"Seconds in the Air":
Women Gang-Members and their Prisons

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In the gang, the world is different. Everything that is normal becomes abnormal, and everything that is abnormal is normal. It's the world upside down...
... after [13/18] seconds in the air, the world is another world...

Woman Gang-member interviewee

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The lives and situation of the women in the *maras* or gangs is a dimension that has been, to date, explored little by empirical research and, in general, little is known about it in civil society. Stereotypes and social images that have been built up around them are, in essence, masculine. The socio-cultural identities prevalent in the social imaginaries are those of young men that are covered in tattoos, are extremely violent and are linked to delinquent activities. Actually, although El Salvador has advanced in its understanding of the phenomenon, from the perspective of academic research, most of the studies have focused their sights on the analysis of its characteristics, the group logic, and the violent social dynamics that are built up within these organizations. The emphasis on these aspects has given rise to great voids in terms of the factors that pressure girls and adolescents to join these groups, the conditions they are inserted in, and the ruptures and contradictions they face once they have joined. The IUDOP, based on a line of investigation about juvenile violence developed since 1996, has sought in most of its research to reveal the gender differences that exist inside these groups, considering the limitations imposed by the study of groups where there are enormous disparities between men and women.

In this sense, this approach to the lives of a group of women gang-members who have been deprived of liberty, from the perspective of qualitative research, has made it possible to penetrate the subjective aspects of their lives, and firmly denude the circles of violence, exclusion, oppression, and abandon that they are exposed to from early childhood. The analysis of these personal stories and their life experiences offer clues to the complex processes of group socialization experienced by the girls and adolescents who comprise the gangs, and the breakages with their families and the rest of society following their membership in these groups. Likewise, this paper shows the gains and profit that these groups offer them, in a context of

multiple shortages and weaknesses, but above all, the multiple vulnerabilities and risks the adolescents and youth are subjected to once they have entered the gangs.

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The University Institute of Public Opinion
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Introduction

Introducing this theme and study is no easy task. Beyond the difficulty that is involved in transferring —in a few pages, with a restricted narrative, and in all its richness— the complexity of an investigation with this type of population, it involves taking the reader —at times, for the first time— into one of the toughest and most tragic dimensions of the experience of being a woman, in a group dominated by men: the gang.

In El Salvador, there have been several investigations on these groups. Some have focused on the analysis of their characteristics (Cruz and Portillo, 1998; Santacruz and Cruz, 2001; Smutt and Miranda, 1998); others, on the way that violence determines the group-dynamics, even inside the gang itself (Carranza, 2005; Santacruz and Concha-Eastman, 2001); and others, on the social and community contexts they emerge from and endure in (Cruz, Carranza and Santacruz, 2004; Eric et al., 2004a; Savenije and Andrade, 2003). Still, other studies have focused on the role and impact of repressive governmental programs, and the lack of articulated and holistic policies to promote development and violence prevention, both in the transformation of the gang phenomenon and the increment in the levels of violence in the country (Aguilar, 2007b; Aguilar and Carranza, 2008; Carranza, 2005; Cruz and Carranza, 2005). The role of civil society as one of the few actors that have intervened and channeled efforts to face the challenge of the gangs in ways that are different from repression and violence (Aguilar and Miranda, 2006), as well as the analysis of these groups as transnational networks, and their contribution to the crime that the country faces (Aguilar, 2007b; Cruz, 2009; 2007) have also been some of the issues that were tackled as part of the efforts to understand the present characteristics of these groups, and the transformations they have experienced.

Despite the aforementioned, and the information that with no small effort has been articulated around the gang phenomenon in the country, the studies have not focused on the situation of women inside these groups. And even less, in cases when the women have been deprived of liberty. Some studies have revealed the differences in the experiences that men and women have in the gang, and the different impact in the exertion and use of violence (Santacruz and Concha-Eastman, 2001). Nevertheless, the studies have not focused on publicizing the set of events that revolve around these young women's situation in these groups that are fundamentally composed of men.

A good deal of the research agenda in the study on gangs has concentrated, in general, on the dynamics of violence and victimization of the groups' majority members —young men—, trivializing or deliberately ignoring the role and experiences of the women members. This approach implicitly considers them mere "satellites" in the male youth-gangs' group dynamics (Curry, 1999). Some authors have stated that, for years, the girls and young women in the gang have been "present, but invisible" in the research efforts (Chesney-Lind and Hagedorn, 1999). The fact that the situation of women inside the gangs has been overlooked leaves serious gaps in the understanding of the processes by which girls and young women can be at risk of entering a gang, and, consequently, of the mechanism that might prevent or forestall this sort of situation. This oversight has not been surmounted in the studies of academia, in the institutional practices and in the State policies.

In El Salvador, the quantitative disparity between men and women gang-members is considerable. These are not women creating "feminine" gangs, but women gang-members in a group of men. These women comprise —within the group— a conglomerate that is subject to the dynamics and directives in this broader aggregation, and their experiences of this is affected by their own restrictions and characteristics. This is not to say they live in a group that is parallel to the gang. In fact,

since they are members of a group —designated *ubiquitous* in this study because of its characteristics, they are subject to its designs. Nevertheless, they are affected by this in a special way, both due to the violence that defines the members' inter-personal dynamics inside the group and out, and due to their condition as women within a group designed and conceived for the expression of an extreme and violent form of mascu-linity. Different analyses from other latitudes suggest that the gangs play a very complex role in the lives of the adolescent-girls and women gang-members, in that, on the one hand, they are "protected" from certain victimization scenarios, and on the other, they are simultaneously exposed to higher risks in other areas (Chesney-Lind and Hagedorn, 1999; Miller, 2001). There needed to be an attempt at accessing Salvadoran women gang-members, in order to begin —albeit late— to propose some hypotheses and articulate some preliminary responses about the situation and experiences of these women, in a group that is composed, conceived, and controlled by men.

The distinguishing characteristic of this exploratory study is that it has focused its sights on this "forgotten" collective: the *homegirls*, the women who are or have been members of the gangs, and who are today in prison. Therefore, this study intends to respond to the following initial hypothesis: given that gang membership exposes the men members in a direct way to the possibility of exerting and receiving violence, this is particularly stressed in the case of the women. And, actually, the evidence obtained in this study makes it possible to maintain, at least for now, that the experience of becoming a member of the gang has an impact on women such that it puts them in an even more vulnerable position than what they were in before joining the group. The situation of a woman in the gang is due, among other factors, to the profound gender inequalities that persist in Salvadoran society, where it would seem that girls, youth and women go from one prison to the next throughout their lives.

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In response to this initial hypothesis and to the general objectives, which seek to understand the characteristics and experiences of the women in the gang, this study used a qualitative methodology, and was approached from a *biographical* perspective, which made it possible to collect and highlight information regarding different periods of their lives. Therefore, through the qualitative interviews —specifically, the biographical interviews, a group of women from the two largest gangs in El Salvador (*Mara Salvatrucha* and *18th Street* gangs) were approached, and asked about their lives *prior to* joining the gang, their lives *within* the gang, and their present life, in prison. Likewise, and by way of meetings and interviews with other kinds of actors (officials in the penitentiary system, professionals that work on the arduous tasks of gang-member rehabilitation and work with persons deprived of liberty) and collective approaches with focus groups of women gang-member inmates, there was an attempt at reconstructing these women's personal life stories, from the time they were girls and adolescents, until they came to join these groups.

One cannot —or should not— approach and try to understand the gang phenomenon, or even the members' biographies —men and women, or the characteristics that presently make up these groups, without alluding to the general situation of violence in El Salvador. Therefore, in the initial sub-section of the *first chapter* of this report, there is a quick overview of the violent situation in the country, based on official figures. This serves as a framework for the subsequent historical overview of the qualitative transformations that the gangs have undergone over the past years. A second sub-section, also based on official figures, presents the ways and circumstances in which the women —gang-members or not— are affected by the violence that is prevalent in Salvadoran society. Likewise, this second block includes a brief characterization of the women that are, or have been in the past, members of the gangs, based on the results from local research on these groups that precede the present study. Finally, the first chapter ends with a subsec-

tion on the consequences for the women who are involved with violence, which are not restricted to the possibility of entering the penitentiary system, but includes the differential impact that being incarcerated has for the women as compared to the men. This chapter, which can be considered extensive and perhaps might be excluded by those who have more knowledge about the situation of Salvadoran reality, can otherwise be useful for those who want to learn about the characteristics of the broader context in which the gangs operate.

The *second chapter* is a run-through of the methodological aspects of the study: the research techniques and the design criteria that were used; the way the women gang-members and the penitentiary system were approached; the difficulties encountered there; the interview process, as are the subsequent phases of information processing and analysis. The *third chapter* —Initial Prisons— presents an overview of the lives of these women *prior to* their entrance in the gangs. This is a period that is circumscribed to childhood, and early adolescence at the latest, given the early age at which many of them entered the group. During this period, there are many experiences that denote situations of exclusion at different levels: personal, family, community and socio-structural. Violence, abandon and precarious conditions were constant factors that prevailed throughout their childhood and early lives. Given that they share social and economic contexts with the rest of the male gang members, it is important to acknowledge the way that, under some circumstances, the girls are *also* affected by them.

The various sub-sections in the *fourth chapter* —the Chosen Prison— explore the different areas of the womens' lives inside the gangs. The first presents their perspective on the reasons that lead them to join the group and the process of rapprochement and joining the gang. The second section is a review of the processes and rituals for induction, as well as their initial experiences in the group. The third block is a study of the role the men have played throughout the women's lives, not only

in their participation in the dynamics of the gang, but as regards to their intervention in violence in general. The fourth block deals with their responsibilities or functions in the inner workings of the gang, as well as some similarities and differences in terms of their men gang-partners. The chapter closes with an exploration of their experiences in the violent social-dynamics that surround the group, from their positions as victims and as aggressors.

The *fifth chapter* —Prison as a Sentence— studies the prison lives of the women gang-members. The first section analyzes their evaluation of their membership and life in the group, from their condition of having been deprived of liberty; besides, it explores the existence of support mechanisms on the part of the gang in their present condition. The second section is a study of their appreciations and personal experiences, and the changes that they might have experienced in their roles —as daughters, mothers, as a couple, and as women— stemming from their incarceration. Also, it looks at their needs both in their condition of internment, as well as in the phase of recovering liberty. The chapter ends with their declarations about future expectations, conceived by some as mere "dreams," when taking into account their penal situation or their status in the gang, once they are outside prison. The *sixth chapter* closes with some reflections articulated in six different premises, which are considered some of the most relevant ideas in the study.

Designing the structure of the interviews with a biographical schema made it possible to access information about these women's living situation, which was not circumscribed to their years of activity in the gang. On the other hand, it also opened the possibility for characterizing some of the living conditions where the limits between individual authorship and exclusive responsibility fade, to give way to the supremacy of the group dynamics in many of their actions. The latter is of great importance in trying to explain and understand —without intending to justify— many of their actions. Thus, the presentation of

the results in this document has been designed following this biographical thread, and the intention has been to trace the path from the girl and/or adolescent to the woman gang-member who, from a less "formal" prison (such as problematic homes, or the overwhelmed, overworked and outdated traditional institutions, inserted in excluded neighborhoods that have been historically marginalized of Governmental attention), arrive at a more structured or formal prison, such as the gang, or the prison where they are presently living.

As to the latter issue, the relation between the women and the Salvadoran penitentiary system is another aspect that has been explored very little in previous work. This is a situation that, besides the fact that they have committed a crime or been part of a gang, leads to a series of vulnerabilities that are shared by many women: exclusion, inequality and the ways in which patriarchal conceptions that society has of men and women are inserted both in the gang and in the prison environment. Aside from the fact of having been deprived of liberty for committing an offense, in the case of El Salvador, prisoners are locked up in conditions that do not favor their rehabilitation or their eventual social integration (Office of the Human Rights Ombudsman [PDDH], 2009; *Quetzalcoatl* Foundation, 2009). Far from this, these conditions promote the perpetuation of the situations of exclusion and marginalization that many of the women come from, which brings them even closer to the circles of crime and violence. Added to this, in the specific case of the women inmates, and as a consequence of the numerical imbalance between men and women that are deprived of liberty, the penitentiary system in general tends to be organized to serve the needs of the male inmates, without taking into account the needs that are specific to the women (Antony, 2007; Rodríguez, 2004; Zaitzow, 2004); and this occurs, regardless of them being gang-members or not. The aforementioned also serves to show how different processes in the patriarchal society are faithfully reproduced within the institutions.

As long as the situation of women inside these different prisons remains undisclosed — woman in a patriarchal society, member of a gang, and an inmate in a prison, then the discussions on proposals and ideas that can help to avert and prevent, at a first level, the girls and young women from joining the gangs will be far off. Equally necessary are those inputs that can, at a second level, help in understanding the situation of the women once they have joined the gang: the different situations they face and the profound shortcomings in terms of support that ceases to come their way from different levels, which many times compel them to stay within the gang. And, going through these different cycles, it is also necessary to have information on the situation that many of them experience at a later time of their lives, when they are deprived of liberty, having made contact with crime, and then with the penal system. Specifically, it is important to get information on how to make their situation more productive inside the overloaded, overwhelmed, and outdated Salvadoran penitentiary system. Likewise, it is necessary to have input on the elements that can improve the processes for rehabilitation and social reintegration that prison is supposed to fulfill. Thus, one of the main objectives of this document is to contribute some initial ideas that can draw attention to some of these situations, and make it possible to put forward the different needs and risks that these young girls and women are exposed to in each of these stages throughout their lives.

While the state and institutions have little to offer in terms of gang-member rehabilitation and reintegration in El Salvador, there is even less available in terms of programs aimed at the specific needs of women gang-members. This is even more so in the case of the women that make the decision to stop being an active gang-member. Otherwise, there is practically nothing for those that, for some reason or other, have come in contact with the penal system. However, although they have been in a gang, have committed one or several offenses, and have been in prison serving a sentence, they are not exempt from their roles

or their responsibilities while they are in prison or, above all, when they leave. Neither are they exempt from their condition as women. Furthermore, based on the information gathered in this study, and from their own retelling of their life stories, it would appear that these multiple prisons have exempted them, time and again, from their rights as citizens and as human beings. In this regard, it is hoped that this description of the women in the gang becomes a motivator so that many necessary steps are taken to draw attention and direct resources toward the many needs that come from the triple condition of marginalization that they face in the patriarchal Salvadoran society: as women, gang-members, and convicts.

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Chapter 1
Background

El Salvador is a country with a drawn out and tragic record of violence. Interspersed throughout its history are decades of State terror which, when joined with another series of circumstances that pertain to diverse historical junctures, have configured the construction and reproduction of society itself, and of the relations between its members (Hume, 2004*b*). Violence has played a role as an organizer of individual subjectivity and of the social dynamics of the country, and has had a fundamental role in forming the moral, relational and cultural codes that have governed —and continue to govern— relations among people, and their relation to the systems of social control (Alvarenga, 1996); these were not dismantled during the transition from war to peace, neither in the passage from an authoritarian regime to a democratic one. Precisely, as it has to do with a kind of historical baggage that leaves its mark and becomes an active ingredient in many later processes, it cannot be expected that cultural changes —or dismantling violence as one of its axes— will come about "from one day to the next." Actually, as Call (2003) puts it, the formal removal of authoritarian structures is easier than the *informal* transformation of the State practices, the social-attitudes or the citizen mindset.

The culture of violence has a complex impact in configuring the relationships, that transcends the interpersonal dimension, and ends up being a characteristic of the ties between people, institutions, and the State. In the case of El Salvador, when describing the processes which configure a political culture where conflict is favored, Whitehead et al. (2005) noted the historical construction of tainted relations between the Salvadoran State and society, which were mediated by violence and the exercise of corruption. Also, they point out that the character of the political culture of the Salvadoran population, which favors conflict, "has a correlate in the behavior of the elite,

which is expressed in authoritarianism... Authoritarian attitudes of the protagonists of polarization, and their practices of clientelism and patrimonialism, are accepted by a certain part of the Salvadoran population, because it is convinced that this is the only way to meet their needs" (*ibíd.*, pp. 70-71). This becomes particularly relevant given that violence is normalized as a means to maintain the *status quo*, and, at an interpersonal level, as a way of relating and subjecting the other; this generates a condition of progressive mistrust and defensiveness among people, which lead to avoiding or restricting the reliance on peaceful means for conflict resolution, and to condition the ways people relate to each other.

In the case of El Salvador, violence has been a constant factor whose different expressions have historically remained a part of society: political violence, economic violence, domestic, social and criminal violence. One of its most eloquent expressions is the high number of violent deaths that prevail to date, almost twenty years since the signing of the Peace Agreements that formally put an end to the over-a-decade-long, brutal armed conflict that afflicted the country. The civil war may have formally ended in 1992, but social and political relations continue to be characterized by the use of terror and violence as the daily currency for exchanges between people.

Inserted in this framework of violence, the gangs are some of the most evident expressions of these vitiated and violent relations among people, and between citizens and the State. Street gangs —also known in the country as *maras*— became a leading social actor, precisely at the end of the civil war; and, together with other forms, actors and expressions of violence, they have progressively positioned themselves on the social arena (Cruz, 2007). This means that this kind of group of youth that exercise violence were already present in society before the cease fire that ended the armed conflict; and that their presence and dynamics were configured and strengthened, at first, by the massive migrations in the eighties and nineties between the

countries of Central America and the United States, where the gangs imported their initial cultural models from. At a later time, they were strengthened by the negligence which for decades characterized the Salvadoran State's response to a phenomenon that already presented itself as a complex cultural and social expression of juvenile violence.

Understanding the gang phenomenon in general, and the members' personal life trajectories or the characteristics that currently shape these groups, requires understanding the general context of violence in the country. For this reason, this first chapter presents, in an initial sub-section, a brief overview of the country's situation of violence, based on some official figures. The intent is that this general overview should serve as a framework for a historical review of the transformations that these groups have undergone over the past years, evolving from street gangs to complex and violent transnational networks (Cruz, 2009; 2007). This generic review of some of Salvadoran society's expressions of violence, which contain and have facilitated the conditions for the rise and transformation of the gangs, is also intended as a preamble to the characterization of the vulnerability of certain groups of the population, among them, the women.

Thus, a second sub-section, based on some official figures, presents the ways and circumstances in which women are also affected and victimized by the violence that runs through society. The intention is to show that, although the more frequent victims of homicide violence in public spaces are young men —whose deaths are also the most publicized by way of the daily presentation of the situation in the mass media, women are often the victims of brutal forms and expressions of violence as well. This sort of violence is at times less public (although not restricted to private spaces), or it has been deliberately normalized or hushed, above all in the face of the "roar" of violence whose arena is public.

The aforementioned also presupposes presenting —or attempting to present, due to the limited amount of data available— the fact that although a vast number of women are the silent victims of different expressions of violence, there is a minority that not only bear it, but likewise make use of it. And, among this minority, there are the women who are, or have been, members of the gangs. A brief characterization of these women is also presented, based on the findings of research on gangs that were carried out prior to this study.

Finally, this first chapter ends with a sub-section on the consequences that having contact with violence has for the women, which are not limited to entering the penitentiary system, but refer to the particular impact that incarceration has on them, compared with the effect it can have on the men. This confinement, as will be presented, has severe consequences for the women, which become extensive to the next generations, whose care they are often the only ones responsible for[1] (FESAL, 2009).

1.1. Gangs in El Salvador: Expressions of Generalized Violence

1.1.1. Brief Overview of the State of Violence in El Salvador

Violence and crime remain some of the main problems facing El Salvador. Geographically located in one of the world's most violent regions, which is the case of Latin America (Krug et al., 2002), and placed in a strategic passage between the principal worldwide suppliers and consumers of drugs (UNODC, 2007), the country occupies one of the first and least honorable places in the ranking of violent countries around the world. With an average of practically 12 persons murdered per day

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[1] Results from the National Survey on Family Health (FESAL, 2009) indicate that, at the national level, in 36.7% of the homes, women are the heads of households. This figure changes to 32.2% in rural areas, rises 40.3% in urban areas, and 40% in the San Salvador Metropolitan area.

during the first trimester of 2009 (the highest in recent years), and a rate of over 55 homicides per hundred-thousand inhabitants in 2008, El Salvador is one of the most violent countries on the continent. Although this violence is not a new phenomenon, the exacerbation and recrudescence of its expressions over the course of recent years has exposed the complexity of its dynamics, which currently manifest themselves in new ways, and contain a series of challenges and threats for the construction of a democratic and peaceful society.

From the time the armed conflict ended in 1992, crime and violence of a social and economic nature have been constant factors in El Salvador. In an effort to understand this phenomenon in the post-war era, different studies coincided in pointing out a series of factors: the aftermath of the war itself and the country's history of authoritarianism, whose legacy is an entrenched culture of violence in civil society (Cruz, 1997; Martín-Baró, 1989a); the presence and proliferation of firearms in society, as well as the weaknesses and permissiveness in the regulatory and legal framework for their use (UNDP, 2003a); high levels of inequality and social exclusion (UNDP, 2003b); as well as the profound institutional weakness (Cruz and González, 1997; Cruz, 2006b)[2], among others.

Currently, a more recent issue that has an increasingly decisive impact on the levels of local violence is the increased and generalized presence of drug-trafficking in the region. The Mexico/Central-America corridor is the main bridge for traffic of cocaine and other drugs from South America toward the United States and Mexico (UNDP, 2009; UNODC, 2007). Although it is difficult to really know the dimensions of the drug trade that passes through El Salvador, this type of commerce has a strong impact on the state of local violence, be it by means of direct and open use of it (as a product of the violent inter-group

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[2]   These same studies emphasize the fact that, even before the armed conflict and the intensifying of political violence during the seventies and eighties, El Salvador was already counted among the most violent countries on the continent (Cruz, 2003; Hume, 2004a).

dynamics in the struggle for territorial domination), or by means of less visible crimes such as corruption and money laundering (UNODC, 2007). These activities inhibit and restrict State control over important areas in the countries, and this winds up having direct incidence on the local dynamics of violence. While the majority of the drugs do not remain in the region, national consumption has also created a lucrative market, that various actors seek to control[3] (UNDP, 2009; UNODC, 2007). Although little is known about the way these criminal structures operate, their activities decisively contribute to configuring a climate where illegality and violence are important protagonists.

However, the way in which different expressions of violence persist and are becoming more severe suggests that, in El Salvador, the issue goes far beyond being a mere post-war phenomenon, or a derivative to the consolidation of democracy. Rather, they present themselves as enormously complex; different actors participate, intervening directly or indirectly, and there is a need to evaluate the issue of institutional functionality —particularly with an eye on the reforms in the institutions of public safety and justice administration that were proposed in the Peace Accords, as well as public policies aimed at dealing with the phenomenon[4].

In order to portray the seriousness of the violent situation that has prevailed in El Salvador in recent years, it is necessary to keep in mind that this is not only the historical legacy of authoritarian regimes and of social and political conflicts prior to the civil-war; neither is it a direct consequence of the conditions prevalent during the years of armed conflict, nor of

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[3] See "Homicides That Taste Like Drug Wars" (Homicidios con sabor a pleitos entre narcos), www.elsalvador.com/ mwedh/nota/nota_completa. asp?idCat=6358&idArt=4019686); and "Police Link Crimes to Drug-trafficking" (PNC liga crímenes al narcotráfico), www.laprensagrafica.com/ el-salvador/judicial/59945-pnc-relaciona-crimenes-a-narcotra); recuperated the 18th and 16th of September, 2009, respectively.

[4] For revision and analysis of reforms, see FESPAD (2005); Morales (2007) and Ranum (2007). More on the issue of policy in the section on gangs in this study.

the circumstances of social exclusion that prevailed during the post-war period and continue to predominate today. Considering the undeniable contribution made by these and other historical factors, violence in El Salvador in the first decade of this century, and specifically, the violence that has prevailed over the past five years, can also be explained in terms of political factors: a series of erroneous and simplistic state policies that were an attempt at dealing with the situation. These had a decisive impact in terms of making the violent situation more complex and severe, and in the inclusion of several actors as part of its dynamics. This way, the violence in Salvadoran society —which has always had an important place among the concerns and fears of citizens— has in recent years been consolidated into a concrete and objective threat to everyday life and to the social fabric, as thousands of victims are claimed yearly; and it stands as an important challenge to the existing institutions, and to the construction of a democratic society as well.

If homicides are taken as one of the most reliable indicators of the Violence crisis,[5] and as one of the most convincing pieces of evidence of the seriousness of the situation of violent crime in the country, the data available makes it possible to establish the sustained upward tendency of the rate of violent deaths, particularly between 2004 and 2007. Table 1.1 shows, in perspective, the increment in violent deaths in the country over the last six years, and figures for the respective rate per 100 thousand inhabitants[6].

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[5] Generally it is considered that official statistics —aside from considerations about their consistency— tend to be highly reliable when it has to do with homicides and vehicle theft (Basombrío Iglesias, 2007). In the case of homicide, records result from the magnitude of the event; and, in the case of vehicle theft, because in many instances it has to do with an insured item. Otherwise, records of household robbery and kidnapping are of a medium level reliability. Statistics on crimes such as robbery in public spaces, rape, domestic violence and injuries, are low reliability, due to the high underreporting, because of the refusal to emit a complaint, or because of the shame or the fear that the event generates, which makes it less liable to being officially registered.

[6] In this regard, it is necessary to clarify the way these figures were calculated. First of all, prior to 2007, the homicide rates were calculated based on the

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Table 1.1. Homicides & Homicide Rates (per 100 thousand inhabitants) in recent years, by Gender

Year	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Homicides	2,388	2,933	3,812	3,928	3,497	3,179	2,148***
Inhabs.	6,638,168	6,757,408	6,874,926	6,990,658	5,744,113	5,744,113	n/a
Natl. Rate	36.0*	43.4*	55.4*	56.2*	60.9**	55.3**	n/a
Women	232	260	390	437	347	348	n/a
Rate	6.9	7.6	11.2	12.3	11.5	11.5	n/a
Men	2,156	2,673	3,422	3,484	3,150	2,831	n/a
Rate	66.1	80.5	101.2	101.3	115.8	104.1	n/a

*   Based on *Population Projections* for those years (Digestyc, 1996).
**   Based on data from *Population Census 2007* (Digestyc, 2007a).
***   Data from January to June 2009, provided by National Civil Police (NCP).
N/A: not available.
Sources: preapared by Author, based on data from the Ilm (2003 to 2005); Ocavi (2006 to 2008) and Ncp (2009)[7].

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number of deaths provided by the *"Dr. Roberto Masferrer"* Institute of Legal Medicine (Ilm), and based on the *Population Projections* taken from Digestyc (1996), for each year. Second, since 2006, the homicide figures presented, and which served to calculate their respective rate, correspond to the validated data from the three national institutions that are in charge of registering them: the Attorney General's Office-AGO (*Fiscalía General de la República* [Fgr]), the National Civil Police-NCP (*Policía Nacional Civil* [Pnc]), and the Ilm. Since 2006, there is a common protocol that consolidates the data in the three aforementioned institutions which previously kept their own records. Third, in the case of the years 2007 and 2008, the figure in the last national census was used as the population parameter (the country's most recent *Population Census* took place in 2007 [Digestyc, 2007*a*]). The latter explains the hike in the homicide rate for 2007, compared with 2006, despite the reduction in the number of violent deaths during 2007 with regards to the previous year: the *Population Census* for 2007 revealed that the Salvadoran population was lower than projected for that year, based on the prior 1992 census. Therefore, the death rate for every 100 thousand inhabitants in 2007 appears greater than the previous year, despite the reduction in the number of homicides committed

[7]   See articles at: www.laprensagrafica.com/el-salvador/judicial/25838-mil-salvadorenos-fueron-asesinados-en-primeros-tres-meses-del-ano.html; www.laprensagrafica.com/el-salvador/judicial/33652-pais-llega-en-4-meses-a-mitad-de-homicidios-2008.html y www.laprensagrafica.com/el-salvador/judicial/37500-funes-recibe-el-pais-con-1235-homicidios-diarios.html; collected on March 31, May 18, and June 4, 2009, respectively.

This data shows the unpromising behavior of homicides in recent years: after having achieved, in the early years of the decade, a reduction and certain stability in the number of homicides compared with the early post-war years,[8] this tendency experienced an important reversal, particularly starting in 2004. Starting that year, a systematic increase in the number of deaths in the country is observed until 2007, when the tendency again reverts. Notwithstanding, although 2007 and 2008 register reductions in homicide occurrence, at around 10% per year, the figures remain very high, and well over the rates for the early years of the decade. Besides, from the consolidated data for the three aforementioned institutions, as well as preliminary data from the National Civil Police from recent months published in the press, this reduction tendency is discarded for 2009. In fact, police statistics indicate that for the first semester of this year, there have been over 2,100 homicides nationwide; and the average number of violent deaths peaks at 12 deaths a day around the country. Actually, this figure shows an increase of almost 28% with regards to the number of homicides registered for the same time period in 2008. Should this tendency continue by the end of 2009, and based on simple linear calculation, this year could end up being over 4,000 violent deaths, and reach levels close to or greater than 70 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants.

Therefore, the previous data makes it possible to establish that, between 2003 and the first semester in 2009, 21,885 people were assassinated, as a consequence of the Violence & Crime Crisis in the country. This situation has caused homicide rates in 2008 to surpass 55 deaths per 100,000

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[8] Some analysts show a rate of 139 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in 1996. This year is considered the most critical post-war year (see Cruz, 2006*a*; 2005). For their part, according to the coroner's records, in 2002, homicides rose to 2,346; this number practically remained the same in 2003 (it only increased by 1.8%). Notwithstanding, the number of violent deaths increased in 2004 compared with figures from 2003, this was a 23% hike in one year, that is, 545 more homicides than the previous year.

inhabitants. Should this tendency continue, the homicide rates for 2009 may reach greater levels. These alarming figures demonstrate, based on one of its most lethal expressions, that the condition of violence is one of the principal problems afflicting Salvadoran citizens.

The prevalence of violence is detrimental to a society in diverse ways. According to the UNDP (2005), in El Salvador, violence has represented a burden that, by 2003, ascended to approximately 1,700 million dollars, which was the equivalent of 11.5% of the country's Gross National Product. These costs come from the areas of health (lost lives and medical care), institutions (public safety and justice administration), private security, investment deterioration, loss of work opportunities and material losses. This does not include the intangible costs of violence. The impact on productivity and the cost in lives lost due to violence is of particular significance, considering that in this country, homicides have historically constituted the main external cause of death in young people (Santacruz, 2005).

Although in this country, homicide is an everyday occurrence (UNDP, 2009), and is frequently one of the crimes that suffers from lower levels of underreporting (Shrader, 2000), this does not imply that this is the sole expression of violence there is, neither does it affect the entire population in the same manner, nor all equally. For instance, Table 1.1 demonstrates that, in terms of homicide, men tend to be the most frequent victims. Nevertheless, it will be shown in later sections that, in recent years, there have been significant and alarming increments in homicides of women (femicides), particularly, among adolescent girls and young adult women. Graph 1.1 illustrates this situation, and it presents the number of homicides that took place in the country during 2006,[9] by age and gender groups. In this regard, it is worthwhile to

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[9]   Figures for this year were used as this was the most recent data that was broken down by age and gender for each group. Notwithstanding, tendencies in the behavior of homicides according to both variables (gender & age) is extremely similar with regards to prior years, and makes it possible to illustrate the tendency already shown in the data.

note the tendencies in both variables: first of all, the ages, and second, the victim's gender.

As for the ***ages*** of the victims of homicide, Graph 1.1 shows that violent deaths are concentrated in the age groups between 15 and 29. In order to illustrate the vulnerability of these cohorts, take the paradigmatic case of 2006 (which, incidentally, is the year with the greatest number of homicides registered in the latest period). That year, 2,166 adolescents and young men, from the age of 15 to 29, were murdered; this is the equivalent of 55.1% of the total number of homicides that were committed that year. If this is transferred in relative terms, the general male mortality rate, calculated for that year, was 101 homicides per 100 thousand men (Molina, 2007*b*). Notwithstanding, this rate spikes at 148 homicides in adolescents between the ages of 15 and 19; at 261 homicides per 100 thousand young men from the ages of 20 to 24; and to 241 deaths per 100 thousand young men between the ages of 25 and 29 (*ibíd.*). This means, that it is at the level that the Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO) considers epidemic (Kliksberg, 2007), but multiplied by 15, 26 and by 24, respectively.

Graph 1.1

Source: Preapared by Author based on Molina (2007*b*).
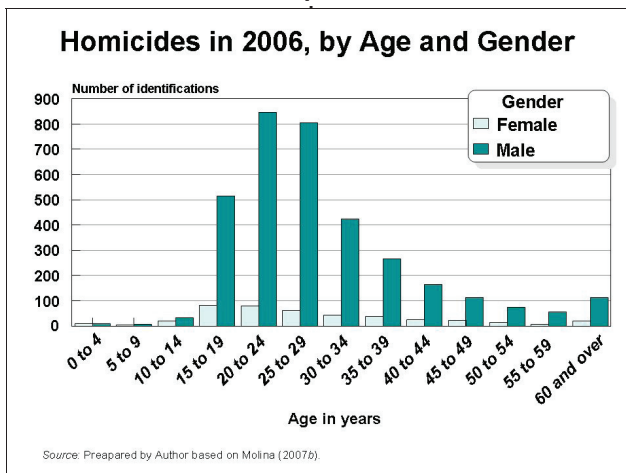
Although its numerical levels are lower, victimization of women by homicide is also concentrated in these age groups (15 to 29 year-olds). This ratifies the elevated levels of vulnerability in Salvadoran adolescents and youth, which are the groups with the greatest probabilities of being affected by one of the most extreme and lethal forms of violence. Graph 1.2 shows, at the national level, the proportion of homicides in which victims were between the ages of 15 and 29, compared to the total number of deaths registered each year by the forensic institute.

Graph 1.2

Victimization by Homicide of Youth Between the Ages of 15 and 29 (in perspective)

Year	Percentage
2003	55.7%
2004	61.2%
2005	61.1%
2006	60.8%
2007	59.3%
2008	55.7%

Source: Preapared by Author, based on data from the Legal Medicine Institute (several years).
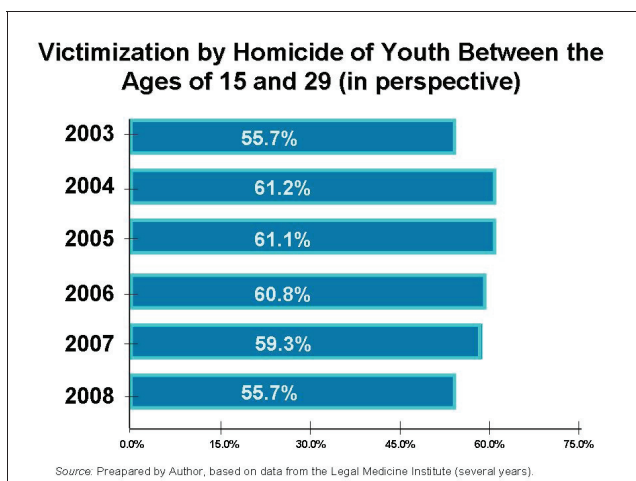
As for the second variable, ***the victims' gender***, it is important to note that, despite that in quantitative terms the most frequent victims of violence that culminates or ends in homicide are young men, it has already been mentioned that, in recent years, the number of murders of women has been on the rise (see Table 1.1 and Graph 1.3)[10].

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[10] Data for 2003 and 2002 were included in order to show that, during the years prior to 2004, the tendency of femicides (although already high), remained relatively constant.

For the purposes of illustrating the magnitude of violence in the female population, it will be shown beginning in 2006 (when, as can be appreciated, over 400 deaths of women were accounted for at the national level). For that year, female mortality rate was calculated at 12.3 deaths per 100 thousand women, at the nation-wide. Nevertheless, the homicide rate doubled in the case of adolescent women between the ages of 15 and 19, as well as for young women between the ages of 20 and 24. Homicides reached 24.5 deaths per 100 thousand young women in those ranges, in both age groups; whereas, in the 25 to 29 group, it reached 19 deaths per 100 thousand women between these ages (Molina, 2007*b*). As can be appreciated, the murder rate for adolescents and young women is practically double the national homicide rate for adult women. This information will be addressed in greater detail in a later section.

Graph 1.3

Femicides in El Salvador (2002–2008)
Totals per Year

Source: Preapared by Author, based on data from the Legal Medicine Institute and Molina (2007*b*).
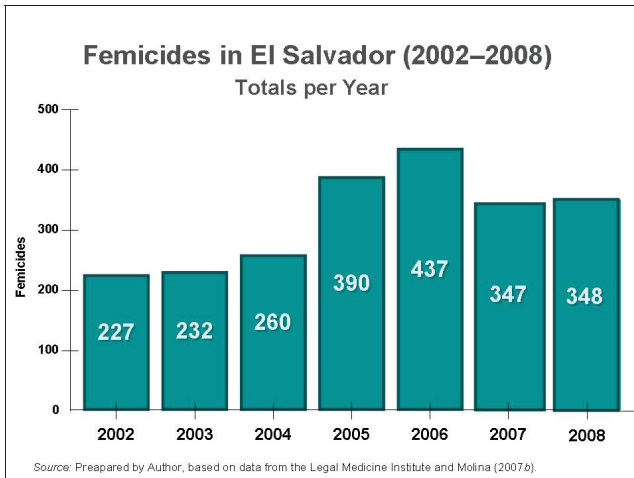
This data shows, among other aspects, that criminal violence, expressed as homicides, becomes particularly brutal among the youth of the nation, without implying that it is the

young men and women that are the only responsible parties, nor the principal ones, in terms of its prevalence (Santacruz and Carranza, 2009). Nevertheless, based on the characteristics of the most frequent victims of homicide violence (young men); due to the notoriety that the gangs have gained since the early nineties because of their violent group dynamics; due to the slant in the handling of this issue in the mass media; and due to the political use the phenomenon was given at the onset of the *Hard Hand* policies in 2003,[11] Salvadoran authorities have almost exclusively blamed the members of these groups for the sharp increase in violence in recent years,[12] without supporting these accusations of primary responsibility of the exercise of violence, by way of the empirical evidence of official data.

According to the most recent study on gangs in El Salvador, and the subregion known as the Northern Triangle of Central America (namely Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras) (Aguilar, 2007*b*), none of the institutions in charge of public safety in these countries has been able to provide figures that show, in a precise way, the level of participation of the gang-members in the crimes that the authorities in each nation ascribed to them, "even though this was the principal argument the governments used to justify the implementation of the anti-gang plans" (*ibíd.*, p.17). Actually, based on police figures on gang participation in different crimes during 2004 and 2005 (the first years of the hard line policies), Aguilar (2007*b*) states that the principal motives of arrest for these groups were illicit assembly, public disorder, and homicide. Homicides attributed to gang-members —according to the same official figures— corresponded to 15% and 25% for 2004 and 2005, respectively. Although these figures are an important segment of the homicide total, this did not come close to the figures alleged by the

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[11]   A later section will deal with this issue in greater depth.

[12]   On numerous occasions, newspaper articles have cited statements from official sources. See "Attorney General Office: 'Homicides are a Product of Gangs'" (*FGR: "Homicidios son producto de pandillas"*), in *La Prensa Gráfica* [a leading Salvadoran newspaper], the story ran on September 3, 2008.

authorities.[13] This casts doubts on the thesis that the gangs are the *sole* generators of violence in the country.

Additionally, despite the notorious increase of gang participation in crime around the country, as part of the transformations that they have been subject to in recent years (an issue that will be reviewed further on), this responsibility has also been overestimated and/or utilized for political ends (Aguilar and Carranza, 2008; State of the Nation Program, 2008). Rather, the violence crisis prevalent in El Salvador has diverse dimensions and actors, and present a much more complex picture, where, for example, the majority of homicides have no clear motive, or at least, a motive established as the result of an institutional investigation of the crime. For instance, Table 1.2 shows a comparison of the motives attributed to different homicides that were committed over the course of three years, based on coroner reports from the ILM.

Table 1.2. Homicides, by Type of Motive (2004 - 2006)

Motive	2004	2005	2006	Average
Unknown	48.4%	59.0%	67.0%	**58.1%**
Common Crime	33.7%	23.3%	18.2%	**25.1%**
Gangs	9.9%	13.4%	11.8%	**11.7%**
Other motives	8.0%	4.3%	3.0%	**5.1%**

Source: Preapared by Author, based on Molina (2007*a* and 2007*b*) and data from the Institute of Legal Medicine (ILM).

It can be seen that these records attribute less than 14% of homicides to these groups per year (see Table 1.2). Due to the fact that the statistics of the coroner's institute are based on information gathered at the site of the murder, or during the post-autopsy work, there exists a possibility that police investigation may later establish a motive that is different from that

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[13] Towards late 2006, the National Civil Police attributed over 60% of homicides to the gangs, without data to empirically sustain this information (Aguilar, 2007*b*).

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registered by the ILM at the time of their investigation; therefore, the real percentage may be higher than what was noted by the coroner's institute. Notwithstanding, National Civil Police figures do not attribute a higher participation in homicides to the gangs either. For instance, data provided by the police force in 2006[14] indicate that, out of the total number of homicides committed during that year, in over 70% of the cases it was not possible to establish a motive; in 18% of the cases, the murder was linked to gangs, and the rest of the cases were tied to other motives, among which were arguments between the people involved (see Graph 1.4).

Graph 1.4

Homicides Perpetratated in 2006, by Motive

Unknown
71.7%

Gang-related
18.0%

Argument
8.2%

Others
2.1%

Source: Preapared by Author, based on National Civil Police data for that year.
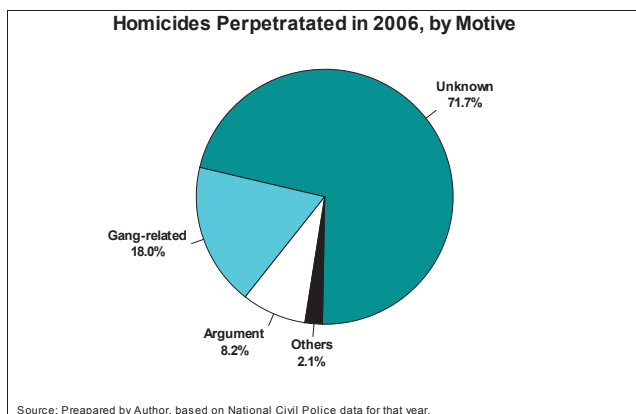
In any case, the fact that the motive cannot be established in at least two out of three homicides indicates the existence of enormous institutional shortcomings in terms of criminal research, the participation of a wide variety of actors in criminal activity, and the high levels of impunity that make it possible and reinforce it. Likewise, one of the current characteristics of

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[14] Following the format for presenting homicides, in which 2006 was chosen as a parameter.

violence and crime is the increase in brutality that characterizes so many of the killings. For instance, the report by the Archdiocese's Office of Legal Assistance (2007) points out a recrudescence of violent acts in recent years, as well as an increasingly systematic pattern of extra-judicial executions, which are made possible by the deficiencies in criminal investigation that result in a lack of explanation for the homicides. This institution has documented several cases of extra-judicial executions, some of them tied to "social cleansing" or the generation of collective terror, by death squads (Archdiocese's Office of Legal Assistance, 2007). According to the latter report, the majority of violent deaths that bore the characteristics of extra-judicial executions had been cases in which the motive could not be established, due to lack information. This indicates the existence and resurgence of this kind of practices in the country. The mere fact that this kind of crime prevails and is again on the rise is a matter for concern, and reflects the highly complex arena, where, although the gangs have become important actors in the violence, they are not the only protagonists. In some cases, there has been documented evidence of executions by irregular groups of citizens, and what is more, these took place with the participation of police agents in the executions (Archdiocese's Office of Legal Assistance, 2007; CCPVJ, 2009).

Nescience regarding the motive and the perpetrators of violence can also be seen reflected in high levels of impunity. In 2005, less than 15% of homicides were investigated by the judicial system, and a mere 3.8% of the total homicides ended in a sentence (Blanco and Díaz, 2007). These figures show a high degree of inefficiency and a series of shortcomings in the judicial system, the Attorney General's Office's, as well as in the police force's investigation process, all of which become obstacles to any effort to understand the complexity of the violence and the actors that participate in it, and wind up fostering the use of violence by generating in the victimizers certainty of not being apprehended as a result of their crimes.

On the other hand, violence in El Salvador cannot be portrayed without dealing with the issue of firearms[15]. According to official data in the coroner's records at the ILM, 4 out of every 5 homicides are committed with a firearm, which doubtless is related to the high number of legal and illegal weapons circulating around the country, as well as the authorities' strong resistance to restricting the right to own and bear firearms. In 2003, it was estimated that approximately 450,000 firearms were in circulation, the majority of them illegal (UNDP, 2003a). Similarly, authorities at the Ministry of National Defense (which is the entity that is in charge of the national weapons registry) revealed, in early 2009, that there were approximately 50 thousand illegal weapons in circulation in the country[16]. Various studies have insisted on the need to disarm the population in order to rein in the violence: on the one hand, firearms make the violent acts more lethal, and on the other, they increase the victimizer's feeling of power, and the possibility of victimizing, when the victim of a crime makes an attempt at self-defense with a firearm (Cruz, 2006a; UNDP, 2003a).

The institutional difficulties in keeping a register of other kinds of crimes, added to the quality and reliability of data, generated by the high percentage of "black figures" or crimes that go unreported, makes it more difficult to determine whether the exacerbation of the homicide violence is concomitant with the general deterioration of other kinds of crimes (Santacruz, 2009). Actually, official figures are based on cases of reports or detention of victimizers, but they leave out all non-reported crimes (UNODC, 2007). On the other hand, the resistance to reporting is highly generalized in El Salvador: a recent victimization survey done at the national level, suggests that practically

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[15] According to data in the Small Arms Survey (Cruz, 2006a), between 1994 and 1999, El Salvador was the seventh largest importer of revolvers and guns made in the United States, a ranking that it has certainly surpassed in recent years, based on the rise in violence and the perception of insecurity.

[16] See: www.laprensagrafica.com/index.php/el-salvador/judicial/21408.html Collected on March 5, 2009.

only a little of a third of the population that has been victimized by some kind of criminal act (35.4%), reported it to the authorities (IUDOP, 2009).

This is the reason data from national surveys becomes alternative and reliable reference sources, particularly about certain kinds of crime (Córdova, Cruz and Seligson, 2008; UNODC, 2007). Looking at surveys done by the University Institute of Public Opinion (IUDOP) at the national level, a rising tendency can be seen in the population that declares they have been the victim of some crime[17], once more starting in 2004 and reaching its high point in 2006 and 2007. As shown in Graph 1.5, at the end of 2007, at least one out of each 5 respondents declared they had been the victim of a crime (IUDOP, 2007), a trend that reverted in late 2008 (IUDOP, 2008), but seems to have resurged in 2009, at least, according to records for July and August (IUDOP, 2009).

Graph 1.5

Source: Preapared by author, based on *IUDOP Year-End Assessment Surveys* and *Survey on Victimization and Perception of Insecurity* (IUDOP, 2009).

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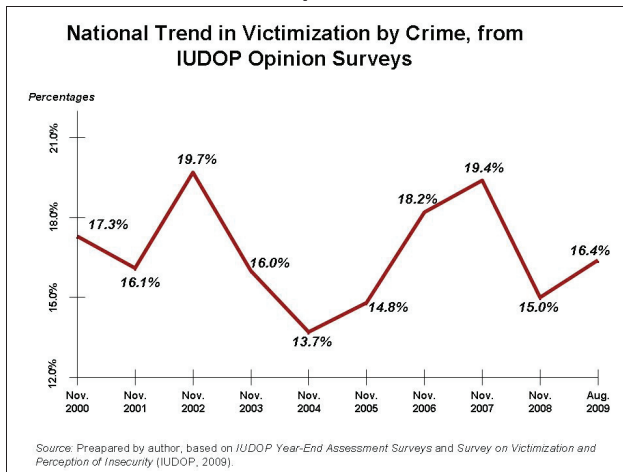
[17] Robbery, with or without aggression, is the most frequent crime mentioned by the total population that says they have been the victim of a criminal act, except in the survey from July/August, 2009.

This trend reversal for the rate of citizen victimization by delinquency and crime this year, exhibits a behavior that is similar to that of homicides: although they experienced a decrease in 2008, this tendency turned around in 2009. Actually, this year's survey on Victimization and Perception of Insecurity (IUDOP, 2009) shows armed robbery and extortion (*rentas*) were the crimes that affected the population the most. Here, it can be seen that although some of the most visible expressions of violence in the country have been homicides, or crimes against personal property, in recent years extortion has attracted a great deal of attention due to the alarming multiplication of these crimes, and their link to gang activity. Actually, the most recent research on the gang phenomenon in the country suggests, based on information provided by key informants,[18] that extortion has become a systematic activity as a means of procuring the funding that the organization requires for uses such as "purchasing arms, paying for lawyers for those arrested, supporting the needs of other gang members, both inside and outside prison, and procuring the resources that make it possible for them to improve their logistical capacity... the gang is using extortion as a means to generate resources for the organization" (Aguilar, 2007*b*, p. 13).

Table 1.3 shows that extortion is a criminal form that has increased significantly in recent years. It can be seen that it has gone from 313 extortions reported in 2004 (4.6 extortions per 100 thousand inhabitants), to 2,451 extortions reported in 2008 (43.5 extortions per 100 thousand inhabitants).[19] This upward tendency of exponential growth does not appear to revert: the total number of reports for this kind of crime had already been surpassed in only the first eight months of 2009.

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[18] Information provided by gang-members as well as security and justice system officials (Aguilar, 2007*b*).

[19] Based on population data for 2007.

**Table 1.3. Reported Extortion (in thousands), per Year
(Period 2004 – first eight months of 2009)**

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009*
Extortions	313	493	1,631	2,497	2,451	2,547
% Responsibility of gangs	N/d	N/d	N/d	32.6%	22.8%	31.8%

N/D: data not determined/registered.
* From January to August 23, 2009.
Source: Preapared by Author based on data from National Civil Police (years 2007, 2008 and 2009) & Ocavi [20].

However, as suggested by official data, research has not been able to place all the responsibility for this sort of crime on the gangs either. Although this kind of crime is one of the criminal modes that gangs have adopted in order to generate resources as part of their criminal economy, currently, there are other criminal groups, individuals, and even state agents that are also participating in this kind of crime, and they do so by alleging they are gang members (Aguilar, 2007*b*). Therefore, the important discrepancies that exist in the crime statistics in the country, the scarce availability of data (particularly on the activities of organized crime), and the inoperative and inefficient criminal investigation have all been characteristic notes that have prevailed to date, and obstacles that doubtless hinder the process of following clues on the evolution of different modes of crime and violence, as well as the actors that are involved.

Within this complex arena, a fact that has decisively contributed to creating a simplistic conception of violence and crime in this country, and to the erroneous governmental measures in facing it, has been the mechanical relation established between youth in general, and the gangs in particular, as the ones that are primarily responsible for the high mortality figures in the country (Aguilar, 2007*b*; Aguilar and Carranza, 2008). Although the participation of young men particularly has characterized

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[20] See www.ocavi.com.sv/docs_files/file_514.pdf and www.ocavi.com.sv/docs_files/file_702.pdf Collected May 20th and June 25, 2009, respectively.

Salvadoran violence, to a great degree this has to do with the fact that they are most frequently the mortal victims of certain types of violence that are closely linked to crime.

Otherwise, it is undeniable that the gangs participate in various expressions of violence, which on many occasions and given the resources these groups currently have, expand the country's figures on deaths due to external causes. Likewise, in recent years, there has been a significant increment in the participation of minors involved in serious crimes,[21] as a result of their membership in these groups. Notwithstanding, the gangs and the minors that are currently exercising violence are not sectors that are representative of the youth groups in the country. In fact, they are not even the majority of young people. Nevertheless, this twofold participation of certain social sectors of youth in violence (as frequent victims, and as perpetrators in the aforementioned cases), has brought on, as one of its most visible consequences, the criminalization of the image of youth in general, and almost exclusive attribution of responsibility for violence and crime rampant around the country by the authorities.

In recent years, some studies have come to play down these positions, and have noted that it is precisely the kind of official response to the gang phenomenon, in particular, that was one factor which came to dynamize the gangs' group dynamics and their participation in the country's wave of violence, and make it even more complex (Aguilar, 2007a; Aguilar and Carranza, 2008; Cruz 2009, 2007). Actually, the latest research shows the gangs' progressive trend toward a specific mode of organized crime; their changes in the values and the rationales for group actions; and, their greater level of responsibility for the current levels of violence (Aguilar and Carranza, 2008; Aguilar, 2007b).

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[21] Personal communication with Roxana Martel, the director of the Central American Coalition for Prevention of Juvenile Violence (CCPVJ); personal interviews with officials at the General Office of Penitentiary Centers.

Before discussing the issue of the public policies that were implemented in order to control and reduce violence, a look at the figures are the best evidence of the failure of those strategies and policies. As some analysts have pointed out (Aguilar and Carranza, 2008; Aguilar and Miranda, 2006; Cruz and Carranza, 2006; Ranum, 2007), these government strategies have been principally of the repressive type, and were implemented by way of a series of police plans and reforms to the Criminal Procedure Code, and the creation of new crimes. One of the most evident and dangerous results of this situation is the high level of over-crowding in prisons, due to the constantly growing number of persons deprived of liberty that are being placed there. Currently, the 20 Penitentiary Centers around the country, whose total holding-capacity is 8,100 people (DGCP, 2008a), housed close to 20,000 convicts at the time fieldwork for this study began,[22] without diminishing in the least the most serious crimes, such as homicides, or having any effect in reducing violence in general.

Subsequently, although the violent situation cannot be portrayed without mentioning these groups, it is important to note that officially chosen responses in facing the gang phenomenon are an example of the kind of policies which have prevailed in recent years around the country. State policies and assumed responses have characteristically emphasized control and a practically exclusive use of punitive, repressive, and forceful measures, as ways to control crime and violence, over and above any use of prevention and/or control, based on the efficient investigation of crime. This sort of policy has marked and dynamized to a determining degree the already complex scenarios where violence takes shape and takes lives each day nationwide, by significantly distorting the complex nature of Salvadoran violence. Therefore, the gang phenomenon must be understood in light of this context, as a symptom of a society

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[22] See "Close to 20 Thousand Inmates Fill Prisons" (*Casi 20 mil reos saturan las cárceles*), in *El Diario de Hoy* [national newspaper], September 19, 2008.

that has yet to leave behind the use of violence as a mechanism to obtain personal, economic and symbolic benefits.

1.1.2. Historical Overview of the Country's Gang Phenomenon

The existence of gangs, or *maras* as they are called in the Salvadoran context, is not a new phenomenon in El Salvador. There have been references to groups of youth since the seventies (Savenije and Beltrán, 2005). However, these groups did not have the same characteristics as the gangs that began to form in the late eighties. Although the nature of those initial groups was very different from that of the gangs that are present in the country nowadays, they have been considered predecessors to the current phenomenon[23] (Smutt and Miranda, 1998; Cruz and Portillo, 1998), which currently presents a serious threat to public safety in several countries around the region, particularly in those that make up the sub-region called the Northern Triangle of Central America. The transformations the phenomenon has undergone are, on the one hand, the result of the nature and evolution of this sort of assemblage; however, no doubt it is also the product of a delayed and erroneous response on the part of the State.

General Characteristics of Gangs in Transition

The gangs of today date from before the end of the Salvadoran armed conflict (1980-1992). However, it was not until the early nineties that these groups of youth began to attract the attention of public opinion and the authorities. Gangs were noted as important actors in the new arena of violence that prevailed in El Salvador after the end of the war. And the gang culture, with the use of symbols such as clothes, signs, tattoos

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[23] For a detailed review of the factors associated to the emergence of the gangs in El Salvador, see Cruz, 2005; Cruz and Carranza, 2006; Cruz and Portillo, 1998; Santacruz and Concha-Eastman, 2001; Savenije, 2009; Smutt and Miranda, 1996. These studies emphasize the complexity and multiple-causality of the phenomenon.

and language, became the new icon for youth identity in the crowded low-income neighborhoods in some urban areas of the country.

These gangs emerged in urban neighborhoods and communities; they often had their base in a specific territory and responded to local dynamics. However, a short time after the end of the civil war, two gangs of Hispanic origin in California, USA —namely *Salvatrucha Gang* (*Mara Salvatrucha* or *MS*), and the *18 Street Gang* (*18*)— became predominant blood-rival gangs on the Salvadoran scene. According to the first studies on gangs (Cruz and Portillo, 1998; Smutt and Miranda, 1998), the large majority of young people with links to this sort of group belonged to either one of these. In this way, a great deal of the local or neighborhood gangs were assimilated into these two groups; while these "new" gangs —which were already larger and better organized— attracted many other youth who joined throughout the decade.[24]

According to the studies cited, the juvenile gangs at that time —even the largest ones such as the *MS* or *18*— were relatively horizontally linked groups, made up of adolescents and youth, mostly men. The young men were organized in *cliques (clikas),* name given –and still used— to a kind of sub-group or cell of the gang that is tied to the neighborhood or territory where it emerged. Despite being identified with a larger gang, the *cliques* operated in a relatively independent manner, and had sporadic contact among them (Cruz and Carranza, 2006). Aside from their identification with their gang, the *cliques* based their identity on the defense of a "physical" territory (streets,

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[24] There is no doubt regarding the importance of the return of Salvadoran youth who had belonged to gangs in the United States, which facilitated the importation of a new gang culture to El Salvador. Still, this migration must not be understood as the sole, or even the principal factor in explaining the emergence of gangs in the country. For more detail and discussion on the role of migration in the development of gangs, see Aguilar, 2007*b*; Cruz and Portillo, 1998; Santacruz and Concha-Eastman, 2001; Smutt and Miranda, 1998.

public spaces), and on the protection of their neighborhood, especially against the members of a rival gang. Although the gang structure at that moment was portrayed as being "horizontal and volatile," there were already signs that indicated a certain non-formal organizational structure. Some gang members enjoyed greater levels of influence and respect within the gang, and to a certain degree acted as leaders (called *palabreros*); despite this, the gang members themselves did not perceive or reject the existence of a leadership (Cruz, 2005). These groups had also established certain rules and rituals that members had to follow, such as the induction rituals, whose formal and symbolic essence are still maintained to date: young aspirants have to subject themselves to a beating by other members of the gang for a number of seconds, according to which gang they are joining (13 seconds if it is the *MS*; 18 if it is the *18 Street*).

Gangs have always been associated with violence.[25] In the nineties, violence associated with these groups was principally related to their deadly rivalry. Although many of the confrontations took place with cutting weapons, the pioneer studies on gangs showed that many gang members started having more frequent access to firearms, and using them. This intensified the lethality of gang violence. Aside from the violence associated with the inter-group rivalry, many of the members accepted participating in another series of crimes such as robbery and theft, which reflects an incipient but real level of criminal activity that affected the general population. This is how, since the early nineties, young gang-members were already perceived by the citizen population as a source of insecurity,[26] and this started

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[25] The relationship between gangs and violence has been an important issue in the discussion on how to define the concept of a gang at the international level. See Klein (2005), for a discussion and consensus on definitions.

[26] Starting in the early post-war years, citizens indicated that youth and gang members were a threat to security (see IUDOP, 1993). Then again, two out of every three gang-members interviewed in the pioneering study by Cruz and Portillo (1998) said they had already been in prison at the time of the interview.

to constitute a public-safety problem which is reflected in the elevated number of gang-members that had already been incarcerated, particularly for robbery and aggression (Cruz and Portillo, 1998).

The noteworthy relationship between gang members and violence was not exclusively that of aggressors, but also as victims. Aside from victimization that many young people had suffered in their family and community contexts, gang-life entails a greater level of exposure to becoming a victim of the aggressions effectuated by other actors. The Cruz and Portillo study (1998) shows the rival gang as the principal aggressor, and a significant percentage of survey-respondents (30%) also said they had been victims of aggressions by police officers. During those initial years, the respondents did not perceive or point out the members of their own gang as potential victimizers. This is not to say that there was no violence among themselves, but rather, based on codes of respect, solidarity and loyalty held as the pillars for the configuration of the group, its members did not perceive their own gang-partners as a threat.

This two-faced nature that characterized the violence associated with these groups was also found in terms of the costs and benefits of belonging to the gang, as well as in the attractive factors and the particular conditions that drew them to the gang. Likewise, this drive toward belonging to a group highlights the fact that, already at that time, there were poor or inexistent cultural options or referents for young people. This made joining a gang a way of entering a space for ascribing identity, which is so important for people at that period of their lives. If, on the one hand, young people felt attracted to the gang movement or to its activities such as *"hanging out"* —which, at the time, was characterized by friendship and fellowship among the members, drug-use, defense of the neighborhood, and rivalry with the opposing gang—, many gang members, on the other hand, were looking for a refuge from a troubled family situation, often characterized by physical and/or psychological abuse, lack

of attention and an absence of positive role models. (Cruz and Portillo, 1998; Smutt and Miranda, 1998).

Those two studies, based on surveys or interviews with gang-members in El Salvador during that period, coincide in that they note the desire for respect, power, solidarity and fellowship as the main benefits of belonging to a gang. Nevertheless, many declared that gang life had generated problems for them, including the threat of being wounded or murdered. This duality was also reflected in the fact that many young people considered participation in the gang *temporary*, that is to say, gang members expressed an interest in *calming down*[27] further on, and finding a job, having a family, and carrying on a life outside the gang. This way, Salvadoran gangs in the nineties still had a certain "volatile" quality, where not all the young men perceived their gang-member status as a permanent condition.

A few years after these initial gang studies, a second survey among gang-members made by IUDOP in 2000 (Santacruz and Concha-Eastman, 2001) made it possible to perceive an intensification of the gang phenomenon. This enhancement was manifested particularly in the levels of violence associated with the gang, the use of drugs and lower level of disposition on the part of the members to abandon the gang lifestyle. Early in this decade, a greater number of gang-members reported having been in prison; many of the young men bore firearms or cutting weapons, and the victimization of gang-members was on the rise, particularly by the police, by rival groups, and even by members of their own gang. Although the rival

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[27] What is understood by *calming down*, is that status where the gang-member —without abandoning his/her membership to the group— puts aside those characteristic activities of gang life which, at that time, tended to be linked to the use of violence and substance use (Cruz and Portillo, 1998). In general terms, this presupposes a *deactivation* from the internal group dynamics. In this regard, Cruz and Portillo (1998) noted that 84% had expressed their wish to calm down; a similar finding was found by Smutt and Miranda (1998), where 8 out of 10 interviewed youth wanted to calm down.

gang was still reported as being the main aggressor, one out of every three gang-members declared having been assaulted by a police officer. Contrastingly, women gang-members that were approached in this opportunity reported a lower rate of victimization by the police; nevertheless, they had greater exposure to being assaulted by a *homeboy*, that is to say, a member of *their* own gang. This situation was warning of significant changes in the *logic* and rationale in the group, and exposed many of their internal contradictions.

So it is that this study, carried out in the early part of this decade, demonstrated the way in which gangs were part of a complex criminal process, in which a possible trajectory that could affect the young people had been identified. By way of a pyramid model, Concha-Eastman (in Santacruz and Concha-Eastman, 2001) showed how the family and social-economic environment, characterized by conflict and violence, was the first step on a path of violence that passes by non-delinquent juvenile groups to gangs, and eventually, arrives at participation in organized crime:

> … the "*maras*" or gangs become a breeding ground for organized crime, drug traffickers, bank or jewelry store robbers, armed mobs at the service of dark interests. [...] The criminal organization requires new imput: the hitman, the mobster, the *gamín*, all of them youth. Once involved in these activities, exiting violence is increasingly difficult (*ibíd.*, pp. 11-12).

These warnings, along with the study results, indicated that Salvadoran juvenile gangs, in the early part of this decade, were becoming groups that were going further than gang rivalry and committing petty crimes.

Despite the changes that had been noted, other characteristics, such as reasons for joining and the benefits of being in the gang, had not changed significantly. The main reason for

joining the gang was still *hanging out [el vacil]*, followed by family troubles. However, another development that was noted were the changes in the conceptualization and meaning that gang-members gave to *hanging out*, which had gone from being a term used to denote a whole plethora of diverse activities (from wandering around the neighborhood to participating in illicit activities), to meaning the crystallization of benefits that transcended mere identity gains, such as access to power, to resources and to the respect of other actors (Santacruz and Concha-Eastman, 2001). In fact, violence went on to be part of the conditions associated with this transformation in the conceptualization of *hanging out,* becoming a key element in the *vida loca* (crazy life) of the gangs. In the gang's dynamics, violence works as an instrument to access power and respect, along with the possibility of configuring the sense of identity and belonging that they get from the gang. In an effort to understand the growing levels of violence exerted by the gangs, it is noted that the collective also generates processes of anonymity or *deindividualization*, which disencumber the participants of individual responsibility for acts they have committed, which reduces the cost of committing crimes.

In this regard, Santacruz and Concha-Eastman found that a higher percentage of gang-members expressed *not wanting to calm-down*, in terms of their participation in the gang. According to the authors, this could reflect the fact that the gang had diversified their operations, and that it generated greater benefits for the young people than before, not only in terms of life with the gang-partners, or in terms of power and respect, now also in terms of economic gain. This was reflected in the group dynamics and characteristics, such as greater levels of cohesion, strengthening of rules, greater internal control and progressive participation in illegal activities that generate economic return. Conversely, these developments in the gang also came as the result of the serious deterioration in the social and economic environments in the neighborhoods where the members lived, as well as the lack of options and possibilities

for affiliation outside the gang, in order to fill their need for symbolic sense, as well as for the socio-economic benefits. Added to this were higher levels of hostility on the part of other actors such as the rival gang, the police force, and society in general; also, there was the neglect-factor in terms of simplistic policies aimed at a phenomenon that was quickly achieving greater levels of complexity. Thus, these results also indicated that the "volatility" which had characterized the phenomenon during the nineties, had decreased. Particularly, taking into consideration the greater exertion of violence and the progressive participation in criminal activity, the members were more deeply committed, and they no longer considered the option of *calming-down* desirable or, even, feasible.

After these early warnings of the intensification of the phenomenon, the operational, organizational and even cultural transformations in the gang continued to evolve. A few years after the Santacruz and Concha-Eastman study (2001), the tendency toward a strong implication in the violence and the warnings that the authors made regarding the gang as a step towards organized crime were confirmed by other analysts. For instance, early in this decade, a regional research program got underway, which focused on the gang phenomenon, in the collection *Maras y Pandillas en Centroamérica (*Maras and Gangs in Central America), given the substantial increase of the gangs' involvement in the violence in different countries of the region. This initiative addressed issues tied to the study of these groups, and a series of recommendations were articulated, in an attempt to present —from different perspectives and issues— possible alternative approaches to the phenomenon.[28] For his

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[28] Participating in this series of regional studies were a group of educational institutions associated with the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) in Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. The series is comprised of four volumes: the first, deals with the general characteristics of the gangs, from a qualitative approach (ERIC et al., 2001); the second volume focused on the characteristics of the social environment where gangs emerged (ERIC et al., 2004*a*); the third, presented the issue of juvenile and rehabilitation policies (ERIC et al., 2004*b*),

part, Carranza (2005) showed several cases of participation of children in organized armed violence; in many of these cases, they were reported as being the executors of serious crimes such as homicide. The same study discovered the relations between some gang members and organized crime rings, which confirmed the aforementioned hypothesis that gangs had transitioned toward crime (Santacruz and Concha-Eastman, 2001). Whereas the relation to organized crime could generate income for the gang-members, it also increased the vulnerability of the members, given that these criminal bands had murdered gang-members who had gotten involved in dealings with organized crime.

The ties between certain gang-members and organized crime show an evolution and an intensification of the gangs-violence relationship, which is a growing cause for concern. Carranza's study (2005) on children involved in organized armed violence (Coav) indicated that many gang members had access to heavy caliber weaponry, and that generally the *missions*[29] that were being assigned to them, were being carried out by way of firearms. It also noted the increasing levels of organization in the gangs, and pointed out that many of the crimes were organized inside the prisons. The fact that the penitentiaries emerged as new key arenas for the gang organization, represented a novel factor in the gang phenomenon. Thus, these groups went from being merely street gangs or neighborhood gangs, to becoming a sort of combination of street gangs and prison gangs[30], a phenomenon that has had a strong impact on the evolution of these groups in different contexts (Decker et al., 1998; Sullivan, 2006).

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and the fourth, dealt with the issue of responses from organizations of civil society to the gang phenomenon (Cruz, 2006*b*).

[29] This term is used by the gangs to denote the task, issued by the group, of murdering members of the rival gang.

[30] In this regard, Cruz (2009) analyses what he has called *the Politics of Violence*, implemented in the country in order to deal with the gang problem, and points out that this sort of measures facilitated the conditions to strengthen and impel the gangs towards more organized forms of exercising criminal violence.

These continuous transformations resulted in a serious increase in the phenomenon's complexity, which currently has characteristics that are very different from those of the last decade in the previous century. Therefore, a decade after the first survey on gang members in El Salvador, a new survey revealed changes in the gangs that were alarming, particularly in their levels of organization and participation in crime (Aguilar, 2007*b*). Based on the I∪DOP's last study on gang-members in prison, Aguilar noted that there have been important changes in the gang identity, reflected in greater levels of secrecy, and the abandonment of traditional symbols, such as tattoos, sign language, particular clothing, among other identifying markings. Gangs appear to have a more vertical structure than before, with more clearly defined leaderships and functions, along with a hardening of internal rules, control over the members' use of drugs, greater access and use of heavy caliber firearms and definite participation in criminal and violent acts, reflecting a greater availability of resources and corporatization. Actually, according to the author "[gangs] are becoming a complex expression of organized crime" (Aguilar 2007*a*, p. 889).

Nowadays, gangs are associated with serious crimes such as homicide, extortion, drug-trafficking, drug possession and drug-dealing, illegal possession and bearing firearms, robbery and theft of vehicles. Some of these illicit activities require a good deal of planning and greater levels of organization, which in turn indicates the changes in their manner of operation. The new criminal pattern also points to the perpetration of crimes that generate considerable economic revenue, and doubtless have provided them with greater resources. Also, ties to organized crime have been maintained and, in some cases, have increased (∪NDP, 2009; ∪NODC, 2007).

Parallel to the rise in the gang's involvement in violence and crime, the gang-members' vulnerability has likewise increased. As mentioned in the previous section, in general terms, the youth are the principal victims of homicide in the country; and

due to the gang-members' average age and their level of exposure to violence, it can be inferred that a great number of the victims are members of gangs themselves. The rivalry between the two major gangs, and within the groups themselves, has been exacerbated and has become more lethal. Other actors have appeared on the scene, who today represent a serious threat to the lives of the people that are involved in the gangs. According to Aguilar's study (2007*b*), one out of every three gang-members blamed the police for the rise in the number of murdered gang-partners in recent years. Aside from the rival gang, the gang-members themselves point to the government and death-squads among the main parties responsible for the deaths of gang-members (*ibíd.*). The existence of extermination groups has recently become more evident, and the participation of some members of the police force is, on the one hand, a symptom of the decomposition of this institution of public security, and on the other, it suggests a growing conflict between the gangs and agents of the State[31]. Also, as a result of the growing complexity surrounding the national situation of violence in recent years, and due to the changes experienced by the gangs, there has been an upsurge in the level of conflict and internal power struggles that have resulted in members within the same gang becoming the victims of their own partners. On many occasions, this is a product of the battle for control over certain territories between the heads of different *cliques*.

Despite high levels of violence associated with the gangs, these groups still appear to be attractive to many young people, who at an early age make contact with them and join. As in

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[31] In a 2007 case of homicide, police officers were acquitted for the deaths of gang-members in the Eastern part of the country. See, as an example, "National Civil Police looks among its ranks for more homicidals in San Miguel"(*La PNC busca entre sus filas más homicidas en San Miguel*) http://www.elfaro.net/secciones/Noticias/20070903/noticias3_ 20070903.asp collected on September 3rd, 2008. For its part, the Archdiocese's Office of Legal Assistance identified seven homicides with the characteristics of arbitrary executions committed by officers of the National Civil Police in 2007 (Archdiocese's Office, 2007).

previous years, the possibility of *hanging out* continues to attract many young people to the gang. Also, the gang continues playing a role as a refuge and protection, and the friendship and solidarity are still part of the benefits that the aspiring young men and women hope to obtain upon joining. Nevertheless, and according to the Aguilar study (2007*b*), many young people no longer identify specific benefits with membership, which may be an indication that *hanging out* and traditional benefits that the gang generated such as power and respect, while still important in the initial phases of membership, compensate less and less when contrasted with the high levels of risk implied in participation in these groups' dynamics. The gang-members do not point out —at least, not openly— the economic gains as a direct benefit of being in the gang. This may indicate that, despite the existence of a greater level of gang participation in criminal activities, the spoils are not perceived equally by all members; rather, they tend to be turned over to the *clique* or gang as a whole, or perhaps it is a minority that benefit more directly from these activities.

The transformations in the gangs have generated a debate on the extension of the phenomenon. Of particular interest is the qualitative dimension, and its potential as a threat to public security and social stability. Official sources estimated, in 2007, a total of 16,810 gang-members, distributed in 381 *cliques*, with approximately 35% belonging to the *18th Street* Gang, 64% to the *Mara Salvatrucha* Gang, and only 1% to other gangs (Ministry of Public Security and Justice, 2007). Considering this number of gang-members, and the high degree of their participation in crime, nobody could doubt the fact that, at the end of the first decade of the 21st Century, the gangs represent a serious problem affecting public security in El Salvador. While not everyone would accept, from the rhetoric of security, the warnings that the gangs have become a threat to national and even hemispheric security, as some official sources maintain,[32]

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[32] See Chiller and Freeman (2005) on new concepts in hemispheric security as used by the Organization of American States (OAS).

it cannot be denied that, presently, gangs are no longer circumscribed to national and local dynamics; they have demonstrated that they possess greater resources, as well as a greater capacity of movement.

Factors Associated with the Transformation of the Gangs

There is no question that the gang phenomenon is due to multiple causes. However, in recent years, analysts coincide in pointing out the need to analyze the impact of the public policies implemented in this country during recent years, in order to be able to understand the transformations and the increase in the level of complexity of the phenomenon, and to anchor it at a structural level. For several years, studies about the gangs have emphasized the need to build public policies to be able to prevent and control the evolution of these groups (Cruz 2007, 2006*b*; Cruz and Carranza, 2006; Eric et al., 2004*a* & 2004*b*). Despite the aforementioned, official efforts in terms of prevention have been scarce or nonexistent, and the initiatives that have come out of civil society have been disarticulated and lacking more solid backing (Aguilar and Miranda, 2006; Aguilar 2007*a*; Carranza, 2005; Santacruz, 2006).

A study on public policy carried out in the framework of the study series *Maras y Pandillas en Centroamérica* (Eric et al., 2004*b*) noted the lack of clarity, responsibility, vision and coordination on the part of the official institutions that dealt with the issue of youth. The most recent papers on gangs and public policy point out that there have been advances in terms of the creation of a national plan for youth, and some efforts on the issue of rehabilitation and (re)integration. However, the implementation of these programs was not a priority for successive incumbent governmental agencies, who instead favored hard line strategies to control the phenomenon, with plans such as *Mano Dura* and *Súper Mano Dura* (*Hard Hand* and *Super Hard Hand*). Thus, since 2003, the dominant strategy for combating gangs in El Salvador was circumscribed to executing

a string of police crackdown plans, based on a "Zero Tolerance" doctrine. Since that time, a series of anti-gang laws and plans were enacted and executed, even though they were consistently shown to be unconstitutional.[33]

This strategy did not go far in reducing the levels of violence, neither did it solve the problem of gangs, and, it actually proved to be counterproductive in terms of the country's situation of violence[34] (Aguilar 2007a; Aguilar and Miranda, 2006; Cruz, 2009; Cruz and Carranza, 2006; State of the Nation Program, 2008; WOLA, 2006). The declared war on gangs generated greater cohesion and organization within the gang structure, and encouraged greater sophistication in the way of operating, in order to obtain more resources and strengthen the organization. This can be seen in greater participation in crime for economic gain. The massive incarceration of gang-members[35] made the penitentiaries a space where the gangs

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[33] These plans basically consisted of massive detentions of young people who were suspected of belonging to gangs, through massive police operations in low-income neighborhoods. Anti-gang laws generated, among other things, important controversies and confrontations between the Executive and the Judicial branches of Government, and they were declared unconstitutional. The result was the incarceration of thousands of young gang-members and non-gang-members alike. This lead to further overcrowding (in the already bursting prisons); also, the phenomenon was driven underground, as a response to the typification the State made of them as illegal agents due to their allegiance to the group. Further, there were important changes in their operational dynamics, which accelerated the processes of institutional formalization of the gangs, and their greater involvement in criminal activity. This does not take into account the consequent construction of social imaginaries tied to the criminalization of youth, which also had an effect on the young people that are not members of gangs. For a detailed description of these processes, see Aguilar (2007b); Aguilar and Miranda (2006); Cruz (2007 & 2005); Cruz and Carranza (2006).

[34] See "14 thousand Salvadoreans murdered in Safe Country" (14 mil salvadoreños asesinados en País Seguro), in: www.elfaro.net/secciones/Noticias/20080602/ noticias1_20080602.asp Collected June 2nd, 2008.

[35] Police sources cited in Aguilar's study (2006) noted that, between July 2003 and September 2005 (during most of the time both crackdown plans were in force), over 32 thousand gang-members were arrested (on occasions,

could strengthen their organization, foster group cohesion, and reaffirmation of commitment to the group. In 2003, the penitentiary system implemented measures by which the two gangs were grouped into different prisons; in practice, this policy transferred internal control to the gang members (Aguilar, 2007*b*; Cruz, 2005). Added to this situation is the fact that members of one and the same gang, but belonging to different *cliques* at the national level, were imprisoned at the same site. This in turn set up propitious conditions for communication, exchanges and connections on the national level (Cruz, 2005).

The Salvadoran penitentiary system's weaknesses inhibited any control on the inmates' activities. Closer proximity facilitated the generation of a climate of aggression and fights between the prisoners, and opened the way for an internal restructuring of the members of these groups in captivity. On the other hand, the fact that the criminal policy was almost exclusively focused on gangs, made it possible for other criminal forms and other criminal actors to evolve and operate with impunity, without the necessary attention on the part of the public security authorities (Ranum, 2007). This made the situation worse, and set off the spiral of violence around the country, which, in turn, had a direct repercussion on the gangs, who organized and restructured themselves in order to face the new situation.

The evolution of the country's gangs in recent years demonstrates that —even though they have their own characteristics, and are inserted in a context that laid the foundations for these transformations to take place at breakneck speed, they respond to patterns observed in other juvenile and street gangs outside the Central American region. Particularly, literature on gangs in the United States has highlighted the importance of considering local factors, such as persecution and dangers perceived by gang members, as keys to understanding the

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arresting the same person several times) in the framework of these plans. A great deal of them were later set free due to lack of evidence.

cohesion of the group and the strengthening of their identity, as well as the prison's function in the transformation of the gangs (Klein and Maxson, 2006). Nevertheless, at the same time that these factors aid in comprehending the transformations of this phenomenon, it must be kept in mind that the conditions that propitiated the emergence, reproduction, and strengthening of the phenomenon still persist. While anti-gang plans influenced the gangs' organization and activities, and have become more important for the analysis of the phenomenon in recent years, many of the factors that cause young men and women to feel attracted to the gangs continue to be the same as they were over a decade ago.

The failure to mention women in the gang throughout this brief run-through of the last fifteen years of evolution and transformations of these groups has not been arbitrary. Actually, it reflects the informational void that, from academia, has been maintained surrounding the figure and the participation of women in these groups. In later sections, some empirical information that has been obtained on women in the gangs will be provided. Notwithstanding, it is clear that the omission of women as significant protagonists in these groups has been historical. This is what the following sections deal with to some extent.

1.2. Women, Violence and Victimization

The relation between women and violence, and the different ways that the latter affects them, in a patriarchal society that is marked by profound gender imbalances, is a complex and little registered connection that is not noted in the official figures. The difficulty in tracing the outline of this relationship comes, precisely, from the types of expressions of violence that the young girls, adolescents and women are victims of, given that the kind of victimization they bear is not often the kind of offense or crime that swells official statistics (Basombrío Iglesias, 2007; Shrader, 2000), nor are they prone to getting media

coverage, particularly when they take place inside the walls of the home, often at the hands of parents, relatives or significant adults. Rape, sexual harassment, injuries, physical, verbal or psychological aggression, as part of complex scenarios of domestic violence, are some of the situations where the children, youth and women are most often the victims. However, the aforementioned crimes are not usually the most reported. Therefore, their prevalence is not reflected in its fair dimension in the official statistics. In fact, the different forms of violence aimed at children and women[36], in general, fill in that "black figure" of crime that is so often alluded to when it is said that official figures are far from representing the reality of everyday violence.

Generally speaking, statistics on violent crime —particularly those related to armed robbery, rapes and domestic violence— tend to be highly dependent on the quality of the available information; and the lack of reports add to the underreporting and absence of data. In this sense, Shrader (2000) suggests that in contexts where the homicide rates are high, inadequate techniques for registering and collecting information on violence toward women contribute decisively in slanting the view of the impact of different expressions of violence on the female popu-

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[36] In December 1993, the United Nations General Assembly ratified the "Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women" (A/RES/48/104, UN, 1994), which is the first international human rights instrument that deals exclusively with this issue. Violence against women is defined as, "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life." It includes, "physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring in the family, including battering, sexual abuse of female children in the household, dowry-related violence, marital rape, female genital mutilation and other traditional practices harmful to women; non-spousal violence and violence related to exploitation; physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring within the general community, including rape, sexual abuse, sexual harassment and intimidation at work, in educational institutions and elsewhere, trafficking in women and forced prostitution; physical, sexual and psychological violence perpetrated or condoned by the State, wherever it occurs."

lation. Consequently, the gender gap shown as a quantitative imbalance in homicide victimization —where young men are the principal victims— does not make it the best or the most precise indicator or predictor to evaluate the existence of other types of expressions of violence in a society; and they are particularly no good for measuring certain kinds of expressions of violence that affect women more, such as domestic violence and rape. Now, even when taking into account the fact that official information sources will only provide a partial glimpse of the complex phenomenon of violence, and its impact on the life of women, it is necessary to make use of the available information in order to have a generic notion of the situation, with due warning that it is just an approximation, and not a conclusive definition of the real situation of violence against girls, youth and women in the country.

Therefore, this section will attempt to approach this complex dimension of the women-violence binomial. First of all, this will be done by presenting some of the officially recorded figures on offenses, which will make it possible to visualize different forms of victimization of girls and women. Second — and going more in depth into the characteristics of the women that are the object of study in this document— data will be presented on the participation of women in the gangs, based on information from previous studies that have been done on gang members in the country. Finally, this section closes with a brief reference to the situation of those women who are deprived of liberty, and the consequences that being in contact with the penal system have had for them.

1.2.1. The Impact of Violence: Women as Victims

Femicides

Although in terms of numbers, young men are the most frequent victims of violent crimes that end or crystallize in homicide, it has been mentioned before that since a few years

ago, the number of murders of women has been on the rise. According to official statistics, femicides —understood as murders of women due to their gender-condition, and the most extreme expression of gender related violence— have experienced a sustained growth, particularly in the period from 2004 to 2006 (see figures in black above the bars, Graph 1.6). Based on forensic records, the murder of women have come to comprise at least 10% of all deaths that have occurred in recent years.

Graph 1.6

Femicides in El Salvador (2002-2008)
Total per Year and Rates per 100 Thousand Women

Source: Preapared by Author, based on data from the Legal Medicine Institute (ILM) and Molina (2007b).
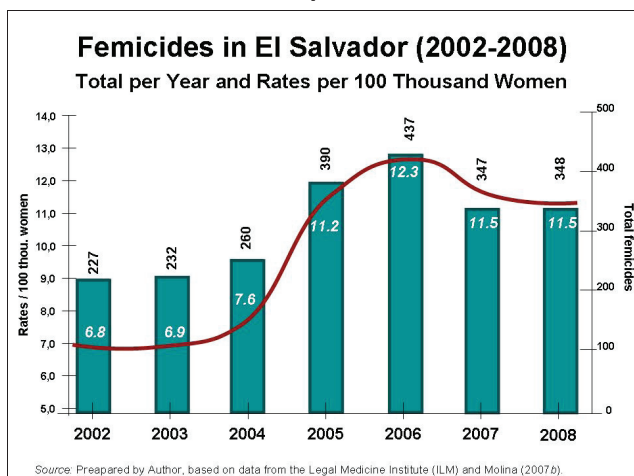
Regarding general femicide rates (white numbers inside the bars, Graph 1.6), these have gone from 6.8 deaths per 100 thousand women registered in 2002, to 12.3 deaths per 100 thousand women in 2006, and to a similar figure (11.5) in the last two years. Actually, based on a more detailed analysis of the murder of women in 2006, the data from forensic records presents results that had already been proposed in the case of homicides around the country: the majority of murders of women have no known motive (Méndez, 2007). While over the last two years there has been an ever so slight reduction in

the marked growth trend since 2005, at the end of 2008, the closing figure was an excessively high number: 348 women murdered. Furthermore, as if the previous figures were not sufficiently eloquent, figures indicate that close to 1,800 women were murdered over the five-year period from 2004 to 2008. The annual increase in the number of deaths in women is a situation that deserves urgent attention. In this case, the numerical imbalance with regards to the deaths in men should not be a reason to consider that women are not exposed to victimization by crime. On the contrary, in the case of the women, they are exposed to being victims both inside and outside private spaces.

Nationwide, a good deal of the violence —including that which results in fatalities such as homicide— is motivated by a power imbalance between people. A clear example of this are the injuries that result from inter-personal arguments, rape, domestic violence and many of the homicides that are the fatal result of a dispute. Although many women have been brutally murdered in recent years, some have been able to survive the event. These cases, while they did not end with the victim's death, have a whole other series of impacts, at a different level. Nevertheless, it is precisely this kind of crimes that go unreported, which shows the deficiencies mentioned previously, in terms of the quality of registry and the underreporting of many crimes because of an absence of records. In spite of this, a significant level victimization of young girls, adolescents and women is evident.

Injuries

Injuries are another kind of high-incidence crime in the country. Table 1.4 shows behavior for the reports taken at the National Civil Police (NCP) for this kind of offense, according to the age and gender of the victims. In this regard, figures show a large number of people injured around the country each year, with levels that surpass 60 and, even, 70 persons battered or wounded per 100 thousand inhabitants, at the national level.

Table 1.4. Injuries (in thousands), Rate (per 100 thousand inhabitants) and Victim's Gender, per Year (Period 2004 — 2008)

Injuries	2006	2007	2008
Total	3,910	4,086	3,951
General Rate (x 100 thou. inhabitants)	55.9	71.1*	68.8*
Women	1,192 (30.5%)	1,361 (33.3%)	1,362 (34.5%)
Men	2,718 (69.5%)	2,428 (59.4%)	2,393 (60.6%)
Not determined	---	297 (7.3%)	196 (4.9%)

* Based on population data for 2007.
Source: Preapared by Author, based on data from the National Civil Police & OCAVI (2009).

As for the victims' gender, although the continuing trend that has been found for certain crimes like homicide or theft is that there was a greater number of male victims (as a product of young men's participation and involvement in at-risk behaviors), in the case of injuries, a high number of feminine victims was also found (at least, of reported victimization or known cases): during the three years mentioned, women comprised 30.5%, 33.3% and 34.5% of injury victims, out of the total number of reports received during 2006, 2007 and 2008, respectively. It can be seen that the crime-category "injuries" is one that affects an extensive number of women around the country. This, without taking into account the elevated number of injuries that are not reported to authorities, as usually happens when they take place behind the walls of the home.

Unfortunately, the sort of information available does not make it possible to establish the motives, causes or circumstances in which these injuries took place; and in many cases, how many of them were serious enough to have fatal results. However, in the case of 2006, data from police records made it possible to disaggregate reports by cause adjudicated by the

police force, as well as the type of weapon the injury was inflicted with. Regarding the type of motivation or cause adjudged to the injuries, some 72.7% came as the result of inter-personal arguments; and 2.6% were the result of economically motivated acts. However, in the same records, 24.7% of the injuries were classified under the category "other circumstances," without specifying any further details (National Civil Police, 2006). For their part, the data from the police force also made it possible to establish the type of weapon that was used to commit these acts during that year: as shown in Graph 1.7, practically one fourth of the reported injuries had been made with a firearm; 15.8%, with a cutting weapon; almost 9%, with a blunt object; 22.6% came as the result of physical violence; and the remainder, with other types of instruments.

Graph 1.7

Injuries registered for 2006, by Types of Weapon Used

Sharp weapon 15.8%

Firearm 23.9%

Physical Violence 22.6%

19.8%

Unknown

8.5% 9.4%

Blunt instrument

Other

Source: Preapared by Author, based on data from the National Civil Police (2006).
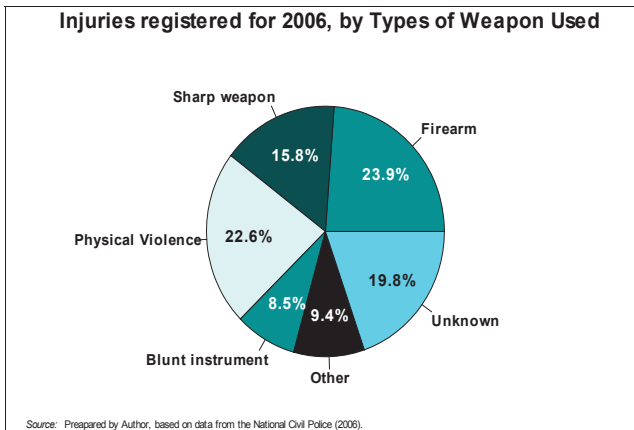
Otherwise, over half (54.4%) of reported injuries took place in public areas. However, almost one out of every five reports of injuries (19%) took place in private spaces, and 26.6% were recorded by the police force under the category "other places", without more explanation.[37]

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[37]   See http://www.ocavi.com/docs_files/file_699.pdf Collected on June 25, 2009.

Considering that three fourths of the reported injuries (at least in 2006) had come about as the result of fights or interpersonal arguments; that over one fifth had not been inflicted by a weapon, but as a product of physical violence; that at least one injury out of every five took place in private spaces; and, that at least 30% of the reports presented during that year were about women victims, it can be deduced that this kind of crime significantly affects women on a daily basis. This crime —which can even lead to lethal consequences, depending on its severity (over 20% of reported injuries were caused with a firearm), is a manifestation of the way in which violence becomes an expression of abusive practices, that are the result of the power imbalance in interpersonal interactions. This is characteristic of the kind of expressions of violence of which women are the most frequent victims.

Sexual Violence: Rape

The search for possible reasons to explain the prevalence of this sort of gender related violence has lead some authors to suggest that societies that have a propensity toward rape (that is, where this manner of offense takes place reiteratively) are characterized by interpersonal violence, male domination and traditional separation of gender roles (Soria and Hernández, in Ferrer and Bosch, 2000). Evidently, these characteristics precisely define the androcentric emphasis in Salvadoran society. So, rape is one of the different modes of gender violence that claims women as its daily victims, among other types of crimes against sexual liberty. In this kind of crime, the predominance of victims that are women over those that are men is noteworthy, even though cultural characteristics, social stigma and the power imbalance between victims and victimizers, make this is one crime whose record is most affected by the absence of reports (Shrader, 2000).

Table 1.5 shows the behavior of reports on this crime over the last 3 years, based on data from the police force.

Table 1.5. Reported Rapes (in thousands), Rate (per 100 thousand inhabitants), by Year and Victim's Gender (Period 2006 — 2008)

	2006		2007		2008*	
Reports	1,049		1,230		1,252	
General Rate	15.0		21.4*		21.8*	
Victims by Gender	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
Reports	907 (86.8%)	138 (13.2%)	1073 (87.2%)	157 (12.8%)	N/A	N/A
Rate by Gender	30.0	5.1	35.5	5.7	N/A	N/A

* Calculation of rates based on population data for 2007.
N/A: breakdown by gender not available.
Source: Preapared by Author based on data from National Civil Police (several years) & OCAVI (2009).

First of all, a slight increase can be seen in the number of reports for 2007 and 2008, compared to 2006. Based on this data, it can be said that, at the national level, in all three years there were between 15 and 22 people victims of rape per 100 thousand inhabitants. This rate could be higher, considering the fact that only reported instances were taken into account. Upon disaggregating this information according to the victims' gender, the differences become clear: over 85% of the victims were young girls, adolescent girls, and women. This shows that the levels of rape are at least 6 times higher among women, with regards to men. Although in 2008 breakdown by gender was not available for the 1,252 reported rapes, it does come into view when taking into account the total number of crimes against sexual liberty[38] that were recorded by the National Civil Police: therefore, in 2008, the total number of recorded crimes against sexual liberty ascended to 1,810[39], 1,252 of which were rape, and

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[38] Crimes against sexual liberty, according to the Salvadoran Penal Code, are comprised of the following offenses: rape and other sexual aggression; statutory rape, and other attacks on sexual liberty (including sexual harassment, corruption of minors, induction, promotion and permissive favoring of prostitution, among other crimes) (Section IV, Chapters I to IV).

[39] See http://www.ocavi.com/docs_files/file_701.pdf Collected June 25, 2009.

558 were typified as sexual aggression. Out of this grand total of crimes against sexual liberty, 86.5% of the cases correspond to women and 13.5% to men, which is not far removed from the tendencies in the more specific case of rape. At the same time, this ratifies the quantitative differential of female victimization for this type of crime, with regards to male victimization.

As for the age groups, the bulk of the cases of rape and crimes against sexual liberty that were reported to the Police figure in the sectors from age 17 and younger (in the case of male victimization, it is concentrated in boys age 11 and younger), as well as adolescents and young adults. Graph 1.8 shows that, in the years where available police information was disaggregated by gender and age, over 60% of the victims of this sort of crimes were minors (under 18); almost one-fifth are concentrated in the group from the ages of 18 to 29; and women from 30 to 39 comprise between 6% to 7% of victims, on average, during those two years.

Graph 1.8

Ages of Victims of Crimes Against Sexual Freedom, by Year

2006 2007 2008

Age 0-17   Age 18-29   Age 30-39   Age 40-49   50 & over   Not available

Source: preapared by Author based on data from the National Civil Police and Ocavi (2009).
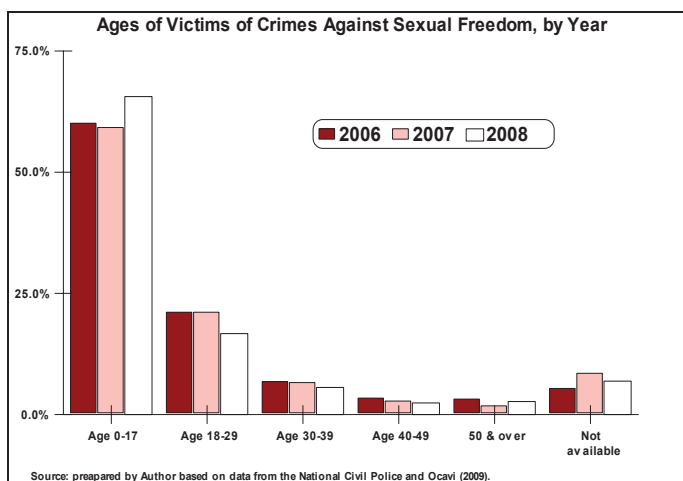
Similarly, the National Survey on Family Health (FESAL, 2009), carried out in 2008 by the Salvadoran Demographic Association, established that 9% of the women at the national level reported that they had been victims of penetrative rape at some time in their lives, and 10% had been sexually abused without penetration. When consulted about the first occurrence of this event, "over half reported it had taken place before turning 20, and one in four said before the age of 15" (FESAL, 2009; p.22). Otherwise, among women who reported sexual abuse (without penetration), half of them declared that the first time had been before the age of 15, including one in every five who mentioned it had taken place before the age of 10 (*ibíd.*).

In terms of the victimizers, information forthcoming from police records for the aforementioned years indicates that the majority of them (over 90%) are men.[40] As for kinship, the FESAL Survey (2009) also asked the victims of this sort of crimes, regarding their victimizers. In the case of rape (with or without penetration), 85% of the victims reported that the victimizer had been someone they knew; and the former husband or former live-in partner was mentioned in 42% of the cases of rape with penetration. This sort of crime confirms the *macho* notions that conceive of a woman as an object and property of the man. In second place are current partners, at 24%. Otherwise, in cases of sexual abuse, "neighbors, friends or acquaintances" are highlighted, representing 27% of the victimizers (*ibíd.*, p.22).

This indicates that a significant number of these crimes were committed by relatives or men that are somehow close to the victims (including fathers, step-fathers, partners and former partners, and so on). This supports the argument that the risk of becoming a victim of violence does not only occur in public spaces, it is also high in private spaces, depending on the type of violence that is being analyzed. Additionally, the fact that many of these crimes are being committed by unknown

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[40]   See www.ocavi.com.sv/docs_files/file_639.pdf Collected May 20, 2009.

men presupposes that women also face significant risk in public spaces. This issue is of transcendental importance in that, as will be explained later on, many of the women that have entered the gang have suffered sexual aggression, abuse, and rape, which took place in the context of their trajectory of victimization.

Domestic Violence

Another dimension and expression of violence whose most frequent victims are women, is that which is produced as the result of relations between members of a family. Record and monitoring this sort of violence is difficult, given that it takes place "behind closed doors", and its victims suffer it without support from relatives or institutions. Data from the Fesal Survey (2009) is convincing in this regard: "practically one out of every two women that are either married or in a long-term union reported that they had been the object of some form of violence from their partner at some point in their lives, including at least one out of four, for physical violence; and one out eight, for sexual violence" (p. 20). According to this nationwide survey, verbal violence was the most frequently noted instance (44%), followed by physical violence (24%) and sexual (12%).

National Civil Police force records on reports filed over the last three years ratify that, in fact, the most frequent victims of this sort of crime are female (see Table 1.6). Actually, in each of the two years where there is available information on the number of homes at the national level, based on the Digestyc data (2008*a*; 2007*b*), the national rate that was obtained comes to 4 households in 2006 and at least 5 households in 2007 per 10 thousand homes, where an act of domestic violence was reported and officially recorded.

Table 1.6. Cases of Domestic Violence Reported to the Police, by Year and Victim´s Gender (Period 2006 — 2008)

	2006		2007			2008		
Report Total	759		770			663		
Rate (x 10,000 households)	4.4*		5.4*			n/d		
Victim's Gender	Fem.	Masc.	Fem.	Masc.	N/d	Fem.	Masc.	N/d
Reports	633 (83.4%)	126 (16.6%)	579 (75.2%)	140 (18.2%)	51 (6.6%)	527 (79.5%)	108 (16.3%)	28 (4.2%)

* Rates calculated based on the number of households estimated according to Household and Multiple Purpose Survey, carried out in 2006 (DIGESTYC, 2007b) and 2007 (DIGESTYC, 2008a).
N/d: No Data; Victim's Gender Not determined/ recorded.
Source: Preapared by Author based on data from National Civil Police (several years) and OCAVI (2009).

The most recent data on these situations, based on over 660 reports received by the police force in 2008, indicate that 75% of these reports were made in cases in which physical violence was used on the victim; in almost 9%, the victim has been the object of psychological violence; and the remaining 16.4% of the cases reported were classified under other types of violence (OCAVI, 2009[41]). However, given that there is a series of hindrances and barriers —that are both cultural and institutional— which make it difficult to file a complaint regarding this kind of crime, it becomes even clearer when victims of domestic violence are the object of modes of violence that are psychological, sexual or economic. Therefore, it can be expected that these figures —which have been recorded in the system— could be much higher, either because this type of expression of violence has become normalized within relationships, to the point of not even being considered mistreatment or offense; or because victims consider they have no recourse to file a report; or due to economic or emotional dependence on their victimizers.

For instance, the great majority of victims of these cases, officially recorded in 2008, were the object of physical abuse and violence. In the majority of the reports (76.9%), the aggressor was some member of the family; in 4.1% it is

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[41] See www.ocavi.com.sv/docs_files/file_700.pdf Collected June 30, 2009.

someone known to the victim; and in 19%, the act was carried out by strangers. According to the data provided by the police force, "the vast majority of the victims suffered physical abuse and the aggressor is some member of the family, which leads to the reflection, when cross-referencing the information in the graphs that correspond to the victims, that the aggressor might be the victim's life-long partner" (*ibíd.*, p. 4).

Domestic violence is a situation that not only affects the victim directly. It affects the rest of the family members as well, particularly the children. As shown in Graph 1.9, from practically 6.7 to almost 10% of reports of domestic violence, over the past three years, have to do with cases in which minors are the victims. In turn, the age group from 18 to 29 contains the highest number of victims. Unfortunately, the data available at the time of writing this report does not allow for a breakdown by the victims' ages and gender, which might show the different inter-personal dynamics that members of the household experience when they are the object of this type of crime. Notwithstanding, the information shows the generalized nature of victimization at the hands of significant persons or family members, and the way in which these violent forms of relating —which have scarcely gotten reported in the system— affect children from a very early age.

Graph 1.9

Age of Victims of Domestic Violence of Reported Cases, by Year

	Age 0-17	Age 18-29	Age 30-39	Age 40-49	50 & over	Not determined
2006	6.7%	28.7%	27.5%	15.8%	17.8%	3.4%
2007	7.4%	33.1%	25.6%	13.1%	12.9%	7.9%
2008	9.5%	37.4%	23.1%	13.3%	9.8%	6.9%

Source: prepared by Author, based on data from the National Civil Police (several years) & OCAVI.
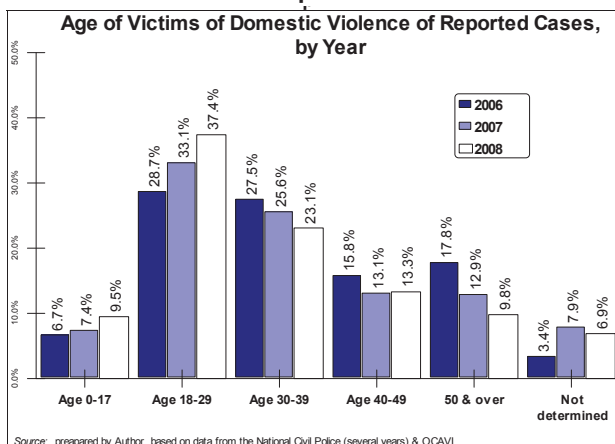
The function of this data is to demonstrate —based on official figures, and with the limitations imposed by underreporting— these other dimensions of the violence experienced in the country, whose victims' profile is distinct: these are boys, girls, women. This is presented here not only to show the generalized and current nature of these practices, but also because this situation has been an everyday occurrence that has characterized the quality of the relationships between the members inside many households.

1.2.2. Gang Participation: Women as Victimizers

The study on the status of young girls, adolescent girls and women and their participation in gangs is a topic that has traditionally been marginalized and left out of research agendas. This has been a characteristic omission since the issue of gangs started to be dealt with from academia, not only here in this country, but abroad as well (Chesney-Lind and Hagedorn, 1999).

Important contributions have mainly come from the American academia, some even date from a long time ago, and from various perspectives and approaches. These have established the basis for a new perspective on these population groups and laid the foundation for discussion and analysis of the role that women have in this sort of organizations (Campbell, 1984; Chesney-Lind and Hagedorn, 1999; Curry, 1999; Miller, 2001; Moore, 1991). These authors are merely the tip of the iceberg of a vast academic production in the United States that, although it initially deals with certain theoretical focuses, emphasizes certain variables (such as race or ethnic group, for instance) and proposes analyses that, in some cases, cannot be transferred to the Salvadoran context, provide a varied, important, and obligatory theoretical anchorage, as well as interpretative clues of great relevance. Likewise, they demonstrate the changes in the approaches and interpretations on girls and women in gangs.

Chesney-Lind and Hagedorn (1999) compiled an important inventory of papers and studies that, from multiple perspectives and focuses, approached the "women in the gang" throughout different decades of the 20th century. This compilation is very useful as testimony of the changes in approach of the study and treatment of the integration of women in the gang, where initially, studies focused on sensationalist viewpoints and notions or explanations centered on "sexuality and promiscuity", as the prevailing note regarding the role of women in a group of men (Bernard, 1949/1999; Thrasher, 1927); or on the "indecency" of what was conceived as a behavior that deviated from the norm (Cohen in Chesney-Lind and Hagedorn, 1999), from the point of view of public expectations of femininity constructed on the basis of the values of "typical white middle-class in the US" (Chesney-Lind and Hagedorn, 1999) and based on traditional gender roles that society adjudges women (Hanson in Cyr and Decker, 2003).

In fact, Curry (1999) states that, between the time of Thrasher's study —that laid the foundation for minimizing or negating the place women occupy in the world of gangs— and the seventies, US research on participation of women in gangs fell into one of two categories: total omission of analysis on their intervention in the gang's group dynamics, or siding with the androcentric perspective introduced by Thrasher, focusing on either their sexuality, or concentrating on the "disintegrating/destructive role" which, in his opinion, women members had in the gang. That is to say that, for a long time in gang research, a masculine perspective prevailed in the analysis of the participation of the female members, which laid anchored in androcentric values, viewing women as marginal, auxiliary members and/or as "accessories" to the group.

Chesney Lind (2006) suggests that, with the advent of women's movements, the emergence of a feminist criminology confronted hegemonic masculine theories on the nature of crime, deviation and social control, calling attention to repeated

omissions of women in criminal research and theorizing, and to the simplistic, androcentric and masculinized treatment of women who entered into conflict with the law. In the context of these events, starting in the seventies, important spaces were generated where agendas in the social, academic and political fields were nurtured by the contributions of feminism and its approach to the analysis and focus on crime from a gender perspective. From then on, important spaces opened up for a vast academic production, whose dimension and quality of contributions is impossible to do justice in this space.

In this framework, it was not until the seventies that a series of studies appear, that laid the foundation to transcend the androcentric perspective that had prevailed in prior research on women in gangs.[42] Among these are studies by Campbell (1984) and Moore (1991), both women researchers, whose hallmark works are considered a turning point in the focus on the issue, as they left behind traditionalist approaches and values that had prevailed from the thirties to the sixties. Therefore, these two classic studies, though not without the limitations that are intrinsic to any research, set the foundation for a more refined analysis on the role and views of women within these groups, and propose, with great thoroughness, two distinct visions on the nature of women's experience in gangs.

Put succinctly, Campbell's (1984) qualitative research yields two major conclusions. The first has to do with the fundamental role that men play involving girls in the gang, and their participation in acts of violence and crime, which their membership in the group presupposes. The second, tied to the interpretation she makes of women's membership in the group, notes that by way of association with the gangs, these women have access to opportunities of self-actualization and equality, which are not

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[42] For an overview of the efforts that emerged in this period of transition from a masculine and androcentric perspective to a more complete view of the nature of women's participation in gangs, see Chesney-Lind and Hagedorn (1999); Curry (1999); Cyr and Decker (2003); Miller (2001).

accessible to them by other means; here the gang becomes the vehicle for "emancipation or liberation" for girls and women that join. For her part, Moore's (1991) study offers, among her most important conclusions, the emphasis participants give to their family situation when making the decision to join the gang. Likewise, this author suggests that the prevalence of sexist attitudes in the gang is not restricted to the men members, rather, it is frequently expressed by the women themselves. This is added to her conviction that involvement in the gang implies long-term damages for women, and the potential gains of their participation do not compensate for the risks and drawbacks involved. Withdrawing from essentialist notions, and from partial or simplistic conclusions, both authors propose different perspectives on the nature and consequences of women's participation in gangs.

For their part, among the multiple academic contributions that followed afterward, Miller's (2001) study "One of the Guys" is an outstanding example in terms of its rigor, because the design makes it possible to set up comparisons between two groups of women (gang-members and non gang-members), and between two different cities. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the study includes an extensive gender analysis and, in particular, proposes, from a feminist vision, an innovative alternative to the sort of ongoing theoretical debate on the forms and interpretations that can be ascribed to women's membership in gangs. Thus, this author suggests that studies of girls, adolescent girls, and adult women in gangs, and their involvement in criminal activity, should be supported by findings and approaches that have been introduced in feminist literature, that enrich —but are not restricted to— issues that are intrinsic to criminology. In this way, she supports the need to surpass essentialist or dichotomous perspectives on the reality of women's life in the gang. One such perspective attempts to explain women gang-members' lives mostly and solely based on an approach centered on gender differences. On the other end of the spectrum, the other perspective leaves the gender

focus entirely out of the analysis of the phenomenon. Alternately, this author proposes that the interpretive logic, along with key factors to understand the induction and permanence of girls and women in these groups, have to transcend that dichotomous logic in the interpretation of women's membership —either as a mere response to victimization that ends up being more prejudicial than beneficial (Moore, 1991), or as a form of "active and emancipatory resistance" to their own life-history of victimization (Campbell, 1984), for a broader perspective, that also takes into account the *gains* that their membership and participation in the gang can mean:

> … scholars typically interpret girls' experiences in gangs through one of two frameworks: the "liberation hypothesis" or the "social injury hypothesis". Viewed as a *continuum*, several studies fall at the poles of these competing frameworks, while most fall somewhere in between […] Scholars who emphasize the social injuries caused by gang involvement focus on the gender inequality within these groups, as well as the negative long-term consequences of gang involvement for young women [...] Studies that can be classified as supporting a "liberation hypothesis" focus on the gang as a site for young women to overcome gender oppression [...] This raises an issue —often avoided by many feminist scholars— about women's accountability for their participation in crime, especially crimes of violence that clearly victimize others. While the images of female solidarity, sisterhood, and resistance to oppression within gangs are seductive ones —and are in some ways true— there is another side to girls' gang involvement (and women's crime) that has to be addressed… (Miller, 2001; p. 12-14).

For his part, Curry (1999) suggests both perspectives are possible and reconcilable, inasmuch as women's participation in gangs can be in a certain sense "enabling" as well as decisively injurious for its women members:

> … From such a dialectical perspective, there is no insurmountable contradiction in simultaneously identifying a

> social activity as rewarding and destructive […] For young women, gang involvement simultaneously offers promising solutions to the threat of violence and social isolation, while generating new risks for violent victimization (Miller, 1996) and new potentially more enduring forms of social ostracism… (Curry, 1999; p. 152-153).

In this regard, the present study coincides with Curry, and attempts to place itself within Miller's analytical framework, in order to approach the study and analysis of women's participation in a group like the gangs, in a context like that of El Salvador. That is, this study accepts the possibility that the gang may be a space where both gratification and additional victimization can be found, making it possible to analyze and explain women's participation not only in terms of what differentiates them from men, but what is similar between them, particularly, when women join an assemblage such as the gang.

In the specific case of El Salvador, the analysis and approach of women's participation in the gang has also been pushed to the background for different reasons. On the one hand, this is linked to subordination to a way of looking at criminal behavior that lacks a gender approach. On the other, it has to do with the development and evolution of the dynamics of the gang phenomenon in El Salvador in recent years. In terms of the first reason, the absence of a gender approach comes from the fact that criminology scholarship is and has been constructed, to a great deal, by men, whose androcentric perspective has failed to explain or analyze the characteristics of female transgression (Antony, 2007; Rodríguez, 2004). In fact, Antony (2007; 1998) proposes that the lack of literature on penal and criminal issues on women cannot be explained solely by the fact that the female criminal rate is lower than that of men, rather it is because a good deal of the research agenda is based on women stereotypes that have even contributed to criminal policy being drafted without a gender perspective.

As for the second reason —the evolution and formalization of the gang phenomenon in the country, as already explained in a previous section, the national research agenda has been concentrating on the two major gangs that practically dominate the Salvadoran arena: *Mara Salvatrucha* Gang and *18th Street* Gang. Both are trans-national networks which, based on a progressive process of transformation and formalization, have become complex and structured assemblages (Cruz, 2005). The latest studies[43] suggest that a great deal of this evolutionary change is manifested in the increased complexity and the qualitative and quantitative rise in the use of violence, the strengthening of the internal organization, changes in identity status, and access to more resources. In this regard, the kinds of issues that have occupied research agendas on gangs in El Salvador —and in the countries that comprise the Northern Triangle of Central America— have been focused on attempting to understand these groups current characteristics, their ties with organized crime and the kind of impact that official policies have had in trying to deal with them, in the course of their evolution and transition to more complex forms of crime over recent years. In other words, the focuses have been others, and all eyes have been on those "others" that comprise the majority in these groups: young men.

The numerical imbalance in favor of men has contributed to the fact that research on women in the gang has been left out. Evidently, it is an eminently masculine phenomenon. However, there is no way to express unequivocally the exact number of women and men in the gangs. The mere effort to come to an approximation of the number of members that in general make up these groups, leads to practically unsurmountable difficulties. Prior research on this issue has already noted that the gangs' current characteristics, the daily induction of new members to their ranks, the daily deaths among their member-

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[43] For a complete analysis of the transformations that these groups have gone through, see Aguilar (2007*b*; 2006); Cruz (2009; 2005).

ship, the absence of "formal" induction mechanisms, and the increasingly clandestine nature of their activities, among other factors, make it difficult or almost impossible to give a specific number of gang members in the country at any particular time (Aguilar and Carranza, 2008; Aguilar and Miranda, 2006; Cruz and Portillo, 1998; Santacruz and Concha-Eastman, 2001; Smutt and Miranda, 1998). Nevertheless, Aguilar and Carranza (2008) use the estimate made by the National Civil Police, based on information gathered by the police force during the massive arrests of gang-members in the context of the anti-gang plans. Using these figures as a basis, in 2005, the estimate was 10,500 gang-members, nationwide.

Aside from the total number of members, both groups are mostly comprised of men, at least in the case of El Salvador and the countries in northern Central America. This is one of the few characteristics in these groups that has remained constant with the passing of time. For example, the Santacruz and Concha-Eastman (2001) study —based on information provided by over 900 gang-member respondents, above all from the two principal gangs—, regarding the number of men and women that comprised the *cliques* or territorial units they belonged to, confirmed the quantitative imbalance between men and women: "...the number of men gang-members in each *clique* is five times greater with regards to the number of women […] the young men and women said that their *clique* was comprised of 50 men gang-members, and 10 women gang-members, on average..." (*ibíd.*, p. 66). Although it has been noted that the figures may be inflated —or not enough cases could have been reported— as the result of a quick or slanted estimate on the part of the gang-members, the data reflects a general reference to the quantitative imbalance between men and women that was maintained by all respondents. The data obtained on that occasion suggested that the most frequent response regarding the number of women in a *clique* "...was five women gang-members; [and] 8.2% of respondents reported there were no women in their *clique*..." (*ibíd.*, p. 67). By comparison, in this

same study, the most frequent figure mentioned by respondents with regards to the number of men in their *clique* was 40.

The most recent studies carried out with gang members in El Salvador (Aguilar, 2006) and Guatemala (Ranum, 2006) also showed this quantitative imbalance between men and women in the gang. Actually, not only did the studies suggest that this characteristic had been maintained, based on newly gathered information —and as a result of the group-dynamics within the gang in recent years, but that male domination has become further entrenched, due to a sharp decline in women's partici-pation in gangs (Aguilar, 2006; Aguilar and Carranza, 2008; Ranum, 2006). Similarly, the Salvadoran study finds this quan-titative disparity between men and women again, and it is also reflected in the level of the number of women gang-members that were deprived of liberty at the time of this study, and were interviewed, in relation to the convicted men.[44]

This "masculine" characteristic of Salvadoran gangs config-ures the group dynamics in quantitative terms, as well as the type of codes, values, implicit and explicit rules, that stem from the exercise of a violent, extreme and *macho* type of masculinity. In other words, this is a group of men, established by men, conceived by men, and designed by men, where women are a quantitative minority, and where there are no reasons to believe —as will be seen in this study— that they are exempt from reproducing at the micro-level (in the group), all those stereo-types, prejudices, imbalances and inequalities between men and women that are prevalent in the patriarchal Salvadoran society in which the subjects are immersed. Actually, the male chauvinism (*machismo*) in the gang is a replica, a micro-version, of the vast Salvadoran patriarchy.

Consequently, the numerical imbalance between men and women, the implications and impact that the gang phenomenon

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[44] In the Salvadoran case, in early 2006, Aguilar (2006) noted that women repre-sented 2.1% of the total penitentiary population. In that study, women repre-sented 4.7% of the sample.

has had in terms of citizen security and in the exacerbation of the levels of violence and crime in the country, the changes that the gang phenomenon has undergone in recent years, and the more traditional and androcentric emphasis in the study of crime, are all elements that have contributed to set the research priorities and to focus the lens on the "more visible" members of these groups. By default, this leads to serious and important gaps in the information on the role, the risks, the circumstances and reasons that may lead a young girl, an adolescent girl, or a woman to join these groups; where violence is the currency for exchange and male chauvinism does not escape the broader dynamics of the patriarchal society the gang is set in.

Notwithstanding, despite the existing information void on women's participation in gangs in the Salvadoran case, in the two studies done by the Iudop —one in the mid-nineties (Cruz and Portillo, 1998), and another in the early part of this decade (Santacruz and Concha-Eastman, 2001), although they were not focused on analyzing the womens' role, nor on the characteristics of their participation in these groups, their results can serve as an introduction to the findings in the present exploration. They provide interesting information on the viewpoints expressed by many women gang-members, in terms of their own lives in the gang, their motivations, concerns, and expectations. What follows is a presentation of some of the information on women gang-members interviewed in those studies from a decade ago, or older.

It is important to acknowledge, beforehand, that there is an important time-lag between these studies and the present, as well as differences between them in the methodological approach.[45] Nevertheless, it was considered important to present and highlight the information these women shared in turn, which doubtless contributed to furthering our general understanding of the gang. Likewise, it was considered important to present some of their visions of the group and of themselves, which make it possible to contextualize and weigh those aspects

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[45]   This present study is based on qualitative methodology and techniques, whereas the previous studies used quantitative approaches.

that may have changed or even stayed the same over time. Also, and where the type of information allows, this overview takes into account contributions from the IUDOP's most recent study on Transnational Gangs[46] (*Pandillas transnacionales*) (Aguilar, 2006; 2007*b*). Although the gang phenomenon has been substantially transformed in relation to past studies, many of the participating women gang-members' declarations found in these works serve to introduce a brief characterization of their status, from their perspective and in their own opinion, taking into account the temporal placement of these declarations.

As mentioned in the prior section, the first study carried out by the IUDOP on the issue of the gangs, was deployed in late 1996, based on quantitative methodology (Cruz and Portillo, 1998). For this purpose, a questionnaire with open and closed questions was used as the information gathering instrument, and work was done with young gang-members during the fieldwork phase. This study involved 1,025 young members of different gangs. Out of this group, 22% was comprised of women (see Table 1.7). A few years later, the IUDOP's next study on gangs kicked off in mid 2000, and was based on the same methodological and procedural approach as its predecessor (Santacruz and Concha-Eastman, 2001). The information gathering instrument was similar to the one designed for the first study, in order to follow up on some of the variables that had been registered before. Work was done by way of gang-members who had *calmed down*[47] (inactive), as part

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[46]   The objective in Aguilar's study (2007*b*; 2006) was to analyze, in light of empirical data, the degree of real participation of gang-members in criminal activities that are prevalent in the country, and it was done with gang-members —both active and retired— that were deprived of liberty. Therefore, in that study, the sample was circumscribed to a reduced number of cases (15 women respondents); by comparison, studies by Cruz and Portillo (1998) and Santacruz and Concha-Eastman (2001) included many more cases. This situation was due to the focus on issues that were different from those in the first two studies on gangs, to the characteristics of the population worked with, as well as the difficult access to all penitentiary centers that had initially been considered for the Aguilar study.

[47]   Being *active* in the gang means participating dynamically in all group activities, regardless of the type and the risk these actions might incur for them, for rival

of the fieldwork team. This study had a sample of 938 men and women gang-members. A total of 162 women participated, which comprised 17.3% of the sample. Finally, in the third study, which took place toward the middle of this decade (Aguilar, 2006), 316 gang-members participated. The subjects were inmates of 6 penitentiary centers for adults and 4 re-education centers for minors; out of these, 15 were women (4.7%).

Table 1.7 shows some of the women-respondents' general characteristics for the three periods. Information in the first two studies (fieldwork done in 1996 and 2000) comes from women gang-members who were not in prison at the time the research was being conducted. Likewise, these studies took place at a time when it was less risky to approach gang-members —for the gang-members themselves, as well as for researchers— than it is nowadays. Therefore, taking into account the efforts involved, the samples of men and women gang-members were larger. For their part, the fifteen women that participated in the latest and most recent of the three studies (fieldwork done in 2006) were deprived of liberty, a condition which puts them in the same situation as the women that are the focal point for the current study. Therefore, aside from the characteristics that are intrinsic to each of them, the information that was provided is very inter- esting.

In the first place, the women gang-members interviewed in the first two studies were, on average, younger than the ones who were deprived of liberty in the last study. As for the educa- tional levels they had reached, the first two studies also reflect that the majority of the women had studied and finished ninth grade (elementary school & junior high). This percentage is slightly higher among the women in the third study. The first important distinction comes from the question that was included in the three studies, about their educational situation (if they were studying) at the time of the interview. A significant decline

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gangs and/or third parties. This status is in juxtaposition with *calmed* gang- members, which means that, although they still belong to the group, they have *request*ed authorization to abandon certain risky activities, or those that require a more active participation in gang life.

was noticeable between the first two studies: in the first, at least one out of every five women respondents was still studying, although they were already part of the gang. This proportion dropped over 10% among the respondents in the second study, which shows that, over time, and as the phenomenon became more complex, those who passed to swell the rank and file of the gangs, irremediably distanced themselves from the educational system. If a situation of *social urgency* usually prevails among young Salvadoran men and women in situations of social exclusion (Orellana, 2005) —where, as their age increases, the possibilities for social moratorium are canceled, and the youth are abruptly inserted into the adult world— this situation takes place more precipitately among young women from low-income backgrounds at the national level (Santacruz and Carranza, 2009). This means that it can have a more drastic impact on those women who, like the women gang-members, face a complex situation of extreme exclusions.

In the case of the third study, it is highly noteworthy that, when fieldwork was being carried out, *none* of the fifteen women gang-members who were interviewed were studying inside the penitentiary where they were serving their sentences, despite the fact that having access to formal education is a right of persons deprived of liberty.[48] Furthermore, the fact that none of the women was in school at that time becomes even more telling when taking into account that 63.5% of the men gang-members interviewed in this same study, who were also deprived of liberty, were in fact attending school in prison.

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[48] The Penitentiary Law of El Salvador, Article 2, holds that "Sentence execution must provide the convict favorable conditions for personal development, that will allow a smooth integration to social life at the time of recovering liberty." Likewise, Article 114 states that, "Every penitentiary center will have a school that will provide inmates with middle-school education. The government study programs will be developed there so that, upon obtaining liberty, the interns may continue studying elsewhere. The administration will provide the possibility of continuing education to those interns that might be able to follow high school and university studies, or vocational-technical training. To this end, penitentiary administration, by way of the Ministry of Justice, will enter into partnership with educational vocational-technical institutions and universities, be they State or private."

Table 1.7. General Characteristics of Women Gang-members, by Year of Previous Studies

Characteristics of Women Gang-members	Year of Study*		
	1996 n=226	2000 n=162	2006 n=15 (deprived of liberty)
Total study sample (men & women gang-members).	**1,025**	**938**	**316**
Number of women respondents & percentage compared to total sample.	**226 (22.0% of total sample)**	**162 (17.3% of total sample)**	**15 (4.7% of total sample)**
Women's average age at the time of interview.	Age 17.8	Age 19.1	Age 24.7
Educational level completed.	67.5% finished 9th grade.	71.0% finished 9th grade.	86.6% finished 9th grade.
Studying (outside prison/ at the time of interview).	22.1%	11.3%	None
Working (outside prison/ at the time of interview).	23.5%	13.0%	73.3%
Had a child/children.	38.9%	N/A	N/A
Average age upon joining gang.	Age 14.8	Age 15.1	Age 15.6
Gang membership (present/past).	*MS* (49.1%); *18* (42.0%); Other (8.9%)	*MS* (43.9%); *18* (51.8%); Other (4.3%)	*18* (100.0%)
Gang involvement at time of interview	N/A	Active (86.4%); Inactive (13.6%)	Active (53.3%); Inactive (46.7%)
Desire to *calm down* (become inactive) / desire to leave gang	Yes (85.4%); No (14.2%); No response (0.4%)	Yes (49.4%); No (37.0%); Already inactive / retired (13.6%)	Yes (40%); No (40%); Already inactive/ retired (20%)

* This refers to the year fieldwork for the three studies took place, and not the date of publication of the studies.
N/A: information not available.
Source: Preapared by Author, based on databases from the studies by Cruz and Portillo (1998); Santacruz and Concha-Eastman (2001) and Aguilar (2006).

In terms of the work situation, the first two studies show that the percentage of women that were working shrunk from the time one study took place to the next. In the case of the second study, almost 12% of the respondents declared that they were looking for work, but had not found any (Santacruz and

Concha-Eastman, 2001). In the case of the third study, practically eleven out of the fifteen women respondents said they had been working prior to internment in the penitentiary: the majority worked as street sellers in the informal sector, or as domestic workers. The limited options mentioned by the women in the third study (Aguilar, 2006) contrast with the ones described in the first study (Cruz and Portillo, 1998): of the women gang-members that had been working, over half (58.5%) worked at different jobs (cosmetologists, silkscreen artists, waitresses, and so on); some 24.6% were employees (in an office, or clerks at a store or business); 11.3% were merchants (informal commerce); 1.9% worked as technicians, and 3.7% indicated other kinds of activities. It would seem that, over time, job options for women have become more restricted starting the moment that they join a gang, and are involved to a greater degree in the group dynamics. The problem is that, to a great extent, this situation deepens their economic and functional dependency on the group, as well as their status in terms of marginalization and exclusion *vis a vis* society in general.

Excluding the first study, none of the later ones inquired whether the women gang-members had children. Judging from the results of the first, a high level of them were confirmed to have had offspring, even those who were very young. This finding has been confirmed in the present study, such that many of the women had become mothers early on.

As for the age at which they joined the gang, the three studies show some numerical differences in terms of the average age. Nonetheless, it cannot be concluded that as time goes on, the women join at later ages, as this average indicator depends a lot on the samples that were taken for each of the cases. Aside from this, there is an undeniably noteworthy figure in terms of prevention, which has been consistently pointed out in several studies: like men, women join the gang when they are going through a developmental phase that is crucial for the establishment of their own identity, the feeling of belonging, identification with others, and construction of self-concept and self-esteem: adolescence. The 14 to 16 age group

is crucial in terms of the conclusion that many young men and women come to that of joining these groups, without much adult contention that can dissuade them, and without any great alternatives for affiliation. These findings regarding the age at which they joined the group seem to remain the same over time, and will be confirmed again with the data collected from the participants in this study. These women's long history in the gang can only be explained by exceedingly early ages at which they joined the rank and file of these groups.

The first two studies had the balanced participation of a majority of members from the two largest gangs in the country (*Mara Salvatrucha* Gang and *18th Street* Gang), as well as women gang-members from other kinds of groups (see Table 1.7). Nevertheless, at the time of the second survey, the number of women members of other kinds of gangs diminished considerably. By the time the third study was made, there was only participation by women gang-members from *18th Street* Gang. As for their status, there was no available data for the 1996 study; but in the rest, almost all were *active* in the gang. In subsequent studies, a sizable number of women gang-members had opted for distancing themselves from their group and their activities, which meant that their narratives came from different perspectives.

Upon observation of the data, it becomes evident that there are a great deal of women that wanted to *calm-down* (become inactive) and even to exit the gang... which leads to the question: what makes so many of these women join these groups in the first place? The motivations or the reasons in the past that many girls, adolescents and young women had to become part of these groups, put in large categories described as percentages (see Graph 1.10),[49] express a series of important deficiencies and voids (domestic problems, lack of guidance, no protec-

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[49] 2006 was left out because the number of women gang-members interviewed at that time (15) makes it difficult to compare with previous studies. The samples in the studies from 1996 (226 women) and 2000 (162) are similar, and are therefore, comparable.

tion), that corner and drive them to joining; aside from the fact that, for others, curiosity, the drive for a sense of belonging, the taste for *hanging out*, and transgressing the norms were also significant. Faced with multiple needs and risks that are characteristic of life in neighborhoods that are controlled by these groups, and countered with the abandon of these spaces by the State, the gang becomes one route for survival.

Noteworthy in both studies, although with greater reiteration in the second, is the allusion to family/domestic problems as one of the reasons that lead them to seeking out another group to belong to, another group that would function in the way that the family, as their primary group, was supposed to. Many of them felt that the family had become a space that they were better off abandoning and replacing. Furthermore, lack of family support was also related to the young women's greater vulnerability to the effects of the environment, and greater susceptibility to allowing themselves to be influenced by the peer pressure exerted by the gangs (already present in the context of their community). This sort of situation has also been found in other studies that document young women's induction to the gang (Miller, 2001; Moore, 1991).

Graph 1.10

Reasons for Joining Gangs in Women, by Year of Study

1996   2000

Hanging Out: 31.0% / 34.6%
Family problems: 18.6% / 31.4%
Lack of Guidance: 18.6% / 0.0%
Protection/safety: 6.2% / 8.2%
Influence of friends: 8.0% / 22.6%
Vengeance/Grudge: 3.5% / 0.0%
Curiosity: 0.9% / 0.0%
Other responses: 13.2% / 3.1%

Source: preapared by Author, based on databases from studies by Cruz & Portillo (1998) and Santarcruz & Concha-Eastman (2001).
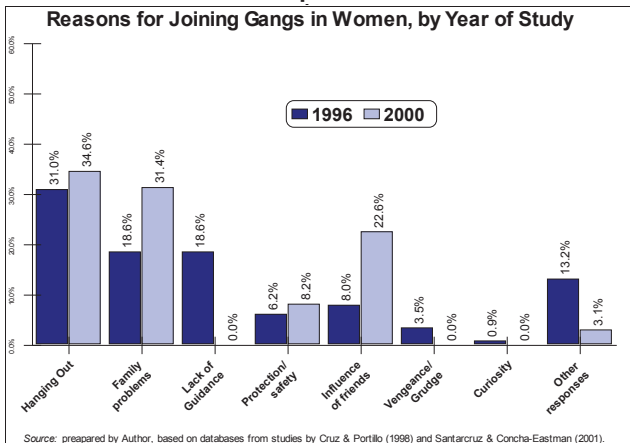
When asked about their relationship with the family, many of these women gave it a negative score, with even greater forcefulness, or at least more reiteration than their male counterparts who were also interviewed (Santacruz and Concha-Eastman, 2001). The respondents in that study declared they had been victims of violence at the hand of their loved ones, and that they had witnessed violence between their parents, or between one parent and their partner. Although this does not mean that all girls and young women that experience violence at home are at risk of becoming gang-members, it is important to note that all the women gang-members interviewed stated that they came from homes where violence and aggression have been brutally exerted.

Once inside the gang, they have to use violence, and not just suffer it. This possibility is crystallized in *hanging out (el vacil).*[50] The violent group dynamics that are experienced in the gang and that operate therein take their toll in terms of the loss of loved ones and friends, from personal injuries that come as a result of their participation in violent activities, and from the fact that they themselves are turned into the aggressors of others.

While approaching the interpersonal dynamics of violence is in itself complex, it is further complicated when attempting to somehow "quantify" the instances in which the women gang-members made use of violence or received violent treatment, in the context of their everyday lives. One of the studies from Iudop attempted to approximate those factors that mediate in the exercise of victimization and violence exerted on others —people in the opposing gang, in their own gang, or other persons (Santacruz and Concha-Eastman, 2001). To this end, a series of scales were constructed, which later became rates/indices of victimization and aggression by criminal violence, based on certain indicators that measured the frequency with which the respondent (man or woman gang-member) had carried out or received the different forms of aggression they

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[50] For a more extensive analysis of the symbolic implications of *hanging out* in the gang's group-dynamics, see Santacruz and Concha-Eastman (2001).

were asked about. In this case, only individual indicators were taken into account, in order to show—with the limitations this imposes[51]—the kinds of aggressive acts they noted they had received themselves or dealt to others (see Table 1.8). In this table, the data shows different violent acts that the men and women gang-members were involved in, both as victims (aggression received from others), as well as victimizers (aggression exerted on others), including acts done on their own, or carried out as part of a group. In this case, the responses have also been broken down by gender, which provides a point of contrast and comparison for the different forms in which they have become involved in violent acts.

There are two issues that are noteworthy in the data from this study. First, the level of active participation of many women gang-members interviewed, in the different forms of violence. It is important to keep this aspect in mind, because it confirms what could seem obvious: when a young girl, an adolescent girl, or a woman enters the gang, this insures they will play a role as a victimizer, along with qualitatively and quantitatively greater acts of violence to others. This role as agents of violence places them —once again, and despite their possibility to use violence— in new and more complex situations of vulnerability, which brings us to the second notable issue: the figures show that although many of them have exerted extreme aggression, the frequency with which they have done so is *significantly* lower than that of the men.[52] This does not mean that they

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[51] Regarding possible errors of measurement, that basically come from the voids in the available information, and from the over or underreporting of different situations that may have taken place, as a result of voluntary omissions by the respondents.

[52] As mentioned before, these actions were not taken in isolation to measure the levels of aggression and victimization due to criminal violence. Instead, more complex and heavily pondered indicators were constructed with regards to the different levels of seriousness of the aggression, be it executed or received (Santacruz and Concha-Eastman, 2001). Nevertheless, when taken here in isolation, a statistically significant (non random) relation was obtained, between the gender of the aggressor or victim, and the frequency with which the action was executed or received.

became involved in situations of violence that are less serious; instead, it means that they have repeated this sort of actions at a lower rate than their male gang-partners.

Table 1.8
Aggressions received or inflicted, during the year prior to the study, by Men & Women Gang-members interviewed in the *Barrio Adentro* study, by Type of Aggression and Gender (in percentages)

Aggressions received or inflicted during the year prior to study		Aggressions inflicted		Aggressions received	
		Men	Women	Men	Women
Blows	Never	3.0	6.8	6.8	5.6
	At least on one occasion	97.0	93.2**	93.2	94.4
Injuries with cutting weapon	Never	17.3	21.0	35.9	32.7
	At least on one occasion	82.7	79.0	64.1	67.3
Injuries with firearm	Never	28.9	65.6	41.0	70.8
	At least on one occasion	71.1	34.4*	59.0	29.2*
Theft	Never	16.6	27.7	65.1	41.3
	At least on one occasion	83.4	72.3*	34.9	58.7*
Robbery with aggression	Never	18.6	28.6	75.8	58.4
	At least on one occasion	81.4	71.4*	24.2	41.6*
Drug Trafficking	Never	46.4	55.9	---	---
	At least on one occasion	53.6	44.1*	---	---
Rape	Never	50.8	79.6	97.9	51.2
	At least on one occasion	49.2	20.8*	2.1	48.8*
Homicide	No	48.8	67.3	---	---
	Yes	24.7	14.8*	---	---
	No response	26.4	17.9	---	---

* $p<.001$
** $p<.05$
Source: Preapared by Author based on data from the study titled *Barrio adentro. La soli-daridad violenta de las pandillas* (Santacruz and Concha-Eastman, 2001).

Actually, the previous data also supports the hypothesis of the increase in vulnerability that is related to belonging to these groups. In the case of aggressions received from blows/bruises and injuries inflicted by cutting-weapons, the levels of victimization between men and women show no significant variation (that is, the levels of victimization in these cases are homogeneous for men and women); in the case of injuries inflicted by firearms, the levels were higher in the case of men. Now, for the other kinds of aggressions —and with alarming notoriety, in the case of rape— women show significantly higher levels of aggressions received, by comparison with their gang-partners.

Consequently, from the available information, which has assuredly changed over this last decade, a series of elements were extracted, in order to set starting points that were to be explored in this new study. Among them, one of the most important hypotheses, that would set the tone for this study, is that a woman gang-member will have greater probabilities of carrying out actions of extreme violence compared with the number the average citizen could —man or woman; she will also have more resources to do so (group protection, weapons, codes and norms that support her actions, and so on) and, on other occasions, she will even be forced to do so. However, this situation puts them in situations of increased risk and vulnerability, which —according to the declarations repeatedly emitted by the gang members— when they do not lead to certain death, they lead to the hospital or prison. The latter possible scenario is the theme for the following section.

1.2.3. The Consequences of Having Contact with Violence: Women and the Penitentiary System

Deprivation of liberty is the sort of sentence that, while it is imposed on people that have broken the law or have committed a crime, presupposes an important amount of suffering, for the men and women that are subjected to it. In theoretical and normative terms, penal sanctions that are imposed by the legal

apparatus —by way of deprivation of liberty as a sentence for a crime, are intended as a punishment for crime and the reduction and control of offenses; but they are also obliged to provide for the reintegration and re-adaptation of the perpetrators[53] (Valverde, 1997). However, prisons in Latin America (Dammert and Zúñiga, 2006) —and El Salvador is no exception to this, far from being a place where there can be reparation of damages and rehabilitation or reintegration into society, have become overcrowded storage spaces for persons, and intensive crime-schools (Rodríguez, 2004).

As Garland (1999) suggests, even when one of the principal objectives of legal punishment or "penalty"[54] is to serve as an instrument for the control and reduction of delinquent behavior (and, with this, an instrumental purpose is attributed to it), it also becomes evident that "the forms of surveillance, prosecution and punishment, the severity of the penalties and the frequency with which they are applied, the institutional regimes and sentence time frames, are more determined

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[53] The country's current Penitentiary Law was approved by way of Legislative Decree No. 1027, on April 20th, nineteen ninety eight. According to Article 3 contained therein: "Penitentiary Institutions […] have the fundamental mission of seeking the social re-adaptation of the condemned and the prevention of offenses, as well as the custody of provisional detainees. Those persons that are deprived of liberty or by application of provisional detention, a sentence of deprivation of liberty or a security measure, are considered inmates." For its part, the Legislative decree that serves as the basis for the approval of the country's Penitentiary Law states that, according to Article 27, Line 3 of the Constitution of the Republic, "the State is under the obligation to organize penitentiary centers in order to correct delinquents, educate them and train them in work-habits, aimed at their re-adaption and prevention of offenses" (Penitentiary Law, 1998).

[54] This author defines punishment as the "legal procedure that penalizes and condemns transgressors of criminal law, according to specific categories and legal procedures... a complex and differentiated process, that is comprised of interrelated processes: legislation, conviction and sentence, as well as the administration of sanctions" (p. 33). For his part, the author utilizes the concept of "penalty" as a synonym of punishment or penalization in the criminal sense, and defines it as "the lattice of laws, procedures, discourses, representations and institutions that comprise criminal matters" (ibíd.).

by social convention and tradition, rather than criminal profiles [that are prevalent in a society]..." (p. 36). This sort of consideration encourages the conception of forms of legal punishment not only within the legal field, as the institutional responses to the criminal phenomenon, but also as a *social and political product*, that exposes many of the cultural conceptions and constructions intrinsic in the societies they spring from. Based on this sort of paradigm, it becomes apparent that the sort of criminal policies, adopted by the Salvadoran State in recent years, have had significant repercussions in restricting the possibilities for rehabilitation and social reintegration of the penitentiary population,[55] in that they have favored, in the words of Wacquant (2004), a *Criminal State* to the detriment of an *Economic State* and through the shrinkage of the *Social State*.

In this sense, in El Salvador, the conceived notions of punishing lawbreakers and the forms and policies to deal with the criminal phenomenon are rooted in the official views on the *problem* of crime, in the conceptions of *problem persons*, and in the persons who define and construct the *approaches to the problem*. Therefore, if the sentence of the punishment reproduces these cultural notions regarding the type and characteristics that penalization must have in a society, there is also a reproduction of the disadvantages that some sectors have, in terms of those who have historically imposed these notions of the "best ways" of dealing with crime and violence: the men, particularly those men who preside in the echelons of power. The logical conclusion that is to be obtained from this is that the system —the penitentiary in this case— will reproduce the same vices and gender inequalities that are found in the

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[55]   In the Salvadoran case, the design and operations of the Penitentiary System ends up bringing together and promoting the participation of its inmate population in criminal activities, as the result of its overcrowding, the absence of policies that separate the persons deprived of liberty by virtue of the sort of crimes committed, and the absence of the application of pre-established norms in the Penitentiary Law, among other issues (Human Rights Ombudsman [HRO], 2009).

society at large, that put women in an additionally disadvantageous position. Prison is, in itself, a penalty or legal modality of punishment that contains heavy doses of suffering for those who have to go through it. In the case of the women, they bear the additional stigma of having broken off from the traditional role society confers: submissive mothers and present wives (Antony, 2007).

This status of confinement and deprivation of liberty is matched, in the case of the women, by a void in terms of specific policies to deal with issues that are peculiar to them, such as motherhood, raising children in prison, having programs for their rehabilitation and preparing for their eventual insertion in the labor market, overcrowding in the prison, among others (Antony, 2007; Núñez, 2004; Rodríguez, 2004). As Carranza states it (in Núñez, 2004):

> … in this case, like in so many others, our androcentric societies designed androcentric institutions, which were conceived in the light of the problems and needs of the male gender, and that respond inadequately to the objectives set down in criminal law and the international instruments of the United Nations and the Organization of American States (p.2).

Thus, women deprived of their liberty present characteristics that are peculiar to their gender condition, which causes them to experience life in prison in a way that is different from the men. Marcela Lagarde (in Rodríguez, 2004) alludes to the different meanings that going to prison has in the life of men and women. She states that, although the consequences of going to prison for both genders, aside from the punishment, imply uprooting and separation from their world, in the case of women, this uprooting is much greater, in that they tend to be the only ones responsible for their children. Added to this, most women are usually abandoned by their relatives when they end up in prison:

> … being a criminal and having been in prison are [like-wise] major stigmas and fault for the women. Women who are ex-convicts get stigmatized as bad, in a world that constructs women as entities of good, and whose wrong-doing is unpardonable and irreparable (*ibíd.*, p.10).

For their part, and again as a result of social conventions and cultural customs, the majority of women have a close relationship with their immediate family. This means that entering the penitentiary system causes special and deep anguish for the women, over and above the fact that they are removed from their family, and also have to face losing touch with their children, a fault that becomes an additional heavy load. This situation, as will be seen later on in this document, is characterized by the respondents as one of the most traumatic aspects of life in prison. As noted by Antony (2007), "the feeling that they are «bad mothers», of having abandoned their children, follows them from the moment they enter, to the time they exit prison" (p. 77).

Now dealing with another series of limitations that women experience in prison, Zaitzow (2004) states the need to evaluate the way in which institutional rules and programming opportunities available for women in prisons contribute and/or promote the perpetuation of women's disadvantaged status, such that prisons usually increase their dependence on the system; they emphasize the inmate-women's domestic role over and above the capacities that they might have; they deepen the ostracism on the emotional and physical level; they destroy their family relationships or those other networks; and, in some cases, they intensify the feeling of unfairness, inasmuch as they are denied opportunities that are usually made available to the men inmate population. This author considers that "…whereas it is not fair to suggest prison is worse for women than it is for men, prison is definitely different for women, because women are different from men" (*ibíd.,* p.33).

Based on the available information on the characteristics of the Salvadoran penitentiary system[56] (among others, the most recent report from the office of the *Procuraduría para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos* (Human Rights Ombudsman [Hro], 2009) regarding the status of the human rights of women deprived of liberty in the country, and the children that live with them), there are five aspects of the situation on the inside of prisons that according to Rodríguez (2005; 2004), make the situation of living in prisons more difficult:

a) *Inadequate Architecture and a Lack of Categorization*: architectural design in prisons and the distribution of space do not usually take into account or guarantee the separation of areas, which is further aggravated in mixed penitentiaries, where women are separated from men by placing them in more reduced spaces, which leads to greater overcrowding (Rodríguez, 2004). In El Salvador, the penitentiary system is comprised of 20 centers that have been set up; only one of these (the *Ilopango* Prison, commonly known as "The Women's Prison") has been designed to house women. Nevertheless, presently, women are distributed in four prisons,[57] which were originally built for men. That is why, they had to be adapted to be able to house women. The changes in the infrastructure consist of remodeling and the addition of "annexes" that often comprise between ten and fifteen percent of the total floorspace in the penitentiary (Hro, 2009). In contrast, the same report explains that "… whereas areas that have been designated for men have at least a minimum amount of space for vocational workshops

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[56] In the fifth chapter of this report, which presents the study findings regarding life in prison from the perspective of the respondent women gang-members, there is a detailed presentation of some of the characteristics of the four penitentiary centers visited in the framework of this study, which are a sample of the precariousness of the Salvadoran penitentiary system.

[57] These are the penitentiaries in *Quezaltepeque*, *Sensuntepeque*, *San Miguel* and the Women's Rehabilitation Center in *Ilopango*. The latter is the only one that was designed specifically for women (see Table 2.2, Chapter 2 of this study).

and recreational spaces, women are obliged to remain in the assigned space, and to use it for all of their activities, including visiting time" (p. 87). In fact, the women sleep in cells or public spaces, which lack proper ventilation due to the great number of inmates. During the rainy season the rain seeps in at times. On occasions, the women sleep in twos or more on a single bed and/or under the beds and bunks as well (see Table 5.1 in this study).

Conversely, and despite the fact that the Salvadoran Penitentiary Law states there must be separation between persons deprived of liberty according to their legal status (provisional detention ["processed"] inmates and sentenced inmates), actually, they share the same physical space in three out of the four penitentiaries. Nevertheless, even in the case of the *Ilopango* prison, this separation is becoming progressively less effective due to the high degree of overcrowding, which makes it necessary to place processed women in the same area as the sentenced women. Likewise, there is no separation by age, special needs or even contagious diseases. The only case for separation is in terms of being pregnant, or living with their children (Hro, 2009).

b) *Secondary and Discrimination-generating Position*: as the women are imprisoned in a model that is inspired by male needs and responds to them, women inmates tend to be in a secondary position, and have to bear diminishing of the rights that are intrinsic to their gender status (Rodríguez, 2004). On the other hand, Zaitzow (2004) proposes that the reduced female inmate population serves to "justify" lower levels of specialization in terms of treatment and rehabilitation, or the scarce supply of "non-traditional" vocational training programs. The Salvadoran penitentiary system provides, once more, perfect examples of these discriminatory situations. For instance, there is evidence that the sort of employment that women are offered inside the prisons, when this is the case, fundamentally consists of janitorial

work. Also, programs are mostly geared towards activities that reproduce traditional gender roles (such as knitting, embroidery, padding, *piñata*-making). Aside from this type of activity, the Hᴿᴏ report (2009) stated that the majority of the female penitentiary population remains inactive or useless, and have no possibility of accessing work. Vocational training activities are isolated, or they lack the resources necessary to be fully and adequately implemented. In this regard, the report notes that "...there is even a lack of programs from the penitentiary administration involving equalization of opportunities for social reintegration; penitentiary treatment and the programs implemented place women in predeter-mined roles that reproduce social inequalities, for instance, doing domestic activities even while in jail: work such as cleaning, food service, handicraft manufacturing, sewing, cosmetology, and so on." (Hᴿᴏ, 2009, p. 86).

In fact, aside from the "Women's Prison," with its physical layout specifically designed for work-activities (which remains inadequate for meeting the population's demand), in the rest of the penitentiaries this disposition is not complied with: in *San Miguel*, women carry out their activities in a very constrained space (which is the space provided for their confinement). *Sensuntepeque* and *Quezaltepeque* have no formally established minimum-space set up for workshops to take place: "...the scarce manual activities [destined for women] are also carried out in the inmates' daily living spaces. However, in the three mixed penitentiaries [*Sensun-tepeque*, *Quezaltepeque* and *San Miguel*] there are spaces set aside for workshops to take place and for vocational activities to be done in the men's sectors, although this does not satisfy the demand either, given the overcrowding and the fact that authorities are scarcely interested in generating internal and external conditions for work to be done, which is a situation that also takes place in the case of the women." (*ibíd.*, p. 105-106). According to this report, these scant possibilities for working or vocational-training,

which the inmate population have, are practically inexistent for the women in provisional detention ("processed"). This situation is particularly important, due to the great number of women inmates who have this status (see Table 1.10).

c) *Violence Against Women:* violence persists as a constant element in prison life (Valverde, 1997), to the extent that it is institutionalized and takes place in the interaction with penitentiary personnel, that is, between the inmates and those in a situation of power over them, taking form in different manners of violence: physical, sexual, psychological (Rodríguez, 2004). In the case of El Salvador, the Human Rights Ombudsman's report (HRO, 2009) notes that, based on their most recent assessments (and the information derived from it), there was no evidence of specific cases of punishment or practices that had violated the physical integrity or implied the use of torture on the women that are deprived of liberty. It did, however, note that these situations had been reiteratively registered in the past. Actually, at the penitentiary in *Quezaltepeque*, women inmates complained that search procedures (periodic cell-checking operatives) have lead to the destruction of private property, "this happens more often when it is the police force that carries out these operations, or when they are implemented by personnel from the General Office of Penitentiary Centers [central administration]" (HRO, 2009, p. 64).

Confirmation of this situation can be found in the Profile of the State of Prison Life in El Salvador, carried out by the *Quetzalcoatl* Foundation (2009), where it is noted that there are violations of human rights inside the prisons: "... in some cases, there are verified instances of possible punishment, and other cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment, that may be common practice in penitentiary centers..." (p. 41). These statements allude to acts aimed at the general population, including both men and women. Likewise, it is important to note that security personnel assigned to penitentiary centers

—who are assigned to the area of custody— are mostly men: 71.4% in *Ilopango*; 86.7%, in *San Miguel*; 86.5%, in *Sensuntepeque*; 83.3%, in *Quezaltepeque* (Hro, 2009).

For her part, regarding the issue of violence, Rodríguez (2004) raises the point that it also emerges in the inmates' relationships: "… among inmate-peers, who are forced into permanent coexistence in seclusion. Aside from the family ties they recreate, and the power that emanates from criminal prestige for each one, the inmates have hierarchical relationships that stem from their relationship with prison authorities: some of them collaborate in keeping watch and organizing everyday life, and this parity rupture affords them power, privileges and the possibility of exerting punishment or causing harm to others" (p. 15). In the Salvadoran case, this situation is also confirmed: in the case of *Ilopango* prison, where women gang members are transferred by virtue of having their children living with them, there have been cases of rows and violence as a result of blood rivalry between gangs, and fights between them and members of organized crime bands.[58] This situation was also confirmed in this study.

d) *Rootlessness and Abandon:* in most countries, there is only one penitentiary for women. This situation induces in the women a sense of rootlessness in terms of the group they belong to. Secluded women are rarely visited by family members, and less so by their partners. This situation is not so frequent among men that are imprisoned. At men's penitentiary facilities, it is common to see a large number of women visiting their respective husbands, fathers, sons and

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[58] In December 2005, inside the "Women's Jail" (*Ilopango* penitentiary), an inmate was murdered (a member of an organized crime band), at the hands of a group of gang-members, during a riot that lasted approximately an hour. After this event, a series of transfers took place, by which women belonging to opposing gangs where placed in different penitentiary facilities. See: http://archive.laprensa.com.sv/20060117/nacion/398091.asp

friends in prison. Contrarily, at the women's detention facilities, visits are scarce and the presence of men almost inexistent (Antony, 1998; Rodríguez, 2004). This situation is likewise characteristic in this country, in that, as the Hro Report (2009) states: "...women that are deprived of liberty see fewer guarantees of this right [to family or intimate visiting] than the men do, due to the fact that there are only four prisons for their incarceration nationwide [...] three of them are in the Central and North-Central Zones (*Zona paracentral*), and the placement of the women in the centers does not correspond to their place of residence..." (p.93). In fact, of these four prisons, two are designated exclusively for members of either one of the major gangs (*Mara Salvatrucha* or *18th Street*), limiting and complicating relatives' transportation options, and widening the gap in the women inmates' ties with the outside world, since their placement will not be in terms of relative closeness to their place of origin, but according to other criteria (such as membership in one gang or the other). As for intimate visiting, this study shows very few instances, which may be linked to the low demand on the part of their male partners (when they are free, in the case of women gang-members).

e) *Living Conditions of the mothers that are deprived of liberty*: legislation allows inmates that are mothers to keep their infant children with them until they reach a certain age. In the case of El Salvador, women deprived of liberty may keep their children by them until the age of 5 (Article 70, Penitentiary Law). Despite everything set down in the United Nations' Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Offenders (1995), many facilities have no day-care or special-care programs for these children. In the Salvadoran case, there are nursery sections[59] in only two of the four penitentiaries designated for women: the *Quezaltepeque*

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[59] Spaces inside the penitentiary facilities destined to house pregnant women or women who are rearing their very young children.

Prison and the *Ilopango* Prison. The latter has the minimum necessary conditions for pregnant women, which implies that there are fewer limitations in terms of the rest of the women population (HRO, 2009). For their part, all penitentiary facilities suffer from deficient access to public works —particularly water. This situation fosters and aggravates unhealthy conditions caused by stagnant water, and the absence of water. Regarding the *Quezaltepeque* Prison (whose facilities were designed to house men, and has one of the highest levels of overcrowding in the country), the nursery section is "inappropriate, given the size, lack of basic conditions for moving about, relaxing and carrying out activities, despite the fact that [the Ombudsman's Office recognizes] at least the women […] located at the nursery section, do not sleep on the floor or in the hallways" (*ibíd.*, p.114).

Consequently, and in consonance with observations by Antony (2007), it can be noted that, for women, prison is a generically discriminating space. This is experienced in the unequal treatment they receive, the different implications that imprisonment has for them, the consequences for their family and the conception that society attributes has of them. Similarly, it is important to keep in mind that incarceration is, in general, an "impoverishment machine" (Wacquant, 2004), in that detention has adverse and counterproductive effects, not just for the inmates, but for their families as well. In the case of women, this damage is accentuated in that they are often the sole economic support for their households (FESAL, 2009), as well as an important socializing reference for their daughters and sons. Therefore, the impact that prison has on a woman, does not end with her. It extends trans-generationally.

To make matters worse, the phenomenon of women in prison has been on the rise. Documentation at the United Nations Latin American Institute for the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders (ILANUD) registers a generalized upturn in the rates of incarceration throughout the Latin

American region, and this includes the rates of women in prison (Rodríguez, 2004). This information confirms, among other aspects, the States' excessive dependency on the prison sentence. In El Salvador, this rising tendency in the number of inmates has been exponential. In fact, in the years after the anti-gang plans were implemented, the crisis that had been growing in the country's penitentiary system since the 90s became more entrenched[60] (Archdiocese's Office of Legal Aid, 2007; Flores and García, 2006; HRO, 2009). The state of emergency that many of the penitentiary facilities have been in has gone from being the exception to becoming the norm.[61] These sorts of

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[60] Two examples of a long-term development: in mid 2004, there was an episode of large-scale murder inside *La Esperanza* Prison, taking the lives of 31 persons that had been deprived of liberty, and leaving 30 wounded. In January 2007, 21 imprisoned persons died as the result of a riot at the *Apanteos* Prison. Both situations are considered the most serious expressions of the penitentiary crisis in recent years. Regarding the latter episode, the report issued from the Archdiocese's Office of Legal Aid states that the characteristics of the situation "denote planning and prior selection of the victims. The omissions on the part of the penitentiary and police authorities, who failed to intervene to prevent the killings, are unjustifiable from the legal, technical, and ethical points of view. Further, the murders took place with some degree of collaboration by the public powers, inasmuch as the aforementioned authorities did not proceed with any deterring measure, such as police intervention that might stop the development of the criminal acts." (Archdiocese's Office of Legal Assistance, 2007; the full report in Spanish is available at: http:// www.tutelalegal.org/paginas/apanteos310107.html). For more detail on prison rows, riots and protests, see the annual reports issued by the Office of the Human Rights Ombudsman on the country's situation in terms of penitentiary centers.

[61] Aguilar (2007*b*) noted that the decision by penitentiary authorities to separate interns by virtue of their membership in the gangs contributed significantly and determinedly to the entrenchment of the penitentiary crisis, in that this boycotted the scant processes of attempted rehabilitation of the intern population, as well as the deterioration and consolidation of the phenomenon, by providing them with the internal control of the penitentiaries where they are secluded. Thus, the State designated certain penitentiary facilities around the country for exclusive seclusion of the members of a certain gang or the other, overlooking the categories established in the Penal Code and the Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Offenders issued by the UN, and in disregard of the mission to socially re-adapt and prevent crime, established in Article 3 of the Penitentiary Law.

events reveal not only the lack of control that characterizes the penitentiary authorities' management, but also the country's criminal policy's failure in terms of education, reinsertion and rehabilitation of inmates, which the Salvadoran State is constitutionally mandated to provide.

One of the indicators that reveal with greater eloquence the crisis in the Salvadoran penitentiary system is the overcrowding that the prison population survives in, which, as already mentioned, has become aggravated due to the lack of political support for the implementation of penitentiary benefits covered in the current Penitentiary Law of 1998, and as the result of political decisions that have hardened sentences. This has all lead to an exponential rise in the penitentiary population, and the concomitant worsening of the conditions for those that are already confined in the system. Accordingly, towards the month of July, 1999, the system contained a total national population of 6,793 inmates (DGCP, in Cruz, Trigueros and González, 2000). By late 2004, this number had practically doubled, with a total of more than 12 thousand persons in confinement (see Graph 1.11). Five years later, toward the month of July, 2009, the penitentiary population surpassed 21,000 persons. This means that, in ten years, the penitentiary population had tripled. This took place in a system with installed capacity for 8,110 inmates (DGCP, 2008*a*), which implies a surplus of almost 13,000 (that is 159% in July, 2009), and a national rate of 340 incarcerated persons per 100 thousand inhabitants.[62] El Salvador is the country that has experienced the most drastic increment in its rate of incarceration, and it is the country with the highest levels of penitentiary overpopulation in Latin America (Dammert and Zúñiga, 2008).

Furthermore, the proportion of inmates that are gang-members has also risen in a drastic manner: the gang-member

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[62] Assuming estimated population of $6_1183,002$ inhabitants by 2010 (DIGESTYC, 2008*b*).

population behind bars, in mid 2009, was double what it had been in August 2005, having come to comprise 35.1% of the penitentiary population in 2009 (see Graph 1.11).

Graph 1.11

Evolution of Penitentiary Population in El Salvador, by Year (in thousands)

Source: World Prison Brief (2004), General Office of Penitentiary Centers.
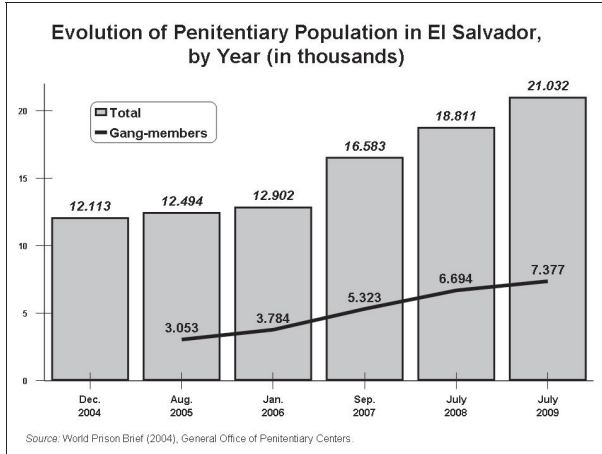
In order to appreciate the detail of the level of overpopulation that is being described, and to give an idea of the negative conditioning that is induced by this situation on the adequate operation of the system as a whole, and at each particular facility, Table 1.9 shows the installed capacity, the actual population, and the level of overpopulation in each of the four penitentiary facilities that are of specific interest in this study (where women are housed). It is plain to see that all of these penitentiaries are operating at a level that is called critical overcrowding, in other words, each has a population density[63] that is equal to or over 120%, according to parameters used by the Council of Europe (Rodríguez, 2005).

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[63] Penitentiary overcrowding is the surplus of persons that are deprived of liberty, over and above the inmate capacity that has been officially determined. This overpopulation is measured by the prison density per hundred spaces, that is to say, the number of persons who are deprived of liberty divided by the number of openings that are foreseen, per 100 (Rodríguez, 2005; 2004).

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Table 1.9. Installed Capacity, Penitentiary Population, Overpopulation, Density and Inmate Population by Gender, According to the Penitentiary Type that Contains Women in the Country

Penitentiary Facility	Installed Capacity	Total inmate population (July 2009)	Over population	Density	Total Population: Men (July 2009)	Total population: Women * (July 2009)
Ilopango	220 places	1,147 persons	927	521.4%	---	1,147
Quezaltepeque	200 places	894 persons	694	447.0%	779	115
Sensuntepeque	220 places	428 persons	208	194.5%	248	180
San Miguel	180 places	808 persons	628	448.9%	626	182

* Does not include women imprisoned in- and receiving attention at the Psychiatric Hospital.
Source: Preapared by Author based on Information from the Penitentiary Records & Control Department (DGCP, 2008*a*) and the General Inspector at the same Office (DGCP, 2009).

This data makes it possible to present the way that the levels of incarceration have increased in the country, as well as the precarious conditions for women imprisoned in a system where the only center that was designed for their confinement has a population excess of almost 1,000 women. And the other three prisons, where the confinement of women had not originally been contemplated, contain practically 500 more women.

Women are not exempt from this incremental tendency for incarceration: DGCP data for the month of January, 2008 indicated that women comprised 6.4% of the total penitentiary population (DGCP, 2008*a*). This percentage had risen to 7.9% toward July 2009 (DGCP, 2009) (see Graph 1.12). On that date, the total number of women prisoners in the penitentiary facilities came to 1,629, including common inmates and women gang-members. Of these, 232 (14.2%) were women gang-members. Simultaneously, these 232 women gang-members comprise 3.2% of the total gang population that has been deprived of liberty, and only 1.1% of the total population in the system. This way, despite the exponential increments in penitentiary population, the women —gang-members and common inmates—

continue to be a minority in the system, which also limits their possibilities and situation inside. The situation of numerical inferiority becomes a reflection of the differential social control that is exerted on women, and winds up aggravating their condition of marginalization and disadvantage in the system. In this sense, since they comprise a minority, the inclusion of a gender perspective in the policies is not considered necessary, neither is training of penitentiary personnel in terms of program contents for rehabilitation and social insertion (Zaitzow, 2004).

Graph 1.12

Evolution of Woman Population & Percentage Representation in Relation to the Total Penitentiary Population

Thousands

Aug. 2005	600	4.8%
Jan. 2008	1,097	6.4%
Feb. 2008	1,156	6.5%
Mar. 2008	1,532	8.7%
Apr. 2008	1,251	6.9%
May 2008	1,265	6.9%
June 2008	1,288	6.9%
July 2008	1,315	7.0%
July 2009	1,629	7.9%

Source: Preapared by Author, based on data from the General Office of Penitentiary Centers.
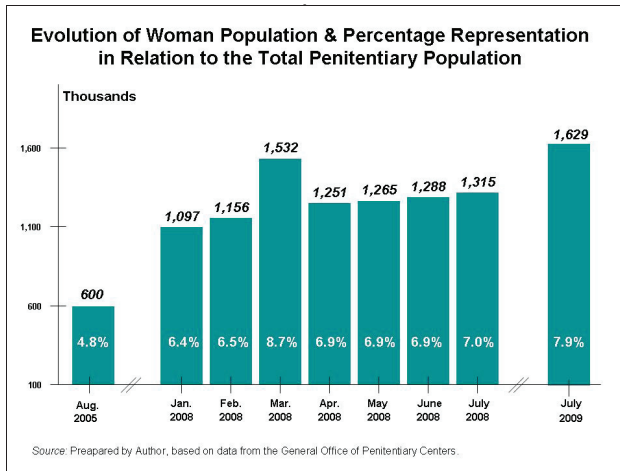
In terms of their legal status, out of all of the women deprived of liberty as of July 2009 (1,629), 42.8% were serving sentences (prosecuted), and over half (57.2%) had been processed (see Table 1.10). The percentages of female population that was processed —both in the case of women gang-members (50%), as well as common inmates (58.3%)— is higher than the percentage of men waiting for a sentence (32.2% for gang-members, and 34% for common inmates). Out of the total number of women gang-members (232), 50% were already prosecuted, and the other half were in provisional detention, as of July, 2009.

Table 1.10. Situation of Population Deprived of Liberty as of July, 2009, by Condition, Gender and Legal Status

Legal Status	Gang Population		Total: Gangs	Common Inmates		Total: Common	General Total: Women	General Total
	Men	Women		Men	Women			
Sentenced (convicted)	4,775 (67.8%)	116 (50.0%)	**4,891 (67.2%)**	7,832 (66.0%)	582 (41.7%)	**8,414 (63.5%)**	**698 (42.8%)**	**13,305 (64.8%)**
Processed (not convicted)	2,270 (32.2%)	116 (50.0%)	**2,386 (32.8%)**	4,028 (34.0%)	815 (58.3%)	**4,843 (36.5%)**	**931 (57.2%)**	**7,229 (35.2%)**
Total	**7,045**	**232**	**7,277**	**11,860**	**1,397**	**13,257***	**1,629**	**20,534***

* This does not include the population in semi-liberty (83 men & 12 women), neither those in condition of trust (340 men & 63 women), because there are no figures on gang-members in these conditions that would make it possible to establish the respective comparisons.
Source: Preapared by Author based on statistics from the General Inspector's Office at the General Office of Penitentiary Centers (DGCP, 2009).

As for the sort of crimes that were committed, the most recent DGCP figures make it possible to sustain that there are differences in the kind of crimes committed by men and by women. Table 1.11 presents, in percentages, the types of crimes perpetrated by the inmate population, by gender. This classification does not give the details of the kinds of crimes for which the women gang-members have been deprived of liberty, because it is not broken down in the official data; however, there are differences shown for men and women in general.

The crimes most frequently committed by the male inmate population are *related to property* (among these are robbery, theft, extortion, and so on), 29.1%; followed by those *related to life* (homicide), 28.9%; 16%, for some offense *related to the constitutional system and public peace* (among these are illegal association; the possession, bearing or running weapons of war; also, holding, bearing or running firearms, among others); and 13% had been accused of offenses *related to sexual liberty*. These four categories include 87% of crimes committed by the convicted male population in general, 86.5% of crimes committed by convicted men, and 87.9% of processed men.

Table 1.11. Offenses Committed by- or Attributed to the Population Deprived of Liberty, by Gender (in percentages)

Types of Offense	Convicts		Processed		Total: MEN	Total: WOMEN	Total: General
	Men	Women	Men	Women			
Related to property	27.5	37.2	32.1	33.0	**29.1**	**34.7**	**29.4**
Related to life	32.0	18.4	22.8	11.2	**28.9**	**14.1**	**27.9**
Related to the constitutional system and public peace	11.7	5.6	24.5	21.9	**16.0**	**15.3**	**15.9**
Against sexual freedom	15.3	1.5	8.5	2.3	**13.0**	**1.9**	**12.2**
Related to liberty	5.6	5.4	4.5	4.2	**5.3**	**4.7**	**5.2**
Related to public health	3.4	27.0	3.2	18.8	**3.4**	**22.1**	**4.6**
Related to personal integrity	2.2	0.4	1.6	1.1	**2.0**	**0.8**	**1.9**
Related to public faith	0.5	1.6	1.0	2.0	**0.6**	**1.8**	**0.7**
Other offenses	1.8	2.9	1.9	5.6	**1.7**	**4.5**	**2.1**
Total	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**

Source: Prepared by Author based on statistics from the General Inspector's Office, General Office of Penitentiary Centers (DGCP, 2009).

In the case of the women, the most common offenses are those *related to property* (37.2% of the convicted female population & a third of those processed); which is a type of offense they are repeatedly accused of, similar to the men. Next, in order of frequency, are *offenses related to public health* (including those crimes related to drug trafficking), which involve more than a fifth of the women in general; more than a fourth of those convicted, and 18.8% of those processed. This is the type of offense that many more women than men are convicted or processed for. Regarding this sort of crime, some authors note the fact that involvement in Narcoactivity tends to make it possible for women to continue carrying out their culturally assigned roles such as that of mother, wife, and homemaker, and provides income at levels that would be impossible to match by other means, whether in the formal or informal job market (Antony, 2007; Rodríguez, 2004). Furthermore, the third most frequent type of offense is that *related to the constitutional system and the public peace,* with an increase in the number of women processed for this type of offense (a figure that is even close to that of the men), by comparison with those

that have been convicted. Another type of crime, for which women gang-members have certainly been processed and convicted as well, is that *related to life*. This comprises 18.4% of the convicted women and over 10% of those processed. In any case, these four categories of crimes add up to 86.2% of the women in general, to 88.2% of the convicted women, and 84.9% of those processed.

As for the types of offense for which women gang-members are deprived of liberty, for want of official information, and only as an illustration, data will be taken from testimony by the men and women gang-members who were interviewed in preliminary studies. This is done in order to present the variety of offenses committed, and the differences that become apparent (see Table 1.12):

Table 1.12. Offenses that Incarcerated Gang-Members were Accused of, by Study Year and Gender (in percentages)

Offense for which subject has been charged	2000* (74.3% of sample)		Total	2006* (first crime)	
	Men	Women		Men	Women
Robbery *(related to property)*	25.5	**33.0**	26.4	25.9	**20.0** (3)
Injuries to others *(related to Personal integrity)*	20.0	**28.4**	21.1	3.3	---
Possession/ sale of drugs *(related to public health)*	14.3	**15.9**	14.5	3.0	**20.0** (3)
Homicide/ attempted homicide *(related to life)*	8.0	**0.0**	7.0	47.8	13.3 (2)
Theft *(related to property)*	6.4	**2.3**	5.9	2.3	---
Possession/trafficking weapons; illegal bearing of firearms *(relat. to constitutional system and public peace)*	5.4	**6.8**	5.6	5.6	6.7 (1)
Rape *(against sexual freedom)*	5.9	**1.1**	5.3	5.3	6.7 (1)
Theft or robbery and injury *(relat. to property; relat. to personal integrity)*	4.9	**0.0**	4.3	---	---
Extortion *(related to property)*	---	**---**	---	3.3	**26.7** (4)
Other responses	6.4	**10.2**	6.9	2.6	6.7 (1)
No response	3.1	**2.3**	3.0	0.8	---
Total	100.0 (609 men gang-members)	**100.0 (88 women gang-members)**	100.0	100.0 (301 men gang-members)	100.0 (15 women gang-members)

* Reference to the year field work for the three studies was carried out, and not the date of study publication.
Source: Preapared by Author, based on Data-bases from studies by Santacruz & Concha-Eastman (2001) and Aguilar (2006).

In the case of the women that have been, or currently are gang-members, their participation in illegal activities is diverse, and leaves behind the "typical feminine offenses" such as infanticide, parricide, or abortion (Rodríguez, 2004). In the study that was done early in the decade (Santacruz and Concha-Eastman, 2001), among the women gang-members respondents who had been in prison there was a predominance of offenses related to property, personal integrity and public health. The last study that was done with gang-members in prison (Aguilar, 2006), the 15 women respondents declared they had been deprived of liberty for a great variety of offenses (see Table 1.12). Among these, there still prevailed those related to property (robbery, theft, extortion); although there were still frequent references to issues such as the possession and sale of drugs, and those related to life.

Although data from these samples do not allow for a generalization of the female gang population, on the type of offenses they were convicted or processed for, the idea in presenting the previous data has been to illustrate the way women's participation in the gang leads to committing a wide gamut of serious offenses; above all, if they take into account that the official statistics present the type of crimes that have been proven among that population that has been apprehended by the system. As part of the black figure of crime, and as a result of the deficiencies in terms of criminal investigation that are prevalent in this country, there remain a whole series of crime-cases that have not been clarified, that add to the existing levels of impunity, leaving the perpetrators without a sanction, be they men or women.

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This overview of some of the consequences that are brought on by the women's contact with violence (through victimization, their participation in violent acts, and contact with the penitentiary system) attempts to show that, in cases where a woman

becomes part of groups that promote and make use of violence as a universal resource for inter-personal relations and wielding power, they end up being assimilated into this group-dynamic. As a result, on many occasions, they go from being the victim to the victimizer of others, as part of a perverse cycle of violence. This cycle or transition from vulnerability and victimization to being the agent, and to safekeeping their identity and integrity by way of committing acts of aggression on others, is funda-mental in understanding the processes that are experienced by women who have been or are now part of a gang.

The pages that follow this review of the situation of violence in the country, of the way in which gangs take on a more promi-nent role, and of the ways that many women suffer —and use— several expressions of violence, will attempt at sketching out this *transition* from victim to victimizer, that is taken by the girl or adolescent who is later the woman gang-member. That is, the trajectory from a number of more "informal" prisons —such as an oppressive domestic environment, the violent neighborhood or the superposition of exclusions— to more formal prisons, like the gang, to finally land in a prison's concrete expression: the penitentiary. Hand in hand with the narratives and experiences that some of the women that have lived and are now living the experience of being gang-members, there is an attempt at sketching out these routes; and the way in which those "*seconds in the air*" that the woman experiences suspended in mid air while receiving the beating that the group deals as part of the violent rite of gang induction, are simply that: a brief interlude before their imminent fall, and the certainty of having, from that moment on and often for good, both feet firmly planted in the gang. The Authors hope, at least, that this reconstruction has been to a certain degree precise, in describing these trajectories from one prison to the next, each more oppressive than the former.

Chapter 2
Methodological Aspects

2.1. Choice of techniques and creation of instruments

While the gang phenomenon is not a new issue on the Salvadoran research agenda, there were no studies —at least not at the time of making this document— that centered on the woman gang-member as its main focus. Nevertheless, a great deal of information gathered by previous studies gave rise to the hypothesis that women represent, within the gang, a group that lives out its own dynamics, and that seems to be differentially impacted, both by the violence that characterizes the gang's internal and external dynamics, as well as by the restrictions that affect their lives when they join a gang. This impact, according to this hypothesis, is such that they find themselves in a position of greater vulnerability than prior to joining the gang.

Nothing was known, or rather very little was known, about certain dimensions and roles in their lives —aside from those linked to the media and social constructs about gangs, that emphasize the display of violence that is characteristic of these groups. Notwithstanding, from these initial notions, we started with the idea of carrying out an exploratory study that would allow to make an approximation of the status and situation of women within the gang, their opinions, expectations, needs and wants, and that this would make it possible to identify aspects that impact their experience within the group in a way that is different or similar from that of the men. In summary, it was decided, from the onset, to attempt to capture certain vital processes of the women that were or had been gang members, starting from their own interpretation of these experiences.

Given that the discovery of meaning is the characteristic note and justification for the use of a qualitative approach in a research project (Ruiz Olabuénaga, 1999), it was decided that

the starting point would be this kind of methodology, given that it is best adapted to achieving the objectives mentioned previously, since it includes research methods that incorporate at least one of five characteristics (*ibíd.*, p.23):

a) *The goal of the research project is to collect and reconstruct meaning:* the intention is to gather the meaning of things (processes, behaviors) more than describing social facts.
b) *Language that is basically conceptual and metaphorical:* based on the primary use of conceptual language, more than figures or statistics; also the use of narration and description, more than algorithms and statistical formulae.
c) *Flexible and "unstructured" method of capturing reality:* which does not imply an absence of systematization, rather it alludes to a preference for gathering information using techniques such as observation or in-depth interviews, more than experiments or massive structured surveys.
d) *Procedures that are more inductive than deductive:* instead of starting from a theory and some perfectly structured and precise hypotheses, it prefers to start from data to try to "reconstruct a world", based on complex systematization and theorizing.
e) *The orientation is not particularistic and generalizing, rather it is holistic and concretized:* instead of trying to generalize a small sample to a larger collective, research intends to capture the content of experiences and meanings that take place in just one or only a few instances.

Assuming this kind of methodology meant to become committed not only to certain kind of information gathering techniques, but with a specific kind of research paradigm, as well as a series of assumptions in terms of design, approach, and procedural strategies. In this regard, a base assumption in this sort of approach is that social phenomena to be subjects of study are considered "worlds", endowed with signification and symbols, which require a search for meanings, starting from devices that favor or make possible their construction. In order

to achieve this task, this study was made using two techniques to gather information: the *biographical interviews* and *focus or discussion groups*.

The choice of both kinds of techniques —the biographical interview and focus groups— followed a logic that is related to considerations of the qualitative paradigm. First of all, if the research objectives were geared towards exploring *subjectivities*, these cannot be separated from the processes of signification given to them by the owners of these subjectivities —in this case the women, who in turn are inserted in specific social and historical contexts. Thus, in dealing with subjectivities, these "cannot be conceived as a universal product, rather as the result of particular and temporal expressions of groups and individuals" (Szasz and Lerner, 1986, p. 208). Therefore, it was decided that the way to reconstruct the life experiences of a group of women within the gangs, and make it possible for the researchers to recover meanings and values given by them to their own experiences, was by carrying out *biographical interviews*.

By and large, interviews used as research techniques tend to be very useful in that they make it possible for participants to manage information at a deeper level, and they also foster greater levels of spontaneity, involvement and depth when giving responses (Kerr, Aronoff and Messé, 2000); this is particularly important in this case, whose issues have not been sufficiently explored. More specifically, qualitative interviews —that include among their modes the *biographical interview*— have as a "basic ingredient" the allusion to conversation or dialogue that is always guided or oriented by the research objectives (Valles, 2007). However, this *conversational* character of this kind of interview must not be confused with the absence of systematization: "qualitative interviews are based, for advanced methodological reasons, on daily conversations. However, in terms of being professional research interviews, they are professional conversations with their own techniques and purposes" (*ibíd.*, p. 40)

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On the other hand, in terms of the structure of the research script used in this study, we decided to adopt a *biographical axis* (Valles, 2007), that serves as a focal point for the structure and content of the interaction. Thus, an *interview script* was created that would make it possible to translate, into colloquial language, a structured axis of themes that were based on the research objectives that looked into diverse topics of interest to deal with their life histories.

Thus the interview guide included five overarching areas, that would serve as a parameter for milestones that were to be addressed either chronologically (organized as presented in the structure) or spontaneously (stemming from the input or narrative spin of the respondents). In this regard, the interview script, more than acting as a fixed structure that would box in the flow of conversation, served to orient the interview based on minimum themes that needed to be addressed. The minimum areas set forth in this script that were addressed in the inter-views, were the following:

I.a. Initial Framework—introducing the researchers and the purposes of the study: it was decided that this phase, which is basically introductory in nature, should be carried out jointly by both researchers at the start of each session, in each of the penitentiaries visited. The objective was to present the research objectives, the reasons for working with women gang members, as well as —something extremely relevant— insure the anonymous and confidential nature of the issues that were to be addressed. During this initial contact with the women, emphasis was made on the *voluntary* character of their partici-pation, and that more than seeking to learn their "identity" (their names, the name of the *cliques* they belonged to, or where they lived before entering prison), the point of interest was "their history". This, as was the case, gave them a greater sense of ease, particularly when dealing with certain topics that are highly sensitive to them and to the gangs.

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I.b. Autobiographical Framework—general information: during this phase, subjects were requested general information in order to subsequently draw up a personal characterization, rather than the identity. The information gathered included the age, level of formal education attained, marital status, the time served in the penitentiary (whether as an inmate or in the processing phase); in case they had children, they were asked regarding the number, ages, and their own age upon bearing their first child.

II. Following the biographical trajectory, a second major heading was regarding *life prior to joining a gang*, including exploration of the following areas:

* *Family situation prior to joining a gang*: family structure, quality of relations within the family, the presence of violence directed at any family member(s).

* *Educational situation*: the respondent's experience as a student, the reasons she dropped out of school (among them, whether the gang had anything to do with the decision to draw away from the educational system) and the consequences —to her or her children— of this situation.

* *Employment status*: the ways which the family (or whoever she lived with before joining a gang) made a living, who worked inside and outside the home, whether she had worked, what had been her occupation, and the impact they consider being a gang member has on re-entering the job market.

* *Community Relations:* the quality of the relations she had with members of the community or neighborhood (*barrio*) where she lived prior to joining the gang, and the ways these relations changed once she entered the group. This deals with her views regarding social and community perceptions of gangs in general, and regarding women that belong to gangs in particular.

III. The next area that was addressed was ***gang life***. In this case, different aspects of life as a member of the group were discussed, including her personal appreciations in this regard. Among these aspects were the following:

* *Reasons and processes for joining gangs:* reasons for joining, ages at which they joined the gang, the processes by which they established the first contacts with these groups, initiation rituals (*"jumping in"*), and their vision regarding the hardships a woman has to go through in order to enter these groups.

* *Changes in family relationships due to the fact that they had joined a gang:* focuses on learning whether family relationships and even with acquaintances, have been modified as a result of their joining the group.

* *Responsibilities and functions inside the gang:* they were asked regarding their appraisal of the responsibilities and possibilities for decision making within the group, and whether they perceived any differences in treatment given to their male counterparts.

* *Forms of participation in the gang dynamics:* they were asked about their experiences within the gang, aggressions withstood and/or dealt, and the kind of actors involved in the violence.

* *Costs and benefits of belonging to the gang:* focuses on their appraisal of these issues.

* *Impact of the use of violence:* the ways they perceive that daily violence may have affected them; their assessment of the most difficult aspects of gang life.

* *Life as a couple:* inasmuch as their partners are also gang members, this issue is circumscribed in this area.

They were asked about the quality of their relationships as a couple, the distribution of household tasks, impact of membership of the two of them in the gang regarding the quality of the relation, and the existence of situations of violence between them and their partner.

IV. Following in sequential order, the next area that was included was **life in jail**. Within this aspect, the following topics were addressed:

* *Life experiences in the penitentiary:* they were asked about a series of aspects regarding their period of confinement, their assessment of the most difficult thing about being in custody, relationships with other inmates in the prison, kind of support they receive from their families or the gang while in this situation, and the kind of resources they would need to improve their living conditions while in prison.

* *Life experiences of maternity:* how they assess their experience of maternity, both in and out of prison.

* *Other personal valuations:* plans or expectations of the future (in case there are any), as well as needs they identify for women gang members once they serve their time.

V. Closure for interview: this consisted of a moment to review certain questions to be clarified, to reiterate the issue of confidentiality, and to insist on the importance of their participation in generating knowledge regarding their situation. In this regard, the researchers reiterated their gratitude for the time and disposition of the respondents in granting the interview, as well as the openness with which they shared the experiences narrated.

Given that the purpose of the interviews was going deeper on the information, the emphasis was not on carrying out a

large number. Rather it was to recover information that would make it possible to articulate a greater understanding in terms of the course of their lives. For this reason, due to the length of the script that had been designed, the interviews were carried out over the course of 3 to 4 hours. All of the interviews took place in one session, one on one (the respondent and one of the researchers).

Complimentary to this research strategy, there were also three *discussion groups* held with groups of up to 10 women gang-members. The purpose of the groups was to fill in some of the information that would be related to their situation inside the penitentiary, as well as to go deeper into some of the issues and get to know the divergences or convergences that may exist between their stories in a group setting. It is noteworthy that the creation of the generative question guide used in the focus groups, as well as its implementation, took place after the interviews, in the final phase of the fieldwork. This made it possible, on the one hand, for the women to feel more comfortable with the researchers in a Group situation—as most of them had previously been interviewed on an individual basis. On the other hand, this was a chance to deepen in certain areas already touched upon during the interviews. Basically, and starting with the generating questions guide, the following issues were addressed:

* Points of view on the gang.

* Experiences within the penitentiary: their life experiences as women, as Mothers, as gang-members, as daughters and as Partners, in confinement.

* Needs of women gang-members in the penitentiary.

* Needs of women gang-members once they have finished serving time.

Additional interviews were also carried out with the following penitentiary authorities: *Quezaltepeque* Penitentiary Technical Assistant Director; Technical Assistant Director at the *Sensun-tepeque* Penitentiary; the Director at the *Ilopango* Penitentiary; and the Director at the *San Miguel* penitentiary, in order to learn their vision of the situation and the needs of the women gang members, among other aspects. Also, in order to broaden the scope of the information in terms of the current situation of gangs, three interviews took place with the heads of programs or institutions that work with members of these groups.

2.2. Procedures

From the onset, it was decided that the study should be carried out with women gang members who were in confine-ment, and serving time in one of the country's penitentiaries, fundamentally for two reasons. The first had to do with access to that kind of population. It is becoming increasingly evident that, currently, there is a growing difficulty in working with gang members. This difficulty was exacerbated by the fact that neither of the researchers belonged to any organization or entity that worked directly with them. Although in the past, the IUDOP in general, and both researchers in particular, had approached research on the phenomenon of gangs starting with direct contact with gang members[64] —both *active*, and *calmados* or *inactive*— presently, and as a result of constant changes that the phenomenon has undergone, it has become increasingly difficult to make contact with them, particularly without a point of reference close to them that could serve as an intermediary during the initial approach phase. The second reason has to do with an academic and professional interest: in the absence of any study of women within gangs, the lack of knowledge of their situation is even greater regarding those in prison. This

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[64] In the case of the IUDOP, see: Aguilar (2006); Carranza (2005); Cruz and Portillo (1998). In the case of the researchers, see: Ranum (2006); Santacruz and Concha-Eastman (2001); Santacruz and Cruz (2001).

added an ingredient to the initial proposal, making it even more interesting and novel: penetrate the points of view of the gang from the perspective of the experiences of women in a situation of additional vulnerability and abandon.

The first step was to address the General Office of Penitentiary Centers (*Dirección General de Centros Penales*—DGCP), which, in El Salvador, is the branch of the Ministry of Justice and Public Safety[65] that is in charge of managing the adult penitentiary system. The respective permits and authorizations were requested there in order to be able to enter the penitentiaries and, with the proper authorization, interviews were set up with the authorities at each of the centers. It took approximately a month, from the initial interview that the IUDOP director and this study coordinator were granted by DGCP authorities, to the time of receiving authorization issued by the aforementioned office to be able to set up interviews with the authorities in each of the penitentiaries. Meantime, as information was being gathered regarding the situation of violence in the country to create this report's chapter on context, and instruments for gathering information were being constructed, there were also a series of decisions being made regarding selection of the women to be interviewed.

Initially, as part of the study design, the team had considered carrying out 15 interviews. The interview distribution (see Table 2.1) would have to be done in terms of three characteristics that were considered important, in order to take into account certain variation of perspectives: to be able to include women gang members from different age groups (adults and minors); they had to belong to the two largest gangs in the country (*Mara Salvatrucha* and *Barrio 18*); they also had to be representative of the diverse situations within the gangs (*active members* and *calmadas* or *inactive*).

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[65] Called Ministry of Public Safety and Justice (*Ministerio de Seguridad Pública y Justicia*) during the previous governmental administration (2004-2009), which is the time frame within which the field work for this study took place.

Table 2.1. Initial Distribution of Interviews to undertake with Women Gang-members, according to Characteristics That are of Interest for the Study

Gang	Active Gang Members (7 interviews)		Inactive Gang Members (8 interviews)		Total
	Adults	**Minors**	**Adults**	**Minors**	
Mara Salvatrucha	1	2	3	1	7
Barrio 18	2	2	3	1	8
Total	**3**	**4**	**6**	**2**	**15**

To this end, at the same time the penitentiary authorities were being contacted, contact was also made with the authorities at the Salvadoran Institute for Children and Adolescents (*Instituto Salvadoreño de la Niñez y la Adolescencia* [Isna]), which is the entity in charge of managing the detention centers for young men and women who are at odds with Criminal Law. The purpose was to share with them the questions raised by the study, as well as request that they authorize interviews with underage girl gang members, who were serving a custodial period in one of the centers that the entity manages. Despite having sent the request for an interview to the then president of the Board of Directors at the institution, of having met with the Coordinator of the Social Reintegration Unit, of having explained the reasons, motives and objectives of the study, of having requested statistics on the underage population that was under custody at the time of the study, of having sent the interview guide that was to be used, and having been given a specific date to meet and discuss its contents, this date was modified twice, and finally was left "pending confirmation." Due to the limitations and restrictions of the time available to carry out the field work, the irregular procedure with which the institutional authorities responded to the request for revising the instrument, and due to the absence of any response after it was sent, the possibility of dealing with the underage population was set aside. Consequently, the original structure of the design had to be altered, and focused on the women inmates of the adult penitentiary system.

On another front, the process of approaching the penal institutions followed its own course. After receiving authorization from the DGCP, the next task was to make a decision regarding which centers would be visited, in order to set up interviews for initial contact with the authorities at each institution. The Salvadoran penitentiary system is currently composed of 19 functioning[66] centers, which are formally classified according to their functions and the regime that corresponds their judicial[67] situation, established in Article 68 (of the Penitentiary Law):

1) *Detention Centers:* 4 penitentiary compounds exclusively dedicated to the holding and the custody of those temporarily held by court order (Art. 72).
2) *Centers for serving sentence:* 3 compounds destined for inmates (men and women) that are in the period of execution of a court ordered sentence (Art. 74).
3) *Mixed Centers (for those in detention and serving sentences):* 10 centers that house inmates or those temporarily detained, as well as those who are serving the execution of a sentence, that is to say, it houses processed and convicted criminals, in different sectors, who for some reason or other do not yet have a legally defined sentence.
4) *Maximum security centers:* 2 compounds classified this way because "they will be dedicated to those inmates that present problems of extreme maladjustment, and constitute a security threat to the inmate himself, to other inmates, and to the rest of the persons that are related to the Center; likewise, it is for inmates that must be subjected to a Special Confinement regime, according to Article 103 of the Penitentiary Law"[68].

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[66] See: http://www.seguridad.gob.sv/Web-Seguridad/Centros%20penales/centro-spenitenciarios.htm Recovered July 25, 2009.
[67] Nevertheless, in practice it has already been mentioned that the previous governmental administration assigned gang members to these centers based on their affiliation with one or another gang, and not using technical criteria, such as their procedural status or the degree to which they are dangerous.
[68] Agreement Number 223 at the Ministry of Governance, issued August 7, 2002. Institutional Paper.

For its part, Table 2.2 shows the distribution of the gang population in different penitentiary centers, to the end of August 2008, which was provided by the DGCP. It can be seen that, at several centers, there is a clear distribution according to the inmate's membership in a gang.

Aside from the *Ilopango* Penitentiary Center (that is exclusively for women in custody), the penitentiary records indicated that there were only three other centers where there were women gang members among the inmate population: *Sensuntepeque* Penal Institution, housing women members of the *MS* gang; *Quezaltepeque* Penal Institution, housing women members of the *Barrio 18* gang; and the *San Miguel* Penal Institution that holds a concentration of retired gang members from both gangs. Likewise, data again reiterate the numerical difference between men and women among the gang population, emulating the general tendencies in the common inmate population (non gang-members): out of the total number of gang members in confinement (6,694) at the time fieldwork for this study began (September, 2008), 94.7% were men and 5.3% were women (see Table 2.2).

Based on this official classification, the decision was made to carry out 16 interviews, distributed according to the condition of women in the group (*active, inactive or retired*); gang membership (*Mara Salvatrucha* or *Barrio 18 Gang*); and the center where they were serving time, such that there might be a variation in terms of these characteristics as well as a greater richness in the diverse personal histories. Thereby, in this study we decided to engage 16 women in confinement, who were being held in four penitentiary institutions. Three of them, classified as *Mixed Centers (for those in detention and serving sentences):* the *Quezaltepeque* Penitentiary Institution, the *San Miguel* Penitentiary Institution and the *Ilopango* Penitentiary Institution; as well as at the *Sensuntepeque* Penitentiary Institution, the latter being classified as part of the group categorized as *Centers for serving sentence*.

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Table 2.2. Distribution of inmate population belonging to gangs to August 31, 2008, by Gender, Condition and Penal Institution

Penal Institution	Mara Salvatrucha Gang (MS)				Barrio 18 Gang				Former MS				Former 18				Other gangs				Total per center	
	Sen.		Proc.		Sen.		Proc.		Sen.		Proc.		Sen.		Proc.		Sen.		Proc.			
	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W
Occidental	6								32				19				3				62	0
Metapán																					0	0
Apanteos	3		2						8		3						11		1		28	0
Sonsonate									285		183										468	0
La Esperanza																					0	0
Quezaltepeque					622	28		33													622	61
Chalatenango			890																		890	0
Sensuntepeque		77		159					29				11				8				40	236
Ilopango				21				14													0	35
Zacatecoluca	115		12		66		9														202	0
Coatepeque					7		635														642	0
Oriental					2		3		25		50		27		107		6		34		254	0
Usulután					22				43				20				6				91	0
Jucuapa			6				2				9				2				2		22	0
Berlín																					0	0
San Miguel	1	1				3		1	37	4		5	8	4	1	4	2				49	22
Ciudad Barrios	1868																				1868	0
San Francisco Gotera	181		22		78		47										8				336	0
La Unión			29				29													2	58	2
Izalco					434		272														706	0
Total	**2,174**	**78**	**961**	**180**	**1,233**	**31**	**997**	**48**	**460**	**4**	**245**	**5**	**85**	**4**	**110**	**4**	**36**	**0**	**37**	**2**	**6,338 94.7%**	**356 5.3%**

Sen: sentenced; Proc: processed; M: men W: women.

Source: Preapared by Author based on data from the General Inspectorate Unit at the General Office of Penitentiary Centers (*Unidad de Inspectoría General de la Dirección General de Centros Penales* [DGCP]).

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Once the decision had been made, the following step consisted of procuring specific interviews with the authorities at each of the four centers, in order to explain to them the purpose and objectives of the study. Also, their collaboration was requested in making it possible to inquire of their technical teams regarding viability of generating a space for initial contact between women gang-members and the researchers. In this first contact, the proposal would be explained to them: participation in an interview, in private, with the researchers, during which they would be asked questions regarding themselves and their life experiences. Their condition as *active, inactive* or *retired* members of a gang was one of the centers of interest to insure, to a certain extent, heterogeneity of the group, due to the exploratory nature of the study, and the biographical axis chosen as a framework for the interview. Nevertheless, it was always stressed that we were interested in getting to know them, and the multiple facets of their lives, in order to make the other "face" of the gang known, which has been seldom discussed.

This first contact with penitentiary authorities (with the Directors and Technical Assistant Directors of the four institutions that were visited), gave researchers the opportunity to walk through the women-sections of two out of the four penitentiaries, both inside their cells as well as the nursery sectors, corroborating from the start and first hand, the precarious conditions experienced at the institutions. Likewise, at this initial interview with the penitentiary authorities, the principal objectives of the study were presented to them, as well as certain minimum requirements, in order to guarantee some kind of quality of information. It was explained to them that, without breaking the safety dispositions that were in place at each of the penitentiary institutions, we needed to be able to carry out these interviews in a space where there would be total privacy, in order to guarantee the respondents that the information that we were going to request would not incriminate them in any way, and would be used solely for the concrete and exclusive purposes of the study; that the confidentiality of the information given would be

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respected and, above all, the anonymity of the respondent. The present characteristics of gangs in the country, and the current complex nature of their dynamics, required that we make use of all the means at our disposal to put the interns' integrity and security first.

In view of the fact that the characteristics of each institution affected in some way the characteristics of the women in confinement there, the only criteria for selection of participants that were requested of the authorities were that they be women who *voluntarily* expressed the wish to participate, at the moment when the members of the technical teams initially approached them to explain the reasons why they would later meet with the researchers. Likewise, it was requested that if any of them did not wish to be part of the study, they should not be coerced into doing so, nor should there be any kind of reprisal due to their refusal. For the purposes of this study, it was fundamental that participation be voluntary and not coerced.

Although it is true that this kind of selection could be questioned by some, due to the implications for a non random selection of participants in terms of external validity[69] (the possibility of generalizing information based on the sample), we considered that it was preferable and desirable, in order to guarantee the quality of the information gleaned, that the subjects' *narrative competence* be guaranteed (Valles, 2007). This criteria —amply fulfilled given that we were dealing with active, inactive and/or retired women gang-members in confinement, as well as their *willingness* and *disposition* to converse with the researchers, were the only thing that could in some way insure an initial minimum basis to establish contact and trust among the respondent and the researcher. The latter two criteria were

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[69] This refers to the fact that the participants were not randomly chosen from among all the women gang-members in confinement. Initially, we had to speak with some group representatives (in order to decide whether or not they, as a group, would participate), and later with those who had chosen to take part in the study.

preferable to the possibilities —and limitations— of a random selection of inmates, using some list provided by penitentiary authorities. By not making a random selection, the technical and methodological consequences of this decision were also assumed. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this kind of study —exploratory in nature— it was considered that these would be sufficient initial criteria to create a sample.

On the other hand, the possibility of addressing long-standing women gang-members of the two largest gangs in the country —that were in confinement for diverse crimes linked to the exercise of violence as part of the gang dynamics, was taken as an additional criteria that showed the women's close-ness and affiliation to their group (see Table 2.3). In this way, the "directed" form of participant selection would have been deter-mining, if the purpose of this study had been to come up with statistically broad generalizations. This was not the intention, neither of the totality of the women gang-members in confine-ment, much less of those who had not been held by the system. The intention was, rather, to contribute to understanding the world-view and experiences of some of the women gang-members that have become wards of the State because they have committed crimes linked to their affiliation to the group.

The next step was to meet, at a new visit, with some of the women who were to be spokespersons for the group, and had initially let the technical team know that they agreed to meet with us. At that moment, colloquial language was used to again explain the objectives of the study, the researchers' purposes, and to stress the point of confidentiality and anonymousness, based on the fact that the researchers at no time had requested their files, or of any of the women population. Although in some cases some showed interest in participating, there were other groups in which it was necessary to overcome a whole lot of understandable initial resistance. Nevertheless, once the group accepted that some of the members would become part of the study, the interviews proceeded. Generally, when a gang (by way

of its spokespersons) accepted participation in the study, we proceeded to begin carrying out the corresponding interviews at the penitentiary institution that same day. On more than one occasion, and due to the length of the interviews, the quota for each institution was not covered in a single day. Therefore, further visits were needed in order to complete them at a later time. In every case, and without undermining the general safety measures at each institution, the interviews took place outside of the cells/sectors, in spaces that allowed for the required levels of privacy.

Interviews with women gang-members were intercalated with other requested interviews with authorities at each penitentiary institution (to the Directors and/or the Technical Assistant-directors), in order to deepen on other aspects and on their visions of the most urgent needs of the inmates, and the most important deficiencies in the system. Already mentioned were the three *discussion groups* that took place, formed by combinations of approximately 10 women gang-members, at the *Quezaltepeque* and *San Miguel* penitentiary institutions (at the latter, two focus groups were held, separated according to gang membership). As mentioned before, the purpose of these groups was to complement some of the information related to the situation of women within the penitentiary, as well as go in-depth into some of the topics and learn about the divergences or convergences in the narration, in a group setting.

At this point it is important to mention that, due to strict safety provisions and rules at the penitentiary system, we were prevented from bringing along recorders to register the information. Therefore, at the initial session where the interviewers explained the purposes of the research to the group of women gang-members, they were told that the system provisions prevented us from recording the information, but that we intended to gather absolutely everything possible, in writing, to which there was no opposition. Certainly, regarding this issue — as in many others— one could attack the quality of the informa-

tion, arguing that the absence of an electronic recording means a loss or lack of precision in the information. It is clear that the completeness of the information is compromised, particularly if the kinds of notes taken are restricted to annotations and generic ideas, without the process of attempting to register literally everything; and due to the difficulties implied in setting down oral speech in writing.

In our case, and in light of the existing limitations, we tried by every means possible to capture, in written form, all the information heard —filling in, at times, over half a field notebook per interview, with the notes taken, and to transcribe (or, to put it in more precise terms, reconstruct), at a later time, the notes taken in the notebook to digital format. This meant doing it, on many occasions, the very evening of the day the interviews were made. With this, we attempted to rescue not only the integrality of the discourse, but also, the slang and their own terms. Although this became an additional difficulty for researchers (as it implied heavy time investments following each of the sessions in order to reconstruct the information in the shortest time and with the highest degree of accuracy) and exposes currently to criticism regarding the forms and fidelity of the record of the interviews, this was a limitation stated in an irreversible way by the penitentiary institution. However, based on the women's disposition during the sessions, we believe this limitation played out in our favor, as it made it possible for the interviews to go on for longer periods of time, without the pressure of having their statements —particularly on more sensitive issues— being registered in a permanent manner on a digital recording. Thus, the goal of rescuing their history and their language was achieved to a great degree, as we have in our possession transcriptions or reconstructions of interviews that recover, precisely, those details, and make it possible in the end to have an extensive written support document.

Once all of the reconstructed and transcribed interviews had been typed up, we proceeded to the phase of "processing" all

of the information. In light of the fact that we did not have the support of any computer program for this purpose, the process used to organize and prepare the information for analysis can be described, in very generic terms, following the steps proposed by Valles (2009), to illustrate non computer-assisted qualitative data analysis:

* *Encoding:* all the transcripts were read over again, and the text fragments were identified and marked up according to each category of analysis, within each of the sub-sections that make up the different overall areas of the analysis (life before, during and after the gang). In the process, a code was assigned to text that was identified, in order to place it in each of the molecular categories that were created. When a molecular category was missing, and there was no pre-established code, all the texts of all the identified categories for this specific theme were re-read, and the codes were created at that moment, based on the great tendencies found in the texts. Likewise, margin notes were made in the texts, to identify fragments not only with a code, but with a specific theme (where applicable) that did not correspond solely with the thematic area that was being focused on at that moment.

* *Classification:* once the previous step had been completed, the encoded text fragments from the different interviews were placed in thematic matrixes, in order to gather the corresponding texts in thematic sections, being careful to retain the identification for the origin of each fragment. The matrixes even provided an important visual aid, that grouped together not only the texts extracted by themes and codes, but also, made it easier to embark on the next process (which the aforementioned author calls "local integration"). This step was done for each sub-theme in each of the overall themes in which the structure of the script analysis had been sub-divided (life before, during and after the gang).

*   *Local Integration:* for this step, the information that had already been classified in matrixes was taken and, in some cases, re-classified within the same matrix (when pertinent) or, in any case, a process of preliminary interpretation of each of the thematic sections was initiated, which would give a minimal outline structure for argumentation at the time of presenting the results of each of these sections.

*   *Inclusive integration:* this consists of organizing material by themes within the larger general sections, starting with an argumentation sequence, based on the schemes or structures outlined in the previous step. In this case, it can be understood as the process of "ordering" these minimum thematic structures, that are integrated based on each theme (local integration), following the biographical axis that is intended for the presentation of the study findings.

It is important to mention that the research process was not ongoing during all the months since the investigation began, fundamentally because the study took place in the middle of the country's election process in the first trimester of 2009.[70] For this reason, the intention was to be able to complete the fieldwork phase prior to the elections in January and March 2009, in order to insure that this external circumstance might have any effect on the effort to gather information. Therefore, the fieldwork started in late August, and ended the first week of November 2008. Gathering of official information on the phenomenon of violence in the country, and input for prepa-

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[70] During the first trimester of 2009, there was convergence as diverse elections were held in El Salvador. In January 2009, city governments and the national legislature were elected around the country. This was followed by the presidential election that March. The active participation of IUDOP and its members in these proceedings (among them, the coordinator of this study), in a pioneering effort at National Election Observation, made it necessary to temporarily put this study on hold.

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ration of the context section of this report began during the months of August and September 2008, and was taken up again in April 2009. As mentioned before, the transcription of the interviews to the computer was done in a process that was practically simultaneous to their being carried out. The information processing and analysis, explained in the four previous steps, began in the month of November 2008. But they had to be interrupted, only to be renewed again in the months of April and May 2009. From June to August, the process of information analysis took place.

2.3. Some Respondent Characteristics

Before starting this section, it is important to clarify that, due to considerations regarding the participants' anonymity and personal safety, during the phase of information processing, the interviews were randomly numbered from 1 to 16, and the identification of the woman gang-member with the corresponding interview number is known only to the study researchers. In this sense, in the body of this document, it is of no interest to highlight whether an expression corresponds to "X" or "Y" gang member. Rather, when extracts are taken from the interviews, they are identified solely by a symbol, in order to be able to present the reader with the fact that these are the statements of different women, who coincide or differ on a certain topic. While, for the purposes of analysis, certain categories were in fact taken into account (status within the gang, type of family of origin, and so on), this is mentioned explicitly in the text only when it is relevant, without relating it to characteristics that identify who could have said it. In this manner, the person's personal safety and anonymity is guaranteed to some extent, without compromising our effort to recover and present the views of the different women that were interviewed.

Moving on to the issue of general characteristics, Table 2.3 shows, in generic terms and only for the purposes of illustration, some of the characteristics of the women that were interviewed.

The researchers were able to interview women gang-members of the two largest groups in the country. Among them were women who held different status in the group (women that were *active* as well as those who had become *inactive*, and even more than one that had *retired*).

In the first place, the data shows that these were fairly young women (the average age was around 27 years old); where the great majority (14 out of 16) were mothers. In fact, some of them even lived with their infants in the penitentiary institution at the time of the interview. At that moment, their children were under the care of their mothers or some presently close family member. Also, the information makes it possible to establish the fact that they had given birth at a very early age. The majority of the respondents were single. In fact, despite having had on occasion several partners, very few of them said that they were living with one, or even married.

In terms of educational level, the estimated number of years studied were 8.1 on average, which indicates that the educational mean is below primary education (that ends in ninth grade); although practically half of them started at least some high school studies. Likewise, it shows that their entrance to the gang took place at a very early age (on average, at 13.8; some even at 10). This leads to the conclusion that most of the women in the group have a long-standing history of gang membership.

On the other hand, the kinds of crimes they are accused of and the respective sentence are not presented. However, in order that the readers may understand the diverse kinds of crimes that many of them have participated in or were involved in as a result of their gang activity, it is important to mention that half of them are being processed or are serving a sentence for homicide; 7 of them, for aggravated robbery; 2, for extortion. One of them was convicted for possession/sale of drugs and another, for aggravated robbery, unlawful detention, bearing

arms and illegal association. At least four of them are convicted for a combination of these types of crimes.

Likewise, as for the duration of the sentences, 2 of them had to serve a 5-year or less sentence; 4 of them, between 6 and 10 years; 3 of them, between 11 and 20 years; and 4 of them had to serve sentences that were over 21 years. Two women were waiting for a sentence, and one did not give any information. This information demonstrates that, in many of their cases, the possibility of leaving and being free again is reduced, either because of the overwhelming number of years on their sentence, or due to the very threats imposed on them by the gang, given that there exists the possibility they may die once they regain their freedom, as a result of inter- and intra-group disputes.

The following chapters will attempt —to the extent the authors are able— to present their stories, describe their life histories, and on the way, try to elucidate how they came this far.

Table 2.3. Characteristics of Women Gang-members interviewed in the study

Condition	Gang	Age	Schooling Completed	Married/ Single	Number and age of children	Age at first birth	Age entered gang
Inactive	18 Street	27	High school freshman.	Single	2 sons: (6 and 2).	16	13
Inactive	18 Street	30	High school (level not defined).	Single	2 sons: (10 and 9).	20	11
Inactive	18 Street	30	High school sophomore (in the penitentiary).	Single	2 daughters: (11 and 7).	19	16
Inactive	MS	27	4th grade outside the penitentiary; 7th grade inside the penitentiary.	Single	2 children: a girl (10) and a boy (7).	15	12
Inactive	MS	24	4th grade outside the penitentiary; 6th grade inside the penitentiary.	Married	None.	None	13
Inactive	MS	25	Finished high school inside the penitentiary.	Single	1 son (6) (lived in the penitentiary with her until he was 2).	19	10
Inactive	MS	29	6th grade.	Married	2 children: a girl (8) and a baby (3 months) (with her at penitentiary).	21	15
Active	18 Street	25	High school freshman.	Single	1 daughter (5).	20	15
Active	18 Street	24	8th grade.	Single	2 sons (7 and 5).	17	12
Active	18 Street	25	High school freshman.	Single	None.	None	12
Active	18 Street	36	2nd grade.	Living together	7 children (21, 18, 17, 13, 11, 9 and 4); 2 grandchildren (twins, 1 and a half).	15	15-16
Active	MS	24	7th grade.	Single	4 children: three daughters (8, 2 and a baby (4 months) at the institution with her); and 1 son (5).	16	12
Active	MS	28	8th grade.	Single	Two daughters: (10 and 5).	18	14
Active	MS	39	8th grade.	Single	3 children: a daughter (17) and two sons (11 and 7).	22	20
Active	MS	25	University sophomore.	Married	A daughter (4).	20	13
Active	MS	23	University freshman.	Single	2 children: a son (4) and a daughter (1 year, 11 mos.)	19	16

Source: preapared by Author.

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Chapter 3
Life Before the Gang:
Initial Prisons

Me, since I was little, I had a horrible childhood[...] Me, since I was a girl, I can't forgive my mother what she did... me, I was needing love and affection, that's why, now, my kids are everything to me [...] When she would yell at me [her mother], and beat the crap out of me [strong corporal punishment], I used to shout at her: "why don't you ask me why I drink, ask me how I feel..."

Woman Gang-member ✻

Despite the young age at which the women respondents in this study got in or *jumped in* the gang, their lives had already been characterized by numerous hardships, situations of exclusion, abuse and violence. One of these early scenarios where they were instructed in the use of violence, and became familiar with it, was at their own homes. There they were witnesses to violent and abusive treatment among the adults around them, and consequently exposed to it themselves, from the adults.

These women were also girls, they were daughters, classmates, neighbors in the community, some were informal workers and even employees. In other words, they had a life before becoming part of the group and assuming a new *identity*: when their own name is substituted by the use of an alias or *tag*[71] the *homeboys* have given them; or when they are no longer part of the family that is known by the surname "x", and become part of another family: the "MS", or the "18". During this phase prior to entering the gang —which, generally, is quite brief due to their early age at the moment of joining the group—, 16 different women experienced a series of situations that are important to keep in mind, in order to better understand the commonalities in their lives.

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[71] Term named *taca* in Salvadorean gang slang.

To this end, this chapter aims at describing the elements that characterized the different environments they moved about in —familiar, educational, work and community levels, when the respondents were just girls who, in many cases, had never even considered belonging to a gang as an option, nor had it been a part of their plans.

3.1. The Family and Relations Within It

The *verbatim* transcript of one of the women gang-member respondents, cited at the beginning of this chapter, is one of the many expressions that has been collected and conserved, which alludes to the difficult family situation experienced by many of them *prior to* entering a gang. This section intends to portray the family life of the women gang-members and to expose their ideas —when possible— by their own narration. In that sense, more than pretending to justify the statements being developed, the idea here is to be able to illustrate —from their own stories— the decisive impact that the quality of family ties have on many boys and girls. Such an impact is reflected not only in their configuration as persons, but, in this case in particular, in the decisions that these girls were cornered into taking, when they considered that the functions of the gang were the closest to complying with those of a *primary group*, tasks their own family had not been able to perform.

Prior local studies have emphasized the role and impact that the quality of relations between the members of the family —more than the family structure, and/or the presence of both parents in the home— have on the "decision" a child or adolescent makes to join a gang (Miller, 1991; Moore, 1991; Santacruz and Cruz, 2001; Santacruz and Concha-Eastman, 2001; Smutt and Miranda, 1998). This study has raised this issue again, and stresses that a family that has been weakened in its functions due to the presence of domestic violence, abuse of women and children, neglect, sexual abuse, as well as the role many men play in those cycles of violence, have severe emotional impacts,

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that lay the preliminary foundations for a whole series of factors that will lead her decision to join a gang.

The home sets the stage for those first scenarios of victimization, where the girl —suffering a serious power imbalance when faced with significant adults who harm each other, or simultaneously hurt her and her siblings— begins to consider other possibilities for equalizing these power imbalances that have been brought about by her young age, her gender and her lack of resources, regarding the members of the household. If anything moves them or encourages them to join a gang, it is the presence of a family —and its key members— that is weakened and incompetent in terms of its functions, faced with what she conceives that will provide the possibility of self-affirmation and the ability to defend herself, even through the use of violence.

Following is an analysis of the commonalities and divergences in the stories that have to do with home experiences.

3.1.1. Family Configuration and the Quality of Relations: Early Experiences of Violence

Regarding family configurations that were prevalent among the women gang-member respondents, three major "types"[72] were found: the *absence of one of the parents* (mostly the absence of the father); "*substitute" families* (persons —relatives or not— who took care of the girls, as they had been abandoned by their parents); and families with the *presence of both parents*.

The first kind —***absence of either of the parents (mostly the male figure)***— is the most common configuration among

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[72] This way of classifying does not respond to nor derive from any theoretical typology; these categories are only for the purpose of illustration, in order to show the different family configurations that the respondents described most frequently.

the women respondents in this study. This kind of structure was prevalent during childhood in half of them. The majority of these cases were characterized by being homes with women at the head of the household (generally, the mother), where the attendant responsibilities —economic, parental, relational, among others— fell exclusively on the single parent. In many instances, the women gang-members never knew their father for different reasons. One of them being because he had abandoned their mother, or because the parents had separated, which translated to distance and abandon of the responsibility for the children by the father. Still another reason was because of the death of the father. Whether it came as a product of the excess of workload and responsibilities, or as a result of conflict and violence in the relationships with the mothers, in this kind of family configuration situations of great conflict prevail between the children and their mother, who, generally, was the only figure of authority in the home. There are even cases in which the mother or father exercised scarce or no vigilance and supervision of the children's actions. All of this shapes the basis for deficient and complicated *intergenerational* relationships (between parents and children) and *intragender* relationships (between mothers and daughters).

> My mother was never at home; she worked making bags in a factory, she was a worker. She worked nights one week, the next she worked days. She got home around 7… 8 at night…we never ate together. Sundays she slept all day, said she was tired because Saturdays she worked overtime. She never went to school things, there was no time for that [...] My mom did not find out I had been jumped [that she had joined the gang]. When she started paying more attention, I had already been jumped-in…
> Woman Gang-member ✹

> As a girl I was always sad, now I can see it… I lived in horrible fear, but this made it so that, now, I never need other people to get ahead… I was very impulsive, and I didn't like it when I saw my mother with her boyfriends. It's just that I felt, when she started having boyfriends, she put me aside, it's just that, since she was a prostitute [...] It wasn't like I was corrupt, what I was, is I was

very aggressive; it's just that I thought I was big, I was about 10-11 years old, but I couldn't count on my mom anymore, and she didn't know anything […] She never realized when I skipped school; she wasn't interested in me…

Woman Gang-member ✤

The quality of the relations reported by the women that lived in this kind of household was extremely bad. They told of acts of violence suffered at their mother's/father's hand or their mother's partner (stepfather). Although in many of the households the mothers had a companion, generally, he did not take the role of the father. In fact, their presence exposed them to situations of additional vulnerability, as in many occasions this man became the victimizer of the mother or of themselves. The following quotes are very eloquent in this regard:

[Before entering the gang] I lived with my mother and sisters. Four of us women, plus a boy, but his dad took him away […]. All of us [the sisters and the brother] come from different fathers. I always had step-fathers […] I never had a relation like daughter-mother, mother-daughter. I don't remember her ever hugging me, telling me she loved me; she didn't give me advice. The only thing she did was hit me, scream at me, mistreat me. And she was only that way with me; with my sisters, she was different. All the scars I've got here [on the arm], my mom gave them to me; she beat me with whatever was on hand […]

[On relations with stepfathers] …well, they hit me, my little sister too; it was physical and he also insulted me. I told him I was going to kill him, 'cause he mistreated me and my little sister… he also hit my mom…

Woman Gang-member ࣸ

…he [the stepfather] was mean. He hit my mom a lot. I lived that a lot. He was a drunk, he even used drugs. He was my little sister's dad; he already died […] I was little. He hit my mom. As a girl I would say: "don't you hit my mom!", and he said nasty things to me. Once, when he hit my mom, I hit him back… I left home, or, I didn't leave… I was kicked out. Maybe my mom loved him too much […]. When I grew up, I worked and I took my mom away from there [from the house]. At her house, he always used to hit her, and he didn't want to let her go. My

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mom was afraid. I was renting a house, I already had my boy. She stopped going to the store [she worked at], so he wouldn't go bother her there. She stayed at home taking care of my little sister and my boy, and I worked...

Woman Gang-member ⊶

Whether it was at the hands of the mother, or her partner (or partners), the women that lived with this kind of family configuration mentioned, in all cases, that they had been the object of violence, abuse and neglect by the persons whose function it had been to provide affection, care and warmth. There were only two cases, out of a total of eight women who had this kind of family configuration during childhood, in which the mother was the figure that was absent in the household. In one of the cases, the reasons for the mother's abandon could not be identified further than that she lived in another country. Nevertheless, in the other case, the mother was not present because she had been obliged to leave the home as a result of the severity of the violence she had suffered at the hands of her partner, the young woman's father.

A second kind of family configuration that is quite frequent among the women respondents (five out of fifteen), was the *"substitute" families*. These are homes in which people —relatives or non relatives— took charge of the young women, often at a very early age, because they had been abandoned by their parents. In this sense, the common factor is the feeling of helplessness they all experienced. As mentioned, they had to live in a home that was not their own, at the homes of relatives, or even non-relatives, who looked after them. Logically, this situation also had a very important impact in terms of socialization and configuration of these important primary emotional networks. In many instances, these relatives or people who were responsible for the girls did not lavish the affection or emotion that the family is supposed to comply with.

Actually, on some occasions, it was noteworthy that in their group of siblings, the respondents were the only ones to have

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become gang-members. It was even more interesting to see that the siblings, who were currently non-members of the gang, had lived with some close relative, with one of the parents or, at least, had not been abandoned in another home at an early age.

> My mom has wanted to see me [at the penitentiary], but I don't want to see her. For me it's all her fault; now that I'm big, she comes looking for me, she's interested in me… and when I was little she wasn't… why did she decide to leave me [abandoned to her grandmother when she was 3 months old] and take my sisters? I've never been able to understand this. The four of us [sisters] came from the same mother, from a different father, but the same mother… and she never gave any explanations, and that is something I will never understand. I still don't want to see her, and I feel like everything that has happened [to me], is because of her, it's her fault, if not, just look at my sisters…[73]
>
> Woman Gang-member ○ઢ

> When I was born… this is really hard… [she cries quietly]… my mom, when I was in the womb, was really angry because she found out that my father was married [to another woman]… when I was born, my mother left me with a lady who had raised her, like a "surrogate grandmother", and I was raised by her until I was about 13 years old… She was old, she had 6 grandchildren […] this was really tough… [her voice breaks, then she cries quietly]… they say that, sometimes, it's good to talk […]
> Well they [the family she lived with] had a farm supply store, they had bucks [money], but they didn't accept me… there, I was a little maid, they put me to work from the time I was very little […] and I, I was a really little girl; they hit me if I didn't do things right… it was really hard for me, being there, and it was really hard, 'cause my mom didn't want me to be with her, because she resented my dad, but, was it my fault?
>
> Woman Gang-member ✕

Aside from a case in which the child had been abandoned as the result of the separation of the parents (and she had been sent to live with the grandmother, and the rest of the brothers and sisters were "divided up" between the parents), in the rest

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[73]   She is referring to the fact that none of her sisters are gang members.

of the cases of abandon, the women gang-members could not specify the underlying causes for this event in their past. Moreover, as can be gleaned from one of the previous *verbatim* transcripts, the mother never gave her explanations for abandoning her. On their part, several of these young women made attempts to seek out their family and try to construct a relationship. However, the stories indicate that usually they were the ones who took the initiative. This normally occurred after several years had passed since they had been abandoned, which meant family relations had to be made starting from scratch, and did not produce the results they had expected.

> … I went to see my mom and she received me, she offered me a place to stay, but she didn't know about anything: that I had been raped, that I had shacked up, that I did drugs… but, after being there a while, my mom's partner made her choose, and my mom asked me to leave, because he's the one that paid the bills…
>
> Woman Gang-member ♣

> When I got there [to live again with her mother], I saw that my stepdad hit my mom, that they were having problems… and I didn't like to see that 'cause, even if I hadn't lived with my mom, she was my mother […]; it was nice living with my mom, except for my stepdad […]
> I, later, I wanted to leave [her mother's house], I got all desperate to get out of the house… and it's 'cause I, I didn't feel right with anyone; I felt better being on my own… at first, I was happy, but that wasn't enough anymore, it wasn't enough, that happiness in the beginning, 'cause I, I was really hurt, I spent hours thinking about why I had to suffer so much…
>
> Woman Gang-member ✗

Finally, the third family configuration corresponds to the one in which the women gang-members had the **presence of both parents**. Although this is the least frequent type of family, the ones that lived in this situation did not escape from experiencing violence in the relationships among the family members.

In these cases, it was interesting to see that the poor relationship the women pointed out they had had with their mothers had been influenced, in turn, by the deficient relationship the latter had with their respective partners. Whether due to issues linked to alcohol consumption by the father —which implied additional responsibilities falling on the mother; or differences between the parents, which lead to the perpetration of violent acts or abuse between them; or due to traditional gender concepts in either or both parents —where the sons are valued and receive a differentiated and privileged treatment than the daughters, the data shows that the bad relationship between the parents had a direct impact on the quality of the relationships between the girls and their mothers (the *intergenerational* and *intragender* relationships). In this regard, again it comes to light that the presence of both parents in the home does not, in itself, guarantee a right niche of socialization, neither a suitable fulfillment of their duties toward the children is guaranteed (see Insert 3.1).

My dad liked to drink… and that lead to fights between them… my mom, she was submissive and old fashioned, raised under ideas like loyalty and serving the man […]; and my dad, the alcohol made him *not give a shit* about anything [indolent]… at my house, there was always food, and a roof over our heads, but there was never peace…

Woman Gang-member ♠

My mom never gave me love like I give my children […] My daddy has always been different, he was loving… the problem with him is he drank a lot […] My dad, he never hit us, I never knew what it was like to get hit by him… the problem with him is he drinks… he drank a lot, and made trouble for my mom and I think that's why she was like that. She always had a strong temper, she hit us… she hit me […] I think she took out on us the frustration my father made her feel… I, I didn't understand that, I used to think "maybe all mothers are that way", but I saw mothers hug their children […] and that, my mother was never that way with me… until I went wrong… and I didn't like it, and I used to think, maybe one day she'll tell me something…

Woman Gang-member ✰

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The relationship with my dad was always good… with my mom, with her, it's
like I didn't have a mom. She had like preferences… sometimes I'd sit on the
legs, and she would tell me: "get off, I'm tired", and she'd send me away… and,
suddenly, one of my brothers would come up and she'd say: "come on my little
boy, come over here…" […], it's just, her temper… she's serious, really hard
faced […] but I used to say, if no one loves me, I am going to love myself…

Woman Gang-member Ж

Insert 3.1 shows a paradigmatic example of the type of
household that many of the women gang-members grew up in
as children. It shows —among other aspects— the existence
of brutal expressions of violence, among which we find sexual
aggression; likewise, we find them progressively shifting among
different homes, until, in the end, they entered into contact with
the gang.

Insert 3.1
The Many Homes One of them Lived in

I used to live with my mom, just with her. My dad left us when I was 6… he
was killed; that's how my mom wound up all alone. Soon, later my mom got
shacked up with another guy. So she used to leave us alone, me and my
little brother with the guy. He was older, he was like 45 years old at the time
[…]. So she used to leave us alone with him, and she'd go to work. My mom
made a living washing and ironing. So one day, in the morning, the guy was
really nice to me, right, 'cause I was female, my brother went out and, well,
like a female you're really dumb sometimes. He was really nice, and he came
up to me, and I let him, right. He abused me, he pulled down my *bloomers*…
I was raped by him…
— How old were you when this happened?
— I was just nine… […] After my dad died, everything got worse […]
— And, how did your dad die?
— It's just that my dad liked drinking, well, my mom did too.
— And what was their relationship like?
— They fought with each other, 'specially when my dad was drunk […]
My dad cut my mom with a *machete*… it's just that when my dad was going

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around drunk, or he was always going around drunk, he got really aggressive, and he got home and started shouting… my mom put my brothers 'n' me under the bed, because my dad, 'cause he was drunk he'd mistreat us. He was almost always drunk and aggressive… and she put us under the bed. One time, he pulled out his *machete,* and he told my mom she was a bitch and cut her about there [points to her upper left arm] … [When my dad died] I was little, I thought it was better that God should take him, because he abused my mom too much […] Me, he only hit me once with the belt, he mistreated us because he wanted to take my brothers where he would go to drink, but mom didn't let him. But he always shouted at us…

— And when your dad died, you said things got worse at home…

— When my father died things got worse because my mom fancied an older guy, a guy who hurt me, harmed me…

— Did you tell your mom he raped you?

— Yes… she just broke down and cried, she didn't say anything, she just cried… then she told me she was going to take me to a lady, that she wanted to give me to a lady… […] The guy [stepfather] left afterwards… Then, after a while, my mom got together with another young guy; he was only 29 years old, he was younger than her.

— And what was your relation like with him?

— He was an impulsive man, he punished us with a stick, my brother 'n' me… I told him he wasn't my father, and I was going to call the police on him if he hit me…

— And did your mom know he used to hit you?

— We would tell my mom, but, y'know? Sometimes mothers prefer men to their own children…

— So she didn't say anything to him?

— No, she didn't do anything… The boy [her brother], she let him go his way, he was about nine years old at the time. Me, she took me with a lady at a market in… The lady taught me to make *tortillas, pupusas* [stuffed corn patties], she had like a diner and I had to help her there and work. She didn't pay me, I worked for room and board.

— And was this lady a relative of yours?

— She was the godmother of one of my mother's sisters. She taught me to do housework, and I did it, but, I don't know, maybe she saw the wickedness in me, and she started to abuse me… she hit me in the face… I told her

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she wasn't my mom, and that I was better off leaving. Then, in... there was a gang that was called... [name of a local gang]. I started going out with one of them, I went to a dance with him and everything, but I never wanted to join their gang. Then, I came to San Salvador, to my grandmother's [...] I was 11 years old... then, I got a girl friend who took me to a dance, I learned to drink, I smoked; I used to go Saturdays, Sundays all night until Monday, and there I met the... [members of her current gang].

— When you returned to San Salvador to stay at your grandmother's, what was your relation with her like?

— She didn't love us, she didn't love me, anyway, I never said anything... I would just go to the house to shower, I just asked for a place to stay, nothing more.

— You only went there to sleep?

— I didn't even have a bed, I slept on the floor... she never gave me a thing, food, nothing. I used to go bumming for change [begging] to eat, I mean, it was asking for a buck, right?

— Do you have any contact with your grandmother now?

— No, I don't have any relationship with her. She turned her back on me when I needed her the most...

— What about your mom, did you go to see her when you returned to San Salvador?

— No, I went many years without seeing my mom.

— And what about your brothers? Any contact?

— Them neither, they shacked up [started living with a partner] and all, the only one that stayed like this, was me...

At this point, it is important to highlight a form of victimization that many women gang-members suffered during childhood (practically half of those interviewed), that had determining consequences in the course of their lives: having been the victims of sexual abuse or of rape. This traumatic experience turned out to be a generalized experience, that was suffered at the hands of men who were related to them to different degrees; but who, in almost every case, were close male figures, and, in many cases, they were even significant male figures, as seen in Table 3.1:

Table 3.1. Women Gang-members interviewed who suffered rape, according to the relation they had with the aggressor, their age at the time of occurrence and the type of family they lived in

Relation with aggressor	Age at the time of occurrence	Number of recurrences	Type of family
Boyfriend	13	1 time	Single Mother
Boyfriend	12	1 time	Substitute Family (Abandoned with relatives)
None (unknown man)	11 and a half	1 time	Substitute Family (Abandoned with relatives)
Uncle	11	3 times	Substitute Family (Abandoned with relatives)
Stepfather	9	1 time	Single Mother
Brother	7	1 time	Nuclear Family (both parents present)
Grandfather	4	1 time	Single Mother

Source: Preapared by Author.

Experiences like these, which decidedly marked the course of their lives and relations, had a deep impact on the physical and mental health of the victims that the family was unable to contain. Actually, at times, the family or persons in charge were not even aware of the aggression or, upon becoming aware of it, they accused them of the act. This meant, that the load was practically experienced and suffered in solitude.

> One time, I took my little sister[74] to sell *tortillas* with me. My little sister suddenly said she wanted to pee [urinate], and we went over to like a wall. Suddenly, I saw a man coming up… I remember it well, he was missing an eye… and he grabbed my little sister… I got in front of him, and I grabbed the girl so that nothing would happen to her, and the man raped me; and my sister saw everything that was going on…
>
> I didn't say anything to anyone about what had happened to me, I just told my grandma that they had robbed me the money [from the sale]; my grandma hit me and scolded me because I had been robbed, but I didn't have the guts to

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[74] The respondent then mentioned that, at the time of the rape, she was 11 and a half years old; her younger sister was nine. The respondent joined the gang a short time after this event, at age twelve.

tell her what had happened […], I only told a friend, and then, later on, the homeboys[75], I started to feel like they took care of me, that they protected me, that I had someone on my side…

Woman Gang-member ♣

My grandma found out about the rape, yeah, she found out, because someone went and told her… […], and until the next day, they didn't take me to the forensic doctor, at the legal medical unit […] My grandmother reacted like crazy… […] she said that it had been my fault, and she hit me and ran me out of the house… She changed; she had never treated me like that… she wanted me to be perfect, that I get married, that I have a "normal" relationship… and she went crazy, when she saw me all bleeding, she started hitting me… until the next day, when the forensic doctor examined me and said it had been a rape, and that it had been by force […] Then, when I started packing my things to go, because she had kicked me out, then she told me to stay… but I felt like I was in the way, and that's why I decided to go… […] I felt bad, I already felt like a woman—by force, I felt terrible, miserable, I hated men… and I always said I'd get even, but in the end they killed him [the aggressor], he was a gangster (*bandero*[76])…"

Woman Gang-member ☙

The frequency in which this kind of traumatic experience recurs in many of the respondents' stories denotes a form of vulnerability they were exposed to, due to their gender. This is not to say that boys are not exposed to this kind of traumatic experiences; rather, it is that, in the case of many of the women gang-members, sexual aggressions appear frequently and are very decisive episodes that affect the course that their lives take later on.

In brief, this sub-section shows that the respondents had already been exposed to violence on a daily basis, in their own homes before joining the gang. They lived in one of three

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[75] Term used to refer to the male members of the gang. The women are called homegirls.
[76] Term used to refer to a member of an organized criminal band.

general types of families, the most frequent was the one in which their household was supported by single mothers, where there was an absence of a significant masculine/paternal figure, and/or their mothers had other partners. A second type is comprised of those women who, as infants or young girls, had been abandoned by their parents, or put in the hands of other relatives or persons who took on the responsibility. And the third and final type are those families that had both parents (father and mother) in the home.

It can be seen that the respondents did not come from a "typical" household, or a family structure that is noticeably characteristic for the majority. What does stand out as a common thread in all their stories is that these households did not comply with vital functions for them during childhood, seriously exposing them to situations of violence and victimization, as well as major shortages of affection and relationships, at the hands of people that had to have nurtured and promoted their welfare.

In terms of the quality of relationships, the ones that are noteworthy were deficient, abusive, and even inexistent. From the point of view of many of the women gang-members, their mother was incapable of playing her role. Nevertheless, the results show that many mothers were, in fact, unable to "play that role" as a result of their own experiences of ill-treatment, abuse and violence by their partners (the fathers or stepfathers of the respondents); this was also due to the fact that, in many cases, they were the only ones who had to bear the economic responsibility in the home.

Many of these women's mothers were, in turn, victims of abuse, of abandonment, of neglect, and of violence, at the hand of other men, along the course of their own personal history. The problem with this is that many of the mothers were inhibited from taking care of their own descendents (their daughters, now women gang-members). This gave rise to this *intergenerational* and also *intragender* transmission of violence, and it became the basis for the bad relation they established with the respondents.

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This conception and these negative relationships with the mother gain greater relevance when confronted with the very real situation of a father figure that was absent or dysfunctional, in the "best" cases, or openly violent and abusive towards them or towards the mother. In this sense, there is no possibility for these households to have fulfilled their functions in terms of socialization, restraint and care for these women, which, in some cases, could have prevented or dissuaded them from joining the gang. This neglect can be seen in the high number of women respondents who reported having been victims of sexual aggression or rape, situations that they also felt the need to hide from their families, many times out of fear of reprisal, or due to the negative cultural burden that having been victimized in this manner had for many of them.

It is not the intention here to suggest that there is a mechanical or simplistic relationship between the deficient quality of relations within the family and joining the gang, because, as has already been pointed out, a series of factors converge here. Above all, if you take into account that these families and households are, in turn, inserted in micro-contexts of exclusion where there is a prevalence of significant social, economic, and cultural shortcomings, and the lack of access to basic State services. In this regard, Savenije and Andrade-Eekhoff (2003), when addressing the complex relation between violence and social exclusion based on the analysis of the social dynamics prevalent in some marginalized communities in the metropolitan area of the Salvadoran capital, highlight the relation between the incidence of domestic violence and the concomitant increase in the situation of exclusion in the broader community context: "...an increase in exclusion meant greater probability of domestic violence" (p. 180). Besides, the mere fact of living in these community spaces generates vulnerability to the use of violence by the residents. Studies report an important link between the use of domestic violence and social violence, in so far as the home offers the initial models and opportunities to witness the uses of violence (Morrison and Orlando, 1999).

The characteristics of these women's homes, and those of the relations among the members of the household, have been generally found, all along the stories, to depict scenarios of deep dysfunctionality, where violence played a transversal role on a day-to-day basis. Therefore, without intending to establish linkages that would reduce the passage to the gang to events that happened in this sphere, we cannot underestimate the decisive impact of household experiences and the quality of the household relations in the decision to join the gang. This will be corroborated in a further section.

3.2. The Educational Experience

The majority of the women respondents reported that their school experience had been one of the few scenarios that bore good memories for them. Many even alluded to their good academic performance, that they liked to study, that they liked the experience of attending school and spending time with classmates. Many of them even related that they had got along well with educational authorities, and with their teachers. In some cases, they even have good memories of some teachers who were interested in their personal situation, and wanted to help them. So, for many of them, school became an important space for containment, for escape, and receiving the support of the educational community.

> [the experience of being a student] was nice… thousands of things could happen to me, but in the classroom… I left the problems at the door… we had like moments for reflection, to talk about problems and stuff […] I didn't have shoes, the uniform had lost its color, but all my classmates put money together and bought me a shirt, the teacher used his own money to buy me some shoes, we got along fine… At school, things just got erased, it was another world, I didn't think, the environment was different from the gang […] When I was about 13, I got the courage to tell the class what had happened to me [the rape]. They hugged me, they all supported me… "We know you've suffered a lot," they told me […] I liked the environment, but I used to say, "what can I do to have a different life?"…
> Woman Gang-member ♣

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A minority emphasized they did not like studying; particularly when they had to do so after work (in or outside the home). This work was part of the functions assigned to them, both as a contribution to the family finances (by way of child labor), and because of the time they were supposed to spend on domestic chores, assigned as part of a series of duties "pertaining" to their sex. Under these circumstances, it is no wonder that schooling did not constitute a pleasant experience.

> I did not like it [studying]... it's just that I, I was always thinking about what had happened to me [the rape]... besides, they made me do things around the house... I washed, ironed... In the mornings, before going to my stall [in the market] to help my mom, I had to finish washing, mopping, making lunch for my brothers... Then, I went out and stayed there until about 12:30-12:45 at the stall... Then, when I came back from school, at around 5 in the afternoon, it was make the meal and do everything around the house...
>
> Woman Gang-member ☆

Aside from one of the respondents, none said she had been expelled from the institution for belonging to the gang. Actually, given the early ages at which many of them joined the group (see Table 2.3), practically half of the respondents were already part of the gang while they were studying.

When asked about the motives for abandoning the educational system, despite the enjoyment some of them had found in studying, the most frequent response was the allusion to progressive involvement in the gang, and the pleasure in taking part in the activities that pertain to their involvement with the group (*hanging out*[77]). This can be explained by taking into account that many of them were already members of the gang while they were in school, and by the manner in which gang dynamics progressively take-in their members, configuring their activities and setting their agendas. On the other hand, as for the ones who were not yet part of the gang, the work that they

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[77]   Term referred to as *vacilar* in Spanish.

carried out —be it within or outside of the household— became an important hindrance for continuing their studies, because it diminished their time and energy. Moreover, they did not see in the school experience concrete possibilities to access economic resources and/or upward social mobility, in the medium-term.

> [She dropped out of school] because I chose the bad… I quit studying about a month after *jumping in*[78], it's just that I got out little by little…
> Woman Gang-member ☙

> [She stopped studying] because, sometimes you're dumb, you're stupid… When I was pregnant, I was going to a class to learn to develop pictures, and a lot of people there told me to get back into studying again. Then, my first husband used to ask me to study… Me, I like to live well, I like things, wear nice things, and what I used to think it's just that, if I study, I won't work to make money and buy things…
> Woman Gang-member ✄

> I used to feel good at school, I got along well with my classmates. Now some of them graduated, they're police-officers, lawyers, professionals. We used to get out of school; some would go home, we [some cousins and she] went to the market to work […] I didn't have a childhood, I didn't have dolls or toys. We'd get home from the market at 7 at night, but not to rest, to work instead, to wash, and we'd get to bed at 1-2 in the morning, to get up at 4-5 in the morning to go to the market. We'd go to school from there, when I was going [to school]…
> Woman Gang-member ✿

They were asked whether they had been influenced by the gangs to join the group while they were studying, in order to establish if they had been accosted by the group inside the schools. In this regard, not much information was forthcoming. A number of them had joined the gangs at a very early age. However, the process of approaching the group, although it was aided by the presence of gangs close to the schools, it

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[78] Join a gang.

also came about because the schools were inserted, in turn, in neighborhoods, residential areas or micro-contexts where there is a strong gang presence. That is, a sum of conditions of exclusion and risk-exposure that worsened the situation.

Thus, the educational experience many respondents had was, and continues to be, valued positively. It is recalled as a pleasing experience and as a space in which many felt the support and affection they did not receive even in their closest family contexts. Nevertheless, already in those early adolescent years, many of them were part of the gang, and others were in the process of rapprochement with the group, which competed for the time and the dedication they might invest in studying. In this regard, school was not able to compete, neither as being attractive nor in satisfying necessities, with what the gang was offering. It is important to note that both joining the gang and dropping out of the educational system tend to take place in the final years of childhood and the early years of adolescence. These stages comprise a key evolutionary period, that requires family and educational maintenance, support, and monitoring, which can dissuade them from abandoning these systems to join the gang.

3.3. The Work Experience

In order to characterize the different environments that these women were immersed in *before* joining the gang, a series of questions were included about their employment status during that period, and who constituted the economic support of the household.

In the first place, these women come from households in working sectors or, even, marginal urban areas, that is, with the economic limitations that stem from the principal occupation of the heads of household. For instance, and returning to the classification by types of family made in the previous section, in the case of families with a woman at the head, the respon-

dents' mothers' occupations were circumscribed to informal commerce, or, at the most, to having a stall at the local market. From an early age, many of the respondents also helped out as an activity that was parallel to studying.

> She [the mother] sold traditional food. I got up to work with her, I used to get up like at four, four thirty in the early morning. I helped prepare, and I'd spend all morning with her […] Then, I'd take the drinks, and I'd go out to sell them before going to school. When I was on my way out, I'd ask her for money to go [to school], but she wouldn't give me a thing. It was my grandma who helped me, she gave me two *Colones*[79], because at that time there were *Colones* […] it's just that, I paid myself. Where I learned to steal was with my mom, because I worked, but she didn't pay me, so I paid myself. Like they say, "the worker's worth the wages"… I worked, I paid myself! Hahahaha…
>
> Woman Gang-member ❖

On the other hand, the ones that lived with "substitute families" (with other relatives or in households where their parents had abandoned them) also had to work in order to contribute to the family finances. Usually, it consisted of households where the head was presided by both grandparents or by the grandmother, who worked in the informal commercial sector, or were already retired —in the best of cases, or supported themselves by way of remittances received from relatives abroad. In the case of situations where the young women resided with persons who were not relatives, they also passed through households that were supported by their members' participation in the informal commerce sector. Therefore, and given the economic situation they faced, they were forced to combine helping out in the family business with a series of tasks: school responsibilities, domestic work and caring for their siblings. These latter tasks corresponded to the traditional role assignment in terms of their gender. This fact contrasts with the role that is proper to their

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[79] Local currency (Salvadoran *Colones*) before dollarization (introduced in January, 2001). The exchange rate that is currently enforced is 8.75 *Colones* for 1 US dollar.

ages, given that domestic responsibilities and childcare (particularly of the youngest) is not a responsibility that should fall on the shoulders of a little girl.

> My family is humble [poor], but we never went without food… my mom [her grandmother] was a midwife, and then, my uncle worked welding, in metal works, and he helped around the house […] I always liked selling, I used to help a woman in the neighborhood sell vegetables. She used to give me like 25 *Colones*, I took 5 for me, and the rest I gave to help out at home… Sometimes, at five in the morning, I'd get up and go out to sell bread, at 7 I sold vegetables and at about 11 I'd come back, because I had to be at school by one in the afternoon…
>
> Woman Gang-member ❦

Finally, in those households where both parents were present, the economic responsibility usually fell on both, again under the informal commerce mode. Those who lived in this kind of family configuration also said they had helped in the family business (market stalls).

So, for many of them, the work experience began early and abruptly, a combination of domestic chores, study and child labour, if one takes into account that these were tasks they did before their early entrance to the gang. In many instances, they had to work collaborating or helping out at a relative's or a stranger's informal business, receiving very low wages, if they received them at all. Some even mentioned having to work in exchange for room and board, which was given them by their "employers." This happened mostly to those women who had to leave home prematurely (due to victimization by either one of the parents), or to those women who had been abandoned by their parents to be cared for by other persons. In any case, it had to do with occupations that paid very little or not at all, which had to be done alongside other tasks and responsibilities of a different sort.

Later, a minority of women had access to temporary jobs in the formal sphere, as employees at some office, or at some business (cashiers, clerks). This was the case for only a small group, those who got their jobs by way of personal references or from family friends. In these cases, they themselves admit that it was helpful that none of them had visible tattoos (since they were already gang members), and that their appearance did not reveal they belonged to the group.

> I worked the cash register at a pizza parlor, this was my last job. The guy was a friend of the family's. I started in the kitchen area, and then he sent me over there as an administrator. I was the administrator, the cashier, I did everything there […] I can talk about my own case […] I didn't change my clothes [she did not dress like a gang member], and my tattoos, I don't have any that are visible, just on my back […] I think I had the opportunities they gave me. But in another, like a public place, like more formal let's say, I couldn't have had them…
>
> Woman Gang-member ⊶

This was the case of only a minority of them, given that once inside the gang, the probabilities of getting a job are drastically reduced. The great majority alluded to the fact that, regardless of their status in the gang (*active* or *inactive*), the mere fact of being tattooed constituted an obstacle to accessing a more specialized job, or one in the formal sphere. This explains why a great deal of these women's work experience, after initial experiences of child labour, is restricted to commerce and the informal sector of the economy. Some of them continued carrying out these activities after having entered the gang. However, as demonstrated before in other studies (Carranza, 2006), having this kind of job in the informal sector of the economy not only presupposes low pay for women, but also the absence of benefits and social security for them or their children, adding to the difficulties of maintaining the household, the lack of probabilities for an ascending social mobility, and the intergenerational transmission of their situation of exclusion at the economic, social and cultural levels.

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3.4. Community Relations

Although at the beginning of these sections the characteristics of the closest circle that surrounded these girls and women in their early childhood were described, it is important to return to the characteristics of the communities or neighborhoods these families and these households were immersed in, and the type of relations they had with their community, according to what is presented by the respondents.

Historically, in El Salvador the gangs are born, strengthened and disseminate their territorial dynamic in neighborhoods and communities that in turn have a series of characteristics that make a decisive contribution toward the configuration of conflict and violence; such that their own dynamics and situations of social exclusion make it possible for gangs to constitute themselves as important local actors (see Baires et al., 2006; Cruz et al., 2004; Savenije and Andrade-Eekhoff, 2003; Smutt and Miranda, 1998). This study did not focus on the characteristics and deficiencies of these community contexts —this work has been done with a great degree of precision by some of the studies cited previously. However, in this section we take up again some of the appreciations made by the women gang-members regarding their relations with the members of their communities, which makes it possible to understand the ways violence configures community and social practices, at different levels.

In general terms, the assessment of the great majority of the women respondents regarding their relations with the persons or the neighbors in their community or neighborhood *before* they joined the gang, is positive. They pointed out that they had a good relation with the people because they were recognized as members of that neighborhood or *barrio*, or because "they had seen them grow up" there. Many even said they had fond memories of the people in their neighborhood before joining the gang.

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People liked me, they used to advise me, they saw I had suffered a lot, they gave me moral support… The neighborhood women admired me, they told me that after everything I had gone through, there I was… They supported me, they used to take me to the Zoo with their children, and if they bought something for their children they'd buy the same for me […] [when she joined the gang] …that relation changed completely, it's not the same anymore… it's just that if I get close, they [the people in the neighborhood] are at risk, 'cause it's the rival's turf [the rival gang's territory], and if I get close, they get attacked… there's no more communication like there used to be…

Woman Gang-member ♣

When for any reason they had to leave their *barrio* or neighborhood to live elsewhere —before joining the gang— many experienced changes in the relationship and in the attitude of the people in the new neighborhood. People did not reveal themselves or were not so close. Added to the change in the environment, migration from one neighborhood to another or from one sector to another, also involved uprooting for them in terms of the relations they could have established with the people in their home neighborhood, the *barrio* or community. On the other hand, there was another smaller group of women gang-members whose answers differ from the former, without necessarily giving a negative rating to their relationships with the community prior to joining the gang. These women's answers denoted the absence of linkages among the residents (or, at least, between them and the people in the neighborhood), which definitely did not contribute to creating a community environment to constitute or strengthen the basic social fabric, that could foster closer social ties.

Over there [the community she came from] everyone lives behind closed doors, there is not much contact with neighbors. I always used to talk with them, I have always tried to get along with people… [next, she says that an "MS" clique was set up in the neighborhood] […] but, [when she entered] in the gang, you can't live together, you can't with a rival, you can get taken for a ride [get fooled]… you can't trust them…

Woman Gang-member ◎

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These characterizations of the places where they had lived are interesting, particularly taking into account that, at this point, they were talking about the forms of relationship between them and the community, at moments when they were not yet gang members, and in places where, based on their own references, the gangs were not present, or at least not at the present level of force, organization and characteristics. In sum, these are appreciations they made regarding their past relationships with community members where, according to some of them, the social fabric had already been weakened. Somehow, this comes to reinforce the findings in other studies about the importance of the factors of social and community order in the existence and development of the gangs, where a crucial aspect is the level of inter-personal trust among its residents, as an indicator of the quality of the social networks in the communities where gangs are likely to reproduce (Cruz et al., 2004).

Once they join the gang, the issue changes. In this regard, their statements show a divergence of opinions on the relations maintained with the community, once they had entered the gang. On the one hand, many women —particularly those that had good relations with the neighbors— considered that their relationships had gone bad when they joined the gang. On the other hand, those who did not have relations or prior-links to the community did not consider joining the gang has changed this situation substantially.

In the case of the first group (going from good to bad relationships), this change of attitude can be explained by many reasons: either because they had gone on to belong to a gang that is the death rival of the one that controlled the territory they originally used to live in; or due to the mistrust or fear that the gang as a group generates in people; or due to the suspicion they began to feel towards the neighborhood residents; or because, practically for all the women, passing to the gang presupposed a devaluation of their image before the community (as will be seen further ahead). The case is that, for at least half of the respondents, their relationship with the community

changed and with it, the sense of being uprooted and isolated from certain people who could still connect them to the world "outside" the gang.

> … when they realized that [that she had joined a gang], the look in their eyes changed… One time, I beat up a neighbor, 'cause she told me I had slept with all the gangsters, I hit her, and I left her there, spitting blood…
>
> Woman Gang-members ❖

> … right, when I jumped in [joined the gang], it changed [the relationship with people] 'cause they didn't trust me… it's just that you're different; people were afraid that I would mix up their daughters' minds, but no, I used to advise the kids […] When they told me they wanted to jump-in and that things were rough at home and all that, I'd tell them that it wasn't the best way to get out of their problems…
>
> Woman Gang-member ☙

A lot of them reiterated, very emphatically, that the community also "helped them," protecting them from the police or the authorities, either due to the affection they felt, to the closeness that remained, or because many families had many of their members in the gang. Nevertheless, the very gang dynamic propitiated estrangement from the community which, in some cases, happened abruptly, and in others came about in a progressive manner.

> Lots of people in the neighborhood liked me… When I lived in the buildings with the group, we tried to get by, but there was this lady that gave us a pot of food every day, we never asked her for anything… she would say: "here kids, eat…" We'd wash her dishes and we'd drop them off at her place… she showed us her affection, and not her fear […], or also, at the *tortilla* stall, there the lady's children would warn us about the cops [the police], they'd help us, they'd tell us: "here come the cops," so we'd beat it… It's about learning to live with people […]
> [people in the neighborhood] they didn't look at us strange, because there [in the gang] a lot of us were family: a lot of them had children there, husbands, brothers…"
>
> Woman Gang-member ♠

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The Civilians [the persons in the community] looked for me to do them *paros* [favors], help them... It's just that I never liked things that weren't fair... okay, look, for example, there was a really old lady that sold coconuts, and I didn't let them ask her for *renta* [protection money[80]]; or when the *contrarios* [rival gang members] came up, and asked her for coconuts, and drank them up without paying her. I filled them with lead *[los plomeaba]* [shot at them]... But, for that, for doing these things, they stopped me cold in the gang, they told me I was going to get busted because of a civilian's problem *[clavo de un civil]*, and if that happened, they weren't gonna help me [...]
And later, after a while, people closed their windows on me, because they were afraid... and well, when they were being like that, then I'd give them a reason to be afraid...
Woman Gang-member ✹

These statements show the progressive deterioration in the relations between community members and the members of the gang; and reveal that the prevailing interactions tend to be motivated by mutual convenience. In the case of communities or territories where the *clika* or *clique* is entrenched, this relation is affected, as stated previously, by the fact that many of the community members are members of the groups, which means the community maintains links to the gang that are emotional, and at times economic. Nevertheless, the statements make it possible to say that this relation with the environment also changed progressively along with the changes in the gang. Over time, territorial disputes among gangs have become more complex, with the involvement of their members in illegal activities. This has fostered a renewal of violence and the configuration of other dynamics within the gang itself, which in turn have increased the levels of insecurity and violence inside and out of the group.

For their part, the communities have gotten stuck in the middle of a crossfire from the conflicts within and between the gangs. And given that many of their relatives are also involved in

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[80] This refers to the money collected as a "war tax" from the citizenry. It also refers to the money charged in extortions (*renta*).

these cycles of crime and violence, some community members have gone on to collaborate with these groups, either out of convenience, due to the very dynamics of insecurity and fear that are generated by the gangs, or as part of more extensive dynamics where the community itself becomes a participant in the earnings of the criminal economy of these groups.

> Some [neighbors] get along fine; others talk [to gang members] out of fear; others know us since we're kids; others because they have to, just "reporting" like so they say "I speak to them", but it's so we don't do anything to them…
> Woman Gang-member ♣

> A *palabrero* [81] sold drugs, but people liked him a lot; he'd help you. If anyone needed anything, medicine, whatever, he'd help. We have to win the people over in our neighborhood, or they'll call the cops [police], and they'll fuck us over…
> Woman Gang-member ◉

To better understand these dynamics, it is necessary to understand the kind of communities where these groups emerge and thrive. These are neighborhoods and whole micro-contexts that are immersed in situations of social exclusion and marginalization from the State, where the gang is constituted both as an agent that generates insecurity, but that, at any given moment, can address needs of a different order. In this regard, Savenije and Andrade (2003) show the way in which youth gangs position themselves as a source of insecurity and concern for the residents, in terms of the negative impact that their dynamics have on the community where they are entrenched. They argue —along the lines of the ideas propounded by preliminary studies on gangs carried out in the country in the mid-nineties, that it is the self-same situations of social exclusion in these community contexts which lay the foundation for the proliferation and strengthening of these groups, who in turn, immerse their communities in situations of added conflict and exclusion.

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81   Leader or spokesman of a *clique.*

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The assessment of some of the women gang-members interviewed were more critical regarding this complex relation with the community, but this was not without contradictions. They pointed out, at various opportunities, that the closeness between the community and the gang was possible due to the fact that many of the gang members come from these same sectors, or because, initially, the gang's logic included protecting the neighborhood as part of its own regulations. However, they also pointed out that this situation had been modified to a great extent in later years, where the link that the population kept with the gangs could be explained, to a large extent, by the fear and mistrust that motivated people to collaborate with the group. In general, many were successful in seeing that the relationship between the community and the gang was mediated by mutual fear and mistrust. However, some of the women gang-members —particularly the *active* ones in the group— persistently alluded to the "social discrimination" that gang-members are subjected to by society, as a way to interpret and justify the gang's actions.

> In the neighborhood, they used to let us know when the police were coming, but they did it out of fear, it's just that there is always mistrust […]
> In general, I think there's discrimination, they think the gang is "the worst thing" for society […] When I did it [the crime she had been sentenced for committing], I did it in front of everybody, and see, nobody accused me…
> Woman Gang-member ☙

> It's just that it [the way the community sees the gang members] depends on the way you treat 'em… it's like, if you treat them bad, people don't get along with you. But we're human beings the same, we deserve respect from other people. It's just that, they forget that before being gang people, we were civilians…
> Woman Gang-member ✄

This means, they are capable of understanding the reasons people can feel fear, mistrust or dread, but they do not seem to connect the people's mistrust with the actions and violent dynamics of the gangs. And this dissonance, between being able to understand that some people can act out of fear and

insecurity, and separate these reactions from the gang, is accentuated even more when they talk about the relations with people outside their community. Not making this dissociation would imply, from our perspective, that they would have to confront more strongly the multiple contradictions inside the gang that, as will be shown throughout the document, many of them have not been able to solve.

This becomes extremely evident when they refer to the image the community has of the gang. On this, the answers given by all the respondents are linked to the issue of discrimination. When they are asked about the image the community has of them, their discourse alludes more to the mistreatment and discrimination they have received, without any reference to the processes that the gang may have generated in such community responses.

> They look at you mean... and you get mad sometimes [...] 'cause of the gestures. You feel it when they discriminate you. I don't give a shit [don't care] about those people... If they mess with me, I'll beat them up. The *palabreros* are well behaved people, but if they talk to you like an animal, they get 'em [attack people]. If they talk to you nice, they respect you too. There are people who treat you mean, how are you gonna be nice to someone who's being mean?
> Woman Gang-member ◎

No doubt, the violent dynamics in and among gangs have a deep impact on the social fabric in the communities where these groups thrive. This sub-section has been an attempt at pointing out the way the respondents perceive their relation to the community before and after becoming part of the group, and their assessment of their image in the community. It is interesting to highlight the way these relations are changing, and further, the way they have become more complex, in a blend of concealment of illegality and corollary benefits. In exchange, the gangs used to provide protection —above all, in the early stages of the gang— that presently has turned into the preservation

of the residents' physical integrity, given the evolution of these groups.

Thus, gang members —except during the first years, when these groups had the characteristics of merely a local bunch of friends, are not viewed favorably by the members of the communities: from those that look upon them with pity, to those that accuse them of all the evils they experience. Multiple local studies have already shown that gangs constitute the sources of citizen insecurity and are seen as "threatening-subjects" (*sujetos-amenaza*) (Baires et al., 2006), that is, as subjects that people identify as the perpetrators of violence. Said authors point out the way violence intervenes in the configuration of certain social practices in these contexts, and how users of public spaces wind up participating, in an important way, in defining the violence and conflicts that take place there, marking certain areas and identifying certain subjects as a threat.

However, group logic that dictates a good deal of the violent dynamics of the gang and a great deal of the community dynamics, are not static. Community dynamics tend to adjust to the realities of group violence that are experienced; likewise, the gang adjusts to the conditions that the community can provide for its subsistence. Savenije (2009) theoretically weaves together the gang's emergence and operation in environments of community exclusion and marginalization, with deficient micro-social environments (aftermath of deficient family socialization), and with the attraction generated by peers that take over the streets in the self-same affected neighborhoods, and then argues that social exclusion in the community, "fosters processes of social fragmentation, which in turn, open niches inside [the community] itself. These niches can be filled by youth groups and other actors, without much control by the residents, or even, the authorities." (p.25) Thus, highly complex relationships are constructed between the communities where these groups are contained, and the gang. These circumstances plunge these sectors into situations of additional exclusion, due

to the constant presence of violence that has to be taken as part of daily living by the residents of these areas.

Added to these dynamics —which from the analytical proposal of Pérez Sainz and Mora (2007) could be called an *articulation of exclusions (acoplamiento de exclusiones)*: an articulation of conditions of inequality and exclusion that worsen the situation of those who live in them—, an extra circumstance of marginalization suffered by these women could be added, given that their integration to this kind of group presupposes breaking with the traditional gender roles and stereotypes in which society tends to pigeonhole them. While the gang, as a group, precisely defines and circumscribes the actions, the scope and possibilities of its members, the girls and young women that join these groups likewise assume a series of behaviors, points of view, attitudes and options that are removed from the more traditional cultural mold of the ways of being that society imposes on young women.

3.5. Conclusions

The intention of this chapter is to show, from the perspective of the respondents, what their life was like before entering the gang, in different areas: in the family, at school, experiences on the job and in the community.

In familiar terms, three large groups are prevalent: the absence of either of the parents (particularly the father figure); the so called "substitute" families; and, families where both parents were present. The most common type of household had a woman at the head of the family (the woman gang-member's mother), and household responsibilities lay solely on them. However, aside from the kind of family they grew up in, the family itself did not comply with vital functions for the girls, exposing them to situations of constant brutal violence, directed at them or between the adults around them. Noteworthy are deficient, abusive and even non-existent relationships with their

mothers in some cases. These mothers, in turn, were not able to exercise their functions and roles due to the excess of responsibilities or due to their own experiences of violence with their partners. This situation fostered the transmission of violence at a level that is *intergenerational* (from parents to children) and *intragender* (from mother to daughter). On the other hand, it was found, quite frequently, that the respondents had been victims of sexual aggressions (rape) in childhood, at the hand of men who, in almost all cases, were family figures or close to the family. This is a situation that had an important impact on the lives of these women, and shaped many of their later decisions.

Many of them gave their educational experiences a positive rating, and considered school a space where they felt supported and cared for. However, many had already joined the gang or were in the process of joining during that period. In this sense, school was not able to compete —either in being attractive or in satisfying their needs— with what the gang had to offer in terms of symbolic or material resources. As for job experiences, and following the child labor experiences many of them had already had in small family businesses or market stalls, this was always restricted to participation in the informal sector of the economy. Although some continued these activities even after joining the gang, their work options were drastically reduced with their integration to the group. At the community level, they confirmed the existence of overlapping conditions of exclusion at the economic, social and cultural level that characterize daily life in these communities. To these are added the disarticulation or the inexistence of a social fabric among the residents, the day to day recurrence of expressions of violence, and the presence of gangs, whose relationship between the community members is very complex.

The experience of growing up among violent and deficient socialization processes in the family, the need to work from an early age and to combine hard labor with study in order to contribute to family finances, the presence of gangs in the

vicinity of educational institutions and as social actors in the community, these are not characteristics that are restricted to the lives of these women. In this country, numerous children live through situations of abuse and violence within the family. They know exclusion, abandonment and what it is like to be expelled from the educational system. They have carried out different forms of child labour and have had to survive in *barrios* and excluded neighborhoods that have been abandoned and neglected by the State. In this regard, the question is then: what leads many children and adolescents to join these groups? In the case of men gang-members, the attempts at answering this question have been the focus of a series of important prior studies. However, the question is still pertinent in the case of the girls, adolescents and women.

In numerical terms, the young men who become members of the gangs are not a statistically representative group of the juvenile population in the country (Santacruz and Carranza, 2009). And this is more so in the case of the women, as they are a minority within a group of young people who, despite their estimated number, are not the majority of young people in the country. How then, can their entrance to the gangs be explained? How do we go about listing the factors that make some girls and adolescents see an option in these groups? Perhaps, we can find the answer starting from *what* option —or options— they see in the gang. By attempting to understand what it provides them with, what it gives them, and *what it turns them into*; and, above all, how they —the girl, the teenager, or the woman— experienced these benefits and this transformation the gang offers. Above all, considering that these young people come from social strata that, although not considered poor, have been progressively becoming impoverished, as the result of dynamic processes of exclusion on the economic as well as on the social and cultural levels. In this regard, the panorama of possibilities that these young people have before them must also be analyzed from the perspective of their context of origin and the options that it provides or denies them.

Prior studies have pointed out in many ways that, histori-
cally, Salvadoran gangs are characterized by the use of violence
to achieve different ends: from self-affirmation, identity config-
uration and group cohesion, sense of belonging, protection,
among others —at the individual and group level; to the provi-
sion of material and economic gain and benefits, as part of
the exercise of a criminal economy practice. Thus, the gang
performs many functions for those who come to live in it, at a
particular moment in their life, as their "family" (especially for
those who come to experience in the gang all the benefits that
their own primary group had been unable to provide them with).
On the other hand, the exercise of violence is a transversal way
of being and acting inside and out of the gang, which is closely
tied to gaining power, status and respect. This is clear to see in
the gang logic, and it has been reiterated on numerous occa-
sions regarding the men. There had already been an allusion to
this, almost ten years ago, in the ways that *hanging out* became
precisely this: a crystallization of these symbolic and economic
kinds of benefits (Santacruz and Concha-Eastman, 2001).

However, along with the benefits come the obligations, and
one of the most important obligations that demonstrate loyalty
is: to behave, think and act as *a member of the group*. And
what characterizes the group, in its most essential form, is its
violence, its most intense processes of group socialization, and
its *male logic*. So, we insist that this is not about gangs of
women. This is about *women in gangs of men*, thought up
by men, and made up of a majority of men, where the exer-
cise of the hegemonic masculinity that they construct as a part
of their social experiences becomes even more radical. In this
regard, for a little girl that has suffered brutally violent situations,
and has found herself once and again in a situation of reiter-
ated victimization —where the power imbalance between them
and their victimizers has been enormous, the group becomes
a means for achieving (not always successfully) an equilibrium
of these imbalances. This is how those girls, adolescents and
young women that in their own time joined the gang opted,

somehow, to put their own female identity at stake, by becoming part of a group where, in order to be just another *homie,* you have to act just like another man (Miller, 2001). Here, feminine identity is not to be depicted as a means of typecasting the way little girls, adolescents or young women "are supposed to behave", and the roles they should adopt to be considered "feminine", as part of a traditional perspective on gender. What is being argued here is that, faced with their own situation, some girls and young women opt for assuming an identity (with every-thing that this implies) that is consonant with the norms, values, codes and principles of a group of violent men. In this way, by entering the group and (re)constructing their identity and (re) affirming it in their peers, many of them exercise —with even greater belligerence— all the symbols and characteristics of the gang: bear arms, act violently, comply with the norms, live and die for the group. In accordance with this "new identity," they take the step from victimization prior to entering the gang, to the use of violence, once they are members of the group. However, although this is a decision made by a minority of girls and adolescents in the country, it is a very hard option which, over time, reverts in new and more complex scenarios of victim-ization towards themselves and others.

This last sub-section of this chapter on community relations introduces, in some way, the notions of the women's lives when they have become gang members. In this way, it has served to articulate and show in advance, the changes in these women's environments, when they made the decision to join a gang.

The following chapter will show, once more in the fragments of their personal histories, the way they have lived out this option and this new identity.

Chapter 4
Life in the Gang:
Prison by Choice

I always say, why fall in love with life, if, in the end, we marry death?
Woman Gang-member ❖

This chapter is dedicated to exploring different areas in the women's lives once they have joined the gang. The first block is dedicated to presenting, again from their own point of view, the motives for becoming part of the group, as well as the process of rapprochement and joining the gang. The second section explores initial gang experiences. A third section explores the role that many men have had throughout their lives, not only in their involvement with the gang, but in their participation in violence in general. The fourth block deals with the kind of responsibilities or functions they had within the group. Finally, the section closes with an exploration of aspects of their experiences in the midst of the violent dynamics surrounding the group, both from the position as victims, as well as aggressors.

4.1. Reasons and processes for joining the gang

4.1.1. Reasons for joining

Throughout many studies on the issue, it has been sustained that, when joining the gang, there is a complex series of factors that converge and interact. It could not be said that there is one, single factor whose weight tips the balance, and leads young men and women to make the decision to be part of this kind of group. Rather, and as was dealt with in greater detail in the studies that have preceded this effort, it becomes necessary to consider a confluence of factors that intervene over the course of their lives, at different moments and at different levels, and which lay the foundation for many of the young men and women to see in the gangs a desirable option.

In the case of the women in this study, the existence of multiple factors that were in fact articulated is characteristic of their narratives about their reasons for joining the group. However, in some stories there is a factor that tends to prevail over the rest. Therefore, and only for descriptive purposes, we have classified responses into three large categories dealing with the reasons for integration into the gang due to: *dysfunctional relations and dynamics within families*; *revenge/retaliation toward an aggressor* (relative or otherwise); and *interest, curiosity or liking for this kind of group.* In those cases where an outstanding category or factor could not be extracted from the cluster of narrated elements, a separate classification was made.

This classification is for the purposes of illustration, in the understanding that these categories are elements that were noteworthy among the accumulation or series of adverse factors they spoke of, which when articulated and combined at a specific moment of their lives, lead to making the decision to join the gang. There are no "pure" motivations for joining; rather, there are linkages or articulations of factors, where one may appear to weigh more heavily than the rest, based on the emphasis given by the respondents in their narrative. On the other hand, while there are, as has already been mentioned in the previous section, a lot of references to concrete situations experienced during childhood and preadolescence; actually, it is important to note that the intention here is not to establish mechanical relations between these situations and joining the gang. Rather, what is sought is an illustration of the weight that they give to the situations they lived in the most recent past to explain their rapproaching those groups.

The first important category—***dysfunctional relations and dynamics within families***—was one that appeared with the most frequent reiteration, when mentioning the series of disadvantages that pressed them to join the gang. Issues such as abuse by parents or responsible adults, the feeling and/or situation of abandon (symbolic or real) that many of them found

themselves in, and the violence in the relations within the family, were issues that bore a lot of weight.

> The gang was like a family. I got pregnant at 15, they [her family] turned their backs on me... I didn't have anywhere to go, and the gang was there. Since then, I've gotten knocked down time after time, but I have always gotten up again...
> Woman Gang-member ✸

> She hit me [the mother] until I couldn't move my arms, she busted my head here in two places [points to an area of her head]. I couldn't cry, I always kept it all in because I couldn't cry [...] That was when I started hanging out with the guys from [...] Once I was in the gang, maybe she [the mother] regretted it, maybe she realized what she had done. I told her it was her fault and my grandmother's that I had joined.
> Woman Gang-member ⚉

Consonant with the male dynamics, in which reasons for joining the gang have a strong instrumental characteristic, in the face of the risk activities they are involved in (Decker and Van Winkle, 1996; Stretesky and Pogrebin, 2007), to women, the instrumental reasons are likewise important. However, among these, motivations of a more emotional nature bear also a lot of weight: the search for a primary group, a sense of belonging, a "family" that is able to fulfill this role (Messerschmidt, 1999; Miller, 2001; Moore, 1991; Moore in Chesney-Lind and Hage-dorn, 1999). That is, importance is given to finding a group that can be understood not only as a means for defense against the rival gang, but also as a source of shelter, even as a concrete alternative when up against the possibility of constructing a more traditionally "feminine" identity that could place them, from their standpoint, in new scenarios of vulnerability.

The previous reflection is linked to the second category that was constructed to explain their joining the gang: ***revenge/retaliation toward an aggressor***. This kind of argument was particularly evident in those cases where the woman gang-member

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had been raped or sexually assaulted during childhood. In those cases, it usually stood out that joining the gang was valued from a more instrumental perspective: a means to have access to the possibility of returning the violence they received; ideally, to that very person who had harmed them in the past.

> When I was about 10, I used to look at the guys with tattoos and I used to say I was going into the gang, but in order to kill him, my brother [who had raped her]…
> Woman Gang-member ☆

> … vengeance on the rivals… because they killed a friend who was really dear… he just got out of jail, he went to get some bread, and a *ranfla* ["ride" or car] passed by spraying him… it was to avenge his death…
> Woman Gang-member ♠

> Before I jumped in [joined the gang] and the rape, my ideology was different. I wanted to be someone in life, I wanted to study, I wanted to get ahead… I had nothing to do with the homies … when I got my tattoos, I said: "I'm going to do this so it hurts my mom…"
> Woman Gang-member ♣

> … the thing with my mom, the resentment… my grandmother told me my mom had left me for prostitution. I remember that, when I was little, she [the grandmother] used to go ask her for money for my milk, and my mom wouldn't give her any… my mom hit my grandmother […] My goal, when I entered the gang, was to be a [gang member] to kill my own mother, and I looked for her, I looked for her to get her for what she had done to me and my grandmother… If I had found her, I would have killed her… everything that has happened, is because of her… I say if she had been with me, I wouldn't be like this, I wouldn't have been raped either… It's just that my grandmother couldn't take care of me all the time…
> Woman Gang-member ☙

However, the latter statement exemplifies clearly how the dysfunctional/inexistent relationship with the mother is articulated with the abandon, the violence between the responsible adults

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(the mother and the grandmother), the condition as victim of sexual abuse, and the subsequent desire for revenge on those considered aggressors. This *verbatim* transcript shows the difficulty of separating, among the series of risk situations, the one single factor that was sufficient to lead them to join the gang.

The search for vengeance as a form of exercising the possibility of retributed violence, makes evident the way in which the gang becomes the ideal place, given that it provides the basic elements that are needed, which also characterize a group (Martín-Baró, 1989*b*): it makes it possible to configure an identity, it provides power, and defines the activity of its members. That is, it lays the foundation to *re-define oneself* (go from the defenselessness of being a victim to the action of the agent, for example); it provides resources to this end (both material and symbolic); and facilitates the legitimation of the use of violence, as it is a central aspect in the group dynamics, which, to the degree it is exercised with greater belligerence, situates the aggressor in a position of greater power and respect within the group. And it is largely useful because —as will be seen later on— the use of violence becomes *the possibility of doing* something about the way they feel in terms of their own victimization. In this regard, the possibility is established for doing, making, acting, behaving and reacting in a decisive manner in the face of aggression, and, at the same time, settle scores with others.

In the final category—***interest or curiosity regarding the gang***, some of the women stated that the main reason for joining was the simple fact that the gang caught their attention. In these cases, there is a greater coherence in the discourse of the "*vacil*" (hanging out*)* as a reason for entering the gang; a motivation that is put forth by the male members in prior national studies.

> My dad wanted me to be there [in the United States] with him… he used to live in an apartment on […] street, then he'd go to work and I'd stay at home. When I went out to shop, I'd go with a friend of his that lived in the same build-

ing. We used to pass by an abandoned building, and there were some *vatos* (guys) living there, real *gangsters*, and that caught my attention. One day, I went up, or I got closer, it wasn't enough that they'd seen me, I started to ask what they were doing, what I had to do to be with them, to enter…
Woman Gang-member ❖

Maybe [she joined the gang] because I liked to inspire fear… I liked people to be afraid of me, that way people weren't going to giving me any hassle…
Woman Gang-member ⋊

In this regard, some women gang-members seemed to have a clear notion of their quota of responsibility in the decisions they had made at one time or another, and did not blame their parents or explain entering the gang because of the household situation or their personal history of prior victimization. Aside from having experienced a series of difficulties and situations of abandonment and violence at home, these women are probably clearer on the ways in which they interpret belonging to the group and the different forms of profit they were able to obtain this way. One of the women who had been abandoned by her biological mother at the hands of a substitute family commented:

Maybe [she joined the gang] because of all… all I had to put up with… I was looking for a way to let it out on something… to have the company I didn't have… When my mom wanted to give me love, I didn't want it from her any-more… although I think that, in the end, each one is born to be what he's going to be, and it isn't anyone's fault, it would be like blaming others for something I decided… I think that, although I'd had a good relationship with people, in the end, it would have caught my attention, the *manchados*[82] ("tinted guys") would have caught my attention… What drives us comes from behind, it helps us out even more. We can't blame anyone, for example, there are a bunch of orphaned kids, they haven't got anybody, but they haven't become like us…
Woman Gang-member ⋊

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[82] This is a way of making reference to gang members, that alludes to the many tattoos that they wear all over their body, which used to be part of their cultural codes, and were exposed on visible parts of their bodies.

Many are conscious of the decision they have made, and for this reason it is important to note that, even though it has come about as the product of an articulation of risk factors, in none of the cases did joining the gang happen in a forced or coerced manner; at least not among the women approached in this study. Although it is true that, according to later statements, for some of them, gang life did not turn out to be as positive as they had conceived it to be initially, the decision to join the gang was a personal choice, driven and stimulated by another series of unfavorable personal and community circumstances.

Among these community factors, their statements confirmed the important influence of the closeness of the gang (which will be dealt with in a later section), above all in the cases of those who had friends, boyfriends, or brothers in the gang before joining it themselves. Without leaving all of these aspects out, what is being highlighted is that this study has not found evidence that the gang itself had obligated them to join. Rather, the gang received in its midst girls and young women who came from contexts of high precariousness and risk, who at that moment believed that joining this kind of group was an adequate way to gain access to some point of reference, to believe in something (or someone), to survive the host of difficulties.

As addressed in the first chapter, the men gang-members have always cited *hanging out* as the principal motive for joining at a general level, followed by family problems. In the case of the women, although this study does not have a representative sample of women gang members that could be comparable at a quantitative level with previous studies, it is noteworthy that, although the desire to be part of the group and *hang out* with the gang are also reasons the respondents cited for entering, their narratives provide much more weight to their personal history of victimization. Key to understanding why women enter a gang is the search for protection, understanding and support from a reference group —which may, in turn, provide an identity, particularly considering the stage of development that

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many were in at the time of making this decision. Nevertheless, also noteworthy in them is the desire to exact revenge on an aggressor figure, which gives rise to sustaining the hypothesis that the gang serves as a medium to gain both pertinence as well as power and the possibility of "returning" this violence, or, at least, exerting it. The importance given to vengeance, in the case of the women, is an expression, on the one hand, of their high vulnerability. But, on the other, it also exposes that kind of search for an alternative mode of expression of the feeling of impotence or vulnerability that in some is produced by their own story, as well as the possibility of liberating themselves from this series of victimizations, starting with the possibility of being active and protagonist inside a violent group, that grants symbolic and concrete power.

4.1.2. Ages at Which They Joined

The majority of the respondents joined the gang at a very early age (see Table 2.3, Chapter 2): nine out of sixteen women respondents entered the gang at the age of 13 or younger, and the rest, at the ages between 14 and 16. Only one stated she had entered at the age of 20, although her rapprochement to the gangs began approximately at the age of 15. In the most extreme case, a woman gang-member said she had *jumped-in* at the age of 10. Actually, upon analyzing their current ages vis-a-vis their ages at the time of joining, the year they joined the gang can be figured out by approximation: three of them —over 30 years old— joined between 1989 and 1991. Seven women joined approximately between 1993 and 1995; and five of them entered between 1996 to 1999. The one who had joined the most recently can be placed in 2001. It can be seen that all were already members of the gang during the period that the *Mano Dura* (Hard Line/Hard Hand*)* policies were implemented in the country. In this regard, except in the case of one woman gang-member, the premature entrances into these groups define periods that span over a decade. In other words, these are

women who have lived practically half of their lives as part of the gang.

Joining the gang at an early age has had strong implications for the lives of these women. The first thing to note in this regard is that their age upon joining also implied a concrete period of development (pre-adolescence and adolescence), where the processes of group socialization become fundamental and configuring elements (Rich Harris, 1999). In general, these were girls and adolescents who had left their homes and entered this masculine and particular world at a premature time. Here, they were faced with extreme situations and had to demonstrate —with deeds— their commitment and willingness to belong, and their disposition to accredit their membership, through the drastic and day-to-day use of violence. To this are added the conditions in which these young women left their homes, which adds to their already high level of vulnerability. Once inside the gang, they are made to follow the rules of the new family. Actually, as part of this redefinition of their identities, a rite of passage to enter the group is practiced, and the new member is accepted into the group under a new name: her *taca* (tag), or nickname that she will bear from the moment of the end of the ritual, and which she will respond to thereafter, while she belongs to the gang. This will be dealt with in greater detail in a later section.

These women have spent the majority of their adolescence and youth within the gang. That is, they spent the crucial stage of identity formation and personal development in a group that, although it could have initially offered them an experience of brotherhood/sisterhood, solidarity and fellowship, later becomes a space where there prevail other kinds of values such as jealousy, intolerance, inclemency, disloyalty and the constant excesses of violence. The acceptance and personal growth within the group often depends strongly on their performance in gang activities, as will be discussed further on.

Nowadays, these women are between 23 and 37 years old. Their early entrance to the gang translates into a long career within the group. It is extremely important to consider the time they have been in the group and the fact that the majority have constructed their identities in it over such a long period of time, when discussing their role and participation in the gang and the violence. We are facing a group of women who have been formed in environments where violence is a part of daily living and, therefore, violence has become internalized as a legitimate behavior and instrument for relating. This violence is not experienced for the first time in the gang; however, in the gang, it is presented in its crudest form, and the possibility of using it is no longer merely satisfactory, but even intimidating and threatening to their own wellbeing.

4.1.3. Rapprochement to the Gang

One thing is clear: for these women, entering the gang is strongly related to the presence of members of these groups in their immediate environment, to the absence of referents, to the inexistent possibilities of joining alternative groups (particularly in the case of girls and young women), and to the condition of State-neglect of the communities where, almost twenty years ago, these organizations began to emerge and consolidate. This study has made it possible to confirm that the neighborhood and school environment are important at-risk areas, as the presence of the gangs in the neighborhoods makes it possible for many boys and girls to be socialized among gang members starting at an early age.

> Yeah, since I was little [the gangs were present in the neighborhood, the Destroyer[83] was in front of her house]… To me […] they'd talk to me, draw me pictures… When I started hanging out with them they'd tell me no, they didn't want to give me drugs, but I kept on… I wanted to belong, to be like them, be in all the hang

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[83] Abandoned houses used as headquarters by the gang.

outs, get myself tattooed. It used to be hanging out, it wasn't like
it is now…
Woman Gang-member ㉛

There are even a couple of interesting narratives by some
of the respondents that were part of local neighborhood gangs
that existed before *MS* and *Barrio 18*. They are eloquent narra-
tives that demonstrate the processes by which the two largest
groups were formed and grew stronger, that is, by "successive
approximations," and by absorbing members and dynamics of
these local groups. These groups of young people were part of
the local background of these two big transnational gangs that
currently prevail in the country.

It's just that we began to form a gang in the neighborhood, but it was just
bichada [a group of kids]… we just got together on the corner, we were
travesiando [doing mischief], we'd steal hens, but nothing bad, we just got
together with several *bichos* [kids], and all alone there, this was like in '93…
Until one day, a guy came, with his face all tattooed, they had sent him to
raise a gang there… […] When he got there, he asked us what we were doing
[…] and we told him "nothing". Then, he started to explain that if we joined
we'd have respect there, because that way, like him, no one touched him […]
He started giving us a big schooling, so, and the *bichada* responded […]
Most of the *bichos* [kids] there, we were from divorced parents, or we'd been
abandoned, or we'd been raped… all of us. If you ask the gangsters, all of us,
or almost all of us, we have something negative […] So he started to ask us if
our mother or out father was with us, if they supported us […] and he told us
this whole story, and we had meetings and everybody brought out what they
had been keeping inside […] He told us they were going to be our family, and
that being with him, nobody could touch us.
Woman Gang-member ✺

When I was in 9th grade, it was in '92, we heard rumors of the *MS* and the *18*.
When I went to study downtown, there was this classmate […] He said he had
been deported from the USA, from [name of the clique]. We thought, "what is
that?" They used to be gangs of the school. Then, the deported guys started
getting together, right?, they stuck with the students that wanted to be like

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them. They'd ask "what do I do to be part of…?" […] They came, looking for
students, for the *bronqueros*[84], that is how they started *jumping-in*. Then, the
others came [the other gang]…, lots of classmates were already [in the rival
gang] […] They came over here, they expanded in the schools and a lot of
them dropped out to be in the gang.
Woman Gang-member ◉

Apart from showing these processes of reconfiguration of the
informal youth groups into more organized groups at the local
level, these facts also account for the environment of neglect
and the absence of figures for identification and/or construc-
tive leadership, which young people are lacking, even today; as
well as the absence of options or alternatives for affiliation that
could have competed, at the time, with the gang. In the case of
girls and adolescent young women, this is even more drastic, in
that, traditionally, when they have the chance to enjoy free time
or leisure time, their options tend to be more restricted than
those of boys or young men (Santacruz and Carranza, 2009).
Different from the young men, their spaces for group affiliation
tend to be restricted to interactions at school or church, and
there are fewer possibilities to make use of their free time in
alternative ways. Studies on youth in general have shown that,
in terms of belonging to groups, adolescents and young men
tend to join sport groups, whereas young women tend to join
religious groups with greater frequency, or, in their absence, they
tend to spend much of their free times on activities in the house-
hold (*ibíd.*). Nevertheless, when spending leisure time at home
is not an option, when outside the home there are no alternative
options to the gang, and when in the gang one finds friends,
boyfriends, or other kinds of close young people, it is an option
that some took without thinking about it much.

For its part, school is another space for establishing contact
with the gangs. In a couple of cases, the women said that the

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[84]   Young troublemakers that start *broncas* or fights.

gang had come to their school, or that the members were close by, and that is how they became closer to it.

> I used to study at public school from 1 in the afternoon to 7 at night. Some boys were there at the bus stop when I'd go catch the bus… they'd ask me for money; sometimes I'd let a bus go by, and another bus, and another bus… I'd just stayed there talking with them… It's just that, I didn't want to go home because he [the stepfather] always hit my mom. I started staying with them, making friends with them…
>
> Woman Gang-member ⚷

Friends or boyfriends that are members of the gang appear as another doorway to facilitate contact with the group. In some cases, these friendships were established after the adolescents had been driven out, had left, or were about to leave their homes; and others had been childhood friendships.

> My sister-in-law [a friend, who later became her sister in law] got along with the homies. When I started to tell her what had happened [the rape], I started getting closer to her, we grew up together since we were *morritas* [little girls]… and the homies would come to her place because she had a brother who was a gangster… […] I started getting along with them, I felt protected, like nobody was gonna touch me, because I was with them… and I started going out with her brother [the gangster].
>
> Woman Gang-member ♣

> I met a friend… now I call her a "friend" because now I know that she wasn't a friend, and she took me to a dance […] I started going there with her, and I learned to smoke, and there I met a gangster. He'd tell me that it was nice being in the gang, that I was going to be okay there, because I liked him, and I was going out with him, right? Once, I went to a *mitin*[85] with him […] I talked with the *palabrero* [a gang/clique leader] and I told him that I also wanted to be… I wanted to get even with someone who had hurt me in the past…
>
> Woman Gang-member ♦

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[85]   Term used in order to refer to a gang meeting (from the English term *meeting*).

Upon analyzing the process of rapprochement to the gang, it must be taken into account that the different processes these women reiteratively noted as contributing to their being ousted from their family homes are added to another series of situations: exclusion in the neighborhoods and entire communities; the lack of options for feminine group affiliation —which becomes even more evident in these socially and economically precarious contexts; the scant possibilities that the educational system retain them in its walls —which in the case of girls and adolescents is clearer because their education is not socially encouraged with the same force as the education of the boys or young men; and the scarce options that many have when they consider entering the working world. To this we add the immediate consideration —mediated by curiosity and by the conditions of their situation at that moment— that the gang is a solution to their problems. So it is that many of the respondents had established relationships with the gang since childhood, and their rapprochement happened as part of a series of interactions with these other actors in the immediate environment.

The influence of friends, boyfriends, husbands, and brothers who are gangsters is another factor that facilitated rapprochement to the gang. Actually —and given the force of the phenomenon over at least the past two decades, added to the early age at which the young women went to become part of these groups, we could consider that there are second, and even third generation gang members. Here the links to the gang are no longer exclusive to the person or groups of people, but are extended to entire families who, in turn, live in entire neighbourhoods, where the children of gang-members grow up and are socialized under the criteria, the rules and the structure that the gang provides.

4.2. Initiation Rituals and Experiences

The initiation ritual[86] that is required of women by the gangs is an issue that, in the general population, has been surrounded by a series of myths and beliefs. The most popular belief is the one called *trencito* (*little train* or *sexing in*), that consists of the aspirants subjecting themselves to rape at the hands of a number of members of the gang they wish to join. However, according to the respondents' narratives, the ritual they had to undergo, and their first experiences within the group are far removed from these beliefs. Rather, they describe that myth as something that has contributed to stigmatizing the image of women gang-members as mere sexual objects for their gang-partners.

Actually, the issue is apparently more complex. The gang initiation ritual is part of a complex process of construction of a new identity, as a result of belonging to this new reference group. Whereas some mentioned that the *train* could be a possibility for entering the gang, this situation does not seem to be the norm, nor the most desirable option. In fact, this study has not found any evidence to uphold that this is *the* way for women to officially enter the gang. On the contrary, there are sufficient elements that make it possible to state that the ritual to enter the gang is the same for a woman as it is for a man: a heavy beating, whose duration and intensity depends not only on the kind of gang (13 seconds for The *MS*; 18 seconds for The *18*), but also on the form and cadence the time is kept, the physical complexion of the aspirant, the physical characteristics of the ones that "deal out" the ritual (male gang-members), among other aspects. Thus, it has to do with testing, by the most physical, the most brutal, and the most "masculine" means, whether the woman is as able, and will have as much disposition to hold up to what is coming, as a man.

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[86] This is called *jumping-in* in gang slang.

Neither the women respondents nor the participants in the focus groups were forced to undergo processes of a sexual nature, and none expressed having done so. In fact, except for two women who abstained from responding to the question, all the respondents had been *jumped-in* by way of beatings or kicking, which kept them literally *suspended in mid-air* while it lasted. That is, the same ritual which any man who wants to be part of the gang has to go through; though with different consequences.

> I got beat up by five [men]. They hit me hard, they broke two ribs, I was all covered in bruises… I'll never forget that the last one that jumped me, a very *cholo*[87] guy, about 1.70 meters; he leaped up, and I remember well that he was wearing some *Caterpillars* [heavy work boots], and he landed right on my ribs… After that, my whole body was shaking. I layed down, they gave me some pills and I slept… My mom got home at about 10 at night, I didn't get up for three days. My mom didn't find out because she was working.
>
> Woman Gang-member �

> Four *cholo* homeboys gave me a kicking of respect… for 1x seconds. My face was all black and blue, with blood in one eye, bruises on the leg [shows the scars on the shin]. I bled a lot. At first, I dodged a couple of hits, but when they took me down, I couldn't get up anymore […] Theirs [other male friends who were jumped in at the same time] was worse I think, or maybe it's because I didn't see how they beat me up.
>
> Woman Gang-member ♣

> Take a *taleguiada* [a beating] for 1x seconds. Four of them beat me up, and just like a man.
>
> Woman Gang-member ♠

> 5 homeboys beat me up for 1x seconds… I wound up in the hospital. I was all beat up. I was in for four days for injuries… but I didn't care, because that was what I wanted.
>
> Woman Gang member ∞

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[87]   Term used to name a large, stout, corpulent man.

> ¡Ouch! ...They hit me real ugly. I was left almost unconscious… it was four really big guys. Three of them are already dead.
>
> Woman Gang-member ✒

Despite the fact that they all entered by beating, it has already been mentioned that some admitted the possibility of being *jumped* by way of sexual intercourse ("*jumping for love*" or *being sexed in*). Only one of them told of having had that option at the time she was going to be initiated; but she refused it.

> So the *morra*[88] told me: "if you want to get into the thing, just let us kick you", and the *vato* [guy] told me: "if you don't want a kicking, give me some love and you're in the gang". But, *púchica* [gee-whiz], I was a little girl, I didn't know anything about that… so, no… that's when they kicked me, and I joined.
>
> Woman Gang-member ❖

For this reason, it cannot be discarded that some women gang-members may have joined the gang in this way. However, the *meaning* of joining the gang is different depending on the way that is chosen: the ones that want a position of respect in the group have to take a beating; the ones that enter by way of sexual intercourse will never have a position of respect in the gang, and they "lose respect" for having done it that way.

> There are some that jump in by having sex, but that makes it so they don't take them as one [of the group]; instead, they use them however they want, because they give "love gifts" or "little gifts", like they call them… and they get used by anyone, anyway […] Some have even been killed because they rebelled. It's just that, look, this gang thing, you have to know how to bear it.
>
> Woman Gang-member ☙

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[88] *Morra* or *morro*, refers to a boy, a girl, a child or even a youth. *Vato* is a colloquial term used to refer to a young man or a man.

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In fact, entering by way of sexual intercourse is a modality of *jumping into* the gang, that is not respected by either the gang-members, men or women. And this is a very important issue because, as will be shown later on, the topic of respect — and the ways in which it is won— is a fundamentally important attribute and distinction in the gang. And entering the gang by way of a beating —that is, by demonstrating that they are not inferior compared to any *man*-member of the group, is the first step on a long staircase that has to be climbed towards consolidating that prestige, as you "walk in the gang." Aside from this, accepting to be brutally beaten is, for many, a way of defining what they "are not," that is, what characteristics *do not* define them as members of the gang: weak, loose, insecure. And this way, they draw a line between themselves and the others that choose the "easy way" (Campbell, 1984; Miller, 2001).

> They [people] think that we go with one and then another, they think we do these things if we are women. In our space, right?, we are really the same, as for respect and courage, we are the same […] Sometimes people talk without knowing what they're saying. I have always liked to show what I am worth. But if you let them, they may not respect you. They say, for example: "several of them got her", that's what my cousin said to me […] but it's not like that. It used to be that girls would come that weren't like us. If you let them, maybe they'd mess with you, no, I only saw that once. But I have my clique, and I am not going to let anyone come at me like that… Nooo way… I've got self respect. Some [girls] say, "I'm a gang-member", but they're nobody. Maybe they've got a tattoo, but no, they aren't. Not that.
>
> Woman Gang-member ⬦

In one of the focus groups, it became clear that this issue generates unease and rejection in some women. Some flatly denied the existence of this ritual; and others admitted that it had taken place. However, all coincide in saying that no one is forced to go through with it. In this regard, a "generational" difference could be seen, since it was precisely the women gang-members who had been in the gang longer that recognized the existence of the *train*; while the younger ones denied

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that this was a gang induction ritual. This could suggest —at a hypothetical level, given that there is not enough evidence of it in the interviews— that these modes may have changed over time; and that, currently, the gang needs to prove the aspirant's "capacity and potential" this way.

The strong reactions that this issue generated in many of them reflects, on the one hand, the women's desire to demystify the idea that women gang-members are only used sexually by the men. On the other hand, it can also be interpreted as part of their permanent effort to equate their worth, their faculties, and their resistance to that of their male counterparts, and the need to demonstrate —often in contradiction to their own reality and the discrimination they have experienced at the heart of the group— that they are no more and no less than the men in the gang.

The fact that they submit to 13 or 18 seconds of kicks and punches by men has, no doubt, a very important symbolic value for the women who join the gang. On the one hand, they subject themselves to the same process, where they are beaten just like any person who aspires to be part of the group. In light of their own statements, apparently there is no consideration at all in terms of receiving a "softer treatment" by virtue of the clear difference in size, weight and strength that there normally is between a man and a woman or, in this case, between a woman and four or five *cholo* (big) men. This process can be understood as being the first effort or the first test that many have to overcome, in order that the group value their will to commit, and their capacity to "stand by the gang-man," showing that she can do the same as he can, and that when the time comes, she will know how to defend herself and respond to threats.

This [the initial beating] helps you, because if tomorrow the rivals get you, you can defend yourself.
Woman Gang-member ◆

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This way, the woman that joins the gang shows that she enters on the same terms as the rest, and so, she *submits* to the group's designs and assumes a different identity. So, the initiation ritual can also be understood as an effort to balance out the differences between the sexes, given that women enter in precisely the same conditions, and therefore, want the same rights and positions as the man. The problem with this is that, paradoxically, when entering this way, they enter into a group and a system designed *by men*, that functions in a patriarchal structure and which is, therefore, conceived and designed to perpetuate this differentiation that, in the first place, the men in the group assume to exist between them and a woman.

Having entered by the same rite of passage as the men gives certain "fundamental legitimacy" to the women in the face of their men and women counterparts. This contrasts with those that join by way of sexual intercourse, who do not get a position in the gang, at least not in the opinion of the respondents. Nevertheless, going through the ritual is only the first step of many to be taken in order to position yourself within the gang. It is important to consider the difficulties that are involved for a woman in climbing that ladder. At this point, it is worth asking whether, in this Salvadoran society, women that are not gang-members have also faced the need to "climb a ladder", having to show that they are on the same level and have the same possibilities and capacities, or more so, as a man, in the roles they have to carry out.

Returning to the women gang-members, it is important to mention that the induction ritual is also important in terms of its function, as the demarcation point or the entrance to a new world, that is governed by its own logic of rules, values and goals.

In the gang, the world is different. Everything that is normal becomes abnormal, and everything that is abnormal is normal. It's the world upside down [...] after 13/18 seconds in the air, the world is another world.

Woman Gang-member ᚔ

It's difficult, because you enter another world [...] Before that, they [members of the gang] had told me to think about it really hard, that after the *jump-in*, everything was going to be an obligation, but what I wanted was to go around with tattoos, that people fear me, have their respect and of the people... but once you're inside, you can't leave or do whatever you want, and they told me, that they were going to make me do things I had never done.

Woman Gang-member ᚲ

In order to function in this world, the progressive construction of a "new identity" within the new collective is key. The activities and responsibilities that are assumed in the gang integrate the person —the women in this case— into this collective, acting from the new identity conferred by the group, and within a group logic that justifies and legitimizes actions that, perhaps in other circumstances, the same person would have been hard pressed to justify. Upon joining and becoming part of a group, the members no longer operate by individual logic, but rather by the group's rules, values, orders and codes that determine them. That is, the members of the gang go on to operate with the logic of the group identity, based on processes of categorization that enable them to identify each other and as a group, that accentuate similarities within the group and the differences regarding other groups outside their own. This construction of new identities —which is clearly drawn with the assignment of a new name (the *tag* or *taca*), of a new territory (their physical and symbolic turf), and of a new family (by way of an assigned number that designates a *clique* and a specific gang)—, is part of a series of important group processes, that will determine its members' activities (Hogg, 2006). In this regard, the following *verbatim* quote is extremely eloquent:

When they *jump* you, they give you the *taca* [tag/nickname] and the turf [ter-
ritory], and your tribe [clique]… in other words, the territory you have and
you have jumped in for, but you're nobody from one day to the next, you earn
it with respect… […] You lose your identity… they give you a *taca*, and that is
your name… and I've spent so many years being the…, so long with my name
[her *taca*], that now I feel odd if they call me my name [her real name] […]
I went through a transformation, my life transformed, my image transformed
[…], but now, I was prepared and alert, and I'd say: "before I get touched [by
a man], I'll do him [kill him]".
Woman Gang-member �ખ

The rite of passage, as such, lasts only a specific time. Once
this initial test is overcome, there is no turning back, and the
new identity, inaugurated by the rite, gradually crystallizes by
way of the activities that the group integrates its members into.
These actions will, in turn, generate a progressive commitment
and strengthen the feeling of belonging. So, the new challenges
that await them not only serve to measure their physical endur-
ance, but will also put to test their psychological resistance, and
their suitability to hold this new status.

Over time, the new members are assigned the first mission.
Many of the women preferred not to enter into detail about the
content of these "missions;" however, the information obtained
reveals that this first mission usually consists of, in both gangs,
killing one or several members of the rival gang. Carrying this
action out is another test of bravery and strength, and despite
the fact that some wanted to show they "stood the same" as
their partners (that is, they fulfilled the mission just like any
other member), participating in this sort of activities also had an
important impact on them.

I let out three shots, and I started running… it felt like I'd never reach the car
[…] When I sleep, I see the images of all these people. They [the *homeboys*]
celebrated for me… I… I wanted to cry, it was strange, everything had been so
fast… a lot of nerves, the *jura* [cops, police] after me… but then, all that

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> nervousness, all that… goes away after a while.
>
> Woman Gang-member ✪

> Suddenly, they stopped the car and told me: "you're gonna shoot"… I was about 12 years old. So I took the gun, I shot one of the rivals […] I didn't know how to shoot, I just got him, and when I looked, I had got him […] I spent a long time with that image in my head.
>
> Woman Gang-member ♣

These first direct experiences in the use of violence, initially shocking, in time become part of their daily lives.

When asked about the experience of entering a group where the majority are men, the women were divided in their arguments. A little over half of them declared that, in the beginning, it had been hard for them, because they could show they were equally able as their partners, but at times they had to wait to be given the opportunity to "show it." At the same time, this was, on some occasions, a challenge for them. Although they were conscious of the difference in the way they were regarded by the men members, their challenge was to "walk like them" and become one of them. And this wish to be just another member of the group, and not to be treated differently than men, made some of them seek out ways to get over the restrictions or "protection measures" that some of the partners in the gang exhibited towards them.

> It feels exciting, it is difficult, but I saw it as a challenge: they [the men] against me… At first, they analyzed me like a woman, they tested me, my challenge was: "I am a woman, but I am worth the same, if they can, I can too".
>
> Woman Gang-member ♠

> I used to stick to them and, at first, they didn't want me to go; they used to tell me: "You stay," but I'd hide from them, like this, in the car sometimes to go with them, and suddenly, when we were far away, I'd come out: "here I am *homitos*

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(little homies)". I just felt really happy going around with them and they saw that I could do it, go around with them… […]

It's hard for them to accept that a homegirl *has got the picture* [has a good image]…it's hard for them to accept. Once, with these guys that had just been jumped, I had to take them to […], and they came out saying: "what, a woman is gonna take me?" I had to go see that they did it. Sometimes they stopped short, they *didn't show the picture*, and I had to do the things and see that nothing happened to them, but it's hard for them to accept.

Woman Gang-member ♣

The previous quote anticipates important issues. Although the mechanisms to gain respect and a position in the gang are not different between men and women, in the sense that all have to prove in front of their gang that they are good for whatever the gang says must be done, the women have a tougher time with winning merit, in that they come from a constant position of disadvantage next to their men partners: for the simple fact of being a woman. And this is because, even though they are all members of the same group, the gang is comprised of spacial/territorial collectives (*cliques*), but also of gender collectives (men and women). And within these groups, the members that wield more power (with numerical and resource differences) prevail over those that are at a disadvantage. Curiously, these androcentric operating schemes are not private or exclusive to men, but also turned out being frequently used by the women, presumably as individual strategies for comparison and seeking identification with the members who have greater power in the group (Bourhis, Gagnon and Moïse, 2006; Tajfel and Turner, 1979).

It is difficult [to enter a male group], because a man, people don't criticize him; the women, they look at them like everyone has passed on them, I mean, there is more discrimination against us… and within the same gang as well. If something goes wrong, they say we don't know how to do things right. If you do more things, and you do them well, the gang will pick you up, but other women start talking, slandering you.

Woman Gang-member ✫

> It's difficult. They want to look down on you: "so-and-so went and did such-and-such", like they don't like it for women to be good. But they keep it to themselves because they can't talk bad about us. If we do it well, they don't like it. Worse if it's a woman. But it's like that all over, not just in the gang.
>
> Woman Gang-member ↜

There were other women who, contrary to those that mentioned difficulties experienced in a group of men, said that it had not been difficult for them to enter a group where men were dominant. Some were even of the opinion that they had not felt any difference between the men and the women. In fact, they stated they got along well with the men, and preferred to go around with them. Others, in a logic that is nearer to the rationale of the needs and shortcomings that were referred to in previous sections, said they felt satisfied and contented to be "taken care of and protected by them."

> It's not difficult for me, because I've almost always gotten along with men… it was the best experience I've had, as long as there's respect, and you have to get it for yourself.
>
> Woman Gang-member ✄

> I felt happy to be the [nickname]… I felt they weren't going to do anything to me anymore, you feel all different.
>
> Woman Gang-member ঽ

Recapitulating, an important initial issue not only refers to the form, but also the meaning of the gang initiation ritual. The evidence suggests that the women could chose the form they wanted to enter the gang; and, most of the time, the chosen option consisted of the very same ritual as a man, by way of a beating, usually dealt out by other men. This modality, within the women's imaginary, constitutes a form of earning respect, a reputation and "basic" legitimacy, from which they position themselves as equals in front of their partners, and can proceed to construct an image and identity according to group expectations and the newly acquired commitments. Stretesky and

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Pogrebin (2007) take up Decker and Van Winkle's findings, and those of Moore, stating that, despite the reasons —most of the time instrumental in nature— for joining a gang, once a person enters a group that is conceived as his or her primary group (which, as such, is central in his or her life and configures identity), peer approval within the group becomes highly significant. In this regard, one of the ways to achieve this approval is projecting and showing a reputation that is along the lines of the expectations the group has of the new member.

Although there are no observable differences in the treatment given the aspiring woman gang-member in this initial ritual, at this point, experience begins to give evidence that entering the gang under the same modality as a man does not confer upon the women the same benefits or the same point of departure that it gives the men, precisely because they begin to run up against the existing contradictions between the rhetoric of "equality among its members" that is used in the group, and the existing divergences in a male-chauvinist group, when these notions of equality have to be extended to the women. So, any new member has to pass by a progressive process of constructing a reputation based on the gang's precepts and values. Yet, in the case of the women, added to this process is the need to convince the men of their capacity, to fight the male mistrust and prejudice. In this manner, the construction of status goes from the creation of an identity and a reputation according to these notions of strength and toughness, and in the gang, this is only achievable by way of the direct and extreme use of violence.

4.3. Fathers, Stepfathers and Partners: the role of men in the initiation to the gang

Throughout the women gang-members' personal narratives, an important thread can be traced: the presence of male figures —one, or several men— who played important roles in different situations of risk and violence. The recurring appear-

ance of these men, not only prior to their entrance in the gang, in various events where they were victimized at the hands of either fathers, stepfathers, or even strangers; but again, as part of their membership in a group of violent men, or due to their relation or affiliation with men that are linked to the exercise of violence and crime. These male figures appear over and over in many remembrances and episodes tied to the use of violence and committing crimes.

In the sections on their lives prior to entering the gang, allusions to their victimizers bring to mind the father figures — in the instances when they were present— and those of the mothers. However, many of the episodes of aggression that also had an important impact involve stepfathers and strangers. This becomes particularly important in the case of episodes of sexual aggression. These forms of violence too often are aimed at girls, adolescents and young women in the Salvadoran reality[89], and reiterated too many times in the lives of these women. In the section on family in the previous chapter, it was seen that almost half of the women interviewed for this study brought to account a sexual aggression during childhood: some, as early as age 4. All, except for one, at the hand of close male figures, relatives, boyfriends.

Although a heavy burden is placed on the figure of the mother and the deficient relationship with her, from the interpretations the women make to understand and explain their passing into the gang, and taking into account a little of the complexity of these family situations, there is also evidence of the participation —by commission or omission— of the men in the succession of events they lived. Men (the fathers), that many of them never knew, and who abandoned their mothers with the heavy burden of supporting and raising the family. Men (the stepfathers), who at different times "got together" with their mothers to form new family units which, far from becoming new homes, become niches of re-victimization for the women and their

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[89] See Chapter 1.

sons and daughters, and that come to deepen the differences and distance between them and their mothers. Men (fathers, brothers, uncles, grandfathers), who attack from the position conferred on them by the androcentric hierarchy of the home, where the girl and the women are thought of and conceived as assistants, servants, property or, at the most, accompaniment for the men in the family. Many of the attacks which, in time, these women were subject to during childhood and youth, were many times carried out directly by their mothers; but the short and long term impacts touched them (the women gang-members) as daughters, and even reached their own sons and daughters, particularly considering the effects of their current situation of imprisonment. Extracted from one of the accounts, the following fragments exemplify the manner in which male intervention in the life of many of the women takes place in early childhood, although it has an impact on the medium and long terms, even of an inter-generational nature:

> My dad didn't know about it at all, he didn't know anything [about her link to the gang-members during school]... I never got the father treatment, he never hugged me, never showed affection [...] My dad forbade me to have contact with my mom [...] I had to see her behind his back, because my dad didn't let me. He told me if I wanted to go with her, I wasn't going to have a dad anymore. My mom wanted to take me with her, but he wouldn't let her, he said I wasn't going to be okay with her. He tried to poison my mind against my mom, and I feel like this pushed me toward the gang [...]

> I felt like my mom loved me more than my dad. They had problems, and my mom left. I was really sorry [about her mother's absence] [...] My dad's family didn't like my mom. They told him she had a lover, but I never saw my mom with another man. One night, my mom was coming home from my grandma's [...] My dad began to beat her, he hit her with a *corvo* [machete] The walls were covered in blood. I was little, I wanted to get between them, but I couldn't do anything for her [...] I couldn't do anything for my mom [...] She went to my grandma's, all cut up. And the next day, my dad went to get her. He always hit her after that... my dad always looked for her. She had family in [city]..., they said they were going to take her away. So she went there, because my dad

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wouldn't leave her alone. When my mom used to come over, my dad wouldn't let me see her. I didn't tell him that I'd see her. I resented my dad and his family. All this was their fault […]

…after all that, they detected a tumor in her head [the mother's] […] she was really badly off; then she got sick in her chest, she got really sick and one day she died […] My dad went on with his life, as usual. Then he married another lady. He has his own life…
Sometimes I get to thinking, if my dad had let me go to… [with the mother], I would never have joined the gang. He didn't let her take me, and here he didn't even treat me like a daughter, it was like I didn't matter to him […] He doesn't visit me [in prison], or my brothers. My sister is the only one, she has my daughters.
Woman Gang-member ◎

This is the type of circumstance that propitiate and facilitate a premature exit out of the home, either to enter the gang or to live with a man and start "a new life," as a couple. Nevertheless, both scenarios wind up harming them and edging them on to making a series of decisions that make the situation worse. Paradoxically, in both scenarios, there is a deepening of the complexity of the situations of dependence and submission to other male figures in their lives.

In the first case —the decision to enter the gang— many girls, adolescents and young women regard it as an alternative, either as a means of escaping violent situations, as symbolic ways of becoming agents that wield some level of power, as means to seeking protection, as forms of exacting revenge, or a combination of some or all of the previous reasons. Nevertheless, the decision to join a gang brings them closer to situations where there is a higher risk of victimization through even more extreme forms, in other violent scenarios, and at the hands of other kinds of victimizers who, as we will find later on, are not restricted to being from the rival gang, and can be found even in the midst of their own group. Still more serious, their entrance to the gang not only brings about situations of victimization, but

also places them in a legitimized position —by the group, and therefore, by the women themselves— to make use of these self same extreme forms of violence.

On the other hand, the other alternative —early exit from the household to start living as a couple— is one of the forms that shows even more clearly the role that men play in the women's progressive involvement in the world of the gang and the use of violence. First of all, the women gang-members "shacked up" and went to live with their first partner at an early age (around the age of fifteen, on average; see Table 4.1). Out of fourteen women gang-members that started living with a man, at least on one occasion, there are seven cases in which the age at which they started living together coincides with the age they entered the gang. Moreover, in some cases, the ages at which they joined the gang coincide with the age at which they went on to share life as a couple, because entering the group happened as part of the process of being the partner of a gang-member. When the women have started —from an early age— a relation with a gang member, it is very probable that she will join the gang, if she was not already part of it when the relationship started. On the other hand, whereas women gang-members cannot have Civilian men partners, men gang-members can have women Civilian partners.

Table 4.1. Ages at which the Women Gang-members interviewed started living together with their first partner, had their first child, entered the gang, and the condition of the first partner

Age at the time of the interview	Marital/ family status	Age when joined the gang	Age when she married (1st. time)/ had first partner	Age when she had first child	First partner's condition
23 years old	Single	16 years old	Stayed single	19 years old	Gang-member
24 years old	Single	12 years old	17 years old	17 years old	Gang-member
24 years old	Married	13 years old	13 years old	Childless	Gang-member
24 years old	Single	12 years old	17 years old	16 years old	Gang-member
25 years old	Single	10 years old	Stayed single	19 years old	Civilian
25 years old	Single	15 years old	20 years old	20 years old	Gang-member
25 years old	Single	12 years old	12 years old	Childless	Gang-member
25 years old	Married	13 years old	16 years old	20 years old	Gang-member
27 years old	Single	13 years old	12 years old	16 years old	Civilian
27 years old	Single	12 years old	14 years old	15 years old	Civilian
28 years old	Single	14 years old	14 years old	18 years old	Gang-member
29 years old	Married	15 years old	14 years old	21 years old	Gang-member
30 years old	Single	11 years old	15 years old	20 years old	Gang-member
30 years old	Single	16 years old	18 years old	19 years old	Gang-member
36 years old	Living together	15-16 years old	15 years old	15 years old	Civilian
39 years old	Single	20 years old	18 years old	22 years old	Gang-member
Averages	**81.3% Single**	**13.7 years old**	**15.4 years old**	**18.4 years old**	**75% were Gang-members**

Source: Preapared by Author.

The section on the reasons for joining and the process of rapprochement to the gang included mention of the fact that none of these women had been forced into making the decision to go on to become part of the group. However, entrance to the gang is heavily affected by the constant presence of gang members in their immediate context, and this includes the boyfriend or partner they were in a relationship with at a young age. This way, many approached the group as a result of an overlap between the progressive construction of affiliation to the gang, and the development of a relatively constant relationship with one of its members.

Then, I started to get along with people in the gang. When I was about 14 years old, I left home with my partner, who was a gangster. He was older than I was. My mom didn't accept that I lived with a gangster. The most difficult thing was to understand the gang thing... One day, I came home all beat up, my lips like this [cut]... and she started to cry: "You jump in?", she asked me. I didn't say anything... "If you're quiet, it means yes", she said.

Woman Gang-member ⚒

I met my first husband because he used to wait for me outside the school... he knew all my moves [laughs]. I was really *bicha* [young]. So he comes, and he promised me the stars... We went out like 3 months as boyfriend and girlfriend and, in the end, I left school with him, uniform and all, I went with him [...] But, from the start, like two months after we were living together, the bitter part started. He was a really *cornudo* [unfaithful], he mistreated me, he hit me. If I was anywhere, he'd come and get me with the guys from the gang. I didn't leave him, I never left him, because I was blind to him [...] After everything that happened with him, I didn't want to believe in men anymore, I didn't accept them, didn't believe them, I was afraid of loving someone again.

Woman Gang-member ✩

The previous fragment shows how, in a majority of cases, narrating their life experience as a couple, they repeatedly show how they went from "initial" violent scenarios, to abusive relationships with partners that are themselves already immersed in violence, and in some cases, in criminal situations. This follows a gradual trajectory that has also been found in other studies (Gilfus, 2002; Miller, 2001).

When we analyze the interview fragments that have to do with the way they characterize their life as a couple, and going over the experiences that the majority had with one or more partners (almost all of them had had more than one sentimental partner), the balance tips heavily on the negative side. They do not always catalog it this way, in a direct way. Nevertheless, on other occasions, particularly because they are not attached to the partner being discussed, they give the relationship a negative assessment. Looking at each of the interviews, and taking

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stock of the characteristics that the women commented on the relationships, there appear reiterated episodes in which jealousy, infidelity, humiliation, excessive substance consumption and different sorts of abuse, are a constant (see Insert 4.1).

> He smoked rock [crack], and when he was high on it, he acted different… he was aggressive […] He did rock, hemp, everything… it got to the point that he beat me […] One day, I found him with the pipe and all, I asked him what he was doing, he got all worked up, maybe he thought I was going to take away the drugs, and he pushed me: "leave me alone, 'cause this is my *vacil* [my fun/my thing]", he said. Me, at that moment, I just remembered what my dad and my mom had gone through […] When he started to hit me, I felt like I was going through the same thing as my parents, for me, that was a trauma […] He'd tied me up, he used to hit me, he put the fear in me, that if I double crossed him, if I tried to fool him, he used to say, he'd kill me.
> Woman Gang-member ♣

> Thirteen years old… I met him when I was 13 years old. But he left me […], he liked to drink with them [the gang members]. He'd come back all drunk and drugged up to mess around at the house. Sometimes, I'd say: "why do you do that?" I asked him if he had another woman, and he used to hit me, and I used to let him; at first, I let him […] Once, he pushed me and hit me against a wall, and I got the *corvo* [machete] and I told him if he lay a hand on me again he'd better kill me or I'd kill him […] He told me to get out… You know? I used to cry over him, not out of love, or because I loved him, but I didn't want to go back on the street… When we used to fight, I'd think: "what if I leave him?, now I have a roof that I never had before, I'm going to lose it"… that's what I was afraid of.
> Woman Gang-member ♠

> When we started living together, we went to live at his mother's. I thought I was going to live in a home, like I'd dreamed… but I was wrong, 'cause he was only good for having sex, but besides that, nothing… I took care of everybody's expenses […] I couldn't find a job, I started that way, to earn a living straight, I was selling on the streets with the kid [her child] […] His mother would wash and iron…, but him, he's an addict…, he used to bet I couldn't or

didn't want to leave the house... and I... I put up with everything for that roof, for a blanket, because I didn't want to go back out on the street.

Woman Gang-member ❃

With my child's dad [she got along] really badly... he used to hit me... he used to threaten me... he'd put the gun to my head, and he'd say that if I ever escaped, if it ever occurred to me to go with another guy, he'd kill me... that, I had to either be with him or with nobody [...] Yeap, he was a gangster.

Woman Gang-member ☆

Many of these narratives do not differ substantially from the experiences of family abuse and violence that many of the women suffer around the country. To make things worse, added to this, their partners are men that are part of a group that legitimizes the use of violence and reproduces, at a micro level (in the group) and with great precision, the conceptions and differential and discriminatory treatment of women which, at a macro level, society gives them.

Insert 4.1
One of the couples, of one of the Women Gang-members

At first, we got along fine, I used to feel he loved me, he pampered me, he made the other homeboys respect me; I felt protected by him [...] He was really jealous, he wouldn't let me talk with the homeboys, because of things that had happened to him, he knew what they were like...

... he [her partner] got busted, they took him to jail, he was about 17... he didn't change... When he left, he came back [after a while] with someone [another woman], and he went to live in the same house I was staying at. At first, [when he was taken to jail] I went looking for him and I couldn't find him, until one day, because I had this street sale of *pastelitos* and *yuca frita* [traditional food] there, so one day, I see him go by hand-in-hand with a woman, in the street... I just froze. Suddenly, he came up, he introduced his family and his sister to her, and suddenly he talked to me and introduced the woman to me, telling her: "This is a homegirl, she's one *fucking good*

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element…" Look, I broke down and cried, and I asked him: "Why?", I asked him… I cried to him, I asked him why he did this. And he answered: "It's 'cause the same thing, it gets old…" I, after that, I got it, like, I reacted… I got all my courage up, and I left him. It hurt, he was everything to me, he was like my God.

From then on, I started to feel something about men. I have something in my mind that I can't understand… Men are like a monster, that destroys us women…

[…] After that, I started going out with several, I didn't give myself time to look at life differently… I made them feel and believe they were going to be loved, I'd get close, make them fall in love with me, just to touch their ego… I went to bed with them, and when it finished, I'd say: "You're not man enough for me", just to touch their ego. It's a negative idea […]

I had a really fast sexual life, because of that idea I had of getting back at them and touching their ego, I enjoyed making them feel bad, that they fell in love with me and, suddenly, I'd go with their best friend… As far as I was concerned, they were all going to pay, for what one had done…

Another way that men "show up" on the way to violence and crime is precisely by introducing women to committing crime. In general terms, and in the cases of the women who are not gang-members, several authors sustain that the relationships with men, either in marriage, as siblings, or maternal, are at the foundation of the transgression (Lagarde in Rodríguez, 2004; Núñez, 2004). As an example of this link, and based on data from different countries across Latin America, these authors sustain that many women who are jailed for health crimes, got involved in drugs by being wives, partners or relatives of drug-dealers. Likewise, they state that the role of women in the drug-trafficking circles on many occasions corresponds to the last link (the delivery of substances to consumers). As they are the ones that move the drug, and as they are the most visible part of the chain, they run the greatest risk of being arrested. This is often the case of women called "related" to the gang, who collaborate

without having become an organic part of the group, as a result of the ties they have with one or more of its members (partner, children, brothers). The role of men in the criminal history of women was also highlighted in the interview with authorities at the Salvadoran penitentiary system; one woman official drew attention to this specifically:

> … [women in general] face situations lived with a man. They get involved in delinquent acts because there is a delinquent man behind it. They always make reference to a man in their stories […] Most of the women have to face it [their situation] alone, and with drugs it is easier and faster: "I don't have to leave my children alone, with one 'job', I've got enough for the month".
> Official at DGCP (General Office of Penitentiary Centers)

In the case of the women who are in the gang, the issue becomes more complex because, although there are cases like the previous one, where many are linked to these crimes through participation in small-time drug dealing[90] (often with their partner), this situation brings on additional conflicts with local drug-dealers over territorial control, as the women themselves point out. On the other hand, carrying out these illicit activities is not supposed to take away time from the rest of the activities and responsibilities they have in the gang. Rodríguez (2004) states that, in general terms, there are two kinds of women tied to drug dealing: the ones that commit crimes along with men, and women constrained to do a crime by the man who has been jailed, particularly those that deal drugs in prison, by virtue of being wives or partners of the drug-dealers. In the case of the women gang-members, both possibilities apply. This winds up speeding up —along with the rest of the delinquent activities committed within the group dynamics— their involvement in crime.

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[90] See sections 4.4.1. and 4.4.2. on responsibilities and functions, and on helping the gang, respectively.

While we were together, I learned to steal. At first, I didn't have the courage because I used to say: "this thing that I'm doing, maybe someone is going to do it to my aunt", 'cause I think that "you get what you deserve"; and I could wind up paying back through my family. Little by little, we started getting things. He also stole, he was the best at it in the neighborhood. But when he fell back into drugs, he'd sell everything [...] I, even, I started sniffing glue. I told him I was going to sniff glue to feel what he was feeling; him with the *rock* and me with the glue, we went around like we were crazy, we felt courage to do things.

Woman Gang-member ♣

To look for a job, I went to the Free Zone, but they saw my tattoos and they fired me. The company was [...] and I asked for an opportunity, finally, they put me on trial for a month: if I cut it, they told me I was going to stay [...] My live-in partner also started working there in construction, in the same zone. But he would go stealing in the afternoons: "Be careful," I told him. One day, he robbed a police officer in Civilian clothes, they shot him... The other guy got away, but my partner got a bullet in the leg. They took him to the hospital and then to *Mariona*[91]. I was already pregnant with the other [second] girl. His family didn't help him out, and me, with the little girl, I couldn't help him on my wages. There, in *Mariona*, there were these Civilians, [...] and he [her partner] had problems with them... he owed them money but, how could we pay them? [...] In order to help him, I started running drugs; I used to take him the drugs. And one those times they caught me and I wound up here in jail; I lost my job and my sister looks after my daughters.

Woman Gang-member ◎

This section looked at the progressive involvement in delinquent activities and violence which result from their relationships with partners who are already members of the gangs. Nevertheless, these situations also happen as part of these women's daily experiences as members of a group where violence is the currency for day-to-day exchanges. The following sections will look at the ways these women go on to exercise their role and new identity as members of their gang.

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[91] *"La Esperanza"* Penitentiary Institution, known as *"Mariona."*

4.4. Responsibilities, Functions and Discrimination in the Gang

In order to access the women's point of view on their roles within the gang, questions were included regarding their responsibilities, their functions, and their experiences as members of the group. These groups operate under rationales that are marked by male chauvinist attitudes and androcentric conceptions, in which the position a woman can play in the activities and organization of the group is mediated by the possibilities that she may have of demonstrating that she "measures up to" the expectations of the gang. Therefore, it is interesting to analyze their role within the gang, the characteristics of their participation, and their margins of influence in the group decision making process.

4.4.1. Responsibilities and Functions

Although some were reluctant to enter into much detail regarding their activities and responsibilities in the gang, the information gleaned in the interviews shows that in the case of all women, participation in the gang was direct, active, and varied. They were involved to an important degree in different group activities and at different levels, with some individual variations. Nevertheless, this process of participation in a leading role does not come about immediately.

An issue that stands out initially is that, at first, they carry out more operative kind of work. Then, as they gain increasingly greater levels of group trust, and they demonstrate greater skills —which are measured by the level of daring shown while participating in the gang's violent dynamics, the activities that they participate in tend to have a more strategic character. Just as status or "reputation" is constructed step by step, in the same manner, the kinds of functions and responsibilities increase, as the woman opens up spaces and gains a position in the group. The merits of the members —among them the women— are

measured by their performance in activities that make it possible for the gang to generate resources and gain benefits; that is, if they do what the group demands of them, and they do it right.

> Because of my personality and my actions [she gained respect]. I always did what had to be done. And with personality, you go as far as you let yourself. If I got respect, it's because I earned it [...] I've behaved well in the gang. I've been good at doing the bad things; maybe not at the good things, but at the bad things, I have. You reap what you sow. In the gang, I've got my respect.
>
> Woman Gang-member ♕

> ... [the responsibilities] increase over time, because when you earn trust, they've got you as a good homegirl. "That one *stands nice, you can see the picture*," it means, that you're serious, that you act serious, and that makes them give you more responsibilities [...] It's 'cause you've got to earn respect with them [...] It means that, to get somewhere, you have to climb a lot of stairs.
>
> Woman Gang-member ♣

> We grow because maybe you do something, and everybody knows about it... "you're so-and-so from this *clique*, I've heard of you". If you're good, it gets around... What's good for us is bad, right?... You get more responsibilities.
>
> Woman Gang-member ⚷

> When I didn't have any color with the cops [the cops had not identified her], I used to go drop off food at jail, I used to get money for the coffins for the deceased, I used to go to the coroner's office, I used to move *mazos* [guns] from one place to another [...] you can do things, run things, people, draw coordinates [give orders]... but with more *clecha* [capacity], with more schooling...
>
> Woman Gang-member ♠

Talking about this issue of their participation lead to the revelation of a series of contradictions in their narratives. So, a second relevant point was that, in terms of their responsibilities or functions in the group, the responses indicate that the women carry out activities that pertain to the gang (that

imply an active participation in the gang dynamics, and, even, in the group's criminal economic activities), as well as tasks that, according to the traditional view that is prevalent in Salvadoran society, pertain to the roles that a woman must fulfill: domestic chores, and care for the members of the gang. Curiously, the latter tasks are not usually taken up by the men-members, despite the notions of "equality between the members" that the gang discourse proclaims. So it would seem that —particularly in those cases in which women have reached a certain level and status in the gang, having earned the "necessary merits" to do so, some of their activities and responsibilities do not differ much with regards to the men. However, these tasks tend to be carried out in combination with and parallel to other that are along the more traditional order of things, both domestic (cooking, washing and ironing), and as the group *caretaker* (drop off food at jail when a fellow-gang-member has been arrested, for example).

Whereas there was argumentation, put forth by more than one of them, that there were activities that were easier for a woman to do given that there were fewer chances of being caught, because they were not identified by the authorities as criminal suspects, or simply because they did not have an arrest warrants out for them, some did state that many men refused to do these tasks, not really for reasons of safety, but rather, due to the simple fact that they just did not feel like doing them. Therefore, the resistance of the majority of men to carrying out certain tasks demanded, up to a point, that women assume them. This, according to some, due to the "sensibility" that women have.

> Me, in the group, I was kind of everyone's mother: I washed for them, ironed for them, cooked for them, organized food packages for them. I had to look after them, even if I was younger than some of them […] I grew up around homeboys; in the kitchen I was their mama, out of the kitchen, I was their *homito*[92]. I had to be with all of them, do the same thing.
>
> Woman Gang-member ♣

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[92] An affectionate term that is used in reference to their gang-partners (*homeboys*).

When there's just one woman [in the clique], they take care of you more, they're on the lookout to make sure no one hurts you, they ask you out… but it's difficult [to join a group of men] because they want the women to do things all the time [domestic chores]… at the *Destroyer*, I had to cook, wash, drop food off at jail, because they couldn't go 'cause a lot of them have arrest warrants, and even if they could, they wouldn't go […] or, sometimes, when we'd cook, it was my turn, but I'd make them: "Let's see, who's gonna help out?"
Woman Gang-member ✵

Sometimes the men are the least willing to do this [go to jail to drop off food], but I felt sorry for them [the gang-partners who were in jail]… I used to say "if I don't go, nobody's gonna go". I think that, in this case, it is because we are women, we have like more sensibility, because a man could say: "let that *sonuvabitch* go hungry, how come he went and did something stupid…", but us, since we feel sorry… but no, actually, all of them, there's like a great big brotherhood… In the gang there are a lot of sick people, people in trouble, and they have everyone's moral support, and it doesn't matter if they're men or women.
Woman Gang-member ♠

Therefore, these other roles that a woman has in the gang —which have more to do with the traditional view that the group has of women— are not activities that lend an "added value" to the construction of their reputation, nor are these things that make them more capable of ascending within the gang. Therefore, only part of their tasks (direct participation in activities that generate resources or benefits for the gang) tend to be taken into account when assessing their performance and capacity, which renders a great deal of the other activities they carry out invisible.

This mix of activities would indicate that, just as is often the case with women in patriarchal societies, the women gang-members have to fulfill several functions in the group. On the one hand, they have to contribute to making the group dynamics work and help out in the group's criminal economy;

on the other, they have to serve and take care of domestic chores in the gang's collective spaces. So it can be perceived that, although many women do not play a subsidiary role in the gang (or its dynamics, or the use of violence), neither are they able to liberate themselves of the exercise of traditional roles; thus, they wind up finding themselves needing to divide their time and capacities among the different responsibilities they carry.

In this regard, they were asked about their time, whether a woman can work while she is in the gang. Practically unanimously, they all answered yes. They said that many had had "legal jobs" (usually at informal commerce), at times accompanied by criminal activities. Nevertheless, among the conditions that they had been given in order to be able to hold a job, they stated that they had been forbidden to do so in the rival gang's territory, and the authorization was contingent on it not interfering with the responsibilities they had toward the gang.

> Yes, you can work [...], but it's all the same, even if you work, there's the obligations, you have to fulfill them. That's why I didn't like working, because it was no use, because I had to fulfill my obligations all the same at night, so it was better not to work.
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> Woman Gang-member ♋

The ones that were mothers had an added function. Aside from doing their part and fulfilling the obligations with the gang, they also had to take care of their home and children; in many cases, this was done without any help from their partner, the father of the children, or from the family, except, at most, help from the gang. Actually, due to the very criminal dynamic of the group's activities, due to the tattoos that many wore in visible places, due to their own limitations in terms of education and/or training, the possibilities of accessing a job in the legal market were minimal, or were unattractive to them in economic terms. Thus, in many cases, aside from informal commerce, many dealt drugs. This business allowed them to generate greater

levels of income in a shorter span of time, often without having to travel great distances, or even, without having to leave the home at all.

> I have never liked wanting anything. I had a drug *trance* [sales point]; but the *transeros* [pushers/drug dealers] stopped me cold [placed obstacles on her business]… But I had to see the way to get my *morro* [son] ahead.
>
> Woman Gang-member ✳

> I *renteaba*, that is, I asked for [protection] money [racketeering]. I also had my thing [*trance*], I sold drugs […] I was working for a while [while already in the gang]. I had the two babies, they didn't have anything, my house had burned down, the money (I had some three thousand dollars), the drugs, everything…I had to work. It's hard working, the hardest thing that can be. I used to get up at 5, got back at 7-8 at night; practically didn't see my babies […] I sold things at a stall: shoes, slippers, juice, everything.
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> Woman Gang-member ꧂

The gang operates under patriarchal and risk-assessment logic, and both have an influence at the moment of assigning tasks to the members. As for the first, it is clear that the gang reproduces —at times, with greater intensity— the stereotypical visions of the roles of women maintained by society. On this basis they are often assigned (and they often take on) additional tasks, over and above the responsibilities that they have to fulfill as members of the gang. In terms of the logic of risk assessment, given that many of the men are restricted in terms of their ability to travel, as they are already identified by the law, collaboration with the women became indispensable in order to carry out certain activities that need a more anonymous profile to be able to be completed. However, these tasks were not risk-free, and were added to the activities and responsibilities that the women had already been assigned, inside and out of the gang.

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4.4.2. Helping the Gang

As a group the gang has a collective fund that is assigned to cover expenses that are to help to maintain and carry out their activities: for purchasing weapons, guaranteeing the subsistence of its members, and, in recent years, paying for the expenses of lawyers who handle the cases of the heads, leaders or members who are imprisoned in different penitentiaries, or paying for the expenses of the needs of gang members who are in prison, or that of their families. These funds are collected periodically from the members, as a form of "tax" that each one has to provide the group with. This contribution that the members make to the gang is done, fundamentally, through illicit activities such as robbery, drug-dealing and, in recent years, through extortions.

The women, at least those who wanted to talk about this issue, were not exempt from carrying out these activities. In this regard, it is important to mention that many of these women had already been in prison for quite some time at the time of this interview[93]. In this sense, the information that is available responds to the gang dynamics at the moment these women were arrested, which have changed over time. Actually, some of the women who have been in custody longer allude to these changes that the gang has experienced in order to obtain economic resources, both in the amount required, as well as the means currently used.

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[93] Actually, based on calculations made with the information provided regarding the amount of time they had been in prison (they generally gave quite precise information as to years and months), an estimate of the year they had been arrested and/or passed into the system: half of them had been arrested during the years the hard-line *Mano Dura* policies were enforced from 2003 to 2006. Three of them had been arrested before 2003; four of them were arrested between 2007 and 2008, and one of the respondents did not provide this information.

I used to ask for *renta* [racketeering/"protection" money] from … It's just that it didn't used to be like it is now, they weren't extortions, they were "rental fees", and it wasn't an obligation; we'd ask for like 10 *Colones*[94], and if they didn't have it, we'd ask for whatever. I asked for money, and a box of sodas… It's just that, if you didn't want to steal, you could ask for *renta*. Today, today it's different. Now it really is extortion, thousands [of dollars], it didn't used to be like that.

Woman Gang-member ✃

Even though the amount and the frequency of their economic contribution varied, the information given confirms that the members had to contribute money to their gang in a highly regular and controlled manner. As for the economic contribution of the women, some did not want to get into details about this issue. One declared that, at times when she could not contribute to the group because she was in a difficult economic situation —particularly when she had to support her children— she requested economic assistance of the gang.

Well, they didn't ask me for money… "I have my daughter", I told them, "I'm not going to give you any, in fact, you have to help me", and the *palabrero* [leader] said that they would help me.

Woman Gang-member ◉

Although very few women gang-members gave detailed information about the support they received from their gang while they had been outside of prison, three of them declared that the gang had helped them economically, and the three of them were mothers. So it seems that, under certain conditions, the gang can "exonerate" some women from payment of *renta*. However, there is not enough information to deduce the other conditions in which the gang can exonerate one of its members from this responsibility, neither is it possible to establish whether allowing some mothers and heads-of-family to abstain from contributing economically to the group is a general policy.

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[94] The exchange rate that is currently enforced is 8.75 *Colones* for 1 US dollar.

Although, along the lines of the way the group functions, the level of support probably depends on the position of the woman in the gang, as well as the level of organization and resources in the *clique*, which is the extended mechanism for economic support around the gang, where women play an active role.

4.4.3. Leadership and Decision Making

The fact that some women do not have subsidiary roles in the gang in terms of their level of participation, their activities and responsibilities, is not necessarily to say that their leadership can have the same impact, or that they can achieve the same levels of influence as men in the decision making process.

The issue of leadership and decision making within the gang is a topic that has been traditionally difficult to approach in previous studies. On most occasions, gang members tend to hold back details about this issue, inasmuch as talking about it presupposes giving an account of the existence of defined structure and leaderships. And this implies giving information that they consider confidential and private to the group. Above all, doing so sheds light on the clear contradictions between the discourse on equality and brotherhood that the members generally expound, and the real situation in which not all members of the gang are so equal. In the case of the women, the self same equality discourse showed up reiteratively in some of the interviews, with a greater emphasis in the discourse of active women gang-members, who refused to go into the issue of leadership, the differences that are observed and/or experienced between men and women, or their own function within the gang.

For the purposes of this study, it is interesting to talk about the ways in which the respondents perceive equality —or inequality— from two approaches: equality among the gang members in general; and regarding the relation between men and women in particular. In this regard, the topic of equality among members is an issue that is defended and

sustained. However, even when important argumentation efforts are made, the contradictions tend to be very evident when trying to explain the existence in the gang of equal levels of respect and value of women when compared to the men.

> So, let's say, we're all equal, we all have a voice and vote, no one is more than anyone else, but let's say, when there's a meeting, there's a speaker. A decision, we all make it, it's not just one that's going to come and tell us... no, right? Capacity, we've all got it. At times it's the way of thinking, we can't have someone there that's going to clash with us, but we need someone who thinks about what is good for everybody.
> Woman Gang-member ⚷

> Yeah, we all have a voice and a vote... we all have the same rights, and just because someone's a woman she's not gonna be less... it's just that the *palabrero*, he doesn't decide by himself [...] Yeah, almost always, the *palabreros* are men...
> Woman Gang-member ⚔

These two examples show that the discourse of equality is not very sustainable, given that they not only acknowledge the existence of leadership positions[95] among them, but they also tend to be concentrated, at the highest levels, in the hands of men. However, these difficulties and dissonances regarding the "relative" equality within the gang are not shared by all the women. Over half of the respondents are clear on this: their opinion is that a woman does not have the same level of influence in making decisions as a man does. In the case of the rest of the respondents, there is only a minority that considers that women and men have the same level of power within the gang. Actually, whereas all of them admitted there are women in leadership roles (called *palabreras*), many recognized that, in fact, they do not usually have the same amount of power that

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[95] In the gang, this kind of leader is called *palabreros*, and function at the level of the *clique,* and in some cases, have served as such even at the national level, and there may be at both levels.

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men do, and their jurisdiction tends to be circumscribed to the women, and not without some difficulties.

The *palabrera* [woman in a leadership role] had a voice and vote with the homegirls, but they didn't get the same value as a *palabrero's* [man in leadership role]… it's just that, like, we women are under the *palabrera*, but she answers to her *palabrero*, and this *palabrero* answers to another, and like that…
Woman Gang-member ♣

In the gang, we all have the same value… yes, there is a *palabrera* […], but she is under the orders of a man… she, really, won her status, she's really serious. She was a *palabrera* only to the women… but I, I practically didn't pay any attention to her, because I'm going to respect my *palabrero*… I don't know, I liked the man to be in charge…
Woman Gang-member ଓ

I only saw one [*palabrera*], but it didn't work really well, because she was female they didn't want to pay attention to what the female says…
Woman Gang-member ♦

Yeah, at times, a woman stands up better [is braver, behaves better]. The guys didn't like it when a woman would tell them that this-and-that has to be done… I always talked straight [said things clearly] and they didn't like that…
Woman Gang-member ✂

Among the women who participated in the study, some had occupied important positions in the leadership of their respective gangs. Others did not wish to go into much detail about their own function and position in the *clique* or in their gang. However, the information gleaned from the interviews indicates that the majority had a significant participation and position in the gang. This was possible because, among the women who were interviewed, there were those who had a long career in their respective groups (veterans). The active women gang-members were more reticent to provide information in this

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regard, which is due to the fact that the issue of leadership, as mentioned previously, is a sensitive topic in the gang.

In any case, it is noteworthy that, although in both *Mara Salvatrucha* and the *Barrio 18* gang, women can achieve a leadership role and act as "spokespersons" of their respective *clique* or gang, many times the obstacles come not only from the men within the group, but also from other women, who, as seen in one of the statements, would rather be under the command of a man. Therefore, male-chauvinist attitudes and discrimination are not exclusive to the men gang-members, as they have their counterpart in the women, just like in society at large. This kind of strategy, as mentioned before, is also one of the mechanisms women use individually, when faced with the disadvantageous situation regarding the group of men. By way of mechanisms of social comparison, and faced with an "order of things" (in this case, the group's hierarchical structure) which the women themselves conceive as natural and legitimate (that men have an advantageous position over them), they look to get closer to them, in order to improve their own position within the group and affirm their own identity. In this sense, they adopt strategies of comparison with other individuals in their own group (in this case, the other women) who are favored less in certain dimensions of comparison (Bourhis, Gagnon and Moïse, 1996; Tajfel and Turner, 1979).

Throughout the conversations held with these women, it was possible to identify the existence of frictions and competitive attitudes between the women of a *clique* or gang, to the point that many preferred to interact with or be directed by men. While the women believe they are equal to men or that they can carry out the same activities as men, they also share —by virtue of the comparison strategies noted— the same distrust that many men have of women, and at times question whether they actually have the same capacities.

In the clique there were over 40 homeboys, and just 2 women, that's all... Then, the group of women started to grow, we got to be about 12 women. But I got along better with the homeboys because there is always this tendency in the girls of being like little tattle-tale kids...

Woman Gang-member ♓

There were like three females in the clique, and some 25 males. In several cliques there was only one [woman], it's just that females are more gossipy than males...

Woman Gang-member ⬤

Few of the women interviewed declared that a woman gang-member could enjoy the same respect and power as the men. Among them, there were two women who had clearly exercised a leadership position. Both noted that they had been respected in the gang, and that their experience made it possible for them to truthfully evaluate the possibility of accessing a position of power. However, throughout their personal narratives, it also became clear that achieving that position and obtaining the level of respect that they had gotten, was in no way easy. At times, this position highlighted their role as a provider and caretaker for their gang, at times even playing the role of mother for the other members of the group. Even these women, with more advantageous positions with regards others in the group, had men as leaders, whose direction they had to follow and make others abide by.

My responsibilities were to take care of the *hainas'* [homegirls] welfare. I looked at them like people, I'd tell them they had to fight, I wanted to train them, I wanted to be like a mother... If they razzed them because they were *marquiando* [making mistakes], I would be tough with them, but I would also listen to them... I didn't need to shout at them, because I had their respect, because respect is not the same thing as fear [...]
... men had to respect me, and respect my word [...] and it's that they had to do it because they knew if they didn't, I'd tell, and I'd tell way up on top... they couldn't do anything to me, because if they did anything to me, if they killed me, they had to carry that.

Woman Gang-member ✳

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Nevertheless, even the ones that came to have that position in the gang noted that "obedience" of the members could also be mediated not just by submission to their orders, but by the consequences that lack of respect shown to them could imply for the member, in the face of the upper echelons of the gang. The fact of having established that there are women that can become *palabreras*, leads to the question about the degree to which the gang respects "their word," or whether, rather, despite the merits these women might have earned within the group, their possibilities of holding and wielding power were always going to come up against a ceiling, that is not the same as in the case of the male leadership. It would seem, based on this information and with upcoming data, that in their case, power has very circumscribed boundaries.

4.4.4. Similarities, Differences and Discrimination

Despite the entrenched discourse about equality between all the gang members, which many of the women made recourse to in order to affirm their sense of belonging to the group, many also came to the conclusion that there were things that men and women did differently. In some cases, they were able to point out very specific instances, that affected them within the group. Furthermore, when analyzing the lives of the women in the gang, the starting point is a very concrete issue: their actions cannot be assessed outside the complex dynamics and group processes in which they are immersed.

Assuming that the women's responses and their active participation in the violence are, on the one hand, expressions of "antisocial personalities" or, on the other hand, "mere reactions to their history of victimization" is to restrict the reading and interpretation of their actions to endogenous and reactive aspects, putting aside the real and concrete meaning of the use of violence and the possibilities that it affords them in the gang. In this sense, it is worthwhile for us to highlight the differences as well as the similarities women may have with regards to their

male group partners, in terms of their actions. In other words, even with the differences and insurmountable power-imbalances which have been alluded to, the women carry out important activities, they are active participants, and, once inside the gang, they exercise a lot of the violence as part of the internal dynamics.

This in turn, although it has its own complex explanations within the group dynamics, is a similarity with regard to the rest of their male partners that is necessary to highlight. In this sense, these women should not only be positioned as victims of external circumstances, or only as people who use violence for the sheer pleasure of doing so. They use it because the group promotes and imposes its use on them, as a medium to exercise influence and power over others —inside and outside the gang. They use it because it is a way to balance power —particularly if it can be accessed by way of aggressiveness; because it is a survival strategy and because in terms of their role as group members, they are not different from their gang-partners. Accordingly, some of the dynamics of the actions the women are involved in and participate in cannot be solely or necessarily explained based on gender, but rather by practical aspects tied to the gang dynamics (Cyr and Decker, 2003). In their own words, some of them identified it as follows:

[Are there differences between men and women in the gang?] Because of my way of being, my clothes, I could enter places. They even fell in love with me, ha-ha-ha-ha… But, it isn't the same with men, they [the police] just lift up their shirt for the men and they'll take them away. Now, something like the strength of a man, the physical strength, yeah… but in the mind, there are no differences between men and women, but strength, that can't be denied. Sometimes, there are things that they have to do because we [women] can't risk it either. Depends on who sees it, who does it. For example, I have to do something, so I do my thing with my toy [weapon], these are things you really have to think through, you think them through so you don't fail. Or I'm going to do it because I can get in, and there's one waiting for someone to give it to him [the weapon]. Sometimes, they are used to us "packing it" [carrying

the gun], but if we ask for our rights, we also have to come through. If I make a mistake, I can't say "don't hit me 'cause I'm a woman," I can't say no, if you have to take care of a place. I assume it, and if I make a mistake, I face up to it.

Sometimes, they forgive you.

Woman Gang-member ⊷

Despite the fact that some insist that there are no differences between men and women, most say that there actually are. Among those who share this opinion are both active and non-active women gang-members, as well as women from either gang.

They look down on females, because of the fact that we are females, because they see us as defenseless, but there are some who get on them, and they don't like that.

Woman Gang-member ⬦

Again, this does not mean that the exercise of violence has generalized effects, or that there are no important dissonances. What other issues differentiate women and men in the gang, from the perspective of the women? In the first place, one issue that was frequently noted were differences in terms of access to certain spaces and the separation of men and women in terms of some activities. The exclusion of women in certain meetings seems to be very generalized, and this in some way confirms the way they see men.

There were times that the *palabreros* wouldn't let us be at the meetings that were for the men, they kept us apart, or they'd put us on guard to make sure people wouldn't tell… Women had value, but not that much importance, "she's a homegirl," they'd say… but a lot of them don't see that we are able to do things, because they think that we are supposed to be at home, washing, ironing, doing all those things.

Woman Gang-member ♣

There are [differences between men and women], uh-huh! For example, when sometimes they go on missions and they don't let us go… they don't let us be

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part of rituals, you know, sometimes, just among the *palabreros* they made pacts… for example […] they would tell us "the *hainas*, out", that because we were women, we couldn't be there.
Woman Gang-member ∽

Then, from the start, they'd tell me: "Get out of the car" when they were going to do a *pegue* [hit]… they doubted I was going to be capable, because a lot of them [women] would freeze up.
Woman Gang-member ⋊

Some noted that participation in certain activities was differential; however, it is difficult to determine the degree of generalization of this differentiation, given that many times it also depends on the dynamics within the *clique* or cell that they belong to, which also has certain autonomy regarding the activities its members carry out. As noted in the section on responsibilities, the women have direct participation in the principal activities that have to do with the dynamics and the criminal economy of the gang, but there are also cases in which this involvement is differential, depending on the *clique* and the level of experience and the position of the woman in the gang. It could be hypothesized that a woman's lack of experience probably is not only derived from the amount of time she may have been in the gang, but rather due to the fact that she has been excluded from certain activities. Nevertheless, in this regard it is important to reiterate that the women respondents could be considered "veterans" of their gangs. Therefore, this situation can be different in the case of the ones that are considered beginners, and there is no information about them in this study.

Some also declared that the gangs use women more often for certain activities related to transporting weapons or drugs. These activities, which involve mobilization outside the zone or the territory of the *clique*, were carried out by the women when they had less "color" (they had not been identified by- or on file with the police), or in cases where the risk of being arrested was less for a woman than for a man.

Because I am a woman, they would give me the guns, they don't usually check a woman. I walked on one side of the sidewalk, and they were on the other side.
Woman Gang-member ◉

This confirms the idea that was stated previously, that task assignment in the gang at times follows a risk-assessment logic, and it is not in all cases related to a discriminatory attitude towards women. Now, whereas some differences can be found under this rationale, there are others that can hardly be attributed to it.

Nevertheless, there are certain differences between men and women that cannot be understood outside the general context of the traditional division of tasks and roles, as well as a vision of women's subordination, in a society that is dominated by male-chauvinist constructions. For example, and returning to what had previously been presented in the section on responsibilities and functions, women are the ones left in charge of domestic chores in collective gang areas (the *Destroyer*), aside from assuming the role of *caretaker* of the group (going to jail or penitentiaries, when this was admitted).

Another inequality that was noted in several interviews, and which cannot be attributed to risk assessment but rather to gender issues, is that women gang-members cannot —by gang decree— have *Civilians* (non-gang members) as partners. That is, their partner has to be a gang-member, ideally in her same *clique*. Contrarily, men have the liberty to choose a partner inside and outside the gang. As some of the women pointed out, in fact, often the gang-members prefer being with a "*Civilian* woman". This means that for some of the men-gang-members, the women-gang-members do not fit their *macho* preconceptions of what a woman ought to be and how she is supposed to behave; or simply, their options to chose a partner can go beyond the boundaries of the group.

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They don't get punished for hanging out with another [being with another woman], but if we go out with someone, we get it… They like us to stand up, to put ourselves at their level so they can see… I tell them: "What's the matter? We both carry the number [the number that represents the gang], mine is worth as much as yours"… but the decisions are not the same… If they shoot down a homegirl, he can run away and say "She got shot for being stupid." But if they get shot, and we run, they call us "fagots" [coward]… There's always inequality.

Woman Gang-member ♣

I got pregnant with a Civilian, and that's a big mark [mistake]… They can have Civilian women, but we, because of the tattoos, we can't… I mean […] we can't let someone who isn't in the gang mix in…

Woman Gang-member ✹

The way I see it, women are not worth the same in the gang. If you pay attention, most of the gangsters are with Civilians. They only use homegirls for a moment, but not to take care of them… that is why you have to earn respect, because the man goes only as far as you let him; later, if you let them, you're their ball if you let yourself be touched.

Woman Gang-member ☙

So, for a woman, being with a *Civilian* can stir up trouble in her gang. Furthermore, some of them mentioned that their partner had to be in the same clique, and that they had to ask for permission to be with someone from a different clique. Nevertheless, the restriction to the clique does not appear to be a general rule, therefore this may depend on each group, and the relations between groups. As the woman gang-members themselves indicate, in very clear terms, this rule is interpreted as a reflection of macho attitude among the men gang-members. Not far removed from this rule and this self-same macho attitude is the fact that not only their liberty to choose the person who they want as a partner is restricted, but also their freedom of movement, of going out alone, of autonomy. Thus, the woman gang-member is not only a member of the group, she becomes its property, by the effect of the groups' power over her. No doubt this attitude is not exclusive to the

gang, at any rate it reflects a general attitude in Salvadoran society, that is dominated by sexist views and notions on the situation, the options and possibilities of women.

In the case of the gangs, this attitude is also based on a strong desire for control in the men members, and a strong dose of suspiciousness and mistrust toward the members in general, and the women in particular. Even so, the need for control, from the point of view of the women, does not apply to the same degree to the men. According to them, men gang-members are at liberty to do what they like. However, perhaps they overlook the fact that the gang, in general, has *differential* control mechanisms for its members. In this case, the restriction of many of their rights, in contrast with the limitations that can be imposed on men, is a part of this differential exercise of power that has already been mentioned, because, in the end, the women are a minority in the group.

> A man can go mess around at a Night Club, the *hainas* [women] can't... because you have to take care of your reputation, you can't *botar el plante* [look bad] like that, you can't put yourself on the same level, getting all wasted [drunk]. They don't... it's just that we have to watch the way we look [their image], for ourselves and for the neighborhood.
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> Woman Gang-member ❇

> When we go to a disco, we have to go with them, because sometimes we do things that you aren't supposed to, and sometimes they watch us to see what we do... [...] I felt really boxed in, because... I couldn't do what I wanted... because [they watch women] so that they don't do something that is not allowed. Sometimes they make things up, right, they make up stories about you [libel]... once they said that I was going out with a guy from the rival [gang] but, how was I going to do something like that?? But if someone is going with you, it's not so easy to make things up... And if someone from the rivals grabs you, they're there to help you out... [...] No, they [the men] are not watched the same way.
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> Woman Gang-member ⬦

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Some of the women perceive this control that is exercised by the men, as a kind of protection towards them; something that, to a certain degree, makes them legitimize it. Some of them perceive it as something positive, in that, on the one hand, they obtain some kind of protection, and on the other, this guards them from false accusations or untrue rumors before the rest of the group. Aside from the general mistrust of women by men in the gang, this issue also reflects the fact that the women themselves have accepted and adopted this discourse and the perception that they are gossipy, tattlers and unreliable. In this context, in which many of them equate protection with control, they end up justifying this attitude in the gang, based on the misbehavior or improper conduct of "other women." This way, they lend coherence to the convictions of the male members of the gang, laying down a barrier that distances their own behavior from that of the "bad female elements" in the group, endowing the others with all the characteristics that they reject for themselves (Campbell, 1984).

Perhaps there are homeboys that don't like women. There are many that don't like them… Maybe it's because some who were on the inside were not serious, they only generated […], they gave the homeboys away to the police or to the other gang. Women are always the cause of problems. I was told that women were the point of discord in the gang […] For them, the girls are no good. I am just that way, I don't boast […] Maybe I am one of the best, they say, they recognize that I've behaved well… that is why they've never let me go, I've always been there and I've always done things for the clique.

Woman Gang-member ॷ

One final factor, which has influenced in a differential manner women's participation in some of the gang's activities, has to do with their condition in maternity. It has been shown that the majority of the women gang-members who are mothers have assumed, at the same time, the exclusive responsibility and custody for their sons and daughters; and several of them reiterated in the interviews that they restricted themselves from doing certain activities for fear of being at risk.

Perhaps there are things that men do and we don't, and the other way around… I have always been careful about my girls, you get more protective with your kids.
Woman Gang-member ✂

Now then, it is one thing to perceive the existence of differences between men and women within the gang, and another very different thing is to conceive them as a form of discrimination. When asked directly whether they had at any time felt discriminated or relegated in their gang, we find again that the experiences and opinions are divided. The majority of the women accept feeling discriminated at some point in time, or at least, they admitted the existence of discriminatory attitudes on the part of the men toward the women in their gangs. A smaller group said the contrary; and only one of them did not wish to give an opinion on the issue.

Starting with the group of women that denied having felt discriminated in the gang, much of their discourse focused on attempting to explain how, despite the fact that they had perceived there existed some differences between men and women within the group, this did not affect them in their daily performance, or they did not perceive it as discrimination. Likewise, it is noteworthy that four out of the five women who declared they did not feel discriminated against, were *active* in the gang. This condition doubtless shapes their discourse to an important degree, given that they are speaking and arguing from a position that is very close to the group identity, by which a kind of coherence or explanation is attempted to cover the dissonance of concrete situations of marginalization or differential treatment that could indeed have been experienced, with the notions of equality that the gang proclaims.

No, I never felt discriminated against… […] Sometimes, you wish you were a man, to do what you want, be like them… […] But they don't discriminate you.
Woman Gang-member ⬦

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We can't go out with Civilians, but they can. Maybe it's because there is always a lot of macho attitude in them, right? But then, I have never seen anything like the men can do this and the women can't. We are all the same…
Woman Gang-member 〰

On the contrary, among those who actually do consider that women are discriminated against in the gang, there prevail the women gang-members that are *inactive (calmadas)*, although there were some *active* ones that agreed with this. This situation contradicts the previous arguments stated by the active women gang-members because, as they are closer to their group in every sense, they do not tend to highlight this fact. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight the various positions of women on this matter. On the one hand, it has been said that the condition of the woman in her group is fundamental to understanding many of the perspectives and understanding the variations that are found. However, the position that many of them had in their gang defines, to a great extent, not only the actions carried out in the past, but the quality of their interaction with the group.

Focusing the issue now on those that expressly have felt these exclusionary attitudes in the group —toward themselves, or toward other women, many of the situations reflect the recognition that they themselves make of the dynamics in the group, where, despite the loyalty many manifest, there is also recognition of the moments in which these differences between men and women (justified by instrumental, functional or gender issues in the group) become open discriminations. Among the most frequently cited differences are the sexist images their gang-partners project on them; they even made reference to open aggressions, to their gang-partners' prejudice regarding women, to the difficulties encountered and overcame in order to earn a position of respect in the gang, and the constant need to demonstrate their capacity to overcome the male-chauvinist image the group has of them.

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> Yes, [she felt discriminated against]… in the way they look at us… they criti-
> cize us, maybe they think we want to get involved with all of them, some even
> say "that's what they get for whoring around, they're pregnant all the time"…
> It's not all of them, but some of them do.
> Woman Gang-member ☆

Others did not perceive —or did not accept— discrimina-
tion was widely present in the gang, instead they made reference
to specific attitudes of certain men. And for those who said they
had not felt personally discriminated against, they did talk of
fighting against it, and that fighting their gang-partners in order
to reduce the differences between men and women became an
important task.

> There are many heads that think in different ways… There are guys that want
> to make you feel that way [discriminated against]… I showed them I was the
> same, and I could do anything a man can do… But yeah, it happens… that
> depends on each one.
> Woman Gang-member ⌐

> I fought this [the differences that are drawn between men and women]… They,
> not all of them, but several of them, call them loose, lazy… and they don't real-
> ize, or they don't see, that they also come from a woman… I fought for them,
> anything that happened, I found out, and I didn't let anybody down, I'd tell
> them "if anything happens to that *morra* [girl], you'll have to answer to me for
> her".
> Woman Gang-member ❄

> I make them see things, that they can't discriminate us… everything is fighting
> discrimination in the gang… There are lots of them [women] that break down
> and cry, they bring them down… Sometimes they shout at them or something,
> they impress anyone by shouting, and this is a put down for them. I'm not one
> of those, just saying: "I was gonna do something" isn't worth anything, what's
> important is what I'm doing… […] It's just that, if you let them bring you down,
> they're going to just have fun with you.
> Woman Gang-member ♣

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These initiatives to "combat discrimination" inside the gang do not seem to be part of an agenda that articulates any actions by women gang-members, nor does it reflect a collective or unanimous position for the women. On the contrary, many do not speak positively of their women-partners in the gang, or they seem to ascribe to some of them certain characteristics that are contrary to the "ideal" that they consider should characterize a good element within the group.

The contradictory responses are interesting, in that they point out and reaffirm the previous hypothesis that not all of them interpret their men gang-partners' attitudes as something negative, moreover, in their own discourse, they defend their male partners to the point of legitimizing their attitudes. The thing is that many of the women are at one of many cross-roads: the degree to which a woman legitimizes the attitudes in the group (or of the majority membership in the group), the member herself is legitimized; at the same time, as her posi-tion in the group improves (she gains power, reputation, and respect), she has to adopt a series of behaviors and rules that make it possible to integrate and make sense of the actions of the men in the group, even when this means the marginalization or the exclusion of other women.

In sum, in no way should the role of women in the gang be considered a subsidiary role, rather, the women participate actively and up front in group activities. The same as the men, the women contribute to the dynamics and the support of the gang's criminal economy. In doing so, they acquire new and more important responsibilities. However, this advancement is not always linear, or exempt of a price, in that they enter a medium in which, to prove their worth, they have to build their reputation and earn the respect of their partners, by partici-pating in the gang dynamics based on the codes, values and principles that the group has designed to catalog a member's worth. At the same time that women play an important role in the daily gang activities, their role is important in other areas,

which circumscribe them to playing the traditional gender roles that society ascribes women: caretakers, in charge of domestic chores. So it is that many women assume an additional share of responsibilities, that are not taken into account at the moment of assessing their performance as members of the group, because what is valued is their performance in another series of more "masculine" activities, which are the ones that characterize the group dynamics and through which women earn a better position in it.

Although the basis for some of the decisions regarding the division of tasks and responsibilities between the men and the women could be apprised in a pragmatic way or using criteria based on security issues, it cannot be ignored that many of the differences between men and women in the gang are based on traditional, male-chauvinist images of the typical tasks for a man and for a woman, as well as on the prejudice that many gang-members have about women. The clearest example of this is finding that there is a possibility for a woman to be the leader in a gang, but she does not get the same respect as the men leaders do, and at the same time, she is subject to the designs of a group of men. This way, the gang operates from an andro-centric and traditionalist logic, where deeply entrenched male-chauvinist attitudes are obstacles for a woman to grow and position herself within the gang hierarchy.

Likewise, one should not characterize the women gang-members' actions as mere defensive reactions that come about as a product of their personal history of victimization, nor can these attitudes be attributed to being the result of personality disorders with antisocial tendency to commit crimes, adopting a clinical/medical category. Rather, these women's actions should be framed in a *group logic*, where they have chosen to exercise an active and conscious participation. Actually, their participation is so active and dynamic, that some of them have come to defy certain postures their gang-partners adopt, which the women perceive as unjust; and to question practices which, in their

criteria, are not justified, particularly when the contradictions and incoherences between the values and benefits that some were seeking when they joined the gang clash with the reality of their practices, norms and interests. Still, when the currency in group interactions is violence, this leaves no flexibility for questioning and criticism; instead, it becomes a transversal element of daily living for those who are in the group.

4.5. Participation in Violent Acts in the Gang

Gang life entails heavy exposure to violence, and women have roles both as victims as well as victimizers. Suffering serious aggression from various actors, they also commit and participate in violent acts. This section contains the most relevant findings in relation to the issue of violence used and received by the women in the gang. An attempt will be made to argue the reasons that support the idea that being in the gang exposes the women to risks and situations of violence that are even worse than the ones they originally came from.

4.5.1. Women Gang-members as Victims

All of the respondents were exposed to violence and suffered different forms of it, as members of the group. The aggressions they were the object of came from different rivals. Notably, and logically, they came from the rival gang. Nevertheless, their narratives also described another series of actors who exercised significant quotas of violence on them. Among them are agents of the National Civilian Police, as well as members of their own gang.

4.5.1.1. Typical Aggressors: Confrontations with the Rival Gang

I have received some good beatings from the contraria [rival gang]. Only God knows how it is that I'm still alive... I've been left spitting blood, they've cut my face... but here I am...

Woman Gang-member ❖

It is not surprising that the members of the rival gang (called the *contrarios*) are shown as the most frequent aggressors in the women gang-members' narratives. Rivalry between gangs has been the historical and principal catalyst for the violence that is associated with these groups, and an important characteristic of the phenomenon in the country; despite the fact that both groups have more things in common than differences. As already demonstrated in the first chapter, gangs initially appeared and modulated their activities based on the conflict between the two largest groups represented in this study (*Mara Salvatrucha* and *Barrio 18* Gangs). The struggle to control territory using violence was, in the first stages, at the base of their confrontational logic, and their activities and strategies were based on this struggle. This rivalry, dynamized by a logic of intergroup confrontation and conflict, makes it so that their own activities and the extreme use of violence stand out as normal and day-to-day forms of relating, and are not considered extraordinary issues, but rather, a form of interaction that becomes "normal" over time.

Despite these processes that normalize violence and the progressive desensitization regarding its use and experience, constant aggression by the rival gang generate an extreme sense of insecurity, in that they live under constant threat and peril of being attacked. On the other hand, no matter how frequent the attacks, or how normal they may seem, they tend to be issues of great scope and intensity, though they continue to have a strong impact on the life of the women, influencing the way in which they live out their life in the gang.

> [one of the most serious attacks I have had]… was when they put a *mazo* [revolver] to my forehead… they didn't have time to shoot, it was in a confrontation. The jerk froze up, he froze worse than I did, and he didn't shoot… and in the middle of the mess, he was able to get away.
>
> Woman Gang-member ♠

One time, I ran into some rivals, it's that I, I was really stubborn, I used to go into their turf [territory]... That time they gave me time to run, but I didn't, I stood there, I thought they were going to kill me, but they just gave me a big stabbing, three of them [...] they beat me up, stabbed me 14 times [in the stomach]; if they'd had more weapons they would've killed me... it's just that, when they stab you, you get braver... and you think, if they don't give you any consideration, why should you consider them?

Woman Gang-member ♋

Well, I've never been attacked... one time, that's all, they put a gun to my forehead...a rival told me: "Okay, remember the date today, and the date you were born, because this is the day you are going to die"... and he pulled the trigger, and it didn't go off... and me, at that moment, I just had my eyes closed... and he came, and moved the gun to the wall, he put a shot there, and the gun let out a shot... and he put it back to my forehead, and it wouldn't go off... when he saw that, he took off running.

Woman Gang-member ♓

So it is that the women that are and/or have been part of these groups, have been likewise exposed to high levels of violence, and to extreme attacks on their character. In this regard, it is not surprising that this constant exposure to violence —aside from the considerations regarding its "naturalization"— leaves important scars not only on the physical, but also on the psychological level. Often, along with the forced hiatus that being in prison represents, these situations come to mind and impose themselves as invasive images, unpleasant memories and even, possible regrets. When analyzing the women's narratives on these issues, some acts were found to have been perpetrated by the rival gang under the logic of a brutal war between rivals, which are perceived as particularly serious or impressive. One of the experiences that doubtless deepened the impact of aggressions in the minds of women gang-members from both gangs, is heavily tied to a situation that is particular to women: their maternity or pregnancy. At

least four of the women made reference to attacks that occurred while they were pregnant, when asked about the worst attack at the hands of the rival gang. In these cases, they did not refer as much to the impact or threat that the attack meant to their lives, rather to the possibility —or the fact— of losing the baby.

> Another time that they caught us, the rivals whipped us with belts and I was expecting... There were three homeboys with me, and suddenly, three jerks surrounded us. They weren't armed and we weren't either, because we were just walking around there... but they surrounded us, they pulled out their belts and they started [to beat them]... the homeboys defended me, they told them not to because I was pregnant, but [a rival] got me, he beat me... I was scared, but because of my belly (pregnancy), but I was able to get away and go into a shopping center.
>
> Woman Gang-member ♠

> One time we were going to [...], I was coming from the penitentiary, when two rivals showed up, and they started to beat me up. They busted my mouth, my eye, they threw me down on the ground, they hit me all over... I didn't know I was pregnant... I got away from them, and I went into the penitentiary... since I was there for an intimate [visit], in the early morning I started to bleed a lot, and then the homeboys took me to the hospital... we thought it was internal bruises, but I didn't know I was expecting... I didn't want to say anything, but when I commented to my homeboys, we went looking for them to kill them, and we did... It's just that the beating didn't really hurt me, it was what had happened to the child... because I had wanted to be pregnant.
>
> Woman Gang-member ♣

These cases clearly illustrate the heavy impact that violence has on many of them, when the result is that they are threatened or their own children are endangered. Despite the fact that the majority of the women reiterated that they had made sure to maintain their children separate from their gang activities, it is difficult to consider that these boys and girls are going to have a life outside this environment, when they have been born into the very same community contexts where the gangs have their territory and carry out their activities.

One time I was with my daughter, I was in a [...] and they threw a grenade at us, but it didn't go off, it was *hechiza* [home-made]... I had gone shopping for something with my daughter, and they threw another one... when we got there, a homegirl was lying on the floor [with grenade shrapnel]... They told me I had been lucky: "if you had been here, your girl would be dead"... [...] I didn't have my family's support, I had to take my daughters with me... because I saw so many things, I saw the danger that my daughter was in, I decided to get away. But I'm always in a lot of danger.

Woman Gang-member ◉

Another kind of situation that showed up as being shocking to them —which dynamizes the hate towards the rival gang— is the loss of relatives or loved ones, to attacks by the opposing gang. When the victims of murders are relatives or friends, this brings on a heavy feeling of guilt. And just as in the case of the children, the fact that their situation as women gang-members generates a risk for their relatives is one of the aspects that most affects them.

They shot me in the right leg one time, they drove by shooting out of a car, it landed on my right leg. It broke my bone, and it didn't come out... The doctors have told me that if they take it out, I may walk with a limp... So, aside from that, like at a psychological level, the death of my brother and my husband [weeps]... these have been the hardest blows I have received in my life.

Woman Gang-member ✂

He just parked the car, I was in the car. My aunt opened the door and she got out... a kid shot my aunt nine times, he thought it was me... My aunt used to help me out a lot, and I felt really bad, because it was my fault that she died. She used to tell me: "I could give my life for you", and she did... I went to the Coroners... it was a real shock to me, it was something that hit me so hard. I've lost friends, people have died next to me, it hurts because they are my people... but I really felt the loss of my aunt.

Woman Gang-member ⚷

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The last, though not the least relevant, kind of aggression identified is directly related to the seriousness of the attack they received. As in the previous cases, several respondents related a series of extremely serious attacks, where one sees that they are exposed to the constant threat of being murdered. In their case, although they have been able to survive to tell the tale, they have done so with serious wounds, as well as physical and psychological consequences.

> Oh!, they cut me up! [...] It was the rivals, they made me get out of a bus [...], five *contrarios* [...] they grabbed me [...] they hit me with the *machete* and they cut me here [points to her arm where she has a scar], and they almost got the bone... [...] I fell in a spot where there were these bottles [liquor]. I'm not a lefty, but I'm good with my left hand when I have to use it, and when I use it, I use it well... one of them stayed with me, so I grabbed the bottle and I hit him like this with my left hand, I hit him in the stomach with the bottle, then they hit me with a blade over the head and they were going to shoot me; the shouted "Kill her, kill her"... but they left me... The police picked me up and took me to the *Rosales* [Hospital], but they didn't want to receive me there, they received me like an hour later.
>
> Woman Gang-member ❖

This violence/gangs binomial has been intercalated over time with the deepening processes of criminalization that these groups have been undergoing, not only by virtue of their own group activities and dynamics —which have brought them progressively closer to organized crime networks, but through deepening the rivalries with the opposing gang and the police, as well as the destructuring of the community fabric, insecurity, and abandon that prevails in the neighborhoods where they keep themselves. The growing level of clandestineness the phenomenon is experiencing makes the gang-members less and less visible or accessible, and in this new context, it is increasingly difficult to identify who may be members of a rival gang. In the past, it was to a certain degree easier to recognize a rival gang member, in that they bore many identity marks in visible places (tattoos, graffitis) or through their open communi-

cation (sign language). Whereas, currently, it is less predictable to assess who or where an attack may come from. This is applicable both for neighborhood residents, as well as for the gang-members themselves.

> We don't know who could be coming. One time, I was going to visit my grand-mother. Over there, by the corner, there were two kids in uniform, they were children... and they pulled a grenade on me.
> Woman Gang-member ☚

Another change in the confrontations between gangs is the increased use of firearms and heavy caliber weapons. Throughout the interviews, several women noted significant qualitative changes in the confrontations in recent years. Fights and brawls of past decades were characterized by bruises, cuts with sharp weapons, belts, stones, and homemade weapons. These do not compare with present day exchanges that mostly involve the use of firearms and heavy weaponry, which, in turn, exponentially increases the lethal nature of the violence.

4.5.1.2. Unexpected Aggressors: Confrontations with their Own Gang

> I asked my *palabrero*: "If this is supposed to be one family, why do we kill each other?" And he told me: "It's just that if the tree doesn't give fruit, you have to cut it, what do you want it for?" "I never was read that rule," I told him. "The *hood* is never going to show you only one face, here, you're going to realize a lot of things," he said... And that's the way it happened: just as I did, I saw done, and I was done.
> Woman Gang-member ✆

The previous statement is very eloquent. Over time, due to the transformations that the gang phenomenon has experienced, to the intensified violence in and after the context of the implementation of hard-line policies adopted to deal with violence, due to the position that many of the men and women in the gangs have acquired in time in the group, among other

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aspects, the experience of violence has become more brutal, more direct, and more common on a daily basis. This is how those who are inside become aware that it is not only the rival gang that they have to face, and whom they might be attacked by, but it might also come from within their own gang. These attacks can take different forms and be due to different reasons, and they are not necessarily or exclusively due to physical wounds —although these do come about, and are very serious. However, when dealing with aggression from within their own gang, these acts carry impacts and *meanings* that are different and important for the women gang-members: it means they have to identify the members of this other "family" as attackers; it implies facing the possibility —or the reality— of suffering violence at the hands of the ones who, in theory, would protect them; and it leads, on many occasions, to distancing themselves from the group.

> When they killed the [name of the *palabrero*]… […] … that day, we were at home. I had just gotten my stitches taken off [she had been operated], and, suddenly, two guys from the same gang came over, but from another turf [territory], and they had him get out of the house… They started shouting at him, and told him if he didn't come out, they were going to come in and get all of us on the inside… He said: "for my homeboys", and he went out… they shot two volleys from an M-16 and AK-47… they tore up the [number] he had on his stomach… in the middle of the shooting, I ran out… I grabbed a 9 [millimeters], I went after them to the other neighborhood, shouting, shooting up in the air… That really affected me, I was even in the Psychiatric [Hospital].
> Woman Gang-member ♣

The lack of support from their own gang-partners (their *homies*), or the disenchantment of having been witnesses to aggression and betrayal within their own gang, or rivalries among their respective *cliques*, constituted for many of them some of the hardest blows. The difficulty in facing this situation lay in the fact that it breaks with the idea that they had when they decided to join. Few of them went into detail about the circumstances and situations in which the members of their

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gang became attackers (attacking them or other partners), both outside and inside the penitentiary. However, the experiences that were shared with us clearly show the disenchantment that some of them feel with the gang.

Other women stated that they had been wounded by their own gang-partners, as a form of punishment after having broken a gang rule, for having committed a fault, or even for having simply questioned "the established order." In this case, there are divergent experiences, since some state that they assumed these aggressions as a way to face up to their errors; however, on the other hand, there are women gang- members that perceived that these aggressions were unjustified. This, in turn, lead to their progressive disenchantment with their group. The latter tends to be expressed in this manner particularly by those who were *inactive* and by the ones who were *retired*. This sort of situation —and the reactions that they could have to them— have put them at risk within the group.

> At about the age of 18, I went to jail for aggravated robbery. They took me to... [...] That was the first time I realized that gangs were not what they had said, because I was there for about a year, and no one came to see me. My family wouldn't visit me. They used to say: "Well, in there the gang is you family, let them visit you." And so neither they nor my gang, just God was with me [...] ...When I got out, the gang, they told me they hadn't been able to go because they didn't have money, because several of them had arrest warrants, they gave me several excuses; but, since I loved them like a family, I believed them. It's 'cause I would've given my life for my *hood*... 15 days later, the rivals wounded me. They stabbed me like 14 times with some irons. I spent 15 days in the Rosales [Hospital]... No one came to see me there either... I got out of the hospital, they gave me more excuses.
> Woman Gang-member ✇

> I used to plead, I used to complain, because I felt it wasn't fair [an action committed by the gang]... Sometimes they reacted based only on gossip, on hearsay, and I used to tell them: "If we are brothers, why are we going to be

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killing each other?" And they used to hit me hard, I had to take it for giving my
opinion.
Woman Gang-member ✳

I resented that, that in the gang, if you make a mark [a mistake], they mess with
your family, and that is what I feared.
Woman Gang-member ◉

Despite the fact that questioning and adopting critical postures often placed them in a sensitive position or put them at risk before the gang, some of the women gang-members said that they had expressed their disagreement with the regulations or the decisions that seemed arbitrary to them; or they had openly resisted when the decisions that were made contradicted the notions of union and solidarity that they considered the members of the group should be governed by. So, even when they did not state this openly, many of the women gang-members came to question the inconsistencies that they observed —directly to the group, or individually to a *palabrero,* based on the values and rules that had originally characterized the gang. The reactions or attitudes of those who complained to, discussed with or simply questioned could become even more evident and sensitive, inasmuch as for the men, as the majority group in the gang, it is more favorable and/or convenient to maintain a conformist attitude in a system that favors them over women.

Much of the impact from the aggressions at the hands of their own gang —experienced or witnessed— comes from the contradiction and disenchantment that this carries over in terms of the reasons that motivated many of them to join. While there is a tendency for the *retired* or *inactive* women gang-members to express themselves in a more critical way about the incoherences and the violent dynamics within the gang, these kinds of reflections —although in some way very punctual, indirect or contradictory— could also be perceived in declarations by the *active* women. Doubtless, the possibility of criticizing one's

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own group is made possible by distance, either the distance that is provided by becoming *inactive* or *retired* from the gang, as well as the inescapable distance imposed upon them by being locked up. This makes it possible for some of them to reflect more on their own lives as part of this kind of group.

4.5.1.3. Added Aggressors: the Police and Organized Bands of Criminals

By the police, when they captured me... we were having a meeting, when they came down on us. They separated me from them [the rest of the clique], they were from the Deco[96], and they hit me. They grabbed me by the hair, 'cause I've always worn it this long [down to the waist]. They wrapped it around their wrists, and they made me bend down to the ground... I spent something like three weeks in jail, and like for ten days, I couldn't get out of bed... With a rifle, they hit my fingers, and they threw me against the wall, and while they were putting me up against the wall, they cussed me out big time: "Three times you've gotten away, ya great big bitch, but this time we've got you"... They beat me up, they threw me on the ground, face down, and they kicked me, they hit me right here [lumbar area], and on the head... and one of them told me: "If it had been just me alone, you would've given me money, and I'd have let you go"... It's that, in the clique, we used to get extorted too. If we gave them money, they wouldn't take us in, but if we didn't pay them, we had it rough.

Woman Gang-member ✄

The gang-members —the rivals or their own— carry a great deal of the responsibility for the aggressions and the violence exercised on their own members, as do the police and the organized criminal bands that are repeatedly mentioned among the principal aggressors.

All of the women have knowledge of some aggression or use of excessive force by the members of the police force, either as direct victims or as witnesses of cases where other gang-

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[96] A specialized unit of the National Civilian Police: Elite Division to Counter Criminal Organizations (*Dirección Elite contra el Crimen Organizado*—Deco).

partners have been the object of abuse on the part of the police. At least six of the respondents reported, at some point during the interviews, that they had been direct victims of some aggression by one or several members of the law enforcement institution, and eight of them described specific cases of aggression to other gang-members. There were also records of cases in which the women gang-members referred to abusive practices by the police force, without specifying the victims or particular events. In these reports, it is noteworthy that these abuses increased particularly during the operations carried out in the framework of the hard-line governmental plans called *Mano Dura.* The excessive use of force and the abuses of authority in the framework of the detention procedures, police operations or household searches, and even the participation of some of members of the police force in "social cleansing" actions, are the aggressions that are most frequently noted by the women gang-members who were interviewed. Furthermore, three of the women stated that they had been direct victims or that they had witnessed sexual harassment committed by a member of the police. Once more, the events occurred during the numerous arrests or operations.

> Me, once, I had to take a beating at the *Isidro*.[97] We were in the cell, and they put in three from the other gang with us, and it was the two of us [from the same gang]... We beat each other up. But to separate us, they took us out, they handcuffed us with our hands behind our backs, really tight, they tied us to a tree. They threw cold water at us, and pepper-spray. Me, they kicked me in the spine, and my hands got all purple and swollen 'cause they were so tight... The other one that was with me, I got beaten on account of her, because I told them to leave her alone. I didn't want her to keep taking it because she was just a kid... and I got mine and hers... Guys from the GRP[98] showed up, and me, I couldn't move my hands, they almost cut them, I couldn't move them. One of them put ice on me, and made me move my hands, and said: "These guys crossed the line..."
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> Woman Gang-member ♣

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[97] She is talking about the jail at Dr. *Isidro Menéndez* Legal Center.
[98] Group for Police Reaction (*Grupo de Reacción Policial*—GRP).

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One time, they broke a rib… it was here [in the penitentiary] during an inspection, a few years ago. It was the guys from the Umo[99]. They were pulling us out, and he grabbed me, and splintered my rib. I spent like 5 days in the hospital for that… It's just that, look, the police, they don't discriminate between men and women: when they get you, they get everyone the same.

Woman Gang-member ♓

Yeah, one time they got me in […] I was walking with some other partners. One of them had his face tattooed. It was noon, and at that time the street gets really hot. They put us face down on the street, and they hit us real hard. They kicked us, and they stood on top of me. One of them looked at me and said: "this girl is really pretty", and took out some condoms, and was showing them to me. "Take her over there," one of them said, pointing to a vacant lot. The others [gang-partners] were handcuffed there. What could they do? "Leave her alone, don't do anything to her," they shouted. He took me over there, and unbuttoned my shirt, but to take it off, he had to take the handcuffs off, and when he did, I took advantage and I hit him like this [in the face], until he backed off. When they saw me hit him, the other three jumped me with the […] I had my face all swollen up, my rib hurt.

Woman Gang-member ⛏

Five women had knowledge of the involvement of police agents in the murder of gang-members. The homicides, according to the women's statements, had all the markings of being the product of the actions of an extermination squad, with participation of police officers. They also reported cases in which police officers that appeared to be on-duty had arrested and later murdered gang-members.

In […] some cops [police] arrived dressed as homies. They busted in the door, came in and killed them; they beat the women and children that were in the house… It's just that there are differences between a *jura* [police officer] and a *Sombra negra* [member of the Black Shadow, a vigilante group] […] There are extermination squads that the police have; they come and get them

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[99] Division for the Mainteinance of Order (*Unidad de Mantenimiento del Orden*), unit of the National Civilian Police.

out of the houses, kill the homeboys, and blame the other gang.
Woman Gang-member ♣

One time, in *San Miguel*, a boy had died. When someone dies, you collect money [...] to pay for the funeral parlor. We take care of everything... Two homeboys were going to bring the money..., and the police arrested them [...], they got them. My husband was talking to them by phone, and they were saying that the police had stopped them, but that they were on their way. When they called back, the cell phones were off. They never knew what happened to them. They looked for them. A week later, they found them in a river; they were tortured, almost trash.
Woman Gang-member ♋

The omission, or non-intervention by the police in the strong rivalries between gangs was another issue that several of the women noted. There were also some accusations that the police even stirred up rivalry. These events doubtless increased the level of conflict between the gangs and the police force, eroding their image and their role as guarantor and protector of the safety of all people, as well as citizen confidence in their management. In fact, many women gang-members coincided in pointing out that the abuse of authority committed by agents of the National Civilian Police has increased in recent years. Although they recognize that the arbitrary revisions and the excessive use of force have been happening for many years, they remarked that the seriousness of the abuse had increased significantly in recent years. This was noted by respondents, regardless their current status in the gang or the group they belonged to.

Suddenly they came [the police], and they came in shooting at us. We had never crossed that line. It wasn't like it is now; now it's different, because they set the tone.
Woman Gang-member ↦

No, they didn't used to mess with us [the police with the gang]... they used to stop us to frisk us, but they'd let us go [...] [now] they mistreat us for every-

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thing. They always get us. I was walking alone and they got me. They take you to the station; then they go get another one, and they pin them with stealing, and they say they were together...

Woman Gang-member ⚡

Nowadays they abuse us more [...] It used to be, I used to go to jail [...] but they didn't beat you, didn't mistreat you. Now, they all take advantage. You may have committed a crime, but that's what jail is for, to pay [...] A cousin of mine was [name of gang], [...] He got arrested and they took him to the station at [...] and they put him in with them [rival gang members] knowing he was their rival, and they started beating him up while the police watched it all. When he started having convulsions, and the police were watching it all, they didn't say anything. They killed him inside. My aunt came, and said she was going to file a complaint, but the police said that nobody had beaten him [...]... My aunt was threatened so that she wouldn't file the complaint, and she didn't want to run the risk [...] It's big time corruption, they take advantage of people. That's why, so many retaliate against the police. There are rapes, they put a gang member in the other's zone... and then they say: "Oh! They killed this police agent...", but people don't know the damage they do... [...] Now they are more abusive... since the *Mano Dura* [hard line policies], they are more abusive.

Woman Gang-member ◎

Nowadays it's worse. Now they kill the gang members straightaway. I wish gangs didn't exist, but we know that it's not going to be that way... they kill 5, but 15 jump in... they are 11-12 years old and they jump in. They put people in jail, but there are 200 a year who go out to raise the columns, they knock some columns down, but there are other columns that they raise.

Woman Gang-member ❖

No doubt, these police practices, far from contributing to solving the problem of gangs or of violence, foster the development of greater levels of complexity in the general situation. The abuse and constant violation of human rights deepen the combativeness between the gang and the police, with gangs retaliating against members of the police force, thus speeding up the spiral of violence and the death toll.

On the other hand, an extremely complex relationship which not much information was given about, was that between the gangs and organized criminal bands, or drug-trafficking networks (whose members are called *banderos* or *transeros*, respectively). Previous sections hinted at gangs dependency for survival on a logistical framework that lays the foundation for a criminal economy where their participation as "service providers" in the work of organized crime is becoming increasingly more frequent. The scant evidence on this issue that can be derived from this study points to the existence of an important relation of their activities to organized crime, even when many of the women gang-members refrained from issuing opinions on this matter. Aside from the commercial or instrumental relationship that exists between gangs and organized criminal bands, this relationship appears to be very complex and, to a great measure, determined by convenience and mutual benefit. Nevertheless, the women do not hesitate to point them out as potential aggressors, when the agreement reached with them no longer yields the expected results or revenues.

> It's just that, when there are murders, you know how to tell when they are by your own turf, or the rivals, or others like the *banderos* or the extermination squads... the *banderos*, sometimes, helped you out with weapons, or with drugs; but if you get into *pedo* [trouble] with them, if you mess with their family or with their things, then you're fucked up.
> Woman Gang-member ✳

> Now it's the police and the *banderos* [that kill gang-members]... the rivalry [between gang and banderos] are over the *renta* [*extortion money*] [...] They used to pay *renta*, now they want to charge *renta*, but we don't allow it [...] Nobody wants to let the other one lead or dominate, and that is why there is also rivalry between the gang and the bands.
> Woman Gang-member ର

> With the *banderos* or the *transeros*... just one time there, when they came shooting like crazy in a nearby *clique*, just with shotguns... It's just that, in the case of the gangs, it's a matter of territory. They, they're about power in cer-

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tain places.
Woman Gang-member ✖

Although there is not very much information in this regard, it can be inferred that the relations tend to be based on mutual convenience. On occasion, it was even directly reported that there existed a rivalry and competition between bands and gangs, over control of certain territories for drug sale and dealing. What is clear is that the link to these groups ties them, and brings them closer to committing criminal acts and to using extreme violence.

In sum, involvement and participation in activities that pertain more to the gang dynamics come about progressively in some aspects, but in a more overwhelming way in others. The progression is experienced by the women as a gradual and complicated process of "achievement of induction and respect" on the part of their gang-partners. The overwhelming aspect of this situation is the result of direct exposure, life experience and use of the worst forms and expressions of violence. Although they carry a long personal history of victimization at the hands of several actors, at diverse moments and stages all along their lives, there is also another side to the issue: the violence that they themselves exert on other people.

4.5.2. Women Gang-members as Victimizers

So like I told you, I jumped in for revenge, and that hate grows… it's like a basketball game; some score for, and some score against… They take someone from me, I take revenge, and I take one from them, and that's how it goes… When you see signs that they aren't from your gang, you know what you have to do… knowing that tomorrow, it could be you… It's not always going to turn out well… […] … I know that God is angry with me right now.
Woman Gang-member ♠

No doubt these women's openness in sharing their experiences as aggressors in violent events tends to be less eloquent

than in the case of relating their experiences as victims. Nevertheless, many of the women gang-members revealed, throughout the interviews, that they had participated in violent acts of varying degrees of seriousness. As discussed in one of the previous sections, the rivalry and conflict between the two gangs has become, historically, in the main catalyst for violence on the part of the men and women gang-members. Most of the aggressions mentioned have been committed against a member of the rival gang, or by order of their gang. On the other hand, the victims of the most serious attacks are people with some link to one gang or the other.

This does not discard the fact that other people outside these groups can become victims of other crimes or attacks by the women gang-members. This is exemplified in the increase in the complexity of the gang phenomenon over time, where violence is no longer circumscribed to the rivalry between both groups. Despite the fact that they all admitted participating in violent acts or having committed crimes, it is important to emphasize that their participation is varied, depending to a great degree on their situation and position within the group. Likewise, despite the constant exposure to and use of violence, and the logic under which the group operates, many of them (both active, inactive and retired) showed that —on occasions, despite themselves— they had been deeply affected by the acts committed in the past, and even accepted the difficulty they faced in committing certain acts, which at one time they considered convenient, necessary and even desirable.

> Defending a [number] lead me to steal, shoot at someone, throwing stones, insulting, participating in homicides…
> Woman Gang-member ❖

> [What was the most serious aggression you have committed?] …Everything you do… if you murder someone, they always take someone's life… no matter

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*how you look at it, the fact is serious… I did many things… No… better ask me
about the least serious [aggression]…*
Woman Gang-member ⌐

Most of the respondents admitted to having participated directly or indirectly in homicides. The most frequent victims were members of the rival gang, and some of the murders were the result of confrontations or rivalry with the "opponents." One thing that is punishable by death, and that some of them refer to, are actions considered "treason" by the gang. These tend to be when one of the members has relations with both gangs, or in those cases when a person is suspected —a gang-member or someone related[100] to the group— of being an "ear" or an informer for the rival gang. In this case, being perceived as a traitor guarantees *"getting a (green) light,"* which means, be sentenced to death.

Aside from the previous consideration, there is no precise consensus as to what defines treason in the gang. This means that, albeit there are rules, many of these rules (and their definition), can be changed, imposed, interpreted and applied at the discretion of those in power. And, this way, a single order can lead to making the members of the self-same group go from "feeling betrayed" to betraying, to the degree in which they have to meet out punishment to the conspirators. This fact was used as an example on a couple of occasions, when the women gang-members found themselves in the position of having to apply the gang's sanctions and punishments. These situations, so they related, had generated a series of dilemmas and conflicts for them later on.

When they killed […] … she used to be in my own gang. She had jumped in
when she was a kid, like at the age of 10, and the guys from the same gang
killed her… and for something that I don't consider was fair, it wasn't … it
wasn't like heavy […] But the *palabrero* said that she made them look bad, and

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[100] Relative or gang-member's partner.

that they had to kill her because they looked really bad going around with that jerk... I told them they had accepted her like that, that she wasn't doing anything to them, that they couldn't kill her for something like that; but they told me that I had to kill her, or if I didn't, it would be my turn.

Woman Gang-member ✪

There are things... right, like, for example... they killed people [...] You see the things that you had to do, and I was inside everything. Once I was going downtown. We were at a homie's [gang-partner] wake, and a rival went by. "There goes a [...]", someone said. Everyone went for him, they started stabbing him. I got out, and I just watched it all [...] I wanted to help him. I don't know, I saw their faces, they were like monsters; I put myself in the place of the one that was suffering, I wanted to get in and tell them to leave him alone, to forget that he was of the rivals, but I couldn't get in because they would've killed me too.

Woman Gang-member ◉

Finally, the gravity of the act itself, although directed at an opponent, no doubt had a significant impact on them:

What shocked me the most... was that time I had to go and do a *hit* and I shot the *vato* [guy] in the face with a shotgun... Look, that time... [detailed narration of the event] ...Oh no!!... I even got sick, I even got a fever, [...], Oh no...

Woman Gang-member ✂

As for other kinds of aggressions, robberies, wounds, or *rentas* (extortions) reappear in their narratives. The wounds they inflicted were related to confrontations with rival gang, and mostly done with sharp weapons. Some admitted that they had participated in robbery and extortion, which in some cases lead to additional aggression to the victim. In the latter case, the most frequent victims were people with no ties to the gangs.

... the *puyada* [stabbing] is the strongest wound I have... it's just that stabs are stronger than bullet wounds, because with a *cuete* [handgun], it's fast, you just die; while the knifing, you die slowly...

Woman Gang-member ☙

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I used to get extortion money. Me, I used to like getting extortion money from
    the prostitutes downtown, from the people at the Mexican sandwich stand,
different stands by the buses... we called that *rentear,* right? And I came up to
them and I said, "What's up? This afternoon I want this much, and we're coming
    by for it at three o'clock." We'd ask for 10 *Colones* at the sandwich place for
example, and we'd go by for it. If they didn't give it to us, then, yeah, we'd jump
    on them [kick and hit] and take everything they had. [...] No, it's that if they
don't give it to you, you just want to get them. One time I asked a *vata* [girl] for
a *Colón*, and she didn't want to give it to me. So yeah, I started taking her rings
    and I beat her up. Since she didn't want to give it to me the easy way, I had to
                                                           get it the hard way...
                                                       Woman Gang-member ⬦

... with a knife, you learn... at first, the skin feels hard, like a little calf... they
teach you with firearms or military weapons... there are even funny things that
    happen because, at first, you go to an empty lot, and when you pull, if you
    aren't standing right, there's a back-kick [from the gun], and if you aren't
standing right, you fall down... [tells of falling down, laughing] ... the homies
    laughed, but that would wake you up... It's that you don't have practice.
                                                       Woman Gang-member ♠

   The data points to the fact that the vast majority of the
actions were committed with firearms. Most of the respon-
dents accepted they had used several kinds of weapons, and
many of them carried one or more weapons. Only one of the
respondents said she had never used weapons, another refused
to respond, and in the last two, there was no direct informa-
tion. However, from the forthcoming information throughout the
interview, it can be concluded that weapons were used to carry
out some activities. The type of weapon depends mainly on the
period of time, being that a very important change has been
observed in terms of the use of weapons in the gang in recent
years. Several of the women gang-members stated they had
initially used sharp weapons, and then changed to firearms.

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Yes, always [was always armed]. I used to carry my jackknife around, but then,
when things got worse, I carried my nine [millimeter gun]
Woman Gang-member ॐ

The manner of their participation in gang activities is varied. Each woman has her own function and responsibilities in the gang and in the aggressions that were committed; and the level of planning and involvement depends on the nature of the event. Several of them did not want to enter into much detail about the form of their participation. On some occasions, the question could not be asked directly. Given the information they themselves provided throughout the interviews, it has been concluded that the majority were following the gang's instructions. Although some admitted they had more direct responsibility in the coordination or planning of the activities, others declared that they did not like having these responsibilities or having leadership roles; and others assumed their roles and responsibilities without this being any problem for them.

… Me, I went by what they told me… In the end, I would throw coordinates
[give orders, instructions]. But I never liked to get my hands in that, because
of jealousy. They can even kill you.
Woman Gang-member ೞ

Well… it's like: "We're going to do something." You had to plan everything,
right? If it came out wrong, we were responsible. If a life was lost… you have to
be responsible for these things. Sometimes it was my turn. "I'll do it", I'd say,
and I had to do it to the last detail.
Woman Gang-member ๛

Within an extremely violent dynamic, many of the women gang-members had many ways to justify the aggression committed by themselves or their gang-partners. This was particularly so in cases where the victim was someone from their own gang. These are efforts that come to legitimize actions in the name of the rivalry or aggressions received, as a part of the logic of revenge and vengeance that gradually permeates

the patterns of their actions. Although on some occasions the aggressions could be considered illegitimate or without much basis, there comes a time when the group logic becomes the person's own logic, in situations where the freedom to act differently is reduced. As the group logic imposes itself, at an experiential level, the women begin adopting and assuming it as a way of functioning that is regular, standardized, and legitimized, which in turn deepens the emotional distance between them and their victims. When asked about the ways in which the violence experienced in the gang can affect the women that are part of them, an official in the penitentiary system provided a very eloquent response:

> ... the greatest impact is on the development of emotional skills. They become cold, when faced with the use of violence on them, or used by themselves... [...]; they learn to live in a survival mode. They assimilate it as something normal or necessary. They assimilate violence and death as something normal in the war between gangs...
> DGCP Official

On the other hand, the violence that the woman gang-members experience and exercise is not explained merely by the rivalry-to-death between the two gangs, but also by the complex dynamic of violence that surrounds them. Agents of the police force, members of the organized criminal bands, extermination squads, as well as the rival and even their own gang, are all flagged as being important agents of violence. In any case, they are actors who, along with the gangs, contribute to raising the level of complexity of a situation in which violence reigns, as does the loss of State-control over it. This entails an important degree of relevance, in that the multiplicity of actors that participate and benefit from the violence is just a reflection of the complexity of the surrounding situation, where the division line between aggressor and victim is becoming more and more diffused. Likewise, this situation has become resounding and emphatic evidence of the failure of the policies adopted over the past years —making exclusive use of force and from simplistic

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and shortsighted points of view— to deal with this complex and increasingly impenetrable world of gangs.

4.6. Conclusions

This fourth section returns to the narrative thread on the personal lives of the respondents at the moment of their first rapprochement with the group, which closed the third chapter, giving way to the motives and processes of the approach and integration with the gang, to arrive at the period in which they have adopted a leading role as members of the group, where the very group dynamic has taken them to act in scenarios of severe victimization and active participation as agents of violence.

A complex series of personal, family and community factors converge and are articulated to bring about the entrance to the gang, therefore it cannot be said that there is a single isolated aspect whose weight would have constituted it as the one principal factor to drive the girls and young women to make the decision to become part of these groups. However, in this mix of vulnerability and precarious contexts, there were three categories that were recurrent in the respondents' narratives: entrance in the gang as a result of *dysfunctional family relations and dynamics*; seeking to exact *vengeance on some aggressor* (a relative or not); and due to *interest, curiosity or liking for this kind of group*. These are not "pure" motivations for entering, they are the main outstanding categories among the accumulation of situations of risk and vulnerability that characterize their situation at that particular moment of their lives. That moment usually is around pre-adolescence: over half of the respondents had entered the gang when they were 13 years of age or less.

A factor that runs transversally through the others was the confirmed presence of either of the country's two largest gangs in the immediate vicinity of the place of residence of the girl or young woman, particularly in the cases in which they had

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friends, boyfriends or brothers that were already members of either group. Actually, the data makes it possible to deduce the level of participation that, at different times, the different men had in their rapprochement and later involvement in the gang. This study did not find evidence that the gang had obligated these women to join. Rather, the gang received girls and young women who came from highly precarious and high-risk contexts. They joined thinking that this was a convenient way to access a group that would provide a point of reference and protection; a way to believe in something (or someone); a way to exact vengeance on aggressor-figures of different kinds; in sum, it is seen as a strategy for survival in the face of the accumulation of difficulties. In the case of the women, although the desire to belong to the group and *hang out* with the gang were reasons for joining that some participants adduced, their narratives also give strong importance to their personal history of victimization, which gives rise to maintaining the hypothesis that the gang serves as a means to earn the feeling of belonging — at a moment in their lives when the processes of group socialization are highly important, as well as the possibility of joining a group that provides symbolic and concrete power.

The rite of passage to enter the gang is a milestone that marks their entrance to the new group, and the acquisition of a new identity, in a symbolic and concrete way. In concrete terms, this consists of a beating whose duration and intensity is variable, generally meted out by partners in the gang they wish to join; and, at a later time after joining, in the direct participation of the new member in a gang *mission*, which generally consists of operations directed at members of the rival gang. In symbolic terms, these processes include, on the one hand, the configuration of a new identity —crystallized in important changes such as leaving behind their own name and assuming a new one (their *taca* or tag), and leaving behind their family group and belonging to a new one (their *clique*), which are to provide them, from then on, with a regulatory and values framework that is distinct and defined, and which will determine and mold

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their conduct, not as isolated people, rather as members of a group. On the other hand, beginning with this identity transformation, the later involvement in gang *missions* implies participating in activities that, from the start, generate commitment to the group, in that this level of personal involvement makes these new members co-responsible for the group activities, making it more difficult to leave it.

The fact that the women joined the group by way of a beating —that is, by way of the same ritual as a man would join the gang, is a way of reaffirming their desire to join the group on equal terms as the rest of the members. It is a way to submit to the group rules, and demonstrate that they do not want different treatment than their men-partners receive. Paradoxically, when they enter the gang in this manner, seeking equal conditions, they enter a group and a system designed to exclude them: it is a group that is made up of and thought up by men, working under androcentric structures, and therefore, it is conceived to perpetuate those differences which, from the start, the majority members in the group (who have more power) assume exist between them and "the women." Whereas entering in the same way as men confers them a certain "basic" legitimacy, this rite is only the first step in a long way to positioning themselves and reaffirming their place in the group structure.

In terms of the activities, functions and responsibilities within the group, the narratives describe their passing from more operational activities to others that are more central and strategic in the gang dynamic, which indicates that a woman can participate in the group in an active, leadership role. Like their gang-partners, they progressively contribute, with the different activities, to supporting the criminal economy of the gang, which also makes their commitment to the group grow. However, added to these tasks that pertain to the group are other kinds of assignments that pertain to a stereotypical view on gender and traditional attribution of roles: they also become caretakers/providers for their gang-partners, and are also in

charge of domestic chores. Although many of the decisions in the *clique* regarding the assignment of the members' tasks and roles are based on pragmatic or security-based considerations, it cannot be ignored that the gang, as a group that is immersed inside a structural dimension, reproduces a series of values, visions, rules and conventionalism from the society it is contained in. In this case, the traditional division of roles and activities within the gang materializes the patriarchal and male-chauvinist reality of Salvadoran society. So it is that many of the women assumed a series of additional responsibilities in the gang and as providers for their own sons and daughters. These responsibilities are not usually valued by the gang in the same way they value those activities that can bring the group remuneration and resources.

The gang in general, and the cliques in particular, are made up of conglomerates; and the collective that is composed of the men has an important quantitative and resources differential, compared with the women. This translates into an imbalance of power that is reflected in the gang most clearly in the limitations for women in terms of wielding it. Although the possibility exists that women may occupy leadership roles within the group, they are not usually accepted the same way, nor will they have the same power to influence or authority as a man. On one hand, they will not always count on having the approval or the obedience of their partners (men and women); on the other, although they may be in a leadership position, women will always be subject to the designs of a collection of men that hold the real reins of power of the group.

In terms of participation in acts of violence, life in the gang implies constant and daily exposure to extreme forms of violence, experienced by the women in their double dimension as victims and victimizers. Victimization by violence does not come solely as a product of confrontation with the rival gang; it also comes from additional actors: members of the police, drug-dealers, organized crime bands, and extermi-

nation squads, among others, appear as important agents of violence. In conjunction with gang activity, these contribute to the processes that dynamize the spiraling escalation of violence and the increasing levels of complexity in a situation that the State appears to have lost control over.

In the case of their role as agents of violence, it is important to emphasize the fact that their actions cannot and should not be characterized as merely defensive reactions based on their personal stories of victimization. Nor can they be attributed to individual variables, such as personality maladjustments or innate criminal tendencies. Although each one of them has their own individual biographies and characteristics that converge in the group structure, the social reality of the gang as a group within a violent society is not reducible to the individual characteristics of its members. And this fact is fundamentally important in understanding the similarities that, on many occasions, can be found when analyzing the situation of men and women in the gang: once the group boundaries are crossed, the members no longer operate under the logic of an individual; instead, they are under group rules, values, orders and codes which determine their actions. Above all, in the case of a group such as the gang, where conflicts are solved by way of violence —outwardly and inwardly, and where disobedience of the norms is usually not admitted.

The fact that these women joined the gang at an early age translates into a long and complex career in the group, in which the use of violence is a primary characteristic. Irremediably, the nature of the dynamic and actions of the gang draws them nearer to the exercise of crime. In this manner, the violence committed against and inflicted upon girls, young and adult women —inside and outside the gang— ends up raising the existing level of risk that they be arrested and incarcerated, through diverse situations and processes in which there is a convergence of interpersonal violence, violence exerted on other actors, and structural violence (Gilfus, 2002).

In the case of the woman gang-members, these situations in which victimizations and aggressions are articulated; where they play the roles of victims and in which they participate as agents of violence; which happen at the personal, community and social levels; and in which a variety of actors participate who are not circumscribed to the rivalry between gangs, all constitute the prelude to a criminal career, which often leads to direct contact with the penitentiary system and confinement, as a form of penalization for the crimes they wind up committing. In this study, and due to the characteristics of the participants (women gang-members in custody), it was also possible to have access to this complex phase in the respondents' lives where, as a result of their group dynamics and the committing of some (or several) crimes, they wound up under the control of the State, confined in a new prison. The following chapter is an attempt at presenting the most important findings on this new phase in their lives.

Chapter 5
Life in the Penitentiary:
Prison as a Sentence

Once I get out, I want both feet out… I didn't pay for this experience,
I didn't buy it, I just lived it out.
Woman gang-member ♣

This last section focuses on life in prison; an environment that is not only deficient —particularly so when considering the characteristics of the Salvadoran penitentiary system but, in the words of Valverde (1997), it is *abnormalizing* and it configures the visions and conducts —already maladjusted— of those that live in it. The first block analyzes the women gang-members' appraisal of their membership in the group, from their condition of being deprived of liberty. It also explores the existence of different means of support by the gang in their status as inmates. A second section focuses on their assessment and personal experiences, and the changes they have undergone in their roles due to their imprisonment. A third section raises their needs, both in their condition of internment and the phase of recovering freedom. The chapter closes by presenting their future expectations, conceived by many as mere "dreams" when considering their criminal status, or their status within the gang, once they leave prison.

5.1. Evaluations on Life in the Gang: Now in Prison

[you stay in the gang] because you feel like if I get out now, I'm not going to live… although […] life goes on… and everything, for not thinking things through… I regret a lot of things […] Sometimes I think… after everything… what did I gain? Nothing… I'm worse off than when I started… […] Thinking it over, what do fight over, after all? A street?… I kill, you kill… if we started killing everybody that walks by on the street… if you start thinking, there is no

basic objective to killing one another... there is no fair reason... no matter that
they are the *contrarios* [rivals]...
Woman gang-member ♣

5.1.1. Benefits and Costs of their Group Membership

Seen from their conception of life, entering the gang entailed a series of benefits that centered on symbolic and *identity-related* elements and, later, on economical dividends and the capacity and the possibility of exercising power and "gaining the respect" of peers and outsiders, by means of the use of violence. In a prior section which showed the results of research that preceded this effort, it was mentioned that many women had decided to join the gangs seeking these more "emotional" benefits and profits, compared with the men, who constantly reiterated that *hanging out* had been the main reason for joining. This study confirms that many women entered the gang by way of complex logical connections, where a series of important factors of diverse origin converge, one of which is the personal decision to become a part of these groups. And it is a decision that has had serious costs in their lives, and which many of them —without expressing so directly, in some cases regret.

When contrasting the benefits they have gained and continue to have as members of the gang, with the cost that joining these groups has had in different areas of their lives, it is clear that their membership and trajectory have had, and continue to have a very high price. From their viewpoint, the "costliness" of the experience is not only related to the brutal exposure to, what some of them have called, a senseless violence —characterized this way because, they explained, that they have had "more time to think it over" in prison—, but also by the imminence implied in their membership in these groups, which has taken them to prison (at times, on repeated occasions), and the serious limitation that this imposes on their liberty, and the possibility to spend time with their own.

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In terms of the benefits received in the gang, many allude to the following aspects: the support, appreciation, affection, solidarity, respect (that had to be gradually earned) and, even, the protection and *anonymity* that the gang provides, through which it encourages and legitimizes its members actions. Nevertheless, these statements about the benefits sound *cliché,* like the kind of argument that stems from a whole rhetoric that justifies the actions and decisions of the group; responses that are more frequently given by the active women gang-members. However, even when these women are committed actively and belligerently with their gang, they allude to benefits with mixed emotions, even with a certain disenchantment, when they recognize that the initial solidarity, support and companionship were aspects that often changed and transformed as time passed. On this issue, the discourse of the women from both gangs converged significantly.

> The affection of the homeboys, the value, the fact that they gave me support, understanding... learning to get to know a side of life that society discriminates against... [about the benefits gained from belonging to a gang]
> Woman Gang-member ♠

> I wouldn't know what to tell you, there were so many good things... well, perhaps the respect they always showed me...
> Woman Gang-member ✂

> The way I see it is... I'm here [in prison] because of what I am, because of what I did... [...], I'm far from my children, I'm deprived of my freedom, maybe I've got support, respect, and this and that... at the level of what I am as a gang-member, maybe; but as a person, daughter, mother, it hasn't given me anything...
> Woman Gang-member ⌗

This disenchantment is present among the inactive women gang members, and it is more prevalent among those who were retired, who clearly draw the line between "before and after" in terms of the benefits they received from the gang, from the

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moment they decided to deactivate from the group. Whether it is because they speak from a distant position from the group (which enables them to regain a little perspective), or due to the disenchantment caused by their personal history in the group, or even because of their own reflections brought on by the overabundance of time in prison, many of these women gang-members do not, currently, see their membership in these groups giving them explicit or concrete benefits. As said before, the costs have been high at all levels.

In terms of the family, although a third of them stated that their relations had worsened, the majority considered that they continued to be "just as bad." In some circumstances, years had passed before their parents or responsible-adults realized that they belonged to the gang. In other cases, by *jumping in* they had lost the possibility of rapprochement with their family because home was in the "rival's turf", and due to this situation, their rootlessness and estrangement from their relatives deepened.

It's only brought me misfortune [belonging to the gang]. I'm in prison, without my daughters, I lost my education, my family too, they don't trust me the same way anymore; being discriminated by people…
Woman Gang-member ◎

I was looking for understanding, love, family… what they didn't gave me [her family], protection, but I didn't find it, it's a front, they are no more and no less than the family, you're born and you die alone…
Woman Gang-member ✻

In other areas of their lives, like education or work, their point of view is that belonging to the gang in the past, and now due to the condition of being in prison, has complicated their insertion in the workplace, and the procurement of other types of opportunities. For instance, they point out that the most immediate consequence of having abandoned their studies in the past, and of their present condition as woman gang-

members with criminal records, are the obstacles that this presents to getting work in the near future, and being able to raise their children. Besides, the reality of their situation in prison, the imminence of the confinement and having long sentences prevents them from considering that the educational or occupational deficit can bring on direct consequences, either because some of them were studying in prison or because their immediate priorities and needs are different.

> Leaving this place, that's difficult... I'm in process [being accused of a new crime], but I'm serving 30 years [sentence]... [...] Both things are weighed [being in prison and being a woman gang-member], but being in prison weighs more, because that's a criminal record, and when you apply for a job they always ask for your criminal record...
>
> Woman Gang-member ♠

The costs of belonging to a gang are also reflected in the severance of ties between them and the people that surround them. As mentioned before, the social fabric suffers from ruptures due to the prevalence of violence. This marginalization from their surroundings is evident not only in their family relations, but in their community relations as well. In Chapter 3, mention was made of the way their relationship with people in the community deteriorated progressively as a consequence of their membership in the gang. This estrangement deepens due to the rupture that the gang has made in terms of the residents or civilian people that live in the territories under their control —as a product of the transformations experienced by these groups, and the logic of a criminal economy, which even the residents in the controlled territories cannot be free from, as well as the notions and imaginaries that the people construct about the members of these groups.

One fact on which there was unanimity among the respondents was the concept that some people in their community and society have of them as members of these groups. Although during the interview they were asked about the way they consid-

ered that they were perceived by their community or neighbor-hood, their responses encompassed society in general, including people in their closest contexts: as sexual objects in the gang, as women "for all men" in the gang, as "something strange," in the best of cases. Also, from a point of view that was general-ized among the respondents, they considered that the social judgments and condemnation were harder on them than on the men. Although they did not provide reasons to account for this situation, they were able to establish that it is related to the fact that they are women. The deterioration of the image people have of them stands out again as one of the costs of being part of the group.

… we women are looked down upon, because in the media they make a contro-versy, that the way of *jumping-in* is by having a bunch of men, and this makes them think that you're a whore… they think that we aren't mothers, that we aren't human…

Woman Gang-member ♠

For us, it's worse, it looks worse for a woman to go around with the gangs. Ac-cording to people, we belong to all of them, we're like prostitutes, that is what they think of us, but it isn't that way… In the gang, you earn respect on your own…

Woman Gang-member ♋

…they look down on a woman worse than a man…

Woman Gang-member ♦

One time, a lady told me if everyone [the guys in the clique] had me… it's just that according to people, a woman lives with all of them, and it isn't that way.

Woman Gang-member ⊕

People see us as something strange, because a woman gang-member is not common… people are surprised, they see her as something bad. Sometimes […] they talk to them more than to the men, but not always…

Woman Gang-member ✄

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Contrasting with these points of view, and referring to the benefits provided by the gang, one of the statements that most frequently stands out is the possibility of having earned "the respect," of having constructed a reputation and a position —sometimes of power— within the group. In other words, if respect has been earned, this presupposes that it is not a good or benefit previously conferred by the gang. The cost of earning respect has been high, and many are conscious of this, although they state —or accept— this in a more or less open fashion.

Despite the difficulties, several of the women respondents have opted for staying active in the gang. It is possible that they value the benefits over the costs; or that the social and economic dependence on the group is even greater; or that fear of retaliation for abandoning the group is too overwhelming. Nevertheless, even among many of the active women, the possibility of "calming down" has not been discarded. The problem is that their subjection to the gang —aside from being perceived as subordination or loyalty— dictates that they remain inside. For their part, even if and when they want to *deactivate*, this status also involves a cost, and it can be exacted by the group by way of the use of violence toward the woman gang-member, or by issuing the order that she use violence, by committing some crime. This is a price that many are not prepared or willing to pay.

> There are many that want out [...] they are really afraid. We talk with the *palabreros* at the penitentiaries, but they said no, there was no space to retire. There are many that keep on out of fear. Only the one who is brave enough can get out of there... and risks facing whatever may come.
>
> Retired Woman Gang-member

> ...no, I would never go back to the gang; it's the worst there is... it's just that you've got to think: how could I let another person hit me? Why at home, I didn't even want to wash a single dish, and somewhere else I had to do it, gladly, for a bunch of people... I complained that I got beat at home, and here they

beat the crap out of me [...] underneath all the nice parts, there are immoral
things, things that are not respected, they don't respect anyone else, they
disrespect each other [...] I feel like those of us that looked for the gangs, we
did it to get someone's attention, for someone to feel afraid... but, actually, we
aren't strong, we're so vulnerable...
Retired Woman Gang-member

This subjection to the gang is more damaging to their dignity, because they are
not subject to the gang, but to the men in the gang.
Official at the General Office of Penitentiary Centers (DGCP)

For those that had already become inactive, the evaluation
of the costs of being in the group (in certain circumstances, this
had been already done when they landed in prison), at a certain
moment in time, was more or less important when deciding to
calm down or *deactivate* from the maelstrom of gang life. This
is a decision which, on the other hand, presupposed other enor-
mous costs for some of the women —because this status is not
costless, and the possibility exists of facing the risk that the gang
might pass her the bill in the future. These risks were stressed
by some of the women gang-members in the focus group that
was held with women that are *deactivated* from life in the gang
(Insert 5.1). They explained that this possibility (deactivation) can
be penalized or even reversed[101] later by the gang itself, which
on occasions, has led them to take more drastic decisions.

Insert 5.1
Focus Group

I have been deactivated for two years..., but out of fear that someone from
my own gang might do something to me because I'm not active, I decided
to join other bands [organized crime], and since the band does not put
up with [does not get along with] the gang... [...], that is why they started
to resent me more, because by looking for other bands we started going

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[101] This means that they can order a "reactivation" of the members that have
calmed down.

against the gangs… […] out of the same fear, I opted for crime… […] It's just that, generally, people believe that when you *calm down* life gets lighter [easier]… but the life of a *calmed* gang-member is worse, because you're afraid of the *contrarios* [rivals], and of your own… you have color [are known] in the gang, they can also kill you, it is more difficult…

Participant 3

It's true, there are many in here that say they have left it [the gang], but they really haven't left it… I, sometimes, feel like when I leave [prison], I'm going out to the same thing. I left it before, and I am back in here for something that wasn't worth it…

Participant 4

… yeah, but I think we all have the capacity of leaving this, maybe the ones who say that, haven't had enough with what happened to them, with the experiences they had… […] You just have to ask God to help you, because nobody else can help you…

Participant 1

The previous sequence presents the difficulties and risks that are faced when taking the option for deactivation from the gang. On the other hand, the decision taken by some gang members, men and women, to *calm down* and leave these groups, has to be accompanied by a program offering that, from the State institutions, could make it possible for them to access concrete alternatives for social reinsertion when leaving the gang and prison. The object is to be able to revert the fact that these prisons are —ironically— options for survival for those who actually want to adopt an alternative lifestyle.

5.1.2. The Impact of Violence: the Other Side of Belonging to a Gang

One of the aspects that motivates many of the women, and persistently calls for their reflection, is the evaluation —over time, and as the product of a more critical analysis of the situation— of their lives in the group, and the manner in which they

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perceive and/or used to perceive the gang. In this regard, they reconstruct the difficult situations that they have experienced in the group; they count up not only the group benefits, but rather the damages; they evoke those aspects that they are proud of, but also those they regret; in sum, they think about what this route and trajectory in the gang has meant. And, as the backdrop of all previous evaluations, violence is always present. Violent events and situations were highlighted by women gang-members who are active, calmed-down and retired; by members of the *MS,* as well as *18th Street*; by those in positions of greater or lesser power; by those who have a point of view that was more critical or less so. There were no differences in this regard.

As evidence of the transversal nature of violence, what is evident is that many women qualify as "the toughest" part of their life experience in the gang, precisely that which they regret: someone's death. In the first case, for one third of the respondents, death of one or several of their loved ones has been the most difficult experience in this journey. And for an equal number of the women gang-members, when pointing out some kind of regret, this is related to the use of violence and having taken someone's life.

> [crying]… When he died [her life-partner]…, I died along with him… We lived together for six years, and I think those were the only good ones I've lived. We loved each other a lot, it hurt me too much… […] When the baby girl was about three or four months old, they sent him to prison; after eight months, he came out legally. That day, they killed him… I was with him, right there with him, I was there… I went crazy, I had psychiatric treatment, it hurt me very much…
>
> Woman Gang-member ✗

> [The hardest thing she experienced in the gang] … was my first mission… that day, I cried like never before, I froze… I began to cry. That time the homies understood because it was my first time… then they took me along, just to watch, so I got accustomed to it; look, that time, just watching […] that was the first time I saw someone kill…
>
> Woman Gang-member ❧

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> [she regrets]… having taken someone's life… you realize it over time…
> Woman Gang-member ♠

> My brother, the rivals killed him on a bus… and the worst is that he got to know the gang through me. He lasted six years [in the gang]… they ate his brain quickly, he jumped in… […] I got along well with him, that was real hard [crying]… that's when I analyzed that what I was feeling, that same pain, I had made others feel it…
> Woman Gang-member ☆

In this regard, a third of the women mentioned the changes that the gang has experienced over the last years as an openly negative aspect. Corresponding to the changes that had been detected in prior studies[102], they pointed out the existence of purges and internal power struggles that led to crimes being committed within the group. These facts, from their points of view, cast doubts on the notions of solidarity, fellowship, brother-hood and loyalty that once encouraged them to decide to join (see Chapter 4).

> … among the gang there have been deaths over leadership and money from the sales of drugs, and the damn extortions… Now, there are many people with dirty minds, the norms aren't respected anymore, they changed the rules […] and they changed many, because now there are a lot of dirty minds in the gang…
> Woman Gang-member ❖

> They don't know how they're going to end up, they are killing each other.
> Woman Gang-member ◗

> I started to see arguments about drug turfs [territories], arguments inside the same gang, there was a lot of envy, scrapes with one side and the other; the *palabreros* beat each other up…
> Woman Gang-member ◉

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[102] See Chapter 1.

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Prison life has been one of the parts of their life in the gang that is the most difficult experience to bear. Prison has implied a loss of freedom, and for many of them, the most extreme deracination from their families and/or networks who, in some cases, cannot visit them due to the remoteness of the penitentiary centers from their home community, or they refuse to do so because of the rupture in- or the absence of relations.

Moreover, in prison there tends to be an excess of leisure time; particularly if, as in the case of the Salvadoran penitentiary system, this time is not occupied in participation in institutionally organized workshops, activities and programs. This excess time has often lead to gaining perspective on life; although other women have not experienced this. Nevertheless, their evaluations and balances suggest that being part of the gang does not seem to have, over the passing years and their life-trajectory, the value and weight it once had when they decided to join the group. Some even consider that the violence that at another time served to position themselves within the group, is something they have now come to question. What appears to be very clear is that the passage through prison is not a situation which, in a great number of cases and for those who have been inside the longest, leaves them intact in terms of their past experiences.

5.2. Support While Inside the Prison

> The gang leads you to the grave or to jail. But once you're here, do they remember you?
> Woman Gang-member ◆

Support in difficult circumstances, solidarity, assistance and protection of the significant others, these are issues that are put to test in prison. This is a situation where the needs of the people who have been deprived of freedom are multiplied and the resources are often provided, at least partly, by the relatives. In the case of the gang-members, these needs are often

provided for by the group itself. Nevertheless, in the case of some of the women gang-member interviewed, the possibilities of aid and backing are determined by their condition in the gang. Therefore, according to what they comment, there is a clear division in the support provided for the *active* members, regarding those that have *calmed-down* and/or *retired*. The active women gang-members that wanted to answer this question, which were the majority, confirmed that they received assistance, both of the economic kind and medicine, clothing, even shoes. Some mentioned that the economic help that they received from the gang was destined to their relatives, who were already in charge of their children (in the majority of the cases this was the maternal grandmother). Notwithstanding, not all of the *active* gang members said they received this kind of support from the group, perhaps in order not to go into this issue, or because they do not receive it directly. Conversely, the retired women gang-members discarded, almost unanimously, that they received any kind of help from the gang, and they stressed their abandon by the group.

… out there, you gather money for the ones that are in prison, for the sick, the ones that are in jail… but when I fell in here, nobody helped me… I expected them to do the same for me […] That is how I realized that they don't help you. I fell in here because of a *clavo* [problem] of the *hood*, and at least you expect them to help you out. I waited for the money, but it never came […] That helped me a lot, because it opened my eyes…
Retired Woman Gang-member

Aside from the lack of support from the group, many of these women have no help from close relatives either. At times, they do not even receive visitors due to the distance of the penitentiary centers from their homes and due to their relatives' lack of resources to visit them. This is because entering prison, as Valverde (1997) proposes, implies a sharp separation and isolation from life on the outside, and the progressive loss of family ties and relationships. Contact with the outside takes place within the prison and is mediated and controlled by the system.

Their partners do not provide great support or aid either, which will be shown in a later section. In the majority of cases, this is because they are in prison as the women are; but, it is also due to the absence of support and help that has characterized the relation that many of them have with their partner. The lack of support for the inmates, due to the status of criminality and the territorial dynamics that still prevail among gangs, is also noted by one of the officials that was interviewed:

> … Now the visit [of the family] is more difficult, because there is a greater risk of being attacked outside the penitentiary. The relatives are also at risk. The family visit is less frequent for women than for men. Outside, they are alone; in prison, they are even more alone. The men already got another woman, they have other activities, they go to other penitentiaries…
>
> Official at the General Office of Penitentiary Centers (DGCP)

For those that do not receive support of any kind, the situation is more complicated, because the environment inside the prison —and between the women— is a circumstance that does not contribute to their capacity of enduring the situation in the best way. Contrarily, many women maintain a relationship with their gang-partners that is distant, when it is not openly hostile. The notions of solidarity and comradeship among the members of the gang are also compromised among the women, since many noted the existence of rivalries and envy between them. In terms of their relationships with the rest of the inmates — women gang-members and common inmates, the answers suggest that they are antagonistic and hostile. As a logical result of the "break" due to the decision some women have made to *retire* from the group, these conflicts and antipathy increase when, because of their condition of imprisonment, women gang-members that are active and inactive/retired end up in the same penitentiary[103].

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[103] This is the case at *Ilopango* Penitentiary, where, at least at the time the field-work was being done, active and inactive women gang-members of the same gang lived together, because they were both pregnant or had children younger than the age of five with them in the penitentiary.

In their stories, some describe their relationships with the other inmates (with the "common" inmates and with the peers[104]) on better terms or, at least, they describe them as "easygoing." They did not describe having had any confrontation with them. Some of them mentioned that it is the common inmates that prefer not to deal with the women gang-members. Although this kind of situation cannot be generalized from the interviews that were made, in any case, based on the information obtained, it cannot be sustained that the women gang-members —although they belong to the same gang— constitute a closely knit social fabric within the prison that might serve to contain or attenuate their situation. Many even declared their preference for being alone, *not walking* with the rest, or being involved only in their things.

The problem is that in these prisons, the limited spaces are not only destined to guarantee physical overcrowding, but also what Valverde (1997) calls «psychological overcrowding», which is, "the permanent company of others […] the impossibility of being alone, which makes the air in prison even more stifling" (p. 73-74). In other words, and despite the discourse in which some allude to "the union that they show each other now that they are imprisoned," in their situation of confinement, they are condemned to living together in those alternative social systems, to share their everyday lives and coexist sharing the scant physical and abstract spaces, despite latent or manifest conflict that exists between many of them.

5.3. At a Personal Level: Experiences and Changes in Prison

In an attempt to give expression to the complexity of these women's lives, from the very conception and design of this study, the idea was to obtain not only information on their

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[104] This refers to those women who, without being full members of the gangs, tend to have close ties with members by way of family relations (mothers, sisters) or by being in relationships.

condition as women gang-members in prison, as one of so many group members that have been seized by the system. The study proposes an approach with this group of women in an exclusive manner, in an attempt to present the complexity of their personal lives: the manner in which they have lived and survived in the gang, and their experiences in prison; but also, how they assume those other roles, that is, as daughter, partner, mother, and woman. The issue of their experiences as a couple was looked at in a previous section[105], when they were free. However, this dimension is revisited now that they are in prison. Therefore, in this space, and as part of their evaluations on their life in prison, we addressed their visions of themselves, the exercise of their different roles, and the way in which these could have been affected by their imprisonment. Speaking of themselves and their lives, implies addressing the way in which prison affects them no only as women gang-members and their dynamics in their group, but also as daughters, partners, mothers and women.

Family Relations

In their relations with the family, particularly in their roles as daughters, there are two great tendencies: either they experience an improvement in the relationships, or they become totally disconnected from their families. As for the first premise, the chapter on life *before* joining the gang looked at the worn out and dysfunctional relationship that the majority of the women had with their family or responsible adults. Within the family, nuclear or extended, the relationship with the mother was seriously affected. However, currently, practically half of them declared that the family relationship had improved at least a little, particularly with the mother. This type of situation seems to be mediated by the fact that the mother tends to be the figure that visits them in prison—when she is able to, but, above all, because more frequently she becomes the one responsible for

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[105] Section 4.3 focuses on the role of the partner in entering the gang.

caring for the children of the women gang-members. In this last role, these "grandmothers" exercise an uncustomary maternity from the perspective of the respondents, who note that their mothers carry out a form of "maternity" with their children, which they never experienced. In this sense, there are contradictory feelings: gratitude for the care they give their children, but likewise, resentment considering that they could have had that kind of treatment from their parents, from their mother or from their relatives.

> Me, that is why, me, since they were little I give them love, so that they get accustomed to it, because I never received it from my mother... I say that if that love, if she [the mother] had given me that motherly love, I wouldn't be like this [...]. Today, look how things are, she [the mother] is affectionate to my daughter, and when I see her, I say: "the bad thing is that you're doing it now, but with other people's children"... It's not that I'm jealous of my own daughter, I'm grateful that she takes care of her for me, but that love she shows my daughter, I am grateful for it, but that love, that love was mine!... [crying]
> Woman Gang-member ✫

> ... [in the past] I begged to live and be with her [her mother], I'd rather put up with her than take it from other people... There, she had already changed a little bit, the relationship started being a little better... It's just that, she didn't use to love me; and now, now she does, she's the best mother in the world, because now she takes care of my daughters...
> Woman Gang-member ✂

The other possibility, the hardest, is total disconnection from the family, a very frequent situation. In the section on support during imprisonment, it explains that this situation is due to the fact that many relatives lack the resources for transportation, given that the penitentiaries are far from their homes; or it is due to the bureaucracy that implies getting through the red-tape in order to enter or, in many cases, a continuation of prior disconnection from the family that may have come about upon their joining the gang.

… the pain is when visiting time comes and nobody comes through that door…
Being here all alone […] … all this time, I have never received visitors. I'm here,
I live in the place I am, this is my home, but nobody visits me, only my aunt came
once, but I'm completely disconnected…

Woman Gang-member ♣

… I'm further away from my family… When I was on the street, I kept track,
even though they were not aware of it […] Here, it's more difficult, I don't know
if they have enough to eat, if they've gotten sick, if they're missing something,
because I can't see them… […] … When you see that others have visitors, you
get a great big empty feeling, like you want to be with yours.

Woman Gang-member ♠

Nobody comes to see me here, my life-long partner is in prison […]; I don't
know what it's like to get a visit…

Woman Gang-member ✿

I've survived for seven years, by the grace of God; neither my gang nor my
family have come to see me…

Woman Gang-member ☙

In the Salvadoran penitentiary slang —or at least in the
penitentiaries that were visited, these women are called *rusas*
(Russians), which is a name to indicate the absence of visitors
or contact with the outside. This situation is particularly difficult
and foretells a forthcoming lack of resources or support upon
recovering their freedom. In fact, a progressive loss of ties is one
of the many psycho-social consequences of penitentiary seclu-
sion (Valverde, 1997; Zaitzow, 2004). This situation presupposes
severe remoteness and isolation from life on the outside and,
added to this, the constriction of their interpersonal relation-
ships and deepening deracination. This is even more serious in
the Salvadoran case, where women are put away in one of four
prisons that are set up for them, out of a total of 20 peniten-
tiaries. On many occasions, these are a considerable distance
away from the place of residence of their family networks, or,
in the case of the gangs, they are prisons situated in "enemy

territory", which implies that the family member that could visit them is also exposed to great personal risk.

Relationships as a Couple

On the other hand, many of the women gang-member respondents declared that they had been abandoned by their partners or life-long companions, because they are in prison, because "they got together" with someone else, because of sheer lack of interest, or because they were already single-mothers before being put in prison. The phenomenon of being abandoned by their partners, in broader terms, is very common. Actually, Antony (2007) notes that "in women's prisons, it is common for the visitors to be other women, something that is unthinkable in male prisons, where visitors are hardly ever men" (p. 77). This situation also applies to many women gang-member respondents, which increases the complexity of the conditions they live in.

I got sent to jail for three months; I got busted… and [her partner] never came to see me, never sent me a single letter… that's when I started realizing things…
Then, I got out, and he got busted… I did go see him… he was expecting me, he knew I was going to come… I didn't take the baby, I don't like exposing her […] Later, they transferred him to [another penitentiary]…, and they told me he had been killed…
I had to go to hospitals, the coroners, the morgue … […] it turns out that the homie that told me he had been killed was wrong, but I spent that whole night going around with a homegirl, all worried… then, in [name of penitentiary], he decided to go off with another woman… I talked to him, I told him things, but I was tired… I grabbed my things, I left the tribe, and I never returned…
[…] I distrust men… being here [in prison] is totally like an island…
Woman Gang-member ♠

A little while ago I called him [her partner]. You need a lot of help in here, I need it for my personal things. I asked him to help me out, but he said it wasn't his problem. I just told him, as soon as I get out, I just need him to give me a divorce. I haven't called him, what for?
Woman Gang-member ♦

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… [the worst part about being locked up] is being disconnected from my kids, and now, since I'm alone, right?, I can't force him [the father of her children] to bring them here… […] In here, I can't communicate with my kids… they live with their dad, and he is already living with someone else…

Woman Gang-member ❋

With my girl's father, I was faithful for about 5 years, even though he was in prison… I used to visit him at …, I used to take the little girl, and then he was nice to me, but it was 'cause he needed things in there… But now that I'm in here, my brother told me he got married to someone else… and it's just that, I went to discover him, I went to visit, and just as I arrived, he was coming out of the [private] visiting room with the woman… look, I hit him, I hit both of them, him and her; he just froze up because he had never seen me that way… and then, yeah, I left him for good…

Woman Gang-member ☆

Now, my partner, the father of my second daughter, is already with someone… that hurt me… but it didn't affect me that much, it's just that it's normal. He is in [name of penitentiary] now.

Woman Gang-member ✄

I stayed with him, right? I used to go see him […] [after some time] I didn't go and see him anymore… I used to go, mostly I used to go by bus. There was the other gang there; they watched me, they had me posted [watched] right? Like we say, right? That was when I made a decision, I started to pay for a car… but I didn't like it, you spend money to go and see him, and he wasn't grateful. I didn't get any affection from him. I stopped going to see him, and I stayed alone at home.

Woman Gang-member ≋

The conditions of distance and lack of support on the part of their partners are not very different from the situation they were in before entering prison. Many cannot count on their own families; neither, at times, on the gang; and most cannot count on their partners. Therefore, when they are asked about the way they perceive their life as "a couple" in their present condi-

tion, many have a series of ambivalent feelings. Some recall the different episodes of their lives; some with different partners, others with the same one. As for those that retain the same partner, the fact that they are incarcerated —both of them, generally— has an effect on the relationship due to the lack of communication that it imposes on them.

Among those that were separated or had no partner at the moment of arrest, there prevails a feeling of abandon and total remoteness that can be seen in some of the previous statements. However, there were three women who openly stated that they had maintained —and in some cases, continue to maintain— a lesbian relationship, currently in their prison life. Although the existence of homosexual relationships is a reality in the Salvadoran penitentiary system[106], it is also an issue that is not dealt with and that is enhanced by the high overpopulation and inhuman overcrowding in which the inmates have to live in this country[107]. In the gang, this issue is not only proscribed, but it is also penalized in extreme ways, in a significant display of homophobia. However, this does not mean that it does not take place, or that it does not exist —albeit in clandestine forms— among its members. The following fragments clearly express how one of the respondents experienced these "changes;" they likewise show the experiences, and grave consequences, that this could have brought on for many of them in the gang.

> [Being deprived of liberty]… has changed my life… I have done things that I never expected I would do, like fall in love with another woman, and it happens…
> I lived with her about 3 years, we were together here, but she was set free. And I already knew it; it's just that when people leave, it's not the same anymore.

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[106] Personal interviews with Officials in the penitentiary centers that were visited.

[107] Based on the most recent data from July of this year (General Office of Penitentiary Centers [DGCP], 2009), the overcrowding density in each penitentiary ascends to more than 500% in the *Ilopango* prison; to practically 450% in the *San Miguel* prison; to more than 400% in the *Quezaltepeque* prison; and to around 200% in the *Sensuntepeque* prison (see Table 1.9, section 1.2.3).

She went back to her family and her children; she's Civilian [a non gang-mem-
ber], and I have a green light[108] for it [having had the relation]…
She left about two and a half years ago […] She was my moral support, it was
a very strange stage in my life…
I didn't like women, but it just came out that way… one time, we kissed; then
it started becoming a relationship… She was really supportive of me, she did
things that not just anyone does for you. We were kind to each other, it was
mutual […] One time, when I was with her, a lady that had just got in told me
how could I do that, and whatever… now, look, 5 years she's been living with
another woman… here they celebrate their anniversaries as a couple… […]

It's just that, look, women are more understandable [understanding]… I feel
that, as a homosexual, I've learned that I don't need a man to get ahead. I used
to feel that I did, because it was the most normal thing; but here, here you see
other things… Now, this makes me understand [a homosexual gang-mate she
had in the gang] even more…
Retired Woman Gang-member

If estrangement from the family, abandon by their part-
ners or the changes experienced in this role were not enough,
maternity is one of the most complex and melancholy issues
to be dealt with. Also, it is one of those roles that encompasses
the complexity of their humanness, in that it allows them to
experience a series of important feelings and sensations that
are contrasted and placed in juxtaposition —in uncommon
ways— with the manner in which they have exercised their role
as agents of violence within the gang.

The Experience of Maternity

In general terms, the women's evaluation of maternity was
extremely positive. Many considered that it is the best —and at
times, the only— gift life has offered them. However, despite this
consideration, the majority have lived their maternity in solitude
due to the deteriorated relationship with their partners, and/or

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[108] Death sentence in the gang.

due to their abandon —because the man abandons the relation-ship, or because he was arrested or already in prison. There was only one woman gang-member who said she had experienced her pregnancy with the emotional and economic support of her partner. The others, despite their initial joy, went at it on their own, or had a bad experience.

… I felt really happy [when she found out she was pregnant], I wanted a girl… the father of the girl was also really happy, but he told me that if it turned out to be a boy, it wasn't his. He didn't want a son, because, he said that if it was a boy, it would turn out to be just like him; if it was a girl, he said that they can be intimidated more quickly… *macho* man things […] The worst thing is that when I was pregnant, he told me several times to get an abortion, mostly because he thought it was going to be a boy […], and it's because they used to tell him: "you're going to have a boy, and *then* you're going to pay for everything you've done"…
Woman Gang-member ✮

… it's been really rough […] They busted the father of my children; he had an arrest warrant; I also had an arrest warrant, I was pregnant […] My baby was born here; I got out after 3 months. He got a bunch of years, and me, what was I to do? […], I had to take care of him in prison, I had to take care of the babies, the gang, it was too much […] He helped me with money, but that was all […] The children are the only good thing I have; it's all been suffering… I've never been happy; we don't know what happiness or peace is, I don't know if that happens someday…
Woman Gang-member ⚲

Being a mother is the nicest thing there is, but there is a great feeling of guilt as well […] Me, in the gang, I learned, it has taught me, how to detect the signals that something can be wrong [with her son]. Me, I talk to him a lot, I tell him that when he's bigger I'm going to explain everything to him… Look, it's death to me that he likes to put stamps on his arms, and he likes the tattoos, and I tell him that that's all bad… One time, listen, he made a big [number] on his arm, and he told me he wanted to be [a member of the gang]… I almost had a heart attack… I cleaned him up, and I told him: "That's bad, What do you

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want?, Do you want to go to jail, or something?" Then, when I said that, he told
me: "You're bad, right?", "Why?", I asked him. So he goes: "Because only the
people in jail are bad"...
Woman Gang-member ⊛

Now is when my daughters need me, not when I get out, if I ever get out of
here...
Woman Gang-member ✄

In a previous section it was mentioned that women could
work, as long as they did not neglect their activities in the group.
This also goes for maternity. Many mentioned that although
the gang had some consideration of the ones that had chil-
dren (such as economic aid, or in-kind, or exoneration from
gang dues, in some cases), they still had to comply with their
functions as part of the group, participate in the activities and
give their collaboration in whatever the group needed, as part
of their obligations. On this issue, the women gang-members
have —just like so many women in society— to divide their
time into several moments, and practice motherhood during the
"marginal" times that the gang allows for this. This fact confirms
the hypothesis that the gang, after a certain point in the life of
some of the women, passes from being a *primary* group to
being a *functional* group, and has to comply with the character-
istics that this implies, among which the most noteworthy is that
certain actions become mandatory (Martín-Baró, 1989*b*). This
issue will be dealt with again in a later section.

By the same token, when a woman gang-member enters
prison, she is severed from her children in a drastic and absolute
manner, in a process that is similar to the one described in the
loss of ties and social relations with the outside world. Above all,
this is so because the children depend on an adult to take them
to visit their mothers. For women in this situation, the feelings of
loneliness, sadness and despair are stronger. According to their
own statements, being separated from their children —in the
case of the women that are mothers (14 out of the 16 respon-
dents), is the most difficult part of their life in prison. In connec-

tion with the inmates that are mothers —and the women gang-members are no exception to this, according to Antony (2007) mothers in prison, in general feel that they are "bad mothers" because they abandoned their children, and argue that their absence will do irreversible harm to their development and their relationship with them.

> One time he got mad when he came [her 5 year old boy] because I scolded him, and he threw the soda all over me, and when my mother told him to respect me, that I was his mother, he told me: "You're not my mom, you don't buy me shoes, you don't buy me clothes, when they poke me [when he gets a vaccination shot], you're not there; in the pictures, you aren't there; you don't give me my bottle, because you are in jail, that's why"... I just kept quiet, listening to everything he has inside... [...] "Mothers are the ones that read you stories at night, they're the ones that go to the hospital with you, and you don't"... I told him that when he got bigger I'd explain everything, that there are people that make mistakes, and they pay a big price... and then, he told me: "I'll forgive you for being in here..."
>
> Woman Gang-member ✳

> I'm not playing my part as a mother, I can't give her my love, affection, care, I don't watch her grow, what she's learning, her fears, what she likes, what she doesn't like, I can't help her... I don't know much about her...
>
> Woman Gang-member ♠

Some of the respondents had their babies with them in prison (they were sought out for having this specific characteristic at the *Ilopango* Prison).[109] This is a very complex situation, because the infants are subjected to the same privations and

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[109] The Salvadoran Penitentiary Law, article 70, allows inmates to have their children living with them inside the enclosure, provided they are five years old, or younger: "Women will be placed in facilities that are adequate for their personal condition, separate from the men. The prison facility must have special units to attend to pregnant inmates, and those that have given birth. Measures are to be taken to insure that the birth takes place in an institution outside the prison facility, and in case the child is born within the penitentiary facility, this should not be noted as a circumstance in the child's birth certificate. Women will be allowed to have their children living with them, provided that they are five years

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precarious conditions the women live in. The mother's punishment is extended to the child that lives with her, because the mother and child relationship is a social and cultural pairing (Rodríguez, 2004). This conflict has no adequate solution: if the child remains in prison with the mother, it is incarcerated as she is; if not, the child experiences the loss of the mother in daily life. This is a highly complex situation that implies the need for addressing the situation of the unprotected children that live with their parents in a correctional system that has multiple and serious shortages, such as is the case of the Salvadoran system (Office of Human Rights Ombudsman [PDDH], 2009). The irony, in the case of the women gang-members that can have their infants with them in prison, is that because they are in prison, they have more time and liberty to exercise their maternity.

> … [as a mother] I'm a thousand times better off… I have more time for them, I'm not stressed out. In the gang, when they call you, I had to drop everything, it didn't matter if at that time I had made plans to do something else with my children; this happened to me several times… One time, we were going to eat out at a pizza place, they called me to a meeting, and I had to go. I left with heart in hand, because I left them with their best suit on [all excited about the outing]… although I paid and my mother took them, they would have rather I take them… […]
> [the experience as a mother inside the penitentiary] helps me more, right?… 'cause, sometimes, I just stare at him, and I tell myself he's here with me… he gives me life, gives me patience, gives me faith that I'm going to leave this place […] Sometimes, at night, I forget I'm here when I hug him and kiss him… I think if I didn't have him here, the days would seem longer to me…
> Woman Gang-member ☆

> In here, you sleep with them; here, they hassle, they cry, but you have more time to be a mother to them. Here you can take them out to play, since they're

old, or younger. To this effect, at the women's prison facilities a unit will be organized as a childcare center." (Article 70, Penitentiary Law of El Salvador).

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just with you… but it's not like having them when you're outside, where you can take them to the park, to the games…
Woman Gang-member ✾

Now, I'm with her [her baby]. For me, it's like a dream, it's so exciting to have her here, have something I love close to me. But it's hard to know that they can take her away from me, when she's five years old, they can take her from me… […] it's really awful in here […] they, the babies, are also prisoners…
Woman Gang-member য়

Exercising maternity within the correctional system is a situation that generates a sensation of hope and joy, it is a sort of "truce" that is relatively ephemeral, in that this possibility has a very concrete temporal limitation. For those who do not have, or did not have this possibility, maternity is experienced from a distance, with a strong feeling of guilt, and certain resignation that this remoteness can be translated into a rupture in their relationship with their sons and daughters.

At a Personal Level

Finally, the personal experience inside prison. The answers to this question were interesting, not just in terms of the content, but the reaction of some of the respondents: amazement, or at times, surprise at the question about the way the situation of being deprived of liberty affected them as a woman[110]. And, aside from one specific case, it was not that they had a hard time understanding the question, but rather —aside from the possibility that they might not have wanted to give a response— perhaps it made them ponder or express something that they do not usually speak about. Therefore, approximately one third of them did not give concrete answers. However, from the statements that came as a response to this specific question, particularly with what could be understood

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[110] The question was as follows: In what way do you think being in prison has changed you as a woman?

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from their life stories in prison, it can be deduced that this was one of the most difficult situations they have had to go through.

In these places, there's time to think… Here, I began to work, to do embroidery work, at the bakery […] … I wasn't used to earning money through my work. Now, that is how I support myself, and I keep struggling… I think that when I get out I'm going to be more mature…
Woman Gang-member ଔ

Being here […] you feel like [you are] a load, or —I might as well say it— like you're in the way… forgotten by society.
Woman Gang-member ♠

At times I feel fine, outside they might've killed me; here nothing can happen to me…but, at times, you get desperate to get out of here, because you're all closed up in here. I feel fine here. God helps me, I ask Him not [to let me] make the same mistake when I leave.
Woman Gang-member ◆

… a lot, it affected me a lot…; during the first years, it didn't, but since a few months ago it has affected me more… I have always had a commanding voice […] but now, I don't even have that.
Woman Gang-member ✳

I've let my looks go. They don't let anything of that sort in; hair treatment, it's really ugly…
Woman Gang-member ⛓

There are some answers that are more "introspective" than others; some more sincere than others. There are responses that allude to some changes that they experienced, to "conclusions that you come to from living in prison," but they are less frequent. Some note their sensation of "safety" inside the penitentiary, because being in the prison has given them more chances of surviving problems with the rivals or with their own gang. Others, however, highlight changes in their

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emotional state, which is worse —as is the case with several of the women gang-members that were interviewed— when leisure time prevails, and time is not put to use in any activity. Notwithstanding, all of them —even the ones that refused to answer— transmitted the impact that prison has had on their lives. Actually, is prison's characteristic as an all-encompassing system (Valverde, 1997), that encloses all the inmates, be they women gang-members or not.

5.4. Needs Inside and Out of Prison

This section deals with the needs the women gang-members have, both in their condition deprived of liberty, as well as when they recover their freedom in the long term. Therefore, here the limitations and severe deficiencies of the system — which have already been gathered and noted in volumes dedicated to that issue[111]— are articulated in the statements by the women gang-members and the authorities at each correctional center.

5.4.1. Needs Inside Prison

As for the issue of **the needs of the women inside the correctional centers**, the results of this study confirm the serious problems facing the penitentiary system, which have been presented, particularly by the Human Rights Ombudsman (Hro-government institution: [*Procuraduría para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos*—Pddh]). Its complaints, presented in its annual reports, have not been heeded by the appropriate authorities throughout the last decade. Shielded behind the rhetoric of security used for at least the last five years, justified by notions of prison as the fair and deserved punishment for criminal acts, and fueled by the media's handling of the violent

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[111] For more information, see Flores and García (2006); Human Rights Ombudsman (Pddh, 2009); Navas et al (1996); *Quetzalcoatl* Foundation (2009); and the Hro´s annual reports on the status of people deprived of liberty in the country.

situation in the country and its most visible protagonists, the of lack of attention —or blatant disregard— the incumbent governments show for the penitentiary situation in the country, is demonstrated by a long standing crisis.

A special report on the situation of human rights of women deprived of liberty in the country, and of the boys and girls that live with them, was recently presented by the Human Rights Ombudsman (HRO, 2009). This report provides a detailed account of the increasing and complex crisis, showing the constant requests this institution has made in its reports and which, since practically the beginning of the decade, allude to the need to address the crisis in the penitentiary system, based on a comprehensive approach of the situation of public safety in the country. Following is a brief extract from the report this institution presented back in 2001:

> There is no possibility of solving the problems of the penitentiary sub-system unless, at the same time, solutions are sought for the other sub-systems, including the action by the institutions that are in charge of implementing social policies aimed at alleviating the conditions of the most helpless sectors (from HRO Report, 2009; p. 11)

During the first years of the current decade, this organism noted "the emphasis on safeguarding the internal security of penal institutions, to the detriment of real efforts to ensure the rights of the men and women inmates" (*ibíd.*, p. 11), as well as overcrowding, as some of the most immediate effects of the crisis that continued on the rise. It has been a decade since these initial warnings. Presently, the inmate population has doubled (from a population of little over 10,100 persons in prison in June 2002, to over 21,000 seven years later). Additionally, the conditions in the system have deteriorated to extreme levels, which has maintained a constant violation of the rights of the men and women inmates, and minimized the possibilities of effective intervention in terms of rehabilitation and social

integration. The needs that the women inmates noted —as well as some officials that were interviewed— coincide with the afore-mentioned grievances and restrictions of rights.

The situation in all of the penitentiaries is very critical, and poses a great disadvantage for the women that are serving their sentence. There are also many needs, as a result of the severe shortcomings in the system. In order to present the most frequent responses on this issue, the evidence of this situ-ation taken from the Human Rights Ombudsman report, the information gathered in this study, and based on some of the multiple effects and consequences of these contexts, a matrix was created to consolidate all of the previous information. It is shown in Table 5.1 in condensed form.

Table 5.1. Principal needs noted by Women Gang-members deprived of liberty and by Officials interviewed, and conditions at the penitentiaries visited

Priority Needs	Statements by respondents	Statements by officials	Conditions at the prisons (based on data from DGCP (2009); HRO (2009) and individual interviews with officials)	Effects & consequences
Over crowded Prison	"... in the sector there are about 60 of us, mix of civilian & homegirls...there are two small rooms with 5 bunk-beds in each room; the majority are used in pairs: 2 on top (in the upper bunk), 2 below. The majority sleeps outside the rooms (about 40)... When it rains, everything gets wet 'cause the drains don't work, it floods all over... The ones that enter first grab the beds in the rooms, but it's better outside (out in the open), because that way at least you lie awake looking at the sky and the stars, even though you get wet..." Woman gang-member, *Quezaltepeque* Prison. "...many sleep in cave [space under the bunk-bed], but they have mats..." Woman gang-member, *San Miguel* Prison. "... for example, the space. We're really overcrowded, there are over 200 women in there..." Woman gang-member, *Sensuntepeque* Prison. "... the mats are like sheets... put two beds together, 5 women can sleep on them; put together 3, 7 can sleep..." Woman gang-member, *Sensuntepeque* Prison.	"... the physical space... the overcrowding generates many problems, communicable diseases, sexually transmitted diseases ... [...] There are cases of HIV-AIDS, terminal cancer..." Sub-director, *Quezaltepeque*. Also noted in interviews with officials in the three other prisons.	In July 2009, the penitentiary population came to 21,032 people deprived of liberty (DGCP, 2009) in a system with installed capacity for 8,100 inmates. This implies an overcrowding of over 12,900 people, and a density of almost 260%. In the case of the prisons visited, and based on the institutional data, the precariousness of the situation is evident: • **Ilopango Prison**: 1,147 inmates, all women. Top Capacity: 220 persons; Overcrowding: 927; Density: 521.4%. • **Quezaltepeque Prison**: 894 inmates, where 115 are women. Top Capacity: 200 persons; Overcrowding: 694 inmates; Density: 447%. This penitentiary was built for men. • **San Miguel Prison**: 808 inmates, where 182 are women. Top Capacity: 180 persons; Overcrowding: 628 persons; Density: 449%. This penitentiary was built for men. • **Sensuntepeque Prison**: 428 inmates, where 180 are women. Top Capacity: 220 persons; Overcrowding: 208; Density: 195%. This penitentiary was constructed for men. On this issue, the HRO (2009) notes that the cells where the women sleep are not properly ventilated due to the elevated number of occupants; the halls and spaces in the prisons that are not destined for keeping the women deprived of liberty, are used for their accommodation, seriously curtailing their movement. Likewise, this institution stated that, due to the lack of availability in terms of beds and space, some of the pregnant women sleep on mats on the floor at *Ilopango* prison (*ibid*, p. 89).	Inasmuch as the architectural structure of the prison "is not conceived for the function of a recovery intervention, but in terms of security, and preventing escape" (Valverde, 1997; p. 72), the physical environment has an important impact on shaping the way in which people adapt to them. Among some of the consequences this author notes (Valverde, 1997): • Lack of personal space and no possibility of being alone (physical and psychological overcrowding). • *Abnormalizing* environment: Architectural layout is aimed at domination and control of the person, as well as emphasis on security and the predominance of the penitentiary regime over the possibilities of intervention. • Depersonalization & progressive deterioration of common areas: lack of the concept of «habitable» spaces, it is designed to avoid escape and project enclosure. • Somatic Consequences: muscle cramps, ill-temper,

Priority Needs	Statements by respondents	Statements by officials	Conditions at the prisons (based on data from DGCP (2009); HRO (2009) and individual interviews with officials)	Effects & consequences
Problems with the infrastructure & utilities	"Currently, the problem we have is that when it rains, like today, all the water comes down on us because there is no roofing, and what we have is a tarp, and its rotting, and the water gets through in the sector… and gets all over everything… […] This director helps us a lot […] It was his initiative to have the floor done in concrete, 'cause before it was just dirt…" Woman gang-member, *San Miguel* Prison. "… When we came, there was no light in the sector; the dorms were stuffed with mosquitoes; there was no furniture, not even a chair, just the beds… We put up the money to put in the power wires. We went without light for several days… […] The sinks were clogged up. […] We needed tarps so that the rain wouldn't get in and although there is a roof, since the asbestos material is broken, the water gets in…" Woman gang-member, *Quezaltepeque* Prison.	"Let's talk about one (need) that to my mind is the greatest, and that is infrastructure. In fact, there are many needs, but the infrastructure is a fundamental part of the penitentiary […] The roof… well, the infrastructure…" Director, *San Miguel* Prison. "Another shortage that is well known is the infrastructure. Not enough capacity to house them all with the population constantly growing. There is overcrowding […] The water situation is complicated, there isn't enough water pressure and the cistern doesn't fill up. The prison has three story buildings but due to the low water pressure, it only gets to the first floor […] The number of mothers with children entering prison is on the rise. We have a space assigned for this sector and we can't overload that space. The children don't deserve that". Director, *Ilopango* Prison.	Among some of the noteworthy characteristics in prison infrastructure, the HRO (2009) highlighted: • *Ilopango* **Prison**: the only facility in the country designed for women; the building is old, it needs maintenance work; ventilation problems in the cells; a significant number of women sleep on mats and on the floor (around 400) in each of the three sectors. Some have no assigned place or personal space, they share a bed with another inmate (p. 24). The water distribution is rationed by sectors, according to a schedule; there is only one basketball court to carry out improvised sport activities; there is a nursery section. • *San Miguel* **Prison**: the building was constructed in the early part of the last century to hold only men. Only one out of six cells is assigned to holding women. The same space houses inmates who have been sentenced and those that are only under temporary arrest. The area seems orderly and clean. It consists of a collective dormitory with a deteriorated roof where water filters in. Its dimensions are no greater than ten by five meters, and there are 128 women sleeping there in bunk beds (two in each space) & 63 sleeping on the ground or under the beds. They spend their time in the yard all day. There is a room that houses a sewing workshop. There is no major problem with the water service; there is a sports court where they can go on weekends. • *Quezaltepeque* **Prison**: was built to contain men. Destined for reclusion of members of the *18th Street* gang. The women inmates are located in one sector (that is less than one quarter of the building), regardless of their legal status, and the nursery is in another section. This area where the women inmates are located is a single space that can hold 24 people (but actually holds 101); the bunk beds are located in the halls; others sleep on the floor. There is a	and personal image neglected. • Psycho-social Consequences: altercations in the relations with officials of the institution, and inter-personal relations; absence of control of one's life, no expectations of the future; no sense of responsibility; loss of personal ties; alteration in affection; changes in the use of language (use of insider terms and use of informative language rather than communicative language). To this type of situations we could add the increase in unhealthiness due to scarcity of water; the possibility of contagion of disease due to the high level of overcrowding, particularly in the case of the children that live with the inmates.

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Priority Needs	Statements by respondents	Statements by officials	Conditions at the prisons (based on data from DGCP (2009); HRO (2009) and individual interviews with officials)	Effects & consequences
Problems with the infrastructure & utilities	"...there is a bad smell in the bathroom, there is no water and the bathroom is very close to the beds, and the bad smell comes to where you are... the food, it's sort of okay... the big problem I see is the water, there is a shortage..." Woman gang-member, Sensuntepeque Prison.	The aforementioned are problems also noted by the Technical Sub-director at Sensuntepeque and the Technical Sub-director at Quezaltepeque.	dormitory, but there is not enough ventilation. The water is rationed per sector, according to an established schedule. There is a soccer field and a basketball court. • **Sensuntepeque Prison:** this was constructed and designed for reclusion of men. Assigned to the imprison members of the *Mara Salvatrucha* Gang. The prison has no nursery section. The inmates are located in a single sector, regardless of their legal status. The intern women occupy one of the sectors, which is made up of three dormitories without enough ventilation. A large number sleep under the bunk beds and on mats. There is little cleanliness and it is unkempt. There is a small yard, where a great number of women remain all day. There is an indoor-soccer arena.	
Lack of programs for vocational training and/or rehabilitation policies specifically aimed at women	"I like reading, I like books by Roque Dalton [Salvadoran poet/journalist], and I used to be able to read them; they don't let them through anymore. In one search, they took all my books, they said that kind of material was forbidden because it lead to the destabilization of the prison'... I like the books of poetry, on testimony [...], but you can't borrow them, you can only read them there [at the library] [...] ...[women are in need of] job opportunities, to show we can be useful... when I watch the news, I see such a facade [...] One time, the INSAFORP came to offer a cosmetology course... when outside courses come, they don't put gang members in those courses.	"... It's necessary to strengthen the rehabilitation programs, open more space to vocational training. We have to knock on more doors with the cooperation agencies. It's necessary to strengthen the budget assigned to the General Office [of Penitentiary Centers]. The ongoing training for prison guards, the technicians, the administration of the penitentiary system [...] We have to improve the system scientifically. Humanism has to be first. Prisons have to go from being a place of suffering to a space for reflection. The system dreams of the prison not being the first alternative for social punishment, but the last. We should see the prison as a place of passage in life of the interns, and not for long term stay. We have to strengthen the search	In this regard, the HRO report (2009) notes: • **Ilopango Prison:** there is a school with six classrooms, with classes from primary to high school; there is an incipient library with basic literature. As for vocational-training activities, they are destined for inmates with a criminal sentence. Institutional Authorities claim there are workshops on embroidery, dressmaking, and padding, vegetable gardening and dairy products, cosmetology, *piñata* making and baking. However, there is a noticeable lack of activity in all sectors. Raw material is provided by the prison, the inmates or NGOs that support these activities; this is one of the principal obstacles noted in the development of productive activities. They are able to study and work at the same time, if they are suitable. The products they manufacture are sold at an institutional store, and there are concrete cases of economic remuneration (janitorial and institutional store). • **San Miguel Prison:** there is a school with 6 classrooms, and it functions as a co-ed (men and women in the classes). Grades go from primary	The lack of education and work training are not only one of the most important deficits that the detainees bear in their process of maladjustment (Valverde, 1997), but they become a serious problem for people deprived of liberty when trying to enter to the job market and productive life, once they recover their freedom. In the case of the women, this is more relevant because they tend to leave the system with low educational levels —many women gang-members had not made high school yet, which has a significant impact in the continuity of their processes of marginalization and social exclusion. Most of the time, early educational failure is followed by a deficient employment status.

Priority Needs	Statements by respondents	Statements by officials	Conditions at the prisons (based on data from DGCP (2009); HRO (2009) and individual interviews with officials)	Effects & consequences
Lack of programs for vocational training and/or rehabilitation policies specifically aimed at women	"They have given trainings to learn to sew on a machine, to make things out of bamboo, but they don't put women gang-members in there. Give us training in something we like!. Out there, nobody lives off of embroidering all day… One time there was a course on baking, but it only lasted 6 months […] The cosmetology one they do in here, so, things like that… because with a diploma you can do something outside…" Woman gang-member, *Ilopango* Prison. "… They won't let us come to the workshops so we don't have problems with the civilians …" Woman gang-member, *Ilopango* Prison. "… We lack workshops, that is something useful, to have a diploma on file, it helps with the judges, to do something different, and entertain your mind […] Here there are no workshops, nothing…" Woman gang-member, *Quezaltepeque* Prison. "We work to amuse ourselves… but, at times, there is no material. […] There is support, a bakery… […] There are activities where we participate."	for social re-education…" Technical Sub-director, *Sensuntepeque* Prison. "… These people in the bakery, these are people who have no visitors, nobody comes to see them; so we have some support, then, for them. We pay them for their work, the profit is theirs, they divide up the utilities because they have no visitors, they can't just ask someone… […] My idea is that inmates not lose responsibility as parents, and if it's a woman, she shouldn't lose responsibility as a mother […] We try to keep them busy so that they don't think of things that can damage them psychologically. So this helps the prison dynamism a lot…" Director, *San Miguel* Prison. "… There are no women in the trust-phase, we only have one man in the trust-phase. We should have more women than men in the trust-phase…" Technical Sub-director, *Quezaltepeque* Prison. "The women are different from the men in this sense [interest in participating in programs]… They try to get into programs; as soon as they finish one they ask to enter another. They look for workshops, programs, treatment, go to school. Inversely, the men, you have to	to high school. As for work activities, in the interior of the yard where they are kept, there are several workshops; two have their own space (dressmaking and bakery). Both workshops work two shifts, to have greater participation of the inmates. The administration noted that they also have padding, bakery, *piñata* making, embroidery, making stuffed toys, sewing, and creating objects out of raffia palm. The raw material is provided by CARITAS, which supports these activities. At the time of the visit, the inmates were seen working. They can study and work at the same time, if they are suited for it. The manufactured goods are sold at an institutional store, and/or through the visitors. • *Quezaltepeque* Prison: there is a 5 classroom school. The authorities noted that around 90 inmates attend different levels of elementary education. There is an incipient library, but the material is for on-site reading only. The prison has no space for vocational training activities; there is only one baking workshop, attended by only some of the inmates. It was found that there was general inactivity during the greater part of the day; the majority lie around, due to the lack of space. A very small number of them do needlepoint/*crochet* activities, embroidery and make stuffed animals. The only ones who are paid are the ones that work in food services. • *Sensuntepeque* Prison: there are 2 classrooms, where three levels of middle school are taught, and a long distance high school program. There is an incipient library with basic literature for on-site reading only. As for vocational training activities, there is a lot of leisure time and general lack of activity among inmates. The majority do no work; there are no spaces for workshops. Some do needlepoint, embroidery, or handcrafts; but this is not part of any systematic activity. The only functioning workshop is dressmaking with fewer than 30 women participating.	In this regard, the level of vocational training or occupation activities reveal clearly the sexist orientation of the system. The women are "kept busy" with activities that do little more than perpetuate the gender imbalances in society, giving primary importance to domestic activities (embroidery, padding, making stuffed toys, janitorial work, etc.) over technical or vocational training that would allow the women to receive education that is not set in the activities that they do, in terms of traditional distribution of gender roles. This type of activity does not prepare them for life, neither for reinsertion in the increasingly demanding job market once they leave prison. There is a risk, therefore, that many of them again become economically dependent on their partner or on the gang. As Valverde (1997) says: "If the goal of prisons, at least according to the law, is the recovery of the inmate, vocational training ought to be one of the fundamental elements in the intervention" (p. 83). Also vocational-training is fundamental in preparing people in confinement, it provides them with an activity to fill the excess leisure time there is while in prison, thus minimizing the risks that come from having a sizable

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Priority Needs	Statements by respondents	Statements by officials	Conditions at the prisons (based on data from DGCP (2009); HRO (2009) and individual interviews with officials)	Effects & consequences
Lack of programs for vocational training and/or rehabilitation policies specifically aimed at women	"… workshops, more workshops to make stuffed toys, padding. I love working the stuffed toys. And here, for about the last ten months, we don't get any workshops…" Woman gang-member, *Sensuntepeque* Prison. "… No workshops, no psychologists. We don't have anything, this is a prison for punishment…" Woman gang-member, *Sensuntepeque* Prison. "I tell them a thing or two…because there are a lot of programs for men, they have a bakery, a court…We don't have the facilities they have…" Woman gang-member, *Sensuntepeque* Prison.	go offering; they are really different. The approach with men and women is different […] … [on the differences between common inmates and women gang-members] common gang-members] common inmates are here on an individual basis, and they look for individual answers; the women gang-members belong to a group, they have a different code of conduct. For example, if a Woman Gang-member comes here alone, this can make trouble for her in the group". Director, *Ilopango* Prison.	Access to magazines and books tends to be restricted, because it is evaluated and authorized by the prison authorities. They are allowed to read, without any restriction, the national newspapers as well as religious literature. In none of the centers there is a specific educational program for people who are deprived of liberty, they follow the same program designed by the Salvadoran Ministry of Education.	group of people with nothing to do, with nothing to occupy their minds on.

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Priority Needs	Statements by respondents	Statements by officials	Conditions at the prisons (based on data from DGCP (2009); HRO (2009) and individual interviews with officials)	Effects & consequences
Deficient medical care	"... We need them to improve medical attention..." Woman gang-member, *Quezaltepeque* Prison.

"... doctors for the babies... for them, there are no check ups, unless they are sick, then they come; then, if they give you a prescription, you have to get someone to buy the medicine..." Woman gang-member, *Ilopango* Prison.

"Improve medical care. For instance, I have two fibromas, and I need to be in treatment every two months. But the nurse won't let me out, because he lost my order. Sometimes they have even given us expired medicine. They give us the same thing, no matter what the illness, and the doctor only comes once a week. No checkups like we need. We need a woman nurse, here there's only a male nurse, and every time he gives us a shot, he leaves us these big sores. Besides, it would be better if the nurse were a woman..." Woman gang-member, *Sensuntepeque* Prison. | "For me, what we urgently need at this prison... is that we lack an ambulance, and that would be a great benefit here, like in all prisons, a lot of inmates leave for the hospital, or they need to be taken to *San Salvador* [the capital], and all that, well, you [meaning the interviewer] you come from there [from San Salvador to San Miguel], do you understand how uncomfortable it is? Now think of someone who is sick, it's really uncomfortable to take them in a van, just sitting there. Do you know what I mean? [...]

[there are several needs] in personnel, we need, for example, we need more in the dentist area... medical area..." Director, *San Miguel* Prison.

Medical shortcomings were also noted by other officials. | In this regard the HRO report (2009) notes:

- *Ilopango Prison:* there is a clean clinic, an independent doctor's office; an area for dentistry, patient room, pharmacy. There is no specific unit for gynecological treatment, or for pediatrics. The inmates stated that they receive attention when they are in critical state, and have to wait a long time before receiving attention. The HRO reports 16 women HIV-carriers. There is basic medicine; the inmates have to purchase any specialized medicine.

- *San Miguel Prison:* there is a small clinic; it includes a dentistry area, but only basic instruments available (for tooth extraction). No instruments for gynecological treatment. There is no ambulance to transfer patients to hospital; any needed transfer is done by the van that is assigned to the prison. The doctor only works two hours a day, and he/she can see 14 to 25 people. Three women HIV-carriers were reported. There is basic medicine; inmates must purchase any specialized medicines.

- *Quezaltepeque Prison:* there is a clinic that gives general medical care, and basic dentistry. There is an area set aside for pediatrics. There is no office, or necessary equipment for gynecological assistance. There is no specific number on women who are carriers of HIV. There is basic medicine; inmates must purchase any specialized medicine. Inmates stated that medical care is only given in serious cases, and they are seen only after great deal of insisting. In very serious cases, they are usually referred to some hospital in the public network, or to a health clinic. There is no ambulance; to this end, there is a pick-up truck assigned to the center, for different jobs.

- *Sensuntepeque Prison:* there is a small clinic with a doctor's office for general medical care, | In terms of health care, there is a lack of services to do diagnosis and tend to specific women's needs (gynecological care) or that of their children (pediatric care), which means a violation of one of their most elemental rights. This situation is enhanced by unhealthy conditions and overcrowding that prevail at the centers, which go against having even minimum levels of standards of living in the prison.

Also, the elevated level of overcrowding, along with appalling conditions for early detection of illness can lead to the spread of viruses or infections, such as HIV-AIDS.

In the case of women that live with their children, the lack of specialized medicine, of systematic pediatric care, as well as the inadequate diet at an early age for many infants, has a direct influence on their health, and violates the children's most fundamental rights. |

Priority Needs	Statements by respondents	Statements by officials	Conditions at the prisons (based on data from DGCP (2009); HRO (2009) and individual interviews with officials)	Effects & consequences
Deficient medical care	"… more medical care, I suffer from asthma, and a couple of times I've been really sick and they had to take me to the hospital […] Many smoke here and that kills me […], I feel like I can't breathe… so they have to tell the guard: 'Miss, she's really sick, we're going to take her downstairs because she's really badly off'… That time, I turned blue, they took me down and had to take me to breathe oxygen…" Woman gang-member, *Sensuntepeque* Prison		and basic dentistry. There is no gynecological equipment or office. There are two women that are carriers of HIV. There is no specialized medicine either. Inmates must purchase them in case they are necessary. There is no ambulance. Transfer of patients are done in the prison assigned vehicle, or support from the National Civil Police is requested.	
Human resource Strengthening	"It felt odd to me that he was talking with us just now [the Prison Director]. He is not an accessible person… […] We need someone who will help us out. The previous warden was okay, he wanted to listen to what we need… Not now, not even a look…. the one who talks to us is the other [technical sub-director]…" Woman Gang-member respondent. "Here we are deprived of everything, not just freedom; we have no rights, not worth anything…. it's not just freedom, you can't eat anything… You used to be able to cook, now you can't get anything in; the awful food they	"The idea […] is for prisons to be managed by the technical team. This is the idea of the policy…. we manage treatment, control of files, we can suggest, but security has control inside, particularly in the case of [a prison with] gang members […] There is a motivation problem among the personnel. Most of them don't seem to emphasize the issue of sensitization and rehabilitation of inmates. They come here to work their hours: '1 [imitating worker]… It gets to the point that the work dehumanizes us, desensitizes us… and the people inside need hope…. […] There aren't enough of us to give hope…'" Technical Sub-director, *Quezaltepeque* Prison.	During the interviews, the officials shared the following information: • **Ilopango Prison:** at the time of the interview there were over 900 women deprived of liberty. The staff consisted of one technical sub-director, 1 psychologist, 1 social worker, 2 lawyers, 1 doctor and 2 nurses. • **San Miguel Prison:** at the time of the interview, there were about 800 inmates, both men and women. Staff included 1 psychologist, 1 social worker, 1 lawyer, 1 doctor, 2 nurses and the technical sub-director. • **Quezaltepeque Prison:** at the time of interviewing, there were over 670 persons, members of the *18th Street* gang. The staff was a Technical Sub-director (social worker), 1 psychologist, 1 social worker, 1 lawyer. • **Sensuntepeque Prison:** at the time of the interview there were 425 persons total, both gang members (men & women) from the *Mara Salvatrucha* gang and common criminals. The	According to Valverde (1997), as a *total institution*, prison also marginalizes the staff & prison authorities, since the severe system shortcomings makes them "scapegoats" of the penitentiary situation. The repercussion tends to be a defensive attitude on their part, an institutional withdrawal with regard to contributions from other actors outside the system, and less efficiency in personnel treatment of the inmates. On the other hand, a large part of the personnel is dedicated to tasks of security and guarding, as the system priorities are contention and control; to the detriment of issues related to intervention processes. The latter tend to involve a minimum number of employees (the technical team), which due to

Priority Needs	Statements by respondents	Statements by officials	Conditions at the prisons (based on data from DGCP (2009); HRO (2009) and individual interviews with officials)	Effects & consequences
	give us.... I'm here but I always have to be guarded..." Woman Gang-member respondent.	"[the need is] to strengthen human resource, particularly in the technical area. The demand is great. We have one psychologist for 900 inmates [...] [due to] the lack of human resources, we aren't able to deal with everything, we do everything, but it is very difficult. The cost is very high. The overload on the technical team is hard...." Director, *Ilopango* Prison.	staff was 1 psychologist (the technical sub-director), 1 social worker, 1 lawyer, 1 doctor (four hours a week) and two male nurses.	the overcrowded conditions at the prison, are incapable of providing for- and meeting the needs of the inmates, with the risks that result from work overload and the *burnout syndrome*.
Human resource Strengtheni ng		"[we need] more technical people and professionals. Not enough people for the work load. The technical teams need to be at the forefront...." Technical Sub-director, *Sensuntepeque*.		There is a schism between the visions focused on security (guards and authorities) and that centered on intervention (technical team). In the Salvadoran context the former have been favored. Aside from this, the absence of a gender focus in criminal and prison policy is evident in the absence of this vision in the approach and intervention aimed at the women.

Source: Preapared by Author based on individual interviews, focus groups with women gang-members in prison, interviews with penitentiary system personnel, data provided by DGCP (2009), and characteristics and conditions of prisons noted by the HRO office (2009), and verified by in-person visits.

The exercise presented in the previous table makes it possible to detect some of the areas that require immediate attention. Nevertheless, in no way does this include all of the demands and shortcomings that need to be addressed in order to guarantee minimum standards of wellbeing and dignified survival of the people deprived of liberty. This kind of situation directly casts doubts on the viability of the penitentiary system and its failure in fulfilling its constitutional functions. However, the intention is not to focus the responsibility for this situation exclusively on the penitentiary administration. The intent is to reflect the nefarious consequences that have come from the policies implemented by previous governments, engaged in favoring and abusing the penalty of deprivation of liberty as an approach to a complex phenomenon like violence —in all its expressions. In so doing, not only has the penitentiary crisis become more critical, but the inability of the State to face it, and to fulfill its constitutional responsibility of guaranteeing that prisons comply with their correctional, educational and formative objectives.

5.4.2. Needs Outside Prison

This is how, and in close relation to the aforementioned, the issue of the **needs of the women outside the system** clashes and contrasts with the absence and void in terms of options to guarantee —or set minimum bases for— their integration back in society. In the first place, because the women are conscious of the lack of opportunities outside the prison, as well as the scant possibilities of entering the job market in light of their active participation in the gang (which is evident due to the tattoos that some preserve on visible parts of their bodies) and, above all, because they possess a criminal record. On the other hand, some made reference to the need to count on some "welcoming" or rehabilitation center, or governmental program that would make it possible for them to acquire the basics in order to "restart" a personal project, or start it from scratch.

Me, at least [she would need] to look for a rehabilitation center… Right now
I might think I don't need it, but you never know, for some slip… It's just that,
look, I know myself, I don't know how I'm going to think outside the door, what
my reaction will be once I'm out… You need help, psychological help, and me, I
think that at a rehabilitation center it is… it's just that, on the street… I'm going
out to another world; it's like being born again… […] Me, right now, I could get
into a band perhaps; but then I think, I'm going to get out of one hole to get
into another one…

Woman Gang-member ☌

You also need support from society. If there are no programs to find work, you
don't have anything, there's just the street… we need support.

Woman Gang-member ◖

Government assistance, a base, so that you can start something… that they
treat you like a person that's going to get ahead in life… I don't know… cred-
its, a base…

Woman Gang-member ❈

You know what's missing? That as soon as those girls get out… some NGO or
their families take them, or… create a program to, lik,e what they have now
created with the deported men, you know what I mean? So, a program where
you facilitate… "Oh! What did you learn to do that at the penitentiary?",
"This, and this, and this" …Have like an employment office so that she feels
she has support, right? But, sometimes, the problem is that we throw them out
on the street, and the poor woman doesn't even know where to turn…

Prison Director

Aside from the clarity that the majority of the women have
regarding their situation and the needs they will have upon
leaving prison, they do not act independently in terms of the
decisions of their gang, not even the ones that are inactive. In
this sense, the group *logic* and processes engulf and determine
the options for these women. For instance, many of the inac-
tive women gang-members have some problem with their gang,
due to the decision to *deactivate,* or the circumstance in which

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the process came about. Actually, some mentioned that their *bronca* (problem) with the gang makes them not want to leave the prison, in so far as serving their sentence makes it possible for them to save their lives. Others simply state that, at a certain moment, the gang can call for their active and leading participation again, and they have to answer that call. For their part, the active women would need —and from the information collected in this study, as an initial step, to take the decision to *deactivate* from their group to begin to think not according to the group logic, but in terms of personal needs and wants.

There are many addictions, not just drugs, there are addictions to many things. You have to ask God not to [let you] make serious mistakes again…
Retired Woman Gang-member, focus group.

If they are in a place where there are active members, they need to get away from them. They sent me to […] where there are active members. If I had stayed there, I would have gotten active again.
Retired Woman Gang-member, focus group.

When I get out of here, I don't know… I want to go far away, erase the tattoos, but I am always in a lot of danger. Only if I went far away, to another country, because I doubt they'd give me work with two entries [in the penitentiary system]. The gang is really disappointing; sometimes they let me down. I've behaved, I kept away, but they always put up obstacles; so, we can't find a way out. I'm trying to be better, but when I go free, I have to work… all the doors are closing on me.
Retired Woman Gang-member.

It's just that there's a difference; calming down is *deactivating*, not getting into trouble… retiring, is *getting a light* [a death sentence from the gang]. I'm re-tired…
Retired Woman Gang-member.

These women's complex situation and the reason that the gang is considered another prison comes from the fact that, even before entering into contact with the penitentiary system,

they lived under the yoke of the gangs, and subjected to their norms and influence. This is such a determining condition, that it does not allow its members to be considered independently — nor should they be. Above all, the women gang-members, especially if they are still active, because they will be acting according to the group logic: thinking of the group dispositions, being at the disposal of the group, obeying the group. Their gender status is not necessarily what induces them to reproduce traditional roles of obedience to the men; rather, it is the powerful group influence —and threat— that transcends the women and men that make up the gang. Because the group logic goes beyond the individual logic, and loyalty to the gang is above personal benefits and considerations. For that reason, one of the ways to access the person, the woman, is by way of her process of *de-activation,* her *de-connection* with the group. This is a first important step.

This is where the penitentiary system could take action, because, aside from being the place where they are detained at that time, the system ought to enhance its "re-socializing" and "educational" roles, beginning with an approach that would allow the inmates, initially, to consider the possibility of deactivating from the gang and, later, train and prepare themselves, to gradually *de-construct* their identity as a member of the gang, and configure an identity of their own, outside the group. At the same time, they should acquire new tools in order to face life with self-sufficiency, without having to appeal to the resources of the men in the group. Without this minimum institutional backing, and with the continuance of the structure of each gang within the system, it cannot be guaranteed that the women may opt for that initial decision.

This presupposes, first, a complete transformation of the vision of the way the women gang-members are attended, in general, before pretending that it is they who are going to rehabilitate simply due to the fact that they are deprived of liberty. Second, it presupposes that the woman can come to an

agreement with their group, in the sense that they are going to respect her decision to withdraw. And third, that the State dispose of resources to construct concrete alternatives for all those women gang-members that want to- or are willing to go through these phases, in a transition towards alternative life-styles. Because if there is no possibility of accessing physical spaces that, based on prior agreements with the gang, can be raised as "neutral territory," where these women (and their children) can settle during their initial phases of their life outside prison, it is practically impossible to consider the possibility of a way out from the exercise of violence.

Taking into account the elevated levels of recidivism in crime reported by all system officials, they were asked what they thought about this situation. Likewise, they were told about the way recidivism in some —as well as the active participation of the majority in the violence— affected the loss of credibility before society, and in the opportunities that this might afford them. Many appealed to the traditional gang-rhetoric, namely, they exempted themselves of responsibility for their acts, and appealed to their history of victimization and marginalization prior to joining the group. Based on these facts, they consider that they deserve these opportunities. Now then, there were also those women gang-members that, aside from their condition of being inactive or active, asked for a vote of confidence:

> …[perhaps] some of us would betray that opportunity, the ones that have been here a short time… but those of us that have been here for over three years, those of us that have been here a long while and feel the walls closing in, feel small, closed in, without toilet paper, not five cents for the things you need, the ones that have suffered this, the ones that have suffered this prison, we would value it… [when asked whether she believed that all the interns would embrace the opportunity or offer of support from society]
> Woman Gang-member ♣

For those women who believe that —despite their personal history, and the crushing pressure of an ubiquitous group, they

can undertake a change in their lives, it is necessary to face the challenge of answering this call.

5.5. Dreams and Expectations: Looking to the Future

If they let me live, I'd raise my kids…
Woman Gang-member ✽

While in prison, particularly when serving a long sentence, questions about the future or about dreams can even seem ironic. "When it comes to dreaming," in the words of one of the women, many speak fundamentally of two things: being able to access a job, and join their children or their family, and live with them.

My dream was to be an attorney; I'd probably already be one, perhaps… I wanted to have my children, get married… I used to see myself as a lawyer, with a college degree… I wanted to be a good mother, I wanted to be the best mother, but it didn't turn out that way…"
Woman Gang-member ❖

"Set up a business," "find a job," "get ahead" were some of the most frequent responses to questions regarding the future; a question that evoked yearnings, but not certitude. However, when presented with a more concrete scenario: "What would you do if you left the prison tomorrow?", the hopelessness was more clearly evident in those with long sentences, and fear in those with short sentences, but who had unsettled scores with their gang. This score, as mentioned before, could even be their decision to retire from the group, or having a same-sex partner, or the simple fact of not wanting to continue *hanging out* in the future.

Some of them appeal to their notion of religion, a set of beliefs to which many of them have had access to inside prison, and where they have found, through its active practice, not only the possibility of legitimizing their changes before the gang,

but also a little consolation and even some redemption. It is worthwhile mentioning that in all the prisons visited there were comments about, and we were able to witness the presence of, the constant and active visiting by Christian groups. Therefore, it is not surprising that through the proximity to these groups — one of the few options that the system admits, and by their own initiative approach the prisons— some are given hope of relief from their situation.

> I would try to get a job…, but it's just that the change, you don't completely change, it's… little by little… I tell this to the sister [whom she has befriended at the prison]. She wants me to become Christian, and I want to become Christian, because I know that God is above all else…; but I tell the sister: "Slowly, little by little," because you aren't going to change all at once…
>
> Woman Gang-member �

> [What would you do if you left the prison tomorrow?] … if I got out… maybe I'd like to look for God… It's just… look, in here, people make you fall…
>
> Woman Gang-member ✄

The vision and search for religion as an option —perhaps the only one— for changes and redemption of their lives, conjugates well with the fatalistic attitude that many have, which is a relatively logical consequence of the course that the absence of expectations and future plans takes, particularly in those whose chances of recovering their liberty are more distant. Especially since, as mentioned, they do not recover their liberty sooner or later; it is, rather, that they move back to the street and are again at the beck and call of the gang. Leaving confinement does not mean they recover their liberty, because they do not have it. Passage from the penitentiary to the prison of the gang is practically insured, to the extent that the State does not intervene to mediate this transition.

5.6. Conclusions

This mosaic of experiences is intended to demonstrate the way in which the women gang-members that were inter-

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viewed live out their current situation in prison, either serving a sentence, or waiting for another sentence to be issued. A series of personal evaluations have been presented, dealing with their life in the gang, while in liberty, and their present situation.

As for their evaluations of life in the gang, there are mixed emotions. In this regard, although they noted that there were benefits, they also highlighted the fact that their membership in the group has had, and continues to bring them important costs, both in the past and present. The benefits were and still are symbolic, related to an identity, and even economical. They likewise note the possibility of gaining respect, inside and outside the group, and of exercising power. Nevertheless, they also understand clearly the costs of the experience at different levels (personal, family, community), among which the most noteworthy are constant and brutal exposure to violence, which many of them have come to question. And this reflection has been made possible by the passage of time, by being removed from the group, and by the excess of time in prison.

On the other hand, the hardest experiences they have had have to do with the loss of loved ones, the intensifying of the violence and conflicts and executions inside the group, as well as life in prison. The loss of loved ones—partners, siblings, friends and family—is closely linked to the intensification of violence stemming from the disputes and the conflicts between gangs and within gangs. Likewise, the situations in which they have been direct agents of violence, and the changes experienced by the gangs over the past years, which are expressed in violence directed at their own members, are reasons for deep frustration and disenchantment.

Added to the impact of violence all along their life histories, living in prison is noted as one of the most difficult experiences, and is interpreted as their destiny due to their activity in the group. Severance of ties with people that surrounded them, among them, estrangement from their children, is an aspect

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that generates a lot of anguish and sorrow, making life in prison even more difficult. In fact, maternity is one of the most complex conditions, yet it is one of the roles that saves them from disillusionment, generates motivation (among them, opting for a change in their life style), at the same time it is something that generates a great feeling of guilt. Generally speaking, their evaluation of maternity was extremely positive. However, having gone through this experience without the emotional and/or economic support of a partner, the father of their children, or more extended networks (except for the gang, which enhanced their dependence on the group), made pregnancy and childrearing very difficult experiences while in liberty. Now in prison, this situation becomes complex because, due to the fact that inmates have progressively lost social links and relations with the outside, they wind up losing control over- and closeness to their children.

Many of them have the idea, and rightly so, that the estrangement from their children is a repetition of their own personal history of abandon, insufficiencies, absence of referents for identity and affiliation, and of marginalization from even the slightest opportunities for development. The few exceptions are those women who live with their sons and daughters in prison. However, this situation —aside from being temporary— puts the children in a state of additional vulnerability, given that they are subject to the same precarious conditions in which their mothers live. As Rodríguez (2004) puts it, the mother's punishment extensively becomes that of the children who live with them, given that the mother-and-child is a social —and above all, cultural pairing.

Life in prison becomes even more difficult given the lack of support that is experienced by many of them. The possibility of support and attention to their needs is conditioned to their status in the gang: active women gang-members receive help from their own group. Inactive or retired women gang-members get no kind of aid whatsoever, and doubly so: they receive no aid from the gang, sometimes due to their history with the

group, nor do they have family support. At times, they receive no help from their partners, who are in prison as well, or already have a new partner/wife, or in other cases, has died. The retired women, aside from being abandoned by their gang in these circumstances, bear the deferred threat of the gang for unsettled scores, once they have served their time in prison.

Added to the abandon by family, partner and/or gang that was noted by some of the women, are the enormously precarious conditions and the severe problems that the Salvadoran penitentiary system suffers from. The results of this study confirm the serious problems faced by the inmates, men and women alike, due to the longstanding crisis in the country's penitentiary system, which has been at the foreground of other specialized documents and periodic reports (Flores and García, 2006; HRO, 2009; *Quetzalcoatl* Foundation, 2009). These deficiencies prevent it from guaranteeing minimal conditions for internment without violating constitutional precepts, national penitentiary legislation, or international instruments of the United Nations, such as the Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (Núñez, 2007; Townhead, 2006). In this regard, recurrent responses by women gang members, as to the issues that require urgent attention are articulated- and coincide with some of the problems most frequently highlighted by officials of the General Office of Penitentiary Centers (DGCP), by personnel and heads of non-governmental organizations that have worked with the prison population (gang-members and civilians): prison overcrowding, inadequate infrastructure, poor access to basic services, absence of vocational-training and/or rehabilitation programs aimed specifically at women, deficient medical care, and the need for strengthening of penitentiary human resources.

The aforementioned aspects stand out among the multiple needs, problems and deficiencies in the system, and they are situations that have a significant impact on the women —gang-members or not. This disadvantageous situation in the Salvadoran penitentiary system reflects the inequality of opportunities

between men and women, in society as a whole. In the case of El Salvador, it has to do with legislation and policies that do not stem from the specific needs of women, therefore, they do neither foster- nor establish the base for equal opportunities and/or for the eventual social integration of those under tutelage of the State.

In penitentiaries originally destined for men, where the space assigned for women is marginal in terms of the total area of the facilities; where the lack of training policies aimed at preparing the interns technically (which might make it possible for them to enter the labor market, and be a counterbalance to the reproduction of traditional work or domestic activities such as sewing, cleaning or handicrafts, and so on) is generalized; with absence of recreational spaces (above all at the prisons where the active women-gang member population is in custody and where the highest rates of overcrowding are registered); where little or deficient medical attention specific to the needs of women (gynecological care), or for their children (pediatric care); and where the lack of training for prison personnel that might enable them to give specific attention to the female inmates (given that the prevalent vision is focused on security), not only violate some of these people's most basic rights, but also, sabotage—from inside the system itself— the objectives of rehabilitation, readapting and re-education that it is obliged to provide and guarantee.

Once the women are outside the prison, their multiple needs are coherent with the void in terms of opportunities and guarantees that characterize the system. For the women gang-members, the lack of options is double: not only do they have a history of belonging to the gang, but they also possess a criminal record due to the time spent in prison. For active women gang-members, otherwise, the "extramural" life options are determined by their gang. The latter will be the one to dictate these women's route when they leave prison. For this reason, the gang is considered another prison, because before entering

in contact with the penitentiary system, and even after that, subjection to the norms and obedience to the group are total. The loyalty —and fear— of their own gang, is beyond individual logic, consideration, needs and aspirations.

In the case of inactive women gang-members, deactivation from the gang —whether inside or outside of prison— has brought them problems with their group. This situation leads them, at times, to want to extend their life in seclusion. This is a very common situation among women whose lives have been determined by cycles of violence (Zaitzow, 2004). On the other hand, inactive women gang members are conscious that this status can revert (they can be reactivated) whenever the gang recalls them to take an active role in the group dynamics. Notwithstanding, deactivation from the group is the first step to begin to think no-longer in terms of group logic or rationale, but in terms of their personal needs and wants. Also, this is the first way to access the person, the woman that is behind the gang-member. This is a gap that the penitentiary system should take advantage of, to begin an approach that would make it possible to gradually dismantle their identity as a woman gang-member, and configure a new identity apart from the group. However, without the appropriate institutional backing, and maintaining the gang structure within the penitentiary system, it cannot be guaranteed that the women gang members will opt to take this first step.

The retired women gang-members are an even more delicate case, given that they have made up their minds to renounce their identity and membership in the group. This decision places them in a condition of enormous vulnerability, because quitting presupposes treason, payable by death. In these cases, the State should provide them with elements that would allow them not only to integrate back into society, but also grant them protection in order to survive the possibility of aggression from their former gang. If retired women gang-members have no access, by way of prior agreement with their

gang and by way of direct State intervention, to physical spaces and basic conditions to be able to re-start their lives outside prison, and outside the group, it is very difficult to consider their transition to alternative modes of living.

Without putting aside the clear responsibility for crimes committed in the past, which was demonstrated through their sentence, and without diminishing all of those acts of violence inflicted upon other people during their life in the gang, part of the complexity of attempting to approach and analyze the women gang-members' situation is understanding their role as a member —or former member— of a group that is total, *omnipresent*, patriarchal, and violent, such as the gangs. This revision of their lives, which ends with this section but leaves in suspense what new prisons await these women when they leave prison, is a first attempt at elucidating the complex interaction between the personal history, group dynamics, situational aspects both experienced and imposed on them as members of a group with these characteristics, and the articulation of multiple precarious situations and inequalities —in a patriarchal and violent society, such as El Salvador— on this trajectory toward the excesses of violence and the exercise of crime, as a way of life for some women.

Chapter 6
Final Reflections

This paper offers a walk through different life experiences of some of the women members of the two largest gangs of El Salvador, who at the time of the study were deprived of liberty in one of the four different penitentiary facilities where women are confined. This exploratory study has a special feature in that its sights were focused on a forgotten group: the *homegirls*, those women that are or were members of the gang. That is, it introduces the novelty of having approached and interviewed these women in a direct manner, without intermediaries —not even through the male members of the gang, neither by way of the authorities of the prisons they are incarcerated in, in an attempt at collecting their life experiences and, based on this, strive to reconstruct their histories as members of a group that has been constituted, devised, and ruled by men.

Over the years, the girls and women who have been part of these groups have been excluded from the analysis and discussion on the gang phenomenon. This omission has been made possible by, among other aspects, the complexity and intensity of the violence that El Salvador has experienced in recent years, which often displaces other issues worth analyzing, placing them in the background; by the gang's mostly masculine membership, group dynamics and rationale; by the lack of clarity on the part of those of us who study the gang phenomenon, and of those who should have defined and put into effect appropriate, comprehensive and pertinent policies to deal with them at different levels. Currently, this oversight has important implications, not only due to the exacerbation and greater complexity of the gang-phenomenon in recent years, in terms of its contribution to the high degree of violence that dominates the national scene. This, not only because it is right to admit, in a politically correct tone, the unarguable and generalized omission of an overall gender perspective in the studies and approaches

to social phenomenons such as the gangs, whose beginnings, propagation and complexity are found in the deficiencies and blunders in the prevailing social and economic model, and in the national policies adopted to deal with them. Without diminishing the aforementioned, the omission of analysis of female participation in these groups has important implications because it is also a confirmation of the androcentric manners of doing and approaching things in the country, and a way to confirm where the policies are designed —and who the decisions are made by, leaving aside a significant part of the protagonists of social life: the women. As for the case that is the focus of this paper, this omission has serious implications because, as explained throughout the text, it is by way of the women — gang-members or not— that some access can be gained to approaching this complex and challenging gang phenomenon.

It is not the intention of this study to attempt to fill these voids in the information. Instead, the aspiration is to generate a modest initial contribution which, in the first place, will draw attention to a subject that has been so abandoned, yet so important, as input for later discussion and focus. Based on its findings, and despite its limitations, it also seeks to introduce the challenge implied in the complex issue of gangs in the country —which has been debated and acted upon without effective results, rather with counterproductive actions, and it seeks to do so based on an approach that draws attention to the complicated and difficult situation of many girls, adolescents and women members of these groups.

A general description of the gang phenomenon in El Salvador cannot leave out, on the one hand, the complex and ubiquitous situation of violence that persists as an intersecting and historical characteristic of Salvadoran society. Consideration of this situation gives an idea of the broader context in which these groups emerge, develop and erect their symbolic and operational scaffolding, starting at a moment prior to the formal termination of the Salvadoran armed conflict in 1992. Alterna-

tively, a revision of the context cannot omit noting exogenous and regional variables, such as the massive presence of drug-trafficking and the extensive prevalence of corruption at different levels in Central America. These aspects arrange the arenas of violence and limited security that the country experiences, as part of a region that is devastated by violence and adversely affected by the weakening of its Nation States.

Therefore, the context provided in the initial chapter of this paper, presents a brief walk through "part" of the history of the evolution of gangs in this country, along with some of the most relevant findings in the research this institute has undertaken over the past thirteen years. This overview of the gangs has, at least, three objectives. First, it presents the evolution, the transformations and the worsening of the phenomenon, and the decisive contribution that the ineffective and unsuitable policies that were implemented by the incumbent authorities had on its intensification. The second objective responds to the intention of showing the absence of women in the gang as a group and focal point for analysis of studies on this topic, which corresponds to the absence of programs designed for prevention and attention to the female members of these groups, whose presence had been noted in some of the initial research on this matter. The third is to show that the theme of gangs is a topic that for many years has been dealt with as an object of study in the country and that, even with all the limitations that are intrinsic to the different research efforts, for a long time there has been information that sought, at different historic moments, to generate discussion, articulate proposals, ideas and warnings on the need for comprehensive and structural approaches in order to face the growing challenge that these groups have posed for over two decades. In other words, there was an attempt at rescuing fragments of the production of knowledge on gangs in the country, to show that the warnings about its complexity, its potential for intensifying and on the type of proposals that were needed to deal with it have been on hold for a long time, what is more, they were never heeded or looked at seriously by the incumbent authorities.

These initial local studies presented empirical evidence on the situation of adolescents and young women members of the gangs (Cruz and Portillo, 1998; Santacruz and Concha-Eastman, 2001), even when the focus of study were not the female members. One of these studies showed glimpses that the violence that is prevalent in these groups affected the female members differently from their male counterparts. It also found indications suggesting the hypothesis that when a woman joins groups that promote and use violence as a universal resource for relating with others and wielding power over them, she winds up being assimilated by this group dynamic, and goes on to inflict it on others in a direct and equally brutal manner, as part of a perverse cycle of violence (Santacruz and Concha-Eastman, 2001). This hypothesis, suggested early in this decade, has been confirmed in this study based on the information provided by the women gang-members who, actually, are serving a sentence for perpetration of one or several crimes tied to their association with- and loyalty to the gang. This is among the wealth of ideas that are worth highlighting out of the plethora of information that was gathered in this paper, which are developed in greater depth across six reflections that are presented in this closure.

Notwithstanding, before getting down to issues, it is worth-while pointing out some which circumscribe the scope and limitations of this information. In the second chapter of this report, the methodological decisions underlying this study are presented: the research techniques that were used and the design criteria, which were the basis for their construction; the procedure that was used to approach the women gang-members and the penitentiary system; the difficulties that were encountered; the interview process that was followed, and the subsequent phases of data processing and analysis. Regarding these issues, it is important to note that the main instrument used in the information gathering process were qualitative biographical interviews. Designing the interview structure with this framework made it possible to access information on these women's everyday life, beyond the years of active participation

in the gang, including situations prior to- and following the period they got involved in these groups. Furthermore, it made it possible to characterize certain conditions of their existence in which the limits between individual initiative and responsibility, vis a vis the supremacy of group dynamics in many of the actions that they perpetrate, become blurred. The latter is of great importance in order to characterize and attempt to understand—without intending to justify—many of the deeds that they commit. That is why the presentation of this document was organized following the biographical thread in the interviews: life before the gang, life in the gang, and life in prison. Therefore, this study attempts to draw a map of the path followed from the young girl or adolescent to the woman gang-member, from the less "formal"-initial prisons, to come to other more organized or formal ones, such as the gang or the penitentiary, where they are presently.

However, and as a result of the shortage of different sorts of resources (economic, human and temporal), the design of the study lacks adequate "control" groups for comparison. This would have made it possible to contrast the information, adding weight to these conclusions that have been arrived at through the visions of the women gang-member respondents. For instance, it would have been ideal to be able to have a group of women who, despite living in social and economic conditions of exclusion, had not joined the gangs (to understand more precisely the role of the different circumstances of social exclusion and deprivation of basic rights in which many girls, boys and adolescents live, in their decision to join the gang). It would have been ideal to have access to biographies of women deprived of liberty that were not gang-members (to understand in greater detail the impact of violence on their lives and on their incursion in the ways of crime, or to attempt to understand the ways, the spaces and the possibilities of access to the exercise of power among those women that are not members of the gangs). It would have also been important to have had the life experiences of men gang-members deprived of liberty (in order

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to deepen on the differences and similarities between the experiences of men and women, both inside the gang and in prison). In sum, it would have been ideal to be able to have access to these different types of populations and, based on a common script, be able to make pertinent comparisons.

Nevertheless, the reality of the situation of the study and the possibilities of the process were much more restricted. For this reason, these limitations —that condition the scope of this information— remain as tasks pending, or as ideas for studies that might come after this first experience of an eminently heuristic character. Despite these restrictions, the findings have made it possible to have a slightly better understanding of the complexity of the life experiences that these women have had. Likewise, they have made it possible to rescue the differences —and the many similarities— between the young men and women, and between the adult men and women that make up these groups. Following is a synthesis in six sections, of the principal ideas that come from the analysis of this information.

First Premise. Factors and processes that can drive many girls to join the gangs have to do with the oversight and lack of institutional protection that children in general suffer across the country.

The third chapter in this document presents an overview of the lives of these women *prior* to their induction into the gang. This period is often circumscribed to childhood and, at most, to early adolescence, given the young age at which so many of them entered the group. Many very difficult experiences and situations from this period denote the simultaneous existence of shortcomings in the personal, family, community and socio-structural spheres, where violence, abandon and precarious conditions are constants that construct the day-to-day reality of the contexts they spend their childhood in. Their narratives uncover situations in which there is physical, verbal and sexual abuse; abandon; alcoholism on the part of one or

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both parents, or one of their caregivers; and the brutal use of physical, psychological and verbal violence show up —most of the time simultaneously— in the families or family groups they lived in as girls.

As will be explained at a later moment, these shortcomings and difficulties that characterize everyday life of children around the country are common to both boys and girls. This reality can lead to experiencing, upon reading this chapter on their lives prior to entering the gang, the sensation of reading—again— the ways in which many boys and young men are compelled to enter these groups. In this sense, although this information is not a "novelty" for many readers in terms of what is already known of the reasons that lead a boy or adolescent to enter the gang, they do however become evidence to uphold the fact that these are reasons that *also* affect the girls, and that the precariousness and the violation of the rights of boys and girls are so common around the country, that some opt for joining these groups as a means for facing them and surviving them. Let's describe this, step by step.

As for the precarious conditions that the girls who join the gang were found living in, these findings coincide to a great degree with those in research on gangs in other contexts, and in local studies as well. In the case of studies done abroad, Moore (1991) found that women gang-members interviewed for her study insisted on pointing emphatically to difficult domestic circumstances, including dysfunctional and abusive family relationships, when explaining the reasons why they joined the gang, when compared to the declarations by the men gang-members interviewed. For its part, Miller's study (2001) on youth gangs in two U.S. cities also offered unequivocal information regarding the impact of the domestic situation on membership in the gang, as a circumstance that overlaps and interacts simultaneously with exposure and contact with the neighborhood gangs, as well as the fact of having a relative already in one of these groups. Miller's study has the advantage of having

included in the sample both adolescent girl gang-members, and adolescent girls at risk. This is to say, that it includes non gang-members. This made it possible to contrast the differential impact between certain factors in both groups. Therefore, according to this author, the ways in which the deficient intra-family situation favors the participation of youth and girls in the gang were varied: the existence of various expressions of violence among the members of the household, the consumption and/or abuse of alcohol and other substances, sexual abuse and rape, among others. These at-risk situations, inside and outside of the home, showed up in the women gang-members' lives simultaneously and with greater intensity, when compared to the disadvantageous situation that prevailed in the homes of non gang-member girls. What Miller´s study suggests is that the young women that were interviewed during her fieldwork pointed out the effect of a combination of at least two or more of these circumstances in their households. As a result of these multiple difficulties and levels of abuse, the girls spent a progressively longer period of their leisure time outside the home, choosing the street and its risks over the perils of remaining in their own home. As a result, there is greater proximity to the gangs, which are already present in those neighborhoods. In the case of local studies, Santacruz and Concha-Eastman (2001) show a variation between men and women, in terms of their understanding the manner in which they joined the gang. According to their argumentation, the former favored entertainment and different tangible benefits (crystallized in the notion called *hanging out*) that joining the gang provided them. For their part, while the women did in fact allude to this factor, they placed much more emphasis on the problems and violence present in their homes, as well as the influence of their own friends who were already involved in the gang.

The results in the present study demonstrate that the way in which these women approached the gangs (at that time as children or adolescent girls) was due to the progressive estrangement from their family, educational and community

contexts, and drawing nearer to the spaces where the gangs were emerging or had already developed. In many instances they were witnesses, and at times even direct collaborators in the creation and/or growth of their respective *cliques* in their own neighborhoods, at a specific historical moment, and as the result of a longstanding membership that is explained by the early age at which they joined. Thus, spending less time at home or at school implied, for many of them, spending more time marauding and wandering the neighborhood streets, which means, spending time in contexts that, as mentioned before, exposed them directly to evidence and to consider the gang as a viable, effective and rapid means for the satisfaction of multiple necessities, contrasting with the want of local and immediate options elsewhere.

As pointed out in the third chapter, the circles of exclusion that characterized the lives of many of the women from early childhood were not circumscribed to the more traditional institutions like the family, school or workplace. These rings of exclusion encompassed broader social circles, among which can be found the lack of options in terms of female group association that are evident in the case of youth in general; but that are practically nonexistent for the young girls, adolescents and young women who live in contexts of inequality and precarious social, economic, and cultural situations. Above all, these young people come from social strata that, although they cannot be considered the poorest, have become increasingly impoverished in a progressive downturn due to the dynamics of exclusion in the economic sphere, as well as in the social and cultural dimensions. In this regard, the analysis of the horizon of possibilities that is open to these youth also has to be based on the context which they come from, and the options that it provides them, or takes away.

Therefore, the family groups of the women gang-members addressed in this study —often lead by the mother, and characterized by abandonment by the father; or composed of other

members, due to the abandon by both parents; or headed by parents who neither care for-, nor protect them— are simultaneously inserted in, following the conceptual proposal by Pérez Sainz and Mora (2007), social contexts that are characterized by the *articulation of exclusions*: that is, by the coupling of a series of precarious economic, social and cultural circumstances. Consequently, they face having to count on weakened or absent local institutions; they inhabit neighborhoods or communities that are immersed in circumstances that include severe marginalization, exclusion and abandon by the social branch of the government; they are adrift in a broken and frankly inexistent social and community network; and they find themselves in a situation in which the institutions that have been traditionally conceived as being "guarantors" of social inclusion —such as education and job insertion— are precarious, and often limited and improbable possibilities, particularly for women. This is where the gangs become real options for affiliation and identity reference for many young people. Added to this series of exclusions, in this case, there is an additional circumstance: the social-marginalization that comes about when a girl or young woman goes on to join this sort of group, and in so doing, breaks with the traditional gender stereotypes to which society usually ascribes socially acceptable comportment and decisions that girls and young women are supposed to assume. The gang, as such, defines and tightly circumscribes the ideology, actions, scope and possibilities of its members. In this sense, the young girls and women that join these groups also take on a series of conducts, world-visions, attitudes and options that stray from the more traditional cultural mold that gives shape to the way of being that is imposed on young women by Salvadoran society.

On the other hand, juvenile gangs are positioned as an important and notorious source of insecurity and conflict for residents of the neighborhoods and territories where they prevail and are in control. Likewise, they have become the dynamo of a parallel criminal economy which is situated at the local level (the neighborhoods and communities), and in the end, may

even favor the residents economically (the girls and boys that swell the rank and file of the gangs, as well as their families). This, therefore, guarantees, or rather, forces loyalties and satellite criminal networks. In this regard, Moore (2007) suggests that as a product of the different processes that globalization entails, many urban sectors are immersed in a process that the author calls *peripheralization*.[112] This term denotes the increasingly evident functioning of broader sectors of the population at the fringe of the economic lives of the large cities they are part of. In turn, this reduces the already scant possibility of upward mobility for its residents, deepens the great social inequalities, and makes it possible for "parallel" economies to blossom with strong illegal components —or «paralegality», quoting the sense proposed by Reguillo[113] (2005), among which gangs can be found. Another result of this *peripheralization* is the greater and closer gang participation in these parallel criminal economies, and an increase in the number of female members in these groups (Moore, 2007). According to this author, the latter can be explained as a by-product of the reconfiguration of the more traditional identities and expectations of the young people, both men and women (the organization of their own households, access to jobs, access to the possibility of education), that lead to "identity crises", which adolescents and young women are not free from, in that the effects of this reduction of options, or of these social and economic transformations that affect the labor market and the impoverishment of the social environment also affect them.

The interesting aspect of this proposal-explanation on the women's entrance to the gangs, as a result of these re-organizations of the expectations and of the masculine and feminine identities as the effect of an environment that is influenced

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[112] A concept that can also be described as *satellitalization*, but it is left as it is to preserve the original definition that the author wants to transmit.

[113] The author suggests that: "the power of 'paralegality' is much greater than illegality, in that the former bears the implicit seed of the founding of a different, parallel order." (Reguillo, 2005; p. 81).

by globalization, is that it picks up on certain presuppositions that are not traditionally highlighted: that the effects of the social, economic and political orders —and their impact on local economies, in terms of options for work, education and identity, among others— *also* influence adolescents and young women. Normally, analysis is based on the false premise and the customary assumption that the girls' and young women's identities are built on and rooted in more traditional and less "volatile" institutions, like the family. In this regard, Moore points out that the gang becomes a viable local option in the face of the void of group and institutional options of different sorts, particularly in the case of young girls and female youth who, in turn, are affected the same as the young men are.

However, while exclusion, violence and marginalized community contexts are part of the daily life that faces both the boys and the girls, what this analytical proposal does not deal with is the fact that not all girls or adolescents see the gang as a way to solve these crises —their identity and affiliation crisis, as well as their economic and social ones. In fact, in this country, although gangs are numerically a minority with regards to the different sectors of young people that make up the age group that is demographically called "youth" (Santacruz and Carranza, 2009), in the gang, the women are a minority within the minority. With this in mind, the analysis also calls for a more circumscribed vision of those girls and adolescents that chose this option. In sum, it presupposes an emphasis — particularly with primary prevention as a goal— on variables of context that reveal the complete vulnerability of the boys and girls, a fact that leads some of them to consider the gang as *a less bad* option in the world they come from. However, it also implies taking into account what it might *mean* for a girl or young woman to become a member of a gang. In other words, it means analyzing the significance that it had —and has now— for them, to have opted for living and facing the challenges of their own lives, by assuming a different identity: that is, highlighting their role as *agents* of their own biography. This is the basis for the following reflection.

Second Premise. Within the gang, women do not play a subsidiary role; rather, they become active agents in its group dynamics and the violence that characterizes it. However, the exercise of power has limitations.

The first chapter states that this study agrees with and is in the framework of Miller's (2001) analytical proposal, to approach the analysis of women's participation in a group such as the gangs, and in a context like the Salvadoran one. This author suggests that the risks of assuming a posture that highlights not only female victimization, but also female authorship or "*agency*"[114] involves the risk of erroneous interpretation. Furthermore, it can lead to the incorrect use of the results of a study, particularly in an issue like violence, where the prevailing rhetoric is focused on raising awareness and sensitizing the public on the impact that this has on the lives of the women, as its victims. Notwithstanding, and without attempting to suggest the contrary, in the case of the gangs (which are violent groups inserted in a violent society), and in the case of the women gang-members (who are women inserted in a group of violent men), when seeking an approach to their life experiences to better understand the complex mechanisms that underly their actions, decisions and options, it is necessary to adopt this interpretative proposal. This, in turn, implies placing these women not only as "victims of their own story", but also as subjects that are responsible —at specific times throughout that story— of inflicting violence on other persons.

This is not about placing oneself at the other end of the spectrum and extrapolate, in a simplistic manner —from the point of view of men on the women, the mechanisms that have lead them to incorporating themselves to the gang, the violence and crime. On the contrary, it has to do with detaching what

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[114] Despite the fact that this term *agency* can be understood in many ways, in this case it is derived from the term "agent," used to denote one who has the capacity to execute or exert an action.

these life courses have in common and their differences, in order to lay some empirical and analytical bases to sustain that the biographies of the men and women can be explained, on occasion, based on gender; and on others, based on membership and belonging to a group. In fact, following Miller's logic, it is possible to raise the question of participation of women in the gang and their authorship, their responsibility and their role as *agents* of violence, "and it can be done so from a gender perspective" (*ibíd.*, p. 200).

Once they are members of the gang, a series of scenarios are imposed on them where violence plays the leading role. In the first place, the violent rite of passage and of induction to the gang. They have to endure a heavy beating that lasts 13 to 18 seconds that can be as flexible as the cadence of the countdown, and adjusted according to the purpose it serves: punishment, initiation, warning, or something else. This ritual becomes the door, the official entrance to the group, but it does not guarantee they enter under equal conditions with the majority of the male members. Joining the gang in the same manner as a man (by way of a beating) provides them with some indispensable minimum credibility in terms of their availability, their endurance, or their fortitude as aspirants within the group logic, but it does not confer upon the women the same starting point as the men gang-members. And things are this way because when women join the gang, they begin to encounter the contradictions in the notions of "equality" that are in the group rhetoric and imaginary, as well as the real divergences that exist in the gang as these notions of equality have to be extended to the women. In other words, the gang's discourse is that "all are equal"; but evidently, some are "more equal than others," or with regard to *those others* that constitute the *homegirls*. In this sense, like in so many others, as a group, the gang reproduces the same patriarchal notions that stem from the culture they are immersed in. Consequently, even though any new member has to go through a process of reputation building based on the notions, values and practices that are ranked best in the gang,

in the case of the women, added to this process is the need to convince and/or demonstrate to the men their capacity to adapt to the group dynamics, and fight the mistrust and prejudice that most of their gang partners feel.

This "status building" comes from reorganizing their identity and configuring a violent reputation, and in the gang this is only achieved by direct and extreme use of violence. Otherwise, joining the gang by the sexual rite —a possibility which some women gang-member respondents admitted exists— is a method of induction that is not respected by the men or the women. In the case of the former, because it confirms their prejudice in the face of the group members that are considered weak ("they are not able to stand it"), judging this way, implicitly and from the group logic, that it has less weight, or they need less resistance to have sexual intercourse with one or several men, than when getting a beating. Added to this, it is not a mode of induction that is tolerated because, in terms of the issue of "respect"—and the ways in which it is won, there are certain codes and concrete notions inside the gang. In the case of the women, the sexual route—as a manner of entering the gang—is frowned upon because putting up with the beating when being *jumped in* becomes the first way they show they are as capable of behaving and subjecting themselves to whatever is necessary to belong to the group, "like another *homie"*, and concretely demonstrate their bravery, and send a message requesting equal treatment as the rest of the members. Paradoxically, however, by joining this way, the women go on to be part of a group designed for their exclusion, in that they seek self-affirmation as *homegirls* who are capable and brave in an androcentric world, that functions within a hierarchical structure that conceives them as a possession, and that, for the same reason, it is conceived in order to perpetuate this differentiation and imbalance of power between men and women.

In turn, joining the gang implies a step into a "new world" or, at least, a new cultural logic that follows its own rules and

values, and which the new member —man or woman— has to adjust to. One of these constructions, as mentioned before, are the means for obtaining "respect", so often noted and appraised. Therefore, in contradiction to the gang rhetoric, that repeats over and over how respect is "something that has to be earned"—and this is achieved by way of the progressive construction of a violent identity, this implies that respect is not a something the gang awards initially. And this is particularly true in the case of the women.

While the mechanisms to earn a position and a reputation in the gang are similar for women as they are for men —linked to the use of extreme violence and the commitment, obedience and total subordination to the group dynamics, women have a very complicated time with this merit test, due to their disadvantaged position from the start, given that they are women in a male chauvinist microcosm. Even so, the results of this study show these women's level of commitment —and obedience—to their group was repeatedly demonstrated, by means of direct participation in the extreme use of violence. In the case of the women gang-members that were interviewed, their participation in the gang was not circumscribed to the exercise of responsibilities and activities that are characteristic of the group. Further, their narratives show that many of them were so implicated and involved in acts of extreme violence directed at others —inside and outside of the group, that there is no doubt that they were main protagonists. This is also explained by the fact that, in this study, the women that were interviewed could be considered "veterans" in the gang, due to their longstanding membership and trajectory. Accordingly, based on a progressive adaptation or "masculinization" of their patterns of behavior as compared with their male gang-partners, their active participation in group exploits became the means by which many of them achieved a position of greater power in the group. In this sense, violence was utilized not only as a means of defense or protection in the face of a hostile environment, or a rival gang, or threatening social actors of different types, but for its instrumental value:

as a means to exercise expressive power and achieve a position within the group.

Following this logic, the notions of intra-group solidarity have been set aside as part of the changes in the rationale, the values, and the notions that now seem to govern the gang, where the group's structural framework involves a struggle for power, where companionship no longer has the weight it had previously, and where ascension of the gang's "corporate ladder" requires competition, to become more than the next person, despite and due to the devaluation of the rest. Women, in their initial imbalanced condition within the group, suffer this demerit directly, in a group where equality is merely a norm which is applied —in some cases with discretion— to the members of the dominant group.

As a reaction to this situation, many women opt for carrying out activities that will "bring them closer" to the men in the group. However, when they do so under these notions of competition and struggle for positions of leadership, they are distanced from their fellow women gang-members —thus weakening the possibilities of strengthening the social fabric among them, that might aid them in gaining more weight as a women's group, and this invalidates the possibilities that other studies on women gang-members refer to. Those studies (Campbell, 1984) suggest that the women's membership in the gang can lay the foundation for constructing a sort of "sisterhood" between them. The results of the present study do not support this notion. On the contrary, they show that on this path towards acquiring power, reputation and respect within the gang, many of them adopt a series of attitudes of the hegemonic group, which include mistrust and suspiciousness, if not outright discrimination or rejection of their own women gang-partners.

Actually, the findings in the present study stress that, in both gangs, while many women have had the possibility of having and exercising a leading role in the gang —even assuming posi-

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tions of power as group spokespersons, the obstacles to access these positions of power come from the men gang-members as well as their women gang-partners, who prefer being under male direction, or are suspicious of the position of power achieved by other women. Consequently, in order to approach the issue, it is necessary to steer clear of "essentialist" notions of the phenomenon of girls' and young women's participation in the gangs, with its focus on an image of them as mere victims of the crisis of their times or of their personal life stories, or the focus on the women's congregation in these groups as a space to achieve "female emancipation." It is possible to adopt an intermediate posture that stresses their personal history —violent and complex biographies, but also suggests the possibilities that many have had and continue to have in the gang and thanks to that group.

These considerations make one thing clear: within the gang, the power that a woman can come to exert is bound by limitations imposed by their men gang-fellows. Nonetheless, even within those limitations, achieving those levels implied for many girls and young women having achieved possibilities of exerting power that they would not have had access to by their own means, in other spaces and in their realities prior to joining the gang. This belief, this notion that the gang is a space "where they obtained respect and went further" than what they could have on their own and outside of the group, is what can be the final piece in the explanation of the reason so many young girls and adolescents join the gangs. Miller (2001) sums up this situation precisely:

> […] these young women chose to trade unknown risks for known ones. The gang offered protection from and retaliation against others on the streets in exchange for the acceptance of violence under more or less predictable conditions (p. 203).

Notwithstanding, these possibilities of "exerting and doing" are circumscribed —once more— by the gang's complex group dynamics and processes. Therefore, as part of their integration into a sexist and androcentric group, the women gang members cannot evade tasks, activities and roles assigned to them based on stereotypical and traditionalist gender perspectives, which consist of assuming domestic labor and group care-taking duties. Subsequently, in terms of their responsibilities and functions, the women —particularly when they have achieved a certain level in the gang— have to carry out activities that are characteristic of the gang —that are not substantially different from many of the responsibilities carried out by their men gang-partners, aside from the more traditional responsibilities the group assigns them.

These multiple activities and functions that a woman can come to exercise in the gang, and which respond to a traditionalist rationale and a male chauvinist vision in the group, as such do not provide an "added value" to the construction of their reputation, neither are they elements that count towards their ascension in the gang. They are simply assigned and carried out by them, along with the rest of the responsibilities. Accordingly, and as often happens in patriarchal groups and societies, only a portion of their activities —those that involve direct participation in issues of interest to the hegemonic group and/or tend to involve economic retribution to it— are taken into consideration at the time of "assessment" of their performance and capacities, and the additional workload that is made up of the activities they normally carry out is set aside: looking after the gang's common living spaces, taking care of their own sons and daughters, or taking care of the homeboys or partners, whether in prison or out.

Assignment of tasks in the gang is often done based on risk assessment, or pragmatic and security issues. Although, on many occasions, it is clearly linked to notions and attitudes that are discriminatory of women, or which are socially conceived

as "women's work." Thus, part of the difficulty that women gang-members encounter has to do with repeated attempts to solve the dissonance and constant contradictions that they have to deal with, in a group which was initially conceived as a family, later as the opportunity to exert power, but finally winds up placing them in a position of additional vulnerability and inequality.

Third Premise. Not all dynamics a woman participates in can be explained by gender, rather, as the result of the influence of the group.

The analysis of the process of the women's rapprochement with the gangs has made it possible to establish that some of the reasons and motivations are different with regards to those of the men, and that this can be understood from a gender perspective. When explaining the ritual for joining the gang, the sense of belonging and the group activities, similarities prevail between the sexes. As mentioned before, joining the gang tends to take place at a time when a series of aspects converge and overlap: asphyxiating personal, social and structural conditions; precarious community scenarios; powerful group influences; as well as the personal belief that many girls and adolescents have regarding the "most adequate" strategy for facing life.

In terms of joining the gang, the tendency in the responses that the women gang-members interviewed in this study mention are the dysfunctional intra-family dynamics, a desire for vengeance and retaliation against an aggressor, wanting to belong to the group and, in the majority of cases, a simultaneous combination of all of these factors. Consequently, this study has come to confirm the idea that many women joined the gang through *complex* processes, where there is a simultaneous convergence of critical material shortages and unsatisfied emotional needs; a lack of alternative reference frameworks to serve as a basis for the construction of their own identity; neighborhoods and communities in which the gang is an omnipresent

actor that has to be interacted with and dealt with; a weak-
ened and inoperative institutional structure that does nothing to
protect children and youth from suffering abuse and violence at
the hands of the adults that surround them, and are in charge of
them; and the historical abandon by the State, in terms of well-
being and development of children and youth.

Without demeaning the aforementioned, within this constel-
lation of factors, another aspect that plays a role is the personal
option for joining these groups (the *agency,* that was mentioned
before), as a non-conformist means for making up for the
previous deficiencies and limitations. There is also intervention
by factors such as group influence that play an important part
in understanding these dynamics, particularly when the women
are already members of the gang. Once in them, the explana-
tions based on gender tend to yield to the weightier explanation
of the group pressure on individual actions. In this regard, it is
noteworthy to bring up two issues. First, linked to the similarities
found in the declarations of these women compared to those
of the men (in previous studies). The second is related to the
similarity of the precarious contexts the women gang-members
survived in childhood when compared with many other girls,
youth and adolescents, who do not see in the gang a way of
being in the world. This study did not have the participation
of young women that did not end up belonging to any gang,
neither did it include men gang-members. Nevertheless, this
is no hindrance to conjecture when seeking to elucidate the
impact of group influences on personal decisions and actions.

As for the first issue —the similarities between the explana-
tions regarding the men's and the women's processes, many of
the meanings, the logic, and the justifications that the women
gave regarding their own actions and/or the gang dynamics do
not vary greatly —or at all— from the rationalizations resorted
to by the men. This was not concluded based on a simplistic
generalization from the latter to the former, rather, it is because
both —men and women— cannot be conceived outside the

way of thinking that engulfs them and determines them: the group influence and the imposition of the group's logic on its members. This sort of situation had already been noted by Miller (2001), who not only recognized the different gender aspects that committing acts of violence and crime had in the young girls that took part in her study, but noted as well that their participation often took place according to the gang's group processes:

> … important similarities across gender emerge […] this provides important information that challenges the tendency […] to describe girls' use of violence in gangs as resulting from protective or defensive responses to gendered vulnerability. Instead, […] girls accounts highlighted the importance of peer contexts in facilitating their delinquency. Despite the gendered nature of girls' crime, their participation was often a function of gang processes. (Miller, 2001; p. 202).

A similar conclusion was arrived at by Cyr and Decker (2003), who noted that gender by itself cannot account for the different perceptions between the members of a gang, and youth who do not belong to it, because of the existence of fundamental social processes that affect both groups. Therefore, one of these authors' key findings was that membership in the gang among the men and women participants in that study, as an indicator, had a greater impact than gender in showing the differences in their visions on group structure, its values, and activities. In other words, the logic and rationale on different aspects of the gang are more likely to be similar between men and women gang-members than between young gang-members and youth that are not members of the gang.

Understanding the supremacy of the group, over and above individual wills, is fundamentally important in order to interpret the similarities that, on many occasions, can be found when analyzing the situation of the men and women that are in the gang: the members do not operate by individual logics, but within the norms, values, orders and group codes that deter-

mines them (Blanco, 2004; Bourhis and Leyens, 1996; Hogg, 2006; Zimbardo, 2007). That is, the gang members operate in the logic of a group identity, based on processes of categorization that enable them to identify each other and as a group, which stress the similarities within the group (endogroup) and the differences regarding other groups (exogroups). This dichotomous construction of the images of the "enemies/rivals" is fundamental, among other aspects, in conferring justification and legitimizing the actions that run through their rationale.

These processes of rigid social categorization "depersonalize" both the group members, as well as those who are outside the group (Hogg, 2006). This means, that they lead the person to assume his or her status as a member, and thus to behave and identify himself or herself under the normative patterns that the group itself dictates. In this regard, depersonalization can even produce aggressive behavior if the group, as such, prescribes it and promotes this sort of conduct (*ibíd.*). Consequently, the person goes on to see himself or herself as a representative of that category (one or another gang), instead of merely as an individual that has joined (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). This is the result of the change in identity, of the introjection of roles, and of the subordinate alignment to its fulfillment, defined by the interests and appraisals of the group (Blanco, 2004). At this point, this process has minimized their individual characteristics and criteria, in a progressive transition to a state that ends up imposing the weight of the group: that of *deindividuation*. That is, the person's immersion in a group which determines the behavior, provides identity, defines roles and functions, and confers the justification discourse that legitimizes the actions undertaken. The conditions are ready for the members to function not according to their own criteria, but according to the provisions of the authority, in order to test the loyalty, fulfill a mission, show themselves to be worthy of belonging. Hence the importance of two things which take place in the gang: the significance of the rite of passage, and the process of construction of a new identity. Bear in mind that men and

women become members of the gang —become *homeboys* and *homegirls*— by means of the adoption of a new identity (crystallized in a series of symbolic attributes, among which the *tag* or nickname is noteworthy), and their subsequent subordination to their system of values, norms, hierarchies and roles. This is stated eloquently in Blanco (2004):

> The immersion of the subject in the group, the unreserved identification with its goals and objectives, the unfathomable satisfaction and pride that is infused into an occasionally hurt self-esteem, and the granite-like feeling of security that it provides us, constitute the base to make of it our true, inalienable, and sole reason for being. The obverse of this coin can take on dramatic nuances: each person whose reason for existence and being in this world is defined in these terms, runs the risk of becoming a destroyer missile […] The group that owns the actions, thoughts and dreams; the *group that subjugates the individual*, and not precisely by the weight of its numbers […] but by the nature of the contents that are held within its structure (pp. 5-6).

Therefore, it is not uncommon that many explanations given by the women respondents in the present study about their life experiences seemed, and are, very similar to those of the men. In this regard, in this study which is about women, it may seem that obvious things are being noted, things that were and are already known about men and gang dynamics. Far from it, more than the product of an easy generalization on women based on what affects the men, these findings confirm the extent of the subordination of the gang's members —both men and women— to the group dynamics and the decisions of the leaders. This is a clear example of the process that Blanco has called the *subjugation of the subject [avasallamiento del sujeto],* that is, the determination that the group logic imposes over the individual wills of the men and women members. Principally, because the gang can be conceived as a concrete example of a *totalizing or ubiquitous group*: a group that invades and determines the lives of its members; and this group

is, in turn, immersed in social contexts that enable and promote the nullifying of personal, dispositional and situational variables (Zimbardo, 2007).

This reconfirms the need to approach the analysis of the phenomenon of the women in the gang keeping in mind the constant interaction between the exercise (and the possibility) of individual action, and the ever present influence —and, in this case, also threat— of the group, particularly when the woman is already a member of the gang. These processes of group identity formation, with their concomitant consequences such as obedience, deindividuation, assimilation of new roles and identities, are not to be removed from the gender analysis. However, it also must be recognized that they are not circumscribed to it to explain the actions that group dynamics lead the members to do in the name of the group, be they men or women, based on the annihilation of their individual identity and their assimilation of that of the group.

As for the second issue —the similarities between the precarious conditions of the girls and youth that join the gangs regarding the majority of girls, youth or adolescents that do not see these groups as an option, to the extent that this study was unfortunately unable to have a "control" group for comparison, there can be no precise assessment of the different impacts on the decision these women made compared with others who, under the same conditions, did not join the gang. This analytical limitation is imposed by the study design itself, in that it is not possible to analyze differential impacts based on a homogeneous group, that is, with no items to contrast.

However, taking up a hypothesis that comes from one of the pioneer studies on the issue (Miller, 2001), and based on some of the narratives by the women gang-members in the present study, the incipient evidence points to something along the lines of a confluence between the personal decision not to join the group and the lesser degree of "intensity" in the constellation

of overlapping risks. In the case that is being dealt with here, this would seem to be expressed in the presence of a situation (usually an alternative group) that is able to rescue and "remove" —symbolically or literally— the girl or young woman from this context of imminent risks. That is, the presence of another group, whose influx makes it possible to have a counterbalance to the potential influence of the gang. This is seen, for instance, in a couple of narratives by women gang-members where they noted that, out of all their brothers and sisters, they had been the only ones that had joined the gang, or, at most, the only woman in her family that belonged to those groups; while their brothers and sisters had not joined them. In those biographies, among the group that faced those risks, the girl-child or adolescent-girl that was "left behind" by her group wound up being the one joining the gang. Here it is evident that physical or moral abandon by the family group, the school or community, merge with the shortcomings in the micro-contexts, and the gang becomes one of the few options that, at the time, they consider having. These events end up reinforcing the processes of internal group cohesion and deepen the loyalty to the group. This is merely a preliminary hypothesis that would require, in any case, later empirical testing, in order to be validated or completely ruled out.

What is being established here is that the gang is a privileged space for analyzing and interpreting the various ways in which the group's ubiquitousness becomes the reason that is installed over and above any reasoning, any dissidence, and, under certain circumstances and situations, above its members' gender.

Fourth Premise. The gang, initially a welcoming place and a space to exert power, becomes another prison over time.

Over the years, and by way of the continuous changes the gang phenomenon has undergone in this country and in the Northern Region of Central America, the group dynamics, char-

acteristics and internal logic have also been modified. This has been decisively aided by the punitive policies that, in the past, were conceived and implemented as the only way to deal with a phenomenon that from any perspective is fundamentally structural: the application of greater doses of force and violence. In the face of these events, and as the result of the deepening of the conflict, the gangs responded to the attack with acts of greater violence —perpetrated on their rival gang, the institutions, and against other social actors, and by increasing the cohesion and rigidity within the group. Their rules, norms and rationale were modified to adapt to the new, more hostile environment, while they became more rigid and suspicious in terms of their demands of loyalty and obedience of their members. In this internal situation (within the group) and external circumstances (threats from outside the group), noncompliance with the norm, defiance of the leaders, power struggles, disloyalty, or even the slightest inkling of the possibility of betrayal bring upon the members —men and women alike— the possibility of having the gang use the necessary means to remedy the indiscipline and transgressions. There is a closure of any spaces for differences and disagreements. Besides, the limits that determine what can and cannot be done become narrower; many of the "rules of the game" become diffuse, less predictable, more arbitrary or, at least, do not seem to apply to all equally.

The aforementioned is articulated around many of the declarations of the women gang-member respondents. Some admitted to having questioned the reasons, interpellated their leaders, and having reflected on the way that the gang had treated them or others at some moment during their trajectory, because of a series of inconsistencies and arbitrariness inside the group, which they witnessed first hand or experienced. A large part of the women noted that, upon coming to a certain point in their lives, the gang was no longer providing them with the satisfactions and benefits of different sorts, which had originally attracted them to the group. On the other hand, the possibilities of challenging the group, of questioning, of criticizing,

of confronting, were never real, even for those that held certain level of "power," or at least a leadership-role. It was not possible, and the group did not accept it. Moreover, it was punished. The sensation of impotence and constraint was accentuated, as well as the sensation of having gone from being a member or part of the group to being its property, without much margin for action. With no freedom to act, no liberty to omit doing something the gang requested or ordered, without the freedom to emit an opinion, the gang is no longer a space for configuring their identity, exerting power or "emancipation", and for many of them, it becomes another prison.

The results of this study show, unequivocally, that women gang-members experience their affiliation with the gang in different ways throughout their life inside of it. Initially, it constitutes a concrete opportunity to belong to a group or a family, an opportunity to configure an identity, an achievement, and the demonstration of their personal capacities. However, over time, it becomes a prison with no way out, at least not without dire consequences, which can come from the gang itself, or result in the absence of options for them to reintegrate in society in the psychological, social, cultural and economic sense.

After several years of group membership, many lack the minimum abilities at the educational level, because, although they are not illiterate, their knowledge is not even the minimum required by businesses (high school), even to apply for low-paying jobs with no benefits. This is one of these women's principal shortcomings, in that —added to a personal history of gang-membership, and now a prison record— lack of education constitutes a severe obstacle to their entry to the job market and productive life once they regain their liberty.

In another order of things, the responsibility for supporting their sons and daughters often falls on them, and is not shared by their partners or the father of their children (on account of being in prison or being deceased; in either case, they are

absent). This increases their need to earn a living and receive income to provide the minimum requirements for subsistence. This situation contributes to making them dependent on the gang, given that it satisfies many of their needs, fundamentally of the economic sort. The gang offers them the possibility of procuring income by way of activities in illegal markets, or at least it allows them to cover some of their own needs and those of their sons and daughters. This, as long as they remain *active*, that is to say, "operative" in their respective gangs. The problem is that, as long as they remain active, there is a high risk and possibility of exerting violence upon others. Paradoxically, this confines and commits them even more to the group, exposes them to being murdered in the escalation of violence, and/or being arrested by the system, for committing some crime linked to their membership in the gang.

Furthermore, if they want to opt for a change in their lives, for activities that involve less active participation in the gang (*calm down* or *deactivate*), the mere desire to do so —as many of them have experienced— is not in itself enough to obtain group authorization. There is always the risk that, as the term itself curiously indicates, and what has actually happened to many of them, if they have *calmed down* or *deactivated*, this condition can be reverted with a single order from the gang. This means that remaining in that state of their own will does not make them free, unless they *retire*. In this study, a minority declared that they were in this condition, that is, they declared they were completely *retired* from their respective groups; which implies, they were in a position that was the farthest removed from the gang possible. However, this is a decision and a situation that is extremely risky, such that voluntary retirement implies both treason and disloyalty to the group, which are generally punished by extremely violent means. Ironically, it is these women, the *retired* women, that feel the most liberty from their group while they are in prison. And they are conscious that, the moment they regain their liberty and leave the prison, since they have been sentenced by their own group, they are at risk of losing their lives. As a prison, the gang can weigh more than jail itself.

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Fifth Premise. Prison, the context where the women gang-members currently survive, does not fulfill its rehabilitation role due to multiple limitations.

This fifth reflection takes a slight detour away from the central issue of the study (women gang-members), in order to focus its attention in the context that they are in: the prison, whose characteristics have evident impact on their lives and their possibilities of rehabilitation and social reintegration. The focus of this study is not the Salvadoran Penitentiary System. Nevertheless, there is a brief overview of the general characteristics of the Salvadoran prisons that house women. From there, it is possible to get an idea of the way in which these prisons are environments full of precarious conditions, insecurity, and dehumanization, completely exempt of the basic minimum conditions that guarantee they are fit for human habitation (Hro, 2009). Therefore, there is an undermining of the legal mandate the State is bound by to provide for the rehabilitation and reintegration of the persons that are incarcerated in those facilities.

In El Salvador, the penitentiary system is characterized by precisely the opposite, given that the inhuman conditions in which the population of persons deprived of liberty subsists — added to the restrictions that incarceration involves— constitute the greatest obstacles for rehabilitation and progressive social re-adaptation of the persons that have been sentenced to living within its walls. These conditions are characterized by extremely high levels of prison over-population and, therefore, overcrowding, given that these facilities, in many cases, had not been designed even as prisons (rather, many of them were military compounds or forts, constructed in the late 19th century or early 20th century); by the lack of basic utilities (the most serious being water rationing); by a fragmented penitentiary personnel in terms of institutional vision, operating with a work overload that contrasts with the scant human resources available; in some cases they are discouraged by work conditions that are in themselves precarious and adverse, in some instances involved in

situations of corruption, and whose members seem to be in a constant struggle between those whose viewpoint is a technical approach to the situation of the persons deprived of liberty and the emphasis on preserving security; and, in general, characterized by the absence of a penitentiary policy that is strategically focused on the social re-integration and rehabilitation of the incarcerated persons, among other limitations.

Whereas this was not its express purpose, the present study confirms the aforementioned situation, not exclusively based on data provided by the official institutions in terms of human rights in the country (Hro, 2009), or that of other institutions which have taken up the task of monitoring the situation of penitentiaries (Flores and García, 2006; *Quetzalcoatl* Foundation, 2009), instead, from the mouths of the gang members and prison officials themselves, and by on-site verification by the researchers.

All parties interviewed coincided in noting a series of fundamental shortcomings and precarious conditions of all sorts, in the individual interviews, in the focus groups, as well as during the initial visits, when cells and the sectors where they resided were visited. The inmates and officials noted and gave concrete examples of the multiple needs. Based on all this input, a comparative table was created (see Table 5.1, Chapter 5). Among the abundance of shortcomings, the most noteworthy were described there in more detail, due to the urgent need for attention: prison overcrowding; problems related to infrastructure and basic services; deficient medical attention; the lack of training programs to prepare inmates for entrance into the job market and/or rehabilitation policies; and the strengthening of the human resources employed in the prisons. Without intending to mean that these are the only issues, they are all important deficiencies which, along with other limitations that are connected to the women's affiliation with the gang, directly boycott any effort aimed at their rehabilitation and social integration.

First of all, *the elevated overpopulation, and the precarious conditions of infrastructure in Salvadoran prisons*; which are inadequate structures operating over and above their normal capacities with a high level of population density. The parameter is called *critical overcrowding* by the European Union, and it comes about when the prison population density is 120% or over (Carranza, in Rodríguez, 2005). In this country, according to calculations made with the inmate population at the time of the field work, the four centers visited for this study have population densities that far surpass this figure: the *Ilopango* Prison facility is the only one that was designed to hold only women, and its population density has been calculated at 520% (an overpopulation of 927 women). The *Quezaltepeque* Prison held members of the *18 Street* gang at the time of the study, and it has an estimated population density of 447% (115 women & 779 men gang-members, in a facility whose capacity is 200 persons), and this penitentiary facility was originally constructed to hold men. The *Sensuntepeque* Prison held gang members of the *Salvatrucha Gang* at the time of the study, and its population density has been calculated at 195% (it held 182 women and 248 men, in a structure whose built-in capacity is 220 persons), and likewise, it is a penitentiary constructed for men. Then, the *San Miguel* Prison, whose population includes retired members from both gangs, and it has a population density that ascends to 449% (it held 180 women and 626 men, and its maximum capacity is 180 persons). Out of all the facilities that were visited, *San Miguel*'s is the oldest infrastructure; it was not even conceived to be used as a prison, given that in the early part of the last century it was a military compound.

At the time of writing, this data had already become outdated, and figures had increased, while, as noted in the corresponding section of this paper, towards mid 2009, the penitentiary population had reached levels that were greater than 21,000 people deprived of liberty. Dammert and Zúñiga (2008), in their study on prisons at the Latin American level, note the following:

> … El Salvador, for its part, has experienced the most drastic increase in its penitentiary population with a 99% increase between 1997 and 2007, and it is also the country with the largest prison overpopulation in Central America, and the second in all of Latin America […] this is reflected the strongest in some of the penitentiary facilities in El Salvador, such as the one in *Quezaltepeque*, whose population surpasses 300% its capacity; others, such as the prisons at *Mariona* and *San Miguel*, come to 241% and 276% respectively (*ibíd.*, p. 47).

These elevated levels of overcrowding make it such that many persons, men and women alike, are forced to sleep on the floor, sharing cots, mats and even on the bare ground itself. In the case of the women, this situation is even more serious in that in most of the cases (except for the *Ilopango* prison), only one of the sectors of the facility is assigned exclusively to them, which many times is only a small portion of the whole facility. For instance, at the *Quezaltepeque* penitentiary, the female sector comprises less than one fourth of the entire construction (Hro, 2009). Some women gang-members —particularly those that are incarcerated in some of the penitentiaries that hold *active* gang members— noted that they were not allowed to leave their sectors, and spent time in alternative areas on very few occasions, such as a sports field or a patio. In this regard, the prison officials contradicted this version. The truth is that the confinement stems not only from the objective limitations in space, but also by an infrastructure and institutional vision that is designed precisely to make it evident to the person that is deprived of liberty.

The problems of prison overpopulation are linked with, and are worsened by, the *precarious conditions of the infrastructure of these prisons, and due to a lack of access to basic services,* which are fundamental for health. In this regard, the most serious limitation is, no doubt, the rationing or lack of access to water, given that many of the penitentiaries have severe problems with water supply shortages, which means the inmates

have access to water only for limited periods of time during the day. This sort of situation is aggravated when the penitentiary also includes a nursery section, given that the children are likewise deprived of liberty, and live with their mothers in conditions that are a high risk for health. Added to the consequences that are psychological, somatic and physical, which are created by the overcrowded conditions these women live in, there is an increase in the levels of insalubrity, and the possibilities of contagion of illnesses. This situation becomes more critical when there are boys and girls present and living with their mothers in these conditions. Likewise, overcrowding is a situation that fosters the abuse of authority in relation to the persons deprived of liberty, because surveillance and institutional control are difficult (Dammert and Zúñiga, 2008).

The situation becomes worse if, as in the case of this country's penitentiary centers, *health services are precarious.* Many women gang-members noted that the penitentiaries lack adequate medicine for treatment of specific illness and conditions. When it comes to requiring a specific medicine, the inmates have to rely on their relatives or, in some cases, the gang itself, in order to cover the costs. Likewise, and due to the overpopulation in the prison, the demand for medical treatment is excessive in contrast with the available supply: few health service personnel and short hours (sometimes, only one doctor or dentist, for half a day). In many cases, it is not only a lack of personnel; rather, it is inadequate personnel for certain kinds of needs. A couple of examples: in the case of the women, there is a need for medical-gynecological attention and follow-up, as well as timely pediatric attention for the boys and girls that live with their mothers in the prisons. Many of the women declared that in order to address gynecological problems, the most immediate attention is from a male-nurse, not a woman, and rarely a medical doctor. They also expressed that they preferred a woman instead of a man for this sort of treatment.

According to the data provided by the General Office of Penitentiary Centers (DGCP, 2008*b*) in late 2008, penitentiary health-services personnel at the national level was a total of 126 professionals, who served a population —at that time— of over 20 thousand persons deprived of liberty. Among these were 28 general practitioners (for the whole country), one gynecologist (at the *Ilopango* Prison, even though there are more penitentiaries that hold women inmates), 1 psychiatrist (at one of the prisons), 22 dentists, and 51 nurses (the latter two groups were distributed around the country). It is plain to see that the amount of personnel has no proportional relation to the number of incarcerated persons, or with their multiple needs, above all when taking into account the overcrowded conditions, insalubrity and lack of access to services where they are housed.

It is important to mention that, in and among the penitentiary population, there are many people with various infectious diseases including HIV-AIDS, who need external assistance in order to cope with their illness and pay the cost of the medicine they require. For instance, based on DGCP (2008*b*) data, the estimated number of inmates with HIV-AIDS at the end of 2008 came to 185 persons, which means, it has practically doubled over a two-year period, when taking into account that the number of inmates with HIV-AIDS that this same institution held was 85 in 2006. The data was not broken down by gender, but the prevalence of this sort of ailment confirms its existence, the vulnerability of many persons, and contrasts with the lack of measures to avoid contagion or to access adequate medical treatment, based on the Penitentiary Law's dispositions regarding sanitary conditions and health services.

Next in line in the list of urgent needs, one of the gravest things noted was the *absence of job-training programs to prepare them to enter the working-world* in some of the penitentiaries that were visited. The absence of policies aimed at the effective integration and adaptation in society of the person that has been deprived of liberty, or at least, the absence of

systematic application of concrete programs and projects, is a situation that reveals a failure in the penitentiary policy of El Salvador. The shortcomings which many of the women that are deprived of liberty —whether gang members or not— have in terms of educational and work experience are some of the principal causes for the perpetuation of their processes of social marginalization and exclusion. Likewise, the lack of structured programs encourages excessive idleness, and this situation propitiates and strengthens group cohesion, in that the disproportionate and permanent "leisure time" leads to involvement in activities within the gang dynamic, strengthening the ties and internal cohesion, rather than spending time on activities that are structured by the system, as established and set down by the Penitentiary Law.

Penitentiary system officials stated that the system contemplates the integration of men and women inmates in general and/or specialized programs. However, many cannot get started, in some cases due to the lack of resources, the excess of population, the deficiency of materials (in the case of programs that require them) or, simply, due to the lack of infrastructure (space) to carry them out. In the case of the gang-population, the technical and security personnel lack specialization and, in some cases, lack the will to work with this sort of population. This situation grew worse during the previous government administration, in the framework of the hardening of security measures that were increased during and after the enforcement of the *Mano Dura* policies. The penitentiary system closed its doors to many non-governmental organizations and religious institutions that worked with the prison population, and therefore reduced the number programs and activities available.

The dearth of job-training programs creates a situation that has dire consequences in the case of many of the women gang-members. In an interview, a system official listed a series of general programs aimed at the male sector, such as job-training, value development, sports programs, productive labor

programs (bread-making, ceramics, string-based handicrafts). For the women, he listed a more limited number of trainings, with a clear gender-slant: sewing (embroidery, padding, cushion-making), making stuffed-toys or *piñatas*, for instance. The few tasks that women had direct participation in were, mostly, activities related to work that had a clearly sexist orientation, such as the ones described above. The activities that women inmates are occupied doing —whether gang-members or not— and the alleged job training imparted, was not directed at facilitating or teaching technical skills, work-related abilities, or occupational competencies that might allow them to operate in a more autonomous manner when they recover their liberty. Instead, it is limited to perpetuating this traditionalist vision of women, by teaching them to learn to sew, create small handicrafts (stuffed-toys or *piñatas*, basically), and less frequently, to take courses to learn dressmaking or bakery. In some cases, and following the same domestic-labor aspect, they earn a wage for their cleaning services, or their work at the penitentiary store. In this regard, this sort of activities are given greater importance than training activities that might allow them to acquire a skill that does not reflect the traditional distribution of gender roles. This situation translates into the institution's lack of vision and interest in the possibilities of social integration for the incarcerated persons, and more specifically, a lack of interest in the job-market that awaits these women when they recover their liberty, since few of these activities would enable them to subsist independently. Above all, keeping in mind that one factor that would enable some women gang-members to make the decision to retire from their active life in the group, is the possibility of being economically self-sufficient, and this is attained by having a means to be able to support themselves, and their family.

Finally, there is the need for *strengthening the human resources at the prisons*. If one considers the brief characterization that has been made of the system, it is to be expected that those that work in it are hindered in their labor due to its limitations. Penitentiary personnel are not only numerically insufficient

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in the face of the amount of the inmate population, but they are also divided among those that favor a vision of security over a technical vision aimed at eventually achieving the social integration of the inmate. In this regard, strengthening is required at different levels: the personnel in charge of security need training in terms of human rights, and ways of dealing with the population that is deprived of liberty, governed by the rules established at the international level. In terms of technical personnel, many officials complained of the need to grant greater prominence and presence to the technical team in the decision making processes that affect the inmate population. In a word, the technical vision should be brought to bear with the same weight as the vision that emphasizes surveillance and security. Likewise, it is fundamental that penitentiary personnel, who work long hours under high levels of stress, receive wage increases according to their functions and comparable to the rest of the officials and personnel in the judicial system. This could also help in preventing corruption among penitentiary personnel, an issue that came up in some of the interviews.

Salvadoran prisons do not appear to be different in any significant way from other penitentiary contexts at the Latin American level (Antony, 2004; Dammert and Zúñiga, 2008) in many of its limitations —except in terms of the exorbitant number of inmates. Therefore, it becomes necessary to again draw attention to the permanent, unresolved crisis that the Salvadoran penitentiary system is immersed in, and where the persons incarcerated in it have to survive. The combination of circumstances presented previously confirm the gravity of a situation which human rights entities and organizations of civil society have each and all attempted to draw attention to (HRO, 2009; *Quetzalcoatl* Foundation, 2009). When focusing on the population that is deprived of liberty —men and women, gang members and civilian inmates, the first effort should be to aim for the transformation of the system that holds them and is responsible for providing the minimum conditions for their survival and eventually their reincorporation into society. It is

important to keep in mind that integration into society is difficult for persons whose rehabilitation process involves being locked up, isolated and deprived of the most basic rights. In the words of Valverde:

> … as long as alternative prisons are not constructed as a step leading up to the alternatives to prisons, also at the level of interpersonal human relations, the prison will continue to be a failure. To sum up, before thinking about programs to attempt recovering the inmate, we have to imagine the recovery of the prisons themselves, if this is at all possible (Valverde, 1997; pp. 95-96).

As for the gang population, a prison system like that of El Salvador provides nothing in terms of offering them the possibility for integration into society. The women that are or have been members of the gang have an even more difficult time of it: they are branded by a series of characteristics that are linked to the processes of prior social exclusion (low educational, cultural and economic levels), marked by their belonging to the gang, and now finally marked by a prison record. Their possibilities, under these circumstances, are reduced twofold, or even threefold; that is, they are very scarce.

In this case, it becomes necessary to undertake processes which, from a gender perspective, might make it possible to attend to the multiple needs of the population of persons deprived of liberty in general, and of the women (whether or not they are gang-members), in particular. Concrete instances of some of these actions are the following: there should be an effort at inclusion of gender perspective in the analysis of the information of female crime, and not only a simple break down of crimes by the victim's gender; the definition of models and programs of education and job-training intervention adjusted to the needs that, in the short or medium term, the inmates will have in order to re-enter society and the job market once they have served their sentences; the effort for the improvement and

specialization of health services for those women whose children are living with them in prison; among other multiple and urgent needs. In sum, it is urgent to reveal the precarious nature of the situation of the persons that are incarcerated in the penitentiary system, to put their issues again in the national public policy agenda for immediate attention. In the case of the women, the political agendas destined to guarantee and promote the development and the fulfillment of their rights, be they economic, social, civil or human, will be irreparably incomplete, if they do not take into account the needs of the women whose care is under the responsibility of the State.

Sixth Premise. The inactive or retired women gang-members require special and urgent aid from the State and Society; active women gang-members need to first make a decision and have the option of retiring from the gang.

The presentation of the findings of this study has been an attempt at bringing to the forefront these women's passage through various unfavorable circumstances that led them, at a certain moment, to opt for joining the gang as a way to face and deal with these conditions. Nevertheless, based on their formal membership in the group, the gang becomes not only the family that is sought for initially; or the brothers (*homies*) that provide protection and contention; or the space where they can exert power and receive the recognition of the group. From that moment on, the group becomes *omnipresent* in their lives. Therefore, where the gang was initially considered ubiquitous in terms of its support and protection, progressively, over time, it becomes the omnipresence of the threat, when the member begins to realize how the machinery works; when he or she begins to show —overtly or covertly— disagreement with the ever changing group norms; or simply, when diverging from a measure, an instruction or an order that was given.

Throughout the study, and based on the findings in prior research, it was mentioned that, as a product of the transfor-

mations experienced by the gangs, the deviations from the norm and disloyalty —or what the leaders could construe as such— bring a high price to pay for transgressors. For their part, the actions or decisions that come from the gang are at times based on suspicion or misgivings, under a logic that can be arbitrary, intolerant and even sexist. The gang does not tolerate difference, disobedience, conflict or contradictions. Many of the women gang-members interviewed in this study, either directly or indirectly, found themselves in a position of having to mention their discrepancies with regards to the group.

Accordingly, based on their own declarations and experiences, it is stated that over time, the gang goes on to become —in the case of some, more than others— just another prison, an additional prison that is added to the one they are presently in, and winds up closing off their already limited options to assume the challenges that are involved in carrying out certain changes in their lives. This is the case, above all, for those women that have already retired from the gang, or have been *deactivated* from the group. The findings in this study suggest that prison, and the characteristics of their lives in it, in some cases, has motivated them to consider the possibility of assuming a change in their lives, abandoning their active role in the gang, and putting aside the everyday coexistence with violence and the dynamics that the group imposes on the members, and to opt for insertion into their most immediate contexts. And this, not so much because Salvadoran prisons are doing any rehabilitation work or promoting adaptation and social integration, but because the absence of programs for female inmates translates into an overwhelming excess of dead time, an excessive amount of inactivity that can lead them to think. It is a time that has invited some of them to reflect on their own lives, on the lives of their dear ones outside prison, on the future (in some cases, when the possibility of recovering their liberty is not that remote), and, at times, to reflect on the possibility of changing their lives.

For these women, opting for a life change is not limited to stop exercising one role —that of gang-member— for another. Rather, it implies discarding an entire identity: their name (not their own, but their *tag*), their group —ubiquitous and threatening, and at the same time, the only thing they have left, their trajectory. Added to this identity change, opting for change also means assuming the risks that this decision involves, with regards their status with the gang. The latter is a particularly difficult decision.

The first issue they have to face with regards to the gang is to *calm down* or *deactivate.* This means to opt for distancing themselves from the everyday activities of the group, and reduce or minimize their participation in the gang dynamics. Many of the women had done so before entering prison; others, made up their mind inside prison; and others, allegedly, will do so at a later time in their lives; it is also possible that there are those who will never make this decision. As mentioned in the corresponding section, the resolution to *calm down* is not an easy one either, because it has vitally important consequences; and, just as in the induction ritual, it implies passing from one status to another which has to be "paid" for, according to group logic. Once this is attained, this status lets them put some distance between them and the gang. Notwithstanding, having *calmed down* does not mean the gang no longer has the ability to require reactivation of the members and, in so doing, it throws out the efforts that may have lead to establishing their condition and their lives *outside* the group. In this regard, it is important to keep in mind that, as many of the women gang-members stated, they may be conscious of their rights, they may even want to leave the group (which *calming down* is a fundamental first step towards). However, what they want or what they understand is of no avail, if they are "at the mercy" of the group, if they renew contact with them, or, as often happens, the group orders them to reactivate.

Therefore, the most radical way to avoid continuing under the domain of the group is to *retire* from the gang. This decision is a step further, beyond that first move that is made when *calming down*. The problem is that the "retired" status implies a direct confrontation with the gang, such that those who have taken this resolution are no longer willing to continue as members of the group. On the contrary, they have decided to distance themselves for good, breaking away from the group. And taking into account the characteristics of the sort of group that they are detaching themselves from, the consequences that this decision incurs for those persons are obvious: they are conceived as the personification of treason, because at the time of retiring, they are deserting the *hood*, betraying the idea of that *group-ness,* they are renouncing the collective identity, they are breaking the promise of sworn loyalty. This means they are condemned to death by the gang, even though they are in prison.

It is very interesting to note the precision with which these concepts are used to refer to, in linguistic terms, what these decisions actually imply for the men and women gang-members. According to the dictionary[115], *activate* means, "to make a process come alive, make a mechanism function." For its part, *calm down* means, "allay, assuage, relax; to be calm or tend towards this state." Whereas *retire* has a series of different meanings, among which are found: "move away or separate someone or something from another person or thing or a place; remove something from sight, reserving or hiding it; move back or separate from dealing with, having communication with, or friendship with someone"; among others. But there is a meaning that seemed particularly precise and interesting, which is the one that refers to *retiring* when speaking of or making reference to the actions of an Army: *retreat or abandon the field*

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[115] In its original version, this refers to the Real Academy of Spanish Language (*Real Academia Española de la Lengua-RAE*).

of battle. And, within this military logic, retire also means, *take shelter, seek safety*.

The latter is precisely what needs to be noted. In order to be able to retire —in the sense of *abandoning the battlefield*, the women gang-members need to take that first step, make a decision to calm down and the determination to opt for a change in their lives. Nevertheless, in order that they may retire —in the sense of *take shelter, seek safety*, they urgently need the aid and attention of the State and its institutions. Retiring from the gang is not something that can be done on their own, or based only on their own resources, which outside of the gang, are really scarce or null.

These are women with a prior history of personal uprooting and dysfunctional families, whose family ties are currently even more debilitated due to their prolonged stay in the gang, or the incarceration that has kept them for the duration of their sentence. Without the resources, the support, or the social networks that their own family could provide, they neither count on economic or moral backing from a partner or the father of their children, given that they are often in prison as well, due to crimes related to their activity in the gangs; or they are dead, in the most extreme cases. With a minimal or non-existing work history, without adequate occupational or job training, with a history of belonging to the gang, and shortcomings on many levels, these are women whose lives have basically consisted in going from one circumstance of exclusion and precarious condition to the next, from one prison to another, now exacerbated by their condition as gang members or former gang-members, and eventually, ex-convicts.

Women gang-members who retire require not only the minimum opportunities to guarantee, eventually, their civil, political, economic, social and human rights are reinstated, once they regain their liberty. Rather, it is about guaranteeing them some minimum conditions to provide them with the possibility

of remaining alive. This implies that the State and its institutions, working jointly and in coordination with the efforts and experiences of civil society organizations, may give them access to concrete conditions to be able to begin —perhaps from scratch— to organize their lives and those of their children, in a place and with an identity that they have never experienced: as citizens. Reaching this goal perhaps involves, at some point in time, them having to come to a certain agreement with their group: that they respect their members' decision of retiring, and concretely, those of the women that want to retire from these groups. Perhaps it might mean giving these women the treatment and/or protection the way witnesses to crimes are given. This might only be feasible if, at the same time, the concrete, real and viable conditions are generated, so that these women might have a place to arrive, and be taken in when they leave the group. On the contrary, the forecast for the women gangmembers that have taken concrete steps away from the group is extremely uncertain and reserved.

Finally, it is primordial to return to the starting point: the need to focus resources on violence prevention and on policies aimed at promoting the adequate development of boys, girls and adolescents. That is, try to prioritize social and economic policies that promote the rights and wellbeing of children, in order to reduce the number of them that see in the gangs a possibility of affiliation, of belonging, of identity, of being taken in, and of control. In the case of the women gang members, we arrive late in terms of promoting their rights, but they are faced with the upbringing of their children. Anything the society and State may do —or not do— on their behalf, is likewise bestowed or withheld from their descendants, thus insuring the passage of growing numbers of boys and girls into the ubiquitous prison of the gang.

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Appendix

Appendix 1. Structure of the Biographical Interview

Introduction & Presentation (explain purpose of study and insure anonymity)

1. Some general data
1.1. Age (actual age)
1.2. Educational level: last grade studied?
1.3. Marital status
1.4. Do you have children?
 → how many; → their ages →¿How old were you when you had your first child?

2. Impact of the gang experience on the women's lives
2.1. At the family level
2.1.1. Whom were you living with at the time you joined the gang (family composition)?
2.1.2. What was family life like before joining the gang?
2.1.3. Were you ever a witness to acts of violence in the family before joining the gang?
2.1.4. Upon joining the gang, did you change the way you related to others in the family? How?
2.1.5. For those who have children:
 → What has your experience as a mother been like?
 → What has this experience been like now that you are in prison?

2.1.6. Are you in a relationship? → How old were you when you got married/in the relationship? Do you still live together? → Is your partner a gang member?
 → Who was in charge of the chores at home? Did you share the work at home with your partner, or did you do it all yourself?
 → What was/is your relationship with your partner like? (the one you were in before or the one you are in now or current relationship)
 → Do you believe that being a gang-member affected your relationship (for good or bad)?
 → Was there any violence between you and your partner?

2.2. Educational level

2.2.1. What was your experience as a student like? (did you enjoy it, did they treat you well, did you dislike it, etc.)

2.2.2. Why did you drop out? Did you drop out to join the gang, or did you quit school before that?

2.2.3. What consequences do you think that dropping out might have for you (and/or your children)?

2.2.4. And while in school, did the gang ever influence you to make you join the group?

2.3. Work level

2.3.1 Who supported your family before you joined the gang?

2.3.2. Did you work before joining the gang? What did you do? Was it paid?

2.3.4. Once inside the gang, what did you do to get ahead economically?

2.3.5. Can a woman work once she is in the gang?

2.3.6. Do you believe your personal history of gang membership has given or will give you problems in seeking employment in the future? In what way?

2.4. At the community level

2.4.1. Prior to joining the gang, did you get along with the people in the neighborhood you lived in?

2.4.2. Upon joining the gang, did the relationship with the people in the neighborhood change? How so?

2.4.3. How do you think the people in your neighborhood view gang members?

2.4.4. In your view, how do people see women that are involved in gangs?

2.5. At a personal level

How do you think being incarcerated in the penitentiary has "changed" you?

→ 2.5.1. …as a daughter? (with your parents, for instance)

→ 2.5.2. …as a mother? (if it is applicable)

→ 2.5.3. …as a couple? (in your relationship)

→ 2.5.4. …as a woman?

3. Women's Participation and Functions in the Gang

3.1.   Reasons and process for joining

3.1.1. What were your reasons for joining the gang?

3.1.2. How old were you when you joined?

3.1.3. How did you approach the gangs, or did the gangs approach you?

3.2. Induction Rituals:

3.2.1. What did you have to do to be part of the gang?
In your opinion, is it easy or difficult for a woman to join a group that is composed almost entirely of men?

3.3. Responsibilities and functions inside the gang

3.3.1. What were your responsibilities in the gang? Did your responsibilities increase over time?

3.3.2. Do you believe a woman has the same weight in the decision making process in the gang as a man? Why? Have you ever met a woman in a leadership role ("palabrera") in the gang?

3.3.3. Have you seen different treatment between women and men inside the gang (for instance, activities that women cannot do but men can)?

3.3.4. Did you ever feel "discriminated" in the gang on account of being a woman?

3.3.5. How did you aid the gang (economically)?

3.4. Participation in violent acts in the gang

3.4.1. What was the most serious injury you received as a gang member? Who inflicted it on you? Why did it happen?

3.4.2. Have you been the victim of any kind of aggression from a rival gang?

3.4.3. Do you know of any acts of violence towards gangs committed by the police, or any other person besides the police *[find out who]*? Have you ever been a victim of any of these violent acts?

3.4.4. Did you ever participate in any act of violence as a gang member? What happened on that occasion?

3.4.5. What was the most serious aggression you committed as a gang-member? Who did you do it to? How come?

3.4.6. Did you use any kind of weapons while you were in the group? Were you taught to use them? (in the case of firearms)?

3.4.7. What was your participation in the gang activities like? (did you organize what was to be done, followed instructions, etc.)

4. General Assessment

4.1. Life in the Penitentiary

4.1.1. What has been the most difficult aspect of your life now that you have been deprived of liberty?

4.1.2. What are your relationships with other gang-members like in prison?

4.1.3. What do you consider are the needs of the women gang-members to improve their situation inside the penitentiary?

4.2. Benefits and Profits

4.2.1. What sort of benefits have you obtained from belonging to the gang?

4.2.2. Have you received support or any sort of aid from the gang now that you are an inmate?

4.2.3. Why do you stay in the gang? Will you ever leave the gang?

4.3. Cost of their Participation and the Impact of the Use of Violence

4.3.1. What has been the most difficult part of your experience in the gang?

4.3.2. Is there anything in your life that you are sorry to have done? If you could "turn back time", would you join the gang again? Yes?, No?, Why?

4.3.3. What negative things could you mention about being/having been a gang-member?

4.4. Future Prospects

4.4.1. What do you expect of the future? What are your plans?

4.4.2. If you left the penitentiary facility tomorrow, what would you do? Would you go back to hanging out with the gang?

4.4.3. What do the women gang-members need once they recover their freedom?

Appendix 2. Structure of the Focus Group

Introduction & Presentation (explain purpose of study and insure anonymity)

Inside the penitentiary:

1. What has been the most difficult part of your life now that you are deprived of liberty?

2. Are any of you mothers? What is your experience of being a mother like, now that you are in the penitentiary?

3. In what ways do you think being incarcerated has changed you as women? (daughters, mothers, couples, gang-members?)
4. Do you believe that time spent in the prison has changed the way you see the gang? Yes? No? Why?
5. What things do you think you need to improve your situation in the prison?

Outside Prison: Before & After

6. In the past, when you were outside, what was the hardest thing you experienced in the gang?
7. What do you expect of the future? What are your plans?
8. What do women gang-members need once they recover their freedom?

Appendix 3. Interview Guide for System Officials

1. Name: **2.** Profession: _____
3. Position:_____
4. How long have you worked at this facility? _____
5. Had you previously worked at another facility? Where and how long?
6. How long have you worked for the penitentiary system? _____
7. How many inmates are there in total at your facility? Total:_____

Common men inmates	Men gang members	Common women inmates	Women gang-members

8. What is the penitentiary facility's technical personnel? Total:_____

Psychologist	Social Workers	Legal Personnel	Other: which?

9. What are the programs, workshops, and other activities that the facility offers the women inmates?
10. **a.** How much interest do you think there is among women inmates in attending these programs?
    b. Are there requests for more programs and activities? **c.** What sort?
11. **a.** Does the Facility have any kind of program or activities carried on by NGOs or other actors that are not linked to the penitentiary system? **b.** What sort? **c.** How long have they been doing this?

12. In your view, what are the principal needs in the penitentiary facility, at present?

13. a. Moving on to the issue of the women, What are the main differences that you notice in the work with women, compared to the attention given to the men at the prison facility?;
b. Do you perceive differences in the way of approach and attention to women gang-members compared to the common inmates?

14. Is there a nursery section? Are there any children?
a. How many? Boys: _____ Girls: _____
Babies (less than a year old): _____
b. Do they receive medical attention? How often?
c. How would you describe the quality of the attention that personnel give the children?
d. In your view, do you think that inmates that are mothers get help from other inmates that are not? What about from family?
e. Until what age are children allowed in the facilities?
f. Among the mothers in the section, Are there more women gang-members or common inmates?

15. In your opinion, what is the experience of mother gang-members in the facility?

16. How would you describe the relationships between inmates…
a. …of the same gang?
b. …of rival gangs (if applicable)?
c. …women gang-members and civilians?

17. What crimes to they normally go to prison for…
a. …the women gang-members?
b. …the "relatives"/peers (wives/companions/couples/gang-members' family)?

18. How often is there recidivism among women gang-members?

19. Do the women gang-members' families often visit them? What about their fellow gang-members?

20. What sort of changes have you noticed in gang members in general over recent years? Have you noticed changes in the women gang-members? What kind?

21. How do you think the experiences of violence in the gang affect or impact the women's lives? (victimization & aggression of others; im-

pact in diverse dimensions); How would you characterize women's participation in gang violence?

22. Do women gang-members have any kind of organization in the prison? (For instance: are there spokespersons ("palabreras"), do they hold meetings to discuss and make decisions, do they use/exert their leadership roles or "palabreras"?).

23. In your view, do women gang-members enjoy autonomy from the men and the gang when they are incarcerated?
24. Have you noted any cases where the ties between common inmates and women gang-members have been strengthened?
25. Do you know of cases where the women have planned and given orders of executing crimes from inside the penitentiary facility?
26. Have there been cases of attempted riots or escape among the women gang members?
27. Have you heard of *cliques* appearing around the facility after the arrival of the gang members? What effect have they had on the community?
28. In your opinion, what are the principal limitations in your facility in particular and in the penitentiary system in general?
29. In your opinion, how could services offered the inmates be improved to facilitate their reintegration into society?
30. What kind of risks do you think the penitentiary personnel face (administration, operators, custodians) in working with this population?

Cordaid

CORDAID is one of the biggest development international cooperative organizations that, together with more than one thousand entities and base-organizations, struggle against the poverty and injustice of more than 40 countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, Mid-West, Central and East Europe as well as the Nether Countries.

CORDAID was founded at the end of 1999 as a result of the fusion of three Roman Catholic institutions: *Memisa*, *Mensen in Nood* and *Bilance* (before known as *Vastenaktie* and *Cebemo*). It is inspired in Catholic social doctrine and considers that every one has right to a worthy life without any distinction by reasons of economics, age, sex, gender, race, origin, beliefs or political convictions. Besides, believes in the individual fortress of people: CORDAID does not perform tasks that can be carried out by the local population itself.

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