

**TESTIMONIAL REPORT on FORCED DISPLACEMENT in EL SALVADOR  
FOCUS on CHILDREN, ADOLESCENTS and YOUTH  
NARRATIVE SUMMARY – ENGLISH TRANSLATION**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Families that live in zones strongly affected by criminal activities in El Salvador experience multiple rights violations. When faced with threats of losing their life or the lives of their family members, individuals are obligated to flee their homes, their communities, or even their country. This implies the deterioration of one's living conditions, abandoning one's home and education, unemployment, and isolation among other increasingly vulnerable situations.

Given the lack of national policies and mechanisms to attend to victims of forced displacement, seven of the thirteen member organizations of the civil society Working Group against Forced Displacement by Violence and Organized Crime reported attending to 146 specific cases of forced displacement between August 2014 and December 2015, and a total of 623 victims.

These first reports represent only a piece of the current situation of forced displacement in El Salvador; these numbers do not reflect the true reach of populations affected by this phenomenon. Each forcibly displaced person has suffered a series of violations and traumas that should be taken into account in order to holistically address the issue of violence, beginning with the rights and needs of the victims themselves.

The principal objective of this report is to make known the stories of families of boys, girls, adolescents and youth who are displaced by generalized violence and organized crime within the metropolitan area of San Salvador. The report seeks to address the context of violence that youth confront in zones where organized crime has control over all aspects of family life, as well as the different expressions of extreme violence to which they are exposed and obligates them to flee their communities. The report also describes the disintegration of families as a consequence of forced displacement and the obstacles families face in gaining access to justice, including intimidations and threats by both legal and illegal armed groups that persuade families not to denounce their cases, leaving violations in impunity.

***“We have confirmed arbitrary detentions and abuses, they are occurring... They have tried to sell the idea that in order to achieve security and effectiveness, they need to decrease human rights. This is a false thesis that I permanently deny. If we have a State that is going to institutionalize torture, that is going to make people disappear, that is going to fund death squads, what we are going to do is make our democracy deteriorate, and later on what will happen is that it will turn against the innocent population.”***

David Morales Cruz - Human Rights Ombudsman of El Salvador, July 2015.

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### **TESTIMONY 2: 18 year-old girl**

They are corner to corner, the MS and the 18; a street divides them, nothing more. I lived at the edge of the street of the 18, and on the other side of the street was MS. They grabbed me when I was leaving, on my way to work. I was boarding the bus when they asked for my ID. I showed it to them and they [the gang members] said I had two days to leave because if not they were going to kill me and hurt my family. I went back home and took my things. I didn't work that day and went to my grandmother's.

The problem was that in the old house where I live the 18 [18<sup>th</sup> street gang] graffitied the wall of my house... all they told me was that I made a bad face at them. I told them I didn't do it, that I am up all night working, working 12 hour shifts without sleep and so when I return the sun hurts my eyes and I can't be smiling at everybody, but they decided I belonged to something [a gang] and that's why I made a face at them.

I just told my mom I had a problem and that I was leaving, I didn't tell her about the ID or the two days; I didn't want to worry her. I didn't tell her they were watching my brother, that soon I'd have to see how to get him out of there too, I'll send someone since I can't go and they'll bring him to my grandpa's. But he'd have to stop going to school because it's too far away.

I didn't report it because of fear, because of fear I did nothing, only my family and my boss know about it. I had to tell him [my boss] because I didn't show up, but they don't understand reasons or problems and docked my pay anyway. I explained I had this problem [with the gangs] and that's why I couldn't come to work, but they just told me it wasn't a problem.

I'm afraid for me and my little brother. He's 12 years old and has to go to school, so he passes by there [where the gangs are] every day. He says when he goes to school there are always two [gang members] walking behind him, but so far they haven't grabbed him or said anything to him, just watching for him when he leaves the house and returns home. That is my fear, I am afraid something is going to happen to him.

They killed our dad in 2004. He worked in a home furniture store and made deliveries in his car; he crossed into a contrary zone and that's where it happened.

My little brother is not so little anymore; he has psychosis. He says that if they killed our dad, they can kill mom and they can kill me. Last week he skipped three days of school because he was afraid, he did not want to leave the house. I told my mom not to make him. He called me crying and he told me that he did not want to go to school, that he did not want to leave because he had seen the gang members around the corner and didn't want to leave the house, so I told him not to go, I don't want to force him and God forbid something bad happens to him, so he didn't leave the house and he didn't go to school for three days, he only went on Thursday. Yesterday, Friday, he didn't go either.

The same thing happened to my aunt and uncle. They lived in Mejicanos before, but left for Soyapango when a house became available, but unfortunately there they [the gangs] killed my cousin because the Campaneras and the Margaritas are close by. My cousin would sell things out of his car to the neighborhood stores, he was driving, it was in the news, it wasn't that long ago, they shot him three times, only in the head, they knew this was his job. It didn't matter which band it was - the Campanera are 18 but they're sureños, the Margaritas are MS - and they had seen him [my cousin] driving around there, my cousin driving around selling product, there they intercepted him and killed him. And so my aunt and uncle came back to Mejicanos.

My aunt and uncle received threats from the MS, they had a spot there in the market close to the Margaritas, that's where they worked. They spent the whole day there, and the gang saw them... with the famous "renta" [extortion fees] as always. They asked for \$300 a week. Where are they going to get that kind of money? My Aunt and Uncle only had God, and so they [the gangs] brought them a paper and gave them a week to leave. My aunt and uncle closed their business, took everything and this was when they [the gangs] threatened and murdered my cousin. He was 19, we were almost the same age.

The truth is that the police sometimes act, sometimes they do nothing... the soldiers too. They can see kids playing and half the time just seeing the kids they start shooting. There was a case of a young boy, he's in a field playing with a ball - in the park behind the street where I live - and the soldiers arrived and just began shooting at the boy. A bullet hit him in the leg and now he's in the Bloom [the children's hospital]. It wasn't that long ago.

That is my fear, the boy [my brother] doesn't go out because of this situation, he's afraid, he doesn't go out to buy things but I am afraid he will go out and God forbid anything happens to him. The soldiers, what they say is there was a confrontation, even though the gang members didn't do anything to them, they only arrive to shoot, I've been there when it happens. One day I went to work, and the soldiers passed by and they shot at the gang members who were just sitting there. I just threw myself to the ground. And then I thought "it's better they say here is where she ran than here is where she died," so I ran, I saw them [the gang members] run so I ran too, though I know it's dangerous to run because then the soldiers might think I'm one of them [the gangs], and they could do something to me. And so it's all the same, I suffer in my heart. I am desperate and I don't know what to do.

***“Such activities prima facie constitute contemporary forms of slavery and are prohibited in international human rights law... As such the Government is obligated to take measures to eliminate these practices, prosecute perpetrators and provide effective access to justice and redress to victims whose rights have been violated.”***

**Urmila Bhoola - UN Special Rapporteur** on contemporary forms of slavery in El Salvador, including the forced recruitment of children into gangs, and the coercion of girls, adolescents and women into participating in sexual activity with gang members<sup>1</sup>.

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### **TESTIMONY 11: Father - 33 years old**

I left my home because the gangs threatened me. A friend of mine who, before becoming a gang member, liked my woman – that was three years ago – and then my so-called friend became a *pandillero* and gave me an ultimatum to go, or stay and die. We three grew up together – him, the mother of my daughter, and me. And so she left – so they wouldn’t kill me. The gang member told her that if she left with them I could stay... but it’d be better if I left so they don’t kill me anyway.

He [the gang member] liked her but she didn’t give him the time of day, she liked me, and so the resentment grew. When he became a gang member, everything changed. The hard part is you have nowhere to go, only God and a miracle. I can’t go back and see my family in that *colonia* where they [the gangs] are, it’s in Mejicanos. So now I go from room to room, without even \$5 brother, looking for options but the gangs are a scourge, they’re everywhere.

The gangs shot me because they had told her [my partner] that we had to go, but I couldn’t, I didn’t want to, and so one day on my way home they grabbed me, they shot me, I had to have an operation to get the bullets out, they screwed up my arm, now it’s broken, I was in the hospital for three months. When I received the last threat, I knew they were serious, I had to go to my mom’s, but they left my arm all messed up, I don’t have any strength in it. They did this to me, and then took my strength.

I was in the hospital three months. There they didn’t tell me I had to leave, just had to separate myself from my daughter’s mother because something could happen to me, but since I left, I thought things would calm down. But no, they let time pass and then suddenly – these guys don’t mess around, you can’t talk to them – I just hope they treat her well, they don’t beat her because when someone is taken away from you like that, someone you love, it hurts like crazy.

They gave me 72 hours. I had a friend there who is a gang member. I went to ask him how to find a solution, and he said he couldn’t do anything, it’s better to just go, if you don’t they’re gonna kill you, and so I had to run. My daughter’s mother had to go with them, if she didn’t they were going to kill my whole family, she was obligated though only God knows. My daughter said she wanted to go with me, and so they let her go, and since then she’s been with me.

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<sup>1</sup> “Rapporteur of the UN affirms that gangs enslave children and women in El Salvador”/The Nation/April 2016.

I went to live with a friend in San Miguel, I was there two months looking for work, and then found a room to rent paying my piece, working jobs in the brick factory. But life is messed up and given that I walk around marked [tattooed, presumably with gang affiliations], if they give me the polygraph test and ask if I'm marked and I say no, the "poligrafista" tells me to take my shirt off and they're going to see I'm all tattooed, now they just do it for fun. But the gangs are tearing apart the *pueblo*, they are eating it alive.

I have friends where the same thing has happened to them, but they've been killed, and I see the kids crying. My daughter is 11 years old, this has all affected her, but I don't like to ask because I think mentally, psychologically it affects her. Sometimes I hide just to watch her, how she remembers, it's terrible. Maybe a psychologist should speak with her.

She was going to school. This year I gave her to her mother so she could bring her to school, she brought her to Apopa because the gang member is there, but they ran into problems, the police arrived, they broke into the house, the girl was there, more trauma for her, and so now I don't send her, I brought her back her, but yes, I think it all affects her. She isn't going to school now since I brought her back from Apopa, I couldn't refer her to a school here in Mejicanos.

I let her mom see her because she has the right and she'll know how to explain all this, I've told her it's not her mom's fault, it's the gangs. I don't know what I would have done if I was a woman, because we'd been together for eight years, and then they rip you out. I hope the government does something because this is garbage. I've told me daughter it's not her mom's vault, it's the gangs, when she's older she'll understand, and then she gets sad and says "it's ok daddy," but it rips your soul out.

I never reported the threats because if you do that it's like ordering the death of your family, resignation brother, that's what you're left with. You go and nothing, you know you're never coming back. My family doesn't get threats anymore because my partner sacrificed herself, I still feel it because they snatched her away from me, by force.

My daughter likes to study, she's smart. I'd like to have money and tell her we're leaving, I'll take her to the U.S., but I don't even have a place to die. I'm a warrior brother, I work from one sun to the next if I can. I try to hide it all from my daughter, I don't want her to see me exhausted ... but it's good to get it all out like this. Alone you just think about it and think about it, I get desperate.

I'd like things to be better for my daughter, I have an uncle there [in the U.S.]. He doesn't write me or send me anything but he knows about my problem, he'd accept the girl and care for her, he doesn't have any kids, but I don't know, I sometimes ask her if she'd go, she says no, but I explain to her that there she'd go to a good university, she'd have a better future.