

command structure and power over territory, local population or resources" that creates a human security problem.<sup>28</sup>

Some of these groups have expanded into major entities – described as "organized criminal empires" – with thousands of members, complex internal organization, and aggressive recruitment strategies, competing in open armed combat for territorial expansion.<sup>29</sup> Organized armed groups very often have structured hierarchies and complex rules regarding membership. Leaving is extremely difficult. Defectors may be socially outcast at best, tortured and killed at worst. However, in many cases youth have no desire to leave their gangs, such as in Guatemala City where only eight of 290 gang members interviewed in one study wanted to leave their gang to "become good citizens."<sup>30</sup> The complexity of gang membership renders finding effective and sustainable policy solutions extremely difficult.

Young men are most likely to be both the victims and perpetrators of organized armed violence. In Puerto Rico, the estimated homicide rate in 1999 among men aged between 15 and 24 was 101 per 100,000 inhabitants, compared to only 6.8 per 100,000 for women of the same age. In Brazil, 91% of gun deaths are among men.<sup>31</sup> Urban gang violence is overwhelmingly committed by males towards males.

Yet these statistics should not justify neglect of the gendered impacts of urban armed violence on women and girls, who are victimized by male-dominated gang warfare in different ways. Threats, psychological abuse, intimidation, and community insecurity affect women and girls in ways that are largely overlooked. Rape is a widely-used, even systematic, tool used by gang members who target young girls in particular. Ubiquitous violence in city streets has led girls and women to drop out of school, increasing their social isolation. Social segregation along gender lines is reinforced since most gangs do not allow girls to join. While the impacts of gang warfare on men and women are different, the general threat to everyone's human security is no less severe.

A 2005 survey by the Human Security Centre found that people consider criminal violence the greatest single threat to their personal security, followed by terrorism or war.<sup>32</sup> This underlines the need for a better understanding of urban gang warfare, insofar as it plays a key role in exacerbating human

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<sup>28</sup> Dowdney (2003), p.12.

<sup>29</sup> Standing (2005), p.2.

<sup>30</sup> Winton (2004), p.89.

<sup>31</sup> Viva Rio (2006).

<sup>32</sup> *Human Security Report 2005: War and Peace in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (2005), p.51. Source data commissioned from Ipsos-Reid by the Human Security Centre; see Ipsos-Reid website, <http://www.ipsos.ca>.