related to the hardships suffered by survivors who were uncertain as to the fate of their friends and family. Uncertainty is one of the most painful and difficult emotions because it prevents a person from truly moving on and recovering from trauma. Also, the potential for violence to continue prevents victims from acknowledging the end of a conflict, accepting it and constructing meaning from it. Zur also supports the idea that, “without doubt, one of the purposes of political oppression is to make citizens psychologically repress – that is not see – the less democratic aspects of

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<sup>128</sup> Zur, 13.



the government they may observe”.<sup>129</sup> She compares this phenomenon to the effect of abuse on children, where they are unable to recognize the wrongs being done to them. Therefore, it is clear that some sort of truth telling and justice must be achieved before Guatemala and El Salvador can achieve truly democratic governments that will improve the lives of all the people of the nation. If not, then violent repression will continue, victims will not be able to recover from psychological problems, and the consequences for the nation will be long-lasting.

### **Impacts on Society**

Growing up in an environment of constant violence and conflict can have serious and lasting effects on children. Disagreements amongst family and community members caused severe tensions and, “militarization distorted and challenged community values such as loyalty and respect”.<sup>130</sup> Especially in Guatemala, violence destroyed many Mayan traditions, damaging existing support systems and solidarity. This point is clearly displayed in the book, Voices and Images: Mayan Ixil Women of Chajul, which captures the stories of the suffering of indigenous women during and after the war through photos. In this book women are given an opportunity to express their thoughts about the violence and their sadness about the loved ones they lost. One woman described the massacre of 200 people in the village of *Finca la Estrella* saying, “the times of *la violencia* destroyed much of our patrimony that is now impossible to retrieve

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<sup>129</sup> Judith Zur, 15.

<sup>130</sup> Guatemala Never Again!, 43.

... but we will persevere with our struggle so that this war never returns”.<sup>131</sup> These visual representations of the violence and allow the reader to look through the eyes of the Mayan women to see, “how the army repressed the people, destroyed their sacred places, and attempted to destroy their religious rites”.<sup>132</sup>

Family discord affected Guatemalan children; however social tensions and divisions at the community level had important effects as well. Constant fear of aggression or death was an important psychological effect of the civil war on the Guatemalan population, especially the nation’s children. Having to live knowing that at any moment the army forces could attack the community fostered extreme uneasiness and insecurity.<sup>133</sup> A major consequence of this threatening environment was a profound lack of trust amongst community members because, “the likelihood of being accused as a guerilla collaborator for the slightest reason made any attempt at solidarity extremely risky”.<sup>134</sup> Mistrust in government institutions has also had a harmful impact on the nation and has hindered the growth of stable democracy.<sup>135</sup> Clearly, during the civil war so much emphasis was placed on the war that normal life changed drastically.

Two important groups of children affected by the conflict are orphans and children conceived of rape. According to studies done by the Human Rights Office, Archdiocese of Guatemala, “children conceived of rape tend to be rejected socially, as a

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<sup>131</sup> *Voces E Imágenes: Mujeres Maya Ixiles De Chajul (Voices and Images: Mayan Ixil Women of Chajul)*, Chajul, El Quiché, Guatemala: La Asociación, 2000, [https://www2.bc.edu/~lykes/voices\\_chapter1/voices\\_massacre.htm](https://www2.bc.edu/~lykes/voices_chapter1/voices_massacre.htm).

<sup>132</sup> *Voces E Imágenes: Mujeres Maya Ixiles De Chajul (Voices and Images: Mayan Ixil Women of Chajul)*, Chajul, El Quiché, Guatemala: La Asociación, 2000, [https://www2.bc.edu/~lykes/voices\\_chapter2/voices\\_rebuilding.htm](https://www2.bc.edu/~lykes/voices_chapter2/voices_rebuilding.htm).

<sup>133</sup> *Guatemala Never Again!*, 44.

<sup>134</sup> *Guatemala Never Again!*, 44.

<sup>135</sup> *Guatemala Never Again!*, 9.

form of community resistance”.<sup>136</sup> These children often ended up in special homes that also took in children directly orphaned by violence. Different forms of intra-community adoption facilitated the lives and recovery of some of the children affected by the war. Other children were not as fortunate and became subjected, as a result of the forced separation of their families, to reeducation in special homes. As documented above in the case of the massacre at Río Negro, military officials responsible for the violence against the family and community of the children fraudulently adopted or abducted them. These children were then taught that their families deserved to be brutally murdered because they supported the guerrilla factions.

Minors who were adopted after their parents were detained, displaced, tortured or assassinated pose a particularly difficult problem today. As psychologist, Pau Pérez-Sales notes, “there were some who premeditated kidnappings, trafficked defenseless human beings as merchandise, sold children to the highest bidder, and treated children as exchangeable toys”.<sup>137</sup> *Pro-Búsqueda* (In Search) in El Salvador is an organization working to correct these wrongs by finding these children and reuniting them with their biological families. This organization faces an extremely difficult challenge of informing individuals of a second identity. Of the 780 cases of documented disappeared children at *Pro-Búsqueda*, it has been possible to find only 317, and only 181 (57%) chose to meet their biological family.<sup>138</sup> Discovering these individuals has proven very controversial in El Salvador.

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<sup>136</sup> Guatemala Never Again!, 37.

<sup>137</sup> Pérez-Sales, 413.

<sup>138</sup> Pérez-Sales, 413.

*Discovering Dominga* is a film about the life of Denese Becker, A Mayan child survivor of the massacre at Río Negro. Denese was born Dominga and was nine years old when the Guatemalan army came to her village of Río Negro and committed one of the worst massacres of the war.<sup>139</sup> Denese fled the attack with a younger sibling on her back. The latter died en route to safety. She has been haunted by memories of her parents' murder and as an adult decided to return to Guatemala and find her remaining family members. When she returned to Río Negro, "[she was] drawn into the ongoing struggle of the surviving Río Negro community to find justice".<sup>140</sup> Taking part in a human rights case against the Guatemalan military, Denese has been able to contribute to the exhumation of the remains, and the creation of a new gravesite called Monument to the Truth.<sup>141</sup> Finding out the truth about her life, while gratifying, also contributed to damaging some of her relationships in the United States, including her marriage. Denese has dedicated her life to sharing her story with schools and community groups.

### **The Role of Truth Commissions in Psychosocial Recovery Processes**

One of the principals of modern-day psychology is that expressing one's feelings, in particular feelings related to traumatic experiences, is necessary for recovery and psychosocial well-being. It is clear from the above analysis that many survivors of violent conflict suffer a great deal of psychological pain, while others are remarkably resilient. As Priscilla Hayner states in her book, Unspeakable Truths: Facing the Challenge of Truth Commissions, "unhealed wounds of society and of individual victims

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<sup>139</sup> "POV - Discovering Dominga. Film Description | PBS." *PBS: Public Broadcasting Service*. 8 July 2008. Web. 05 Apr. 2011. <[http://www.pbs.org/pov/discoveringdominga/film\\_description.php](http://www.pbs.org/pov/discoveringdominga/film_description.php)>.

<sup>140</sup> "POV - Discovering Dominga. Film Description | PBS."

<sup>141</sup> "POV - Discovering Dominga. Film Description | PBS."

may continue to fester long after the cessation of fighting or the end of a repressive regime . . . a country may need to repair torn relationships between ethnic, religious, or political groups”.<sup>142</sup> In this book Hayner discusses the role that Truth Commissions can serve in promoting human rights and national recovery. Hayner believes that having the truth told publicly can significantly aid the people of a nation in their, “need to slowly learn to trust the government, the police, and armed forces, and to gain confidence in the freedom to speak freely and mourn openly”.<sup>143</sup>

On the positive side, Truth Commissions effectively give survivors a public voice and bring their suffering to the awareness of the broader public. However, “many psychologists question the idea of a one-time catharsis resulting in real healing”.<sup>144</sup> In the past, the limited resources allocated to Truth Commission bodies have prevented them from offering ongoing psychological support services. Perhaps in the future Truth Commissions will be awarded more support and resources so they can enact some of Priscilla Hayner’s recommendations including,

A commission should hire a mental health specialist and provide training for statement-takers in how to respond to signs of distress; set up a referral system to outside services and support structures . . . Where possible, a commission should facilitate exhumations of persons killed in political violence, working in conjunction with victims’ groups and giving due respect to the desires of survivors . . . Finally, a commission should aim to stimulate a longer-term healing process, perhaps through targeted recommendations, in recognition that its contribution will represent only the first step of a long process of national and individual recovery.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Priscilla B Hayner. *Unspeakable Truths: Facing the Challenge of Truth Commissions*. 2002, 133.

<sup>143</sup> Hayner, 4.

<sup>144</sup> Hayner, 139.

<sup>145</sup> Hayner, 153.

It is extremely important for the children of a nation that the truth about human rights violations be officially recognized. Child victims of the violence and devastation that occurred during the Guatemalan and Salvadoran civil wars need to understand more about what happened to them and to their families. Unfortunately, these governments and armies were very efficient in their efforts to prevent public acknowledgement of facts about massacres and other gross violations of human rights. In Guatemala, studies show that the greatest hardship for survivors from the indigenous population is to not know what happened to a family member lost in a collective massacre.<sup>146</sup> This tragedy is especially difficult for people of the Mayan culture because not being able to bury the body and perform sacred rituals distorted the grieving processes of the survivors. Therefore, clear information about the fate of massacre victims, along with public acknowledgement of facts and of institutional responsibility are necessary steps that must be taken by the Guatemalan government in order for true national recovery to be achieved. Additional healing measures, many of which have been identified in the PNR's proposals, include acts of social restitution and measures to honor the victims.<sup>147</sup> The psychological role that acknowledging wrongs and providing an official, if only symbolic, apology in truth commissions can be very beneficial.

Children must be given opportunities to express their experiences of the violence in these countries in order to positively develop and grow. These opportunities can involve talking to children or creative indirect techniques, such as those used by Brinton Lykes in her work with Mayan youth previously discussed. According to scholar Lykes,

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<sup>146</sup> Guatemala Never Again!, 21.

<sup>147</sup> Guatemala Memory of Silence, 50.

“terrorism and silencing accentuate the distinctions between the self and the other, thereby destroying solidarities among groups”.<sup>148</sup> Conditions of fear and insecurity only breed silence, which is why, “we must tell the truth, for it is the truth the children seek”.<sup>149</sup> Truth commissions give validation to horrible events that were covered up or denied. It has been observed that, “a Guatemalan is prohibited to talk about his/her suffering and is forced to keep his/her suffering secret”.<sup>150</sup> This reveals the importance of truth commissions because, “the boundaries between reality and fiction, normal and abnormal, life and death have been blurred”.<sup>151</sup> Although silence may be a natural defense mechanism for many survivors of war, it also contributes to feelings of isolation, preventing communities from taking advantage of opportunities for collective action.

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<sup>148</sup> Lykes, 3.

<sup>149</sup> Lykes, 1.

<sup>150</sup> Lykes, 4.

<sup>151</sup> Lykes, 3.

## Chapter 3



### International Norms

The international community has played a strong role in efforts to restructure post-conflict societies and working to establish lasting peace. Two examples of these efforts are the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the United Nations' sponsored truth commission investigations in both Guatemala and El Salvador. The Convention on the Rights of the Child is a human rights treaty, which sets out the civil, political, economic, social, health and cultural rights of children. Truth commissions are official groups designed to discover and reveal past offenses by a government in the hopes of resolving the conflict and promoting reconciliation. These efforts by the international community to contribute to the healing processes in these nations will now be explored further.

#### **Convention on the Rights of the Child**

The United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child in November of 1989. As of November 2005, 192 countries had ratified the Convention, more than any other human rights treaty in history.<sup>152</sup> As of 2011 all but the United States and Somalia have ratified the treaty. This convention guides the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) whose "mission is to advocate for the protection of children's rights, to help meet their basic needs and to expand their opportunities to

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<sup>152</sup> "Convention on the Rights of the Child." *UNICEF*. 26 Aug. 2008. Web. 3 Nov. 2010. <[http://www.unicef.org/crc/index\\_30160.html](http://www.unicef.org/crc/index_30160.html)>.



reach their full potential”.<sup>153</sup> The 54 articles and two optional protocols in this document aim to guarantee civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights to children. It seeks to create means of protecting children from neglect and abuse by recognizing their vulnerability and need for special rights.

Rights guaranteed by the Convention on the Rights of the Child include, “the right to survival; to develop to the fullest; to protection from harmful influences, abuse and exploitation; and to participate fully in family, cultural and social life”.<sup>154</sup> It is based on four core principles of, “non-discrimination; devotion to the best interests of the child; the right to life, survival and development; and respect for views of the child”.<sup>155</sup> The United States has not adopted the Convention, for multiple reasons including opposition from those who see it as a threat to national control over domestic policy. Much evidence suggests that the Convention has contributed to improve standards of health care, education and civil services because, “national governments have committed themselves to protecting and ensuring children’s rights and they have agreed to hold themselves accountable for this commitment before the international community”.<sup>156</sup>

El Salvador and Guatemala both signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child on January 26, 1990. In Guatemala the Convention was ratified on June 6, 1990, and in El Salvador it was ratified on July 10, 1990. The fact that both of these countries ratified this document legally obligates them to “respect, protect, promote and fulfill the

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<sup>153</sup> "Convention on the Rights of the Child." *UNICEF*.

<sup>154</sup> "Convention on the Rights of the Child." *UNICEF*.

<sup>155</sup> "Convention on the Rights of the Child." *UNICEF*.

<sup>156</sup> "Convention on the Rights of the Child." *UNICEF*.

enumerated rights”.<sup>157</sup> These countries must make reports to the Committee on the Rights of the Child explaining measures taken by the State to protect children’s rights.

Article 37 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child declares that, “no child shall be subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment”.<sup>158</sup> Another article of the Convention prohibits the involvement of children under the age of 15 in military forces. These represent efforts to guarantee the rights of international humanitarian law with respect to children during times of armed conflict. Both El Salvador and Guatemala ratified the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in armed conflict in 2002. This protocol adds a legal mechanism to “strengthen implementation of the Convention and increase the protection of children during armed conflicts” and raises the minimum age for children in armed forces to 18.<sup>159</sup> Adopting this Optional Protocol is a major step for these nations, especially in light of the devastating effects of child recruitment into the military during the civil wars.

One of the most innovative aspects of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is right of a child to an identity. The text of the Convention states that, “[a] child shall be registered immediately after birth and shall have the right from birth to a name, the right to acquire a nationality and, as far as possible, the right to know and be cared for by his or her parents”.<sup>160</sup> A child is guaranteed the right to preserve his/her identity, which includes name, nationality, religion and cultural background. In both Guatemala

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<sup>157</sup> "Convention on the Rights of the Child." *UNICEF*.

<sup>158</sup> Convention on the Rights of the Child. Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. 20 November 1989. <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm>

<sup>159</sup> "Convention on the Rights of the Child." *UNICEF*.

<sup>160</sup> "Convention on the Rights of the Child." *UNICEF*.

and El Salvador the right to identity was denied to children who suffered death, injury or loss of a parent. Especially in Guatemala, the right to an identity was violated by the government's attempt to eradicate the Mayan culture. Organizations like Pro-Búsqueda, previously mentioned in this paper, exist to protect this right of every child to an identity.

### **Truth Commission Reports**

Truth commissions are official bodies set up to investigate and report on a nation's history of human rights abuses. These bodies generally use a victim-centered approach and publish their reports based on thousands of testimonies collected from survivors in the country or in exile. Each commission is different and the specific context of a country must be taken into account when deciding, "how a commission should best collect, organize, and evaluate the many accounts from victims and others; whether to hold public hearings or carry out all investigations confidentially; whether it should name the names of specific perpetrators" and many other issues.<sup>161</sup> It is extremely important to appreciate the role of truth commissions in Guatemala and El Salvador because these reports have the power to change how the people of a nation understand and accept its controversial past. Establishing a truth commission is difficult because they face an, "almost impossible task and usually insufficient time and resources . . . struggle with lies, denials, and deceit, and the painful, almost unspeakable memories of victims".<sup>162</sup> Both the Salvadoran and Guatemalan truth commissions were administered by and included members from the United Nations, but they operated independently and were not UN bodies.

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<sup>161</sup> Hayner, 7.

<sup>162</sup> Hayner, 23.

According to scholar Priscilla Hayner, the five aims of truth commissions are: “to discover, clarify, and formally acknowledge past abuses; to respond to specific needs of victims; to contribute to justice and accountability; to outline institutional responsibility and recommend reforms; and to promote reconciliation and reduce conflict over the past”.<sup>163</sup> Truth commissions bring to light the difficulties faced by victims and by entire nations after a period of brutal violence and repression. Many people in these nations have expressed that, “only by remembering, telling their story, and learning every last detail about what happened and who was responsible were they able to put the past behind them”.<sup>164</sup> Many times expectations for truth commissions far exceed the reasonable capacities of these bodies. However, as Hayner states truth commissions can sometimes, “go far beyond simply outlining the facts of abuse, and make a major contribution in understanding how people and the country as a whole were affected, and what factors contributed to the violence”.<sup>165</sup> By understanding the impact truth commissions have had on these nations we can begin to understand how a country might recover from such atrocities.

As mentioned above, an agreement for a truth commission for El Salvador was included in the peace accords. Commissioners were appointed by the United Nations’ Secretary General to work in the country for eight months and no Salvadorans were allowed to work on the staff.<sup>166</sup> The Salvadoran Truth Commission reported on over seven thousand cases of killings, disappearances, torture, rape, and massacres. By taking

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<sup>163</sup> Hayner, 23.

<sup>164</sup> Hayner, 2.

<sup>165</sup> Hayner, 85.

<sup>166</sup> Hayner, 39.

testimony from victims, the commission summarized the overall patterns of violence, and chose a few cases for in-depth investigation to represent typical victims, perpetrators and types of abuses. In her book, Unspeakable Truths: Facing the Challenge of Truth Commissions, Priscilla Hayner commends the Salvadoran truth commission for its work and states, “as a general rule, terms of reference [in truth commission mandates] should be sufficiently broad and flexible to allow investigation into all forms of rights abuses”.<sup>167</sup>

In a very controversial move, the commission decided to name over forty members of the military, judiciary, and guerrilla opposition for their role in the violence. However, no legal action was taken against these individuals because the government had passed an amnesty law five days after the release of the truth commission’s report.<sup>168</sup> The contributions of the report were still significant, as before its publication government and military officials had denied that atrocities such as the El Mozote had occurred.<sup>169</sup>

In Guatemala, the case is a little different because the government decided to create a “historical truth commission”. Historical truth commissions are, “present-day government-sponsored inquiries into abuses by the state that took place many years earlier . . . to clarify historical truths and pay respect to previously unrecognized victims or their descendants”.<sup>170</sup> The Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH) investigated the bloody history of Guatemala to explore and document root causes of the

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<sup>167</sup> Hayner, 73.

<sup>168</sup> Hayner, 40.

<sup>169</sup> Hayner, 163.

<sup>170</sup> Hayner, 17.

events that occurred over the past few decades, seeking to aid the nation in its efforts to restore and enhance social, political and economic order. The Guatemalan truth commission operated for 18 months and included both Guatemalans and non-Guatemalans on its staff. Due to the influence of the powerful armed forces, and the terms of the Peace Accords, the Salvadoran model of naming perpetrators would not be allowed in Guatemala. Research teams travelled throughout the country, “to address causes and origins of the armed conflict, strategies and mechanisms of the violence, and consequences and effects of the violence”.<sup>171</sup> This work was extremely difficult as many Guatemalan villages are very isolated in the mountains. Villagers, especially women, speak only their indigenous Mayan language, and some villagers did not know there had been a peace agreement and that the civil war was over.

The CEH’s Conclusions and Recommendations concerning Guatemala’s internal struggle were translated into Spanish, Quiché, and several other local languages to promote dissemination of the knowledge of the atrocities that occurred throughout the past few decades in this nation’s history to the many indigenous cultures as well as to nations worldwide. Some parts of this document, especially those detailing the cruelties and torture inflicted on innocent Guatemalan citizens, are extremely difficult to read. This report draws specific attention to children in article 28 of the Conclusions section when it states,

The CEH has confirmed with particular concern that a large number of children were also among the direct victims of arbitrary execution, forced disappearance, torture, rape and other violations of their fundamental rights. Moreover, the armed confrontation left a large number of children

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<sup>171</sup> Hayner, 83.

orphaned and abandoned, especially among the Mayan population, who saw their families destroyed and the possibility of living a normal childhood within the norms of their culture, lost.<sup>172</sup>

In Guatemala, using the CEH's report as evidence of the violence and its effects will ensure that students never forget the suffering of the past. The CEH affirms the necessity of spreading this information so that the people of Guatemala can move forward, and so that unspeakable acts like these are never permitted to occur again. A fundamental aspect of the Conclusions and Recommendations in the Report of the Commission for Historical Clarification is its emphasis on education as the primary tool for recovery. Education is vital because of the need to support the younger generations of Guatemalans who have grown up surrounded by violence, fear, and repression.

Of course, there are many problems and controversies surrounding truth commissions. Importantly, the data collected from testimonies can never represent the total number of victims and crimes that occurred. Abuses involving women, sexual abuse, and rape are especially underreported.<sup>173</sup> Nongovernmental organizations and women's rights scholars and advocates typically provide the primary support for women victims in these countries. However, the contribution of truth commissions' recognition of denied truths should not be underrated. Benefits of truth commissions can be clearly seen in Guatemala where, "the ceremony to release the commission's report to the public, attended by over two thousand people, was an enormously emotional event, with

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<sup>172</sup> Guatemala Memory of Silence, 23.

<sup>173</sup> Hayner, 77.

most in the audience in tears from the impact of hearing the truth finally and authoritatively spoken”.<sup>174</sup>

The most important aim of any truth commission should be to prevent further violence and human rights abuses by encouraging reconciliation between opposing groups, and recommending reforms in the military, police, judiciary, and political systems. For this context reconciliation can be defined as, “developing a mutual conciliatory accommodation between antagonistic or formerly antagonistic persons or groups”.<sup>175</sup> This implies rebuilding relationships that are not haunted by the conflicts of the past. This is particularly challenging in countries such as Guatemala and El Salvador where chasms between social classes where small numbers of elite families controlled vast resources and institutionalized racism characterized relationships pre- and post-conflict. Despite these social realities, aspects of a national reconciliation sought through truth commissions include, “a clear end to the threat of further violence; a reparations program for those injured; attention to structural inequalities and basic material needs of victimized communities” and more.<sup>176</sup> Truth commissions aspire to be an important step in a process of reconciliation, which will require the passage of time and widespread systematic change.

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<sup>174</sup> Hayner, 153.

<sup>175</sup> Hayner, 155.

<sup>176</sup> Hayner, 6.



## Chapter 4



### Recovery

These nations' current and future leaders are challenged to learn alternative ways to resolve political and social disputes other than the violent choices of their predecessors. Cultivating an environment of tolerance, respect and pride in society will require immense efforts on the part of the governments and individuals as well. Miller's studies suggest, "that the availability of an ideology or a sociopolitical framework that allows children to make sense of their experience of political oppression promotes psychological resiliency and facilitates active rather than passive coping".<sup>177</sup> We now discuss some initiatives that seek to promote children's and youth's well-being post-conflict.

### Resilience

Rigoberta Menchú is probably the best known example of a child who suffered the horrible conditions and violence of the Guatemalan civil war. Tradition, suffering and a strong sense of community characterize Rigoberta Menchú's vivid description of her life in Guatemala in the book, I, Rigoberta Menchú. Born into a family of poor Quiché living in the *altiplano* highlands, Rigoberta and her family strove to preserve their culture and survive in a society dominated by *ladinos*, or Spanish descendents. They helped found the Peasant Unity Committee (CUC) and worked to fight against the repression of the wealthy, powerful *ladinos*. The CUC was a peasant farmer union, which fought for land rights and liberal economic reforms that favored the indigenous

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<sup>177</sup> Miller, 98.

population. Their resistance sparked a great deal of controversy and placed Rigoberta's family in a very dangerous position. Eventually, Rigoberta's father, mother, and older brother were killed for their efforts to defend the indigenous population and Rigoberta fled into exile. Despite all of these difficulties, Rigoberta actively pursued a diplomatic solution through her work with the United Nations and other achievements, including winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992.

Another example of resilience is the organization, *El Salvador: Stories of War and Hope*, an oral history project that seeks to collect testimonies from Salvadorans living in Boston. The goal of this organization is to serve, "as a vehicle towards processes of truth and reconciliation".<sup>178</sup> Their website includes stories from Rufina Amaya, military volunteers, women guerrillas, and kidnapped children. One of these children, Imelda, was reunited with her family thanks to the *Pro-Búsqueda* organization.<sup>179</sup> Imelda witnessed the murder of her parents and two older sisters when she was only four. Today, she has joined with other Salvadorans in Boston to create a group called *Advocates of the Disappeared*, a support group for people in her situation.<sup>180</sup>

### **Education and Military Reforms**

A research study conducted experiment done by psychologist Pablo Chavajay in 2008 compared Guatemalan Mayan fathers with differing levels of formal schooling engagement with their school-aged children. Previous research involving parent-child

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<sup>178</sup> "Welcome To El Salvador." *Welcome To El Salvador: Stories of War and Hope*. 2011. Web. 05 Apr. 2011. <[http://www.memoriaypaz.net/repression1.php?testi\\_id1=61](http://www.memoriaypaz.net/repression1.php?testi_id1=61)>.

<sup>179</sup> "Welcome to El Salvador"

<sup>180</sup> "Welcome to El Salvador"

interactions with mothers confirmed that, “children’s engagement in problem solving with others is regarded as essential to helping children learn and develop” and informed this study of fathers and children.<sup>181</sup> This research found that, “fathers play significant roles in problem-solving interaction with school-age children”.<sup>182</sup> Suggesting the need for a better understanding of the ways in which fathers support children’s learning and development. Also, education of the broader populations in Guatemala and El Salvador should be promoted because, “increasing schooling has also been related to greater economic resources as well as reduced family size and infant mortality”.<sup>183</sup>

Education is thus a vital part of community and culture that can foster positive psychosocial development in children and youth. Mayan practices, severely repressed during the armed conflict, are now gradually diminishing due to rapid modernization in many rural towns. This has potential disadvantages because, “traditional Mayan practices have a long history of being used productively in organizing social interactions in community activities”.<sup>184</sup> Thus, educational reformers are urged to, “consider how traditional indigenous collaborative forms of social organization may be integrated into [school] settings”.<sup>185</sup> In this way, learning can be facilitated while preventing the loss of valued traditional indigenous customs. Making changes to primary, secondary and university education curriculum stress the importance of tolerance and appreciation, core

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<sup>181</sup> Pablo Chavajay. 2008. Organizational Patterns in Problem Solving Among Mayan Fathers and Children, 882.

<sup>182</sup> Chavajay, 886.

<sup>183</sup> Chavajay, 887.

<sup>184</sup> Chavajay, 887.

<sup>185</sup> Chavajay, 887.

values of Mayan communities, is one suggestion to accomplish this goal and be consistent with post-conflict peacemaking initiatives.

Scholar Elizabeth Oglesby studied Guatemalan education and determined that the Commission for Historical Clarification's report should be used as a framework for educating youth about the civil war. In fact, part of the CEH's recommendations included plans to improve the, "country's dismal educational system by raising government spending on education and mandating curricular reform to treat issues of ethnic diversity and multiculturalism".<sup>186</sup> Oglesby conducted interviews with teachers at six high schools and reviewed Guatemalan textbooks produced since 1985. After her research, she concluded that the Truth Commission should be included in the national educational curriculum to make it easier for teachers to approach sensitive topics about the past.<sup>187</sup> According to Oglesby,

recent textbooks include references to the report of the Truth Commission, although the references are brief and limited to the basic data of how many deaths and disappearances the CEH tabulated . . . some textbooks include more visual elaboration, such as an image of Guatemalan refugees or a photo of Rigoberta Menchú.<sup>188</sup>

As discussed in this paper, there are some teachers and social workers who are working to develop alternative, creative projects to teach kids about the war. However, including the CEH's report in the national curriculum will help achieve the long-term goal of constructing a framework for children to understand the past.<sup>189</sup> Possibly, future truth

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<sup>186</sup> Elizabeth Oglesby, *Historical Memory and the Limits of Peace Education: Examining Guatemala's 'Memory of Silence' and the Politics of Curriculum Design*. Tucson: Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs Fellows Program, History and the Politics of Reconciliation, 2004, 15.

<sup>187</sup> Oglesby, 16.

<sup>188</sup> Oglesby, 18.

<sup>189</sup> Oglesby, 33.

commissions can include didactic guidelines for introducing their findings into the national education system.

Along with education, another way to provide a better future for children is to reform the ideology of the military institution and national police. As documented in the Truth Commission reports, the large majority of massacres and other human rights violations were committed by the government-sponsored armies. For this reason, it is extremely important that future members of the military are aware of and trained in the defense of international law and human rights. Martín-Baró makes an important point when he notes, “repressive violence constitutes a model that teaches and reinforces habits of violent response as the most effective way to solve social and political problems . . . [and] fosters a deterioration in the conditions of social existence”.<sup>190</sup> It will be extremely valuable for Guatemalan and Salvadoran officials to assess and remedy the way members of the military and police force view the use of violence and its purposes. Reform in these institutions is necessary to regain the trust and confidence of the population in other government institutions such as the judiciary. This is especially true for cases where children were forced to become soldiers and grew up in an atmosphere where violence was demanded from them. Many initiatives in both countries to reform the police and military have had unclear and mixed results.

### **Community Initiatives With and For Children and Youth**

*Play for Peace* (PFP) is an international program that brings together children, teenagers, and organizations from areas of conflict, and uses cooperative play to foster

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<sup>190</sup> Martín-Baró, 166.

peace and harmony. Since its creation in 1995, 30,000 children have participated in countries including Guatemala, India, South Africa and many others.<sup>191</sup> *Play for Peace* works from the top down engaging leaders from major institutions in educational experiences and cooperative play. Once these leaders are trained, they recruit and help train members of local community organizations, who in turn recruit and train teenagers.<sup>192</sup> Finally, young children from age six to ten are brought in to participate in the cooperative play exercises. Benefits of this program are widely spread because, “organizations increase their organizational capacity, gain new tools and skills that can be implemented in their other programs, and create links to other communities”.<sup>193</sup> PFP maximizes their reach and improves their program’s sustainability by organizing it in a scalable and cost-effective manner.

The goal of PFP is to bring together people with diverse and controversial backgrounds, values and beliefs through play. Amazingly these, “activities encourage laughter, compassion, and personal connection at a time when, developmentally, the young children are forming a sense of self, awareness of others, and basic ideas about interactions with people they perceive as different”.<sup>194</sup> All of this combines to promote compassion for a peaceful future. This work is extremely valuable because children are able to, “break down generations of barriers between them before they harden into fear,

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<sup>191</sup> Joan Leafman. 2003. *Voices of Peace: A Chronology of the Play for Peace Methodology—An Experiential Community Development Training Model*, 1.

<sup>192</sup> Leafman, 1.

<sup>193</sup> Leafman, 11.

<sup>194</sup> Leafman, 11.

hatred, and violence”.<sup>195</sup> Additionally, teenagers gain skills in leadership and conflict resolution.

Developing compassionate relationships through play is the key to breaking the cycle of violence and hatred in countries like Guatemala and El Salvador. According to an analysis of this program, “through the friendships [the children] form, they ‘unlearn’ their taught prejudices, build compassion, and find constructive ways of managing conflict as they grow into adulthood and become the community leaders of tomorrow”.<sup>196</sup> PFP helps children develop powerful advantages such as, “emotional maturity, integrity, responsibility, compassion, interpersonal communication skills, and understanding and tolerance for individuals”.<sup>197</sup> Progress in these areas are essential for different cultures to work together to build a peaceful, democratic society.

Another example of a community-based initiative to foster the mental health and positive growth of children during ongoing conflict and in post-conflict situations is Creative Workshops for Children, an international program in Argentina, Guatemala, and the United States. This program, “incorporates drawing, storytelling, collage, and dramatization in a group process that seeks to create a space and time in which the child can express him or herself, communicate experiences to others, and discharge energy and emotion”.<sup>198</sup> Children are able to express tension about their past experiences and construct an identity outside of trauma and war. Creative Workshops in a community-based group setting foster the development of imagination and resourcefulness. As in

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<sup>195</sup> Leafman, 12.

<sup>196</sup> Leafman, 14.

<sup>197</sup> Leafman, 14.

<sup>198</sup> Lykes, 1.

*Play for Peace*, international workers in this program train para-professionals in Guatemala, who then help to train others. Through Creative Workshops, non-traditional mental health strategies and children's play combine to address important issues of violence and warfare. A benefit of these innovative strategies is that they can be adapted and used in different ways depending on the stage of the conflict in a nation. According to psychologist Brinton Lykes;

The workshop was organized around three axes: corporal expression, dramatic play, theater, and dramatization; drawing, and all forms of physical creativity 'outside of ourselves', including drawings, models made with newspapers or other materials, and collages; and, verbal techniques, that is, play with words in ways that reveal the liberating character of words.<sup>199</sup>

Adults working for this organization play and create actively with the children, incorporating Mayan cultural traditions. As maintained by Lykes the, "development of play, of imagination and of fantasy are key to helping children become more aware of themselves, to know themselves, to be able to communicate with others, and thus to be able to develop an easier set of relationships with their friends".<sup>200</sup> By playing the child can reproduce the problems he/she has encountered and try to understand them in a secure environment. In this community context, children are able to grow because, "creating through drawing, storytelling, and dramatization offers a resource for developing an alternative to existing reality, one which may facilitate a re-discovery of oneself through coming into contact with oneself, with others, and with one's story".<sup>201</sup>

An interesting strategy that allows the children to communicate their thoughts and feelings about their lives and their experiences with violence is the collages.

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<sup>199</sup> Lykes, 9.

<sup>200</sup> Lykes, 10.

<sup>201</sup> Lykes, 10.



Children are asked to create a collage about their lives and then present it to the group. Through this exercise the children, “developed new levels of trust, alternative forms of communication and insights into the effects of sharing experiences heretofore silenced”.<sup>202</sup> Play and creative expression permits children to laugh at the unlaughable, develop alternative responses to fear, and express repressed feelings and emotions.<sup>203</sup> Fantasy provides endless possibilities for expression, and this is particularly helpful to children when followed by reflection.

Creative Workshops are designed to protect while fostering communication, creativity, learning and development. International collaborators in this program insist, “we have seen that when the children participate in the workshops there is a significant change for the better . . . children become more active and welcome the opportunity to participate in various activities”.<sup>204</sup> The work done by programs such as this and *Play for Peace* demonstrate the need to combine play with learning in a process of recovery from trauma. Most importantly, “Workshops are important contexts for breaking silence and facilitating the discovery of what has happened to these children and their families and communities”.<sup>205</sup> Children will use the tools they gain through these programs as they grow and become contributing members of society.

Some of the ideas in these programs about child’s play are typical of Western psychology; however in countries like El Salvador and Guatemala a childhood in rural communities when these wars took place is characterized by extreme poverty, limited

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<sup>202</sup> Lykes, 13.

<sup>203</sup> Lykes, 15.

<sup>204</sup> Lykes, 17.

<sup>205</sup> Lykes, 17.

access to education, and hard work. Alternative approaches that integrate indigenous traditions and Western practices are important, particularly in Guatemala. Additionally, due to armed conflict and its effects as described above those who work in these programs are not neutral listeners, a characteristic of many Western-informed clinical psychological interventions, but work in “alliance with the survivor [which] is key to developing the relationship of trust essential for the recovery process and for the reintegration of the survivor into an ongoing life project”.<sup>206</sup> As suggested above, in Mayan cultures the community is the basis for all activities and relationships, meaning that, “the group is an essential element for any process through which one seeks to re-enter a social space and time that has been, at least partially, destroyed by terror”.<sup>207</sup> Working with children in a group setting is therefore the best method of inspiring personal development and self understanding.

### **Support from Non-Governmental Organizations**

Violence against children is still a problem in Guatemala today, over fifteen years since the signing of the Peace Accords. Social investment for children there is one of the lowest in Latin America, making recovery from the trauma of the war very difficult. According to a study done by *Lift the Children*, a non-governmental organization working with the United Nations in Guatemala, “the situation is dramatically worse among children in rural areas and indigenous children and adolescents where 76% and

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<sup>206</sup> Lykes, 16.

<sup>207</sup> Lykes, 17.

80% respectively live in property”.<sup>208</sup> This organization classifies children from Guatemala as “vulnerable children”, meaning they are “at risk of losing, family-based care”, which includes parental care, healthcare, equality, education and protection.<sup>209</sup> Unfortunately, this organization has not had a great deal of success in improving the conditions of children due to a lack of monetary and political support.

One social investment program working to improve the conditions of children in Guatemala is the Alianzas Project, which began in 2005. This organization receives its funding from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), international corporations and donations from the private sector. According to its representatives, Alianzas works to “provide technical support and training designed to: strength community organization and participation to improve food and nutrition security; improve and expand maternal and child health care services; provide sexual and reproductive health education” among other things.<sup>210</sup> By training teachers and health providers, donating textbooks and computers, and awarding scholarships, Alianzas has given invaluable aid to many people in Guatemala. More efforts like this program are needed to generate more substantial and faster development for the nation.

Reliance on international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as Save the Children, UNICEF and the Alianzas Project is necessary due to lack of enthusiasm from the Guatemalan and Salvadoran governments. For this reason, economic and social

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<sup>208</sup> Lift the Children – Protecting Children Around the World, “Lift the Children Fact Sheet on Child Abuse, Neglect and Abandonment”, International Fact Sheet, 17 March 2010, [http://liftchildren.org/lift\\_research\\_fact.asp](http://liftchildren.org/lift_research_fact.asp)

<sup>209</sup> Lift the Children. “Lift the Children Fact Sheet on Child Abuse, Neglect and Abandonment”.

<sup>210</sup> University Research Co., LLC / Center for Human Services, “Alianzas Project, Strategic Alliances for Social Investment”, URC/CHS Projects, 8 May 2010, <http://www.urc-chs.com/projects/health/rti.htm>

statistics concerning the health and education of Guatemala and El Salvador are still regrettably low. Secondary school enrollment in Guatemala from 2003-2008 was only 58% for males and 53% for girls, with actual attendance being around half of that.<sup>211</sup> In El Salvador, 70% of children do not have access to secondary education.<sup>212</sup> Lack of access to education and low literacy rates are severe problems for these nations.

Also, as of 2007 only 10 out of every 100 people in Guatemala were internet users.<sup>213</sup> According to UNICEF, “poverty, which affects mostly the rural sector, has a significant impact on children, especially in terms of access to adequate nutrition, water and sanitation”.<sup>214</sup> Disadvantages such as these limit the ability for children in Guatemala and El Salvador to develop skills necessary to promote progress in their nation. On a positive note, elementary school attendance has increased significantly as has bilingual education in Guatemala, with 65% of children completing at least a primary school level education.<sup>215</sup> Also, literacy rates in El Salvador rose to 95% and 96% for males and females respectively in 2008.<sup>216</sup>

The impacts of the bloody internal struggles that Guatemala and El Salvador suffered will be felt by these nations for a long time to come. According to the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) approximately 50% of the under-18 population in

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<sup>211</sup> UNICEF, “The State of the World’s Children”, 20 Years The Convention of the Rights of the Child, 8 May 2010, <http://www.unicef.org/rightsite/sowc/statistics.php>

<sup>212</sup> UNICEF, “At a glance: El Salvador”, [Unite for Children](http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/elsalvador.html), 26 February 2011, <http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/elsalvador.html>

<sup>213</sup> UNICEF, “The State of the World’s Children”

<sup>214</sup> UNICEF, “At a glance: El Salvador”, [Unite for Children](http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/elsalvador.html).

<sup>215</sup> UNICEF, “At a glance: Guatemala”, [Unite for Children](http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/guatemala.html).

<sup>216</sup> UNICEF, “At a glance: El Salvador”, [Unite for Children](http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/elsalvador.html).

both of these countries lives in poverty.<sup>217</sup> It is essential to find long-term solutions to ensure a better future for the nation. Learning from the atrocities of the past is one important way to ensure that those who suffered and died did not do so in vain. Future generations of students need to use these lessons to promote harmony, peace and success in these nations.

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<sup>217</sup> UNICEF, "At a glance: Guatemala", *Unite for Children*, 17 March 2010, <http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/guatemala.html>

## Conclusion



The effects of civil wars in Guatemala and El Salvador are particularly devastating for children and youth. During wartime, not only are children deprived of support systems, they also experience threat, danger and extreme poverty. In Guatemala, the government army used indiscriminate violence against the civilian populations and, most particularly, indigenous communities to eradicate any basis of support for the guerrilla groups. Similarly, in El Salvador, social and economic inequalities led to brutal fighting between the government and guerrilla groups. Both of these conflicts resulted in many massacres and other human rights violations.

It is clear from the analysis of psychological studies in this paper that the violence in these countries produced harmful effects on children and youth and their families. Insecurity, fear, aggression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress are just a few of the possible consequences produced by these wars. Psychologists and social workers working with children in these countries value children as ‘gifts from God’ and have a sense that children are the future of the country, so by addressing the needs of children and youth, they would be building towards a better future.<sup>218219</sup> While there are many negative effects of the trauma these children have suffered, it is important to note the strength and resilience of many of these survivors. Environments that foster freedom of expression allow children to understand the terrible things that happened so they can develop positive identities in spite of their hardships. More research in this area is

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<sup>219</sup> Lykes, 8.

needed to discover long-term psychosocial effects of trauma on young people and develop coping strategies.

The efforts of the United Nations in creating the Convention on the Rights of the Child and supporting the truth commissions are very important. Nations like Guatemala and El Salvador need this aid from the international community as they emerge from long periods of violence, dictatorship and turmoil. Together, bringing the truth about these wars to light and establishing international standards for respecting human rights will help promote peace. While it is essential to remember the past and honor the victims, we must also ensure a better, safer future for the world's children.

Finally, the process of recovery and reconciliation in both Guatemala and El Salvador must include special consideration for children and youth. National reforms in education, the military and the justice systems are essential to reconciliation. Providing children with opportunities to share their feelings in a secure environment will allow them to establish an ideological framework within which to make sense of and actively cope with their pain. Teaching children tolerance and respect for themselves and others will create a more harmonious future. After all, *children are the living messages we send to a time we will not see.*<sup>220</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> Neil Postman. *The Disappearance of Childhood*. New York: Delacorte, 1982, xii

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