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Human Rights and Inequalities in El Salvador

There are a variety of universal social, political, and agricultural issues that plague the modern world. One country, in particular, faces human rights violations and gender inequalities that reach beyond the surface of simple social issues: El Salvador. This paper will analyze the irrefutable negative ramifications of human rights violations as they relate to women, people of the LGBTQIA+ community, impoverished individuals, criminals, and the average Salvadoran citizens. Economic instability is a large contributing factor to food insecurity, yet connections must also be made between the basic respect (or lack thereof) and treatment of citizens with their ability to provide for themselves. Marginalized communities are under threat from their government, and international aid is necessary to reverse the significant damage already affecting millions in the modern day.

El Salvador is the smallest and most densely populated Central American country with a total population size of 6,366,000 individuals, recorded at the end of 2024 (Varela, 2025). Their government is currently a republic with one legislative house. President Nayib Bukele was first elected in 2019 and maintains El Salvador's highest political position of power. He succeeded outside of the traditional party system and is widely regarded for his "iron-fisted" approach to ending gang violence while remaining a controversial politician as a result of human rights violations committed under his administration (Varela, 2025). The overarching job distribution in El Salvador includes "14.97% agricultural, 23.43% industrial, and 61.6% services" (O'Neill, 2025). This demonstrates a shift from El Salvador's previously dominant agricultural industry as a result of disproportionate land distribution. Non-commercial farms cannot compete successfully with commercial crop production, resulting in a lack of subsistence farmers and family-owned agricultural entities. Cattle raising and coffee production are the largest and most economically significant sectors of their agricultural entities, both of which are increasingly exclusive to commercial farmers (Varela, 2025). While the typical Salvadoran family can provide for themselves, it is reasonable to assume that without the economic advantage of being on a larger, government-funded scale, they will face further limitations in the future.

In El Salvador, hunger and poverty are experienced because of deep social inequalities, high violence rates, and average wages below the poverty line. 12% of the population grapples with food insecurity and 25% of children are anemic as a result of an insufficient nutritious food supply (World Food Program USA, 2024). Action must be taken to decrease these staggering statistics and work towards greater food security. Data collected from the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) states that "the number of people in humanitarian need has increased to 18% of total population... [and] the World Food Program (WFP) National Food Security Survey for June 2023 estimates that 1,044,895 people are moderately or severely food insecure" (OCHA, 2024). In terms of general average household income, the "proportion of men living in poverty increased by 40.9%" over one year. This unfortunate statistic highlights the growing urgency for El Salvador's government to change its approach to ensuring food security for all citizens. The Human Rights Watch notes, "In 2022, working-age Salvadorans completed an average of 8.8 years of schooling, significantly lower than the Latin American average of 10.1. Additionally, 23.5 percent of Salvadorans aged 15-24 were neither employed nor in school in 2022" (Hassan, 2023). With less education and low employment rates, many young individuals turn to gangs and illegal methods of obtaining food. Poverty continues to disrupt El Salvador's progress towards a safer, equitable future.

It is challenging to address food insecurity without first analyzing the comprehensive treatment of human rights, as defined by “the right to life, prohibition against torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment, and freedom or personal security” (Amnesty International, 2023). There is an extensive variety of factors that violate human rights in El Salvador: systematic torture, governmental acts restricting the media and civic spaces, incompetent legal framework, a less independent judicial branch, corruption within the criminal justice system, and a general lack of accountability for violations committed by agents of the state (Amnesty International, 2023). Since its adoption in March 2022, El Salvador has been under a State of Emergency. This is “a legal mechanism used to address emergency situations and must be eminently temporary and extraordinary” (Washington Office on Latin America, 2022). Due to its extended timeframe, this has “eliminated legal controls over administrative processes for the use of public funds and state contracts and the right of access to public information” (Washington Office on Latin America, 2022). This state allows these negative characteristics to thrive unbounded by the law. “As of October 2023, local victims movements and human rights organizations had recorded more than 73,800 detentions, 327 cases of forced disappearances, approximately 102,000 people imprisoned (making El Salvador the country with the world’s highest incarceration rate), a rate of prison overcrowding of approximately 236%, and more than 190 deaths in state custody” (Amnesty International, 2023). Citizens live in fear of their government as there is a gradual replacement of gang violence with state violence. This vicious cycle of violence and punishments creates deep-rooted distrust within communities, particularly those who are targeted because of their impoverished status and insufficient education.

Additional governmental limitations further this issue with mass misinformation and institutional discourse. This is accomplished through media stigmatization of human rights groups, harassment of journalists, concealment and manipulation of public information, appeals by state institutions to violate rights, and the weaponization of ministries for excessive media control (Amnesty International, 2023). Though technically considered a republic, the sitting president exhibits characteristics of a dictatorship through propaganda and state violence. The thousands of incarcerations without evidence of illegal action removes an integral aspect of the community: men employed in agriculture. Without farmers, laborers, and ranchers, there is little hope for sustainable food security. When fathers and sons are removed from their homes in the name of cleansing gangs, families simultaneously lose their primary provider. Food insecurity on the familial level of a patriarchal system stems from the oppression of the work force. The suspension of basic human rights is the foundation of hunger, civil unrest, and danger in El Salvador.

To be a woman in El Salvador is to face challenges and overcome the oppressive governmental limitations that leave many stranded in fear. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs describes in “June 2022 to May 2023 there was a 13% increase in sexual violence... psychological and patrimonial violence also increased by 10% and 19% respectively” (OCHA, 2024). These alarming percentages raise the question of to what extent will the international community allow these universal rights to be violated before severe action is taken. The United States Embassy in El Salvador reports that “67% of women continue to be victims of at least one form of gender-based violence in their lifetime” (U.S. Embassy, 2024). If two-thirds of the population of women report this violence, then the basis of this issue is systematic and ingrained within their culture. While gang violence is decreasing, governmental and domestic abuse is steadily increasing in its place. Under President Bukele’s Administration, “investments in gender-equality-related programs and services constituted less than 1% of the national budget, and gender equality initiatives have decreased” (Rubio, et al, 2023). The militarization of public security constitutes an increase in military funding from 295 million to 422 million dollars, clearly reflecting where the priorities of the government stand (Rubio, et al, 2023).

Women have limited access to judicial, restitutorial, and primary prevention services despite the disproportionately high ratio of crimes committed against them. Corruption within the judicial branch poorly positions women to decrease their chances of retribution, instead focusing efforts on the military. Within their limited healthcare options, there are more restrictions on the freedom of women’s bodies.

Abortion is illegal and has been for over twenty years, with no exceptions. Healthcare personnel often turn impoverished women over to the police if they attempt an abortion and many face up to 50 years in prison (Rubio, et al, 2023). Femicide, or the murder of women based solely on their sex, is another serious issue that must be resolved. A Gender-Based Violence Impunity Regional Study conducted by the United States details “In 2020 El Salvador had the third-highest rate of femicide in Latin America, with 2.1 femicides per 100,000 women...[there were] 133 violent deaths of women in 2021, including 53 homicides and 80 femicides. Only 48.1% of femicide cases resulted in a conviction” (Rubio, et al, 2023). Under the threat of violence and omnipresent inequality, women have fewer chances to provide for their families. Victims of domestic abuse and sexual violence often struggle with mental illnesses like chronic depression and anxiety as a direct result of this trauma, rendering them incapable of leaving the house to find work or physically handicapped. Limited income and unstable family relationships hinder a family’s access to consistent nutritious food. From restricted healthcare to unjust legal protection, women are severely discriminated against.

Individuals within marginalized communities are not respected and struggle to maintain their livelihoods. The LGBTQIA+ community has restricted access to economic prosecution and courts are often biased in favor of money and social status. Cisgender males and females are the only genders recognized by the country; therefore, there is a lack of gender identity laws and gender-inclusive legal frameworks. The Directorate for Sexual Diversity within the Secretariat for Social Inclusion of 2010 was the country’s first major piece of legislation protecting those in the community but it was dissolved in 2019. “In February 2022, the Supreme Court of Justice updated an important, historic ruling from the Constitutional Chamber. The ruling determined that the category ‘sex’ contained in the constitutional article on discrimination includes, ‘gender’ and, by extension, ‘gender identity’” (Rubio, et al, 2023). As a result of this ruling, a broad law banning discrimination based on gender now exists. This law is often ignored by state officials and internalized homophobia and transphobia are prevalent in the country (Rubio, et al, 2023). It is dangerous if one does not conform to the traditional family structure, and those who are different, either because of their gender identity or sexual orientation, face the harsh reality of discrimination or the challenges of forced migration.

International aid is the primary solution to rebuild El Salvador’s economy and hold its government accountable for human rights violations. The United Nations World Food Program is working with the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology to adapt to the food needs of the people. They created the Kitchen-in-a-Box (KIAB), or temporary, solar-powered kitchens made out of recycled shipping containers, to provide short-term relief for students without food (World Food Program, 2024). They serve staple foods such as pupusas: corn tortillas stuffed with cheese, beans, or pork, and biofortik: a biofortified drink made from corn and sorghum. The Innovative Bakery Program and Gastro-Lab were created in collaboration with Fe y Alegria to provide hands-on training for local bakers and increase employment rates (World Food Program, 2024). Within the U.S. Embassy, the LibRES: For an El Salvador without Gender-Based Violence Project was created. This is a \$35 million investment by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) for the period of 2022 to 2027. The U.S. Embassy then launched the first Gender-Based Violence Research Institute (GBI) in the country which allowed law and psychology students, as well as justice agencies, to use the courtroom of the Legal Practice Centre to defend human rights cases (U.S. Embassy, 2024). Within El Salvador, the Special Comprehensive Law for a Life Free of Violence for Women (Ley Especial Integral para una Vida Libre de Violencia para las Mujeres) currently serves as a public policy to protect women. The Specialized Technical Commission (Comité Técnico Especial) and Salvadoran Institute for the Development of Women (Instituto Salvadoreño para el Desarrollo de la Mujer) ensure funding to support women victims of violence and housing protection (Rubio, et al, 2023). These programs, however, are not specific enough to effectively prevent crime against women and have not been successful at punishing violence. El Salvador is also a member of the Organization of American States (OAS), an American System for the Protection of Human Rights. OAS provides opinions and non-binding rulings with the Inter-American Commission on Human

Rights to help protect people from gender-based violence and human rights violations. In turn, people can focus on their jobs, continue to grow agriculturally, and are more financially stable and food secure.

Recommended solutions include general funding for human rights programs and international aid in reforming current government policies. The United States should increase funding for gender-based violence survivors protection and recovery support services, support the restitution or reparations mechanisms for survivors and their dependents, and further fund the Salvadoran Institute for the Development of Women and feminist empowerment movements. The Embassy program should also support existing women's community groups, including Indigenous, Afro-descendant, migrant, or transgender women. Additional funding and technical support for inclusive women's economic empowerment, advocacy for survivor-centered trauma-informed judicial response, and the creation of a diverse and inclusive gender identity law are also needed (Rubio, et al, 2023). Data collection should be encouraged and public education needs to include awareness for human rights violations. If young children are taught how to recognize sexual and psychological abuse, they are more likely to stand up for themselves and join together to create social change. The Salvadoran government needs to remove repressive security policies, strengthen the National Civil Police Force, and "repeal the legal reforms that violate due process and nullify judicial guarantees" which allows for an organized withdrawal of the armed forces from public security tasks (Rubio, et al, 2023). The United Nations should be involved and "create the necessary comprehensive humanitarian response to guarantee access to protection and restore rights, especially for vulnerable groups such as women, female heads of household, children, adolescents, LGBTIQ+ people, and people with disabilities" (Rubio, et al, 2023). This provides dignified economic participation, property tenure, and limitations in access to sexual and reproductive health, water, sanitation, and hygiene services for all people (Rubio, 2023). This will drastically change El Salvador and create a future of prosperity and safety for all.

While international interference is necessary, it is only one piece of a potential long term solution. Systematic transformation must occur to change social and political attitudes of negligence to action and protection. One method of instigating a cultural shift is through the media and religion. Local artists, authors, filmmakers, non government affiliated radio hosts, priests, pastors, spiritual leaders, and musicians uplift marginalized voices and alter the collective consciousness on both a local and national scale. Archbishop Oscar Romero served as a primary example of the cultural impact of liberation theology, "the idea that God sides especially with the poor and the oppressed" (McCorkle, 2015). His positive influence extends beyond changing the future of Catholicism. He inspired passion and support from Salvadorans and the international community to shift towards compassion and away from persecution of the poor for political gain. In a similar manner, the Municipal Food Security Plan in Las Palmeras, Izalco aims to promote sustainability through local government funding of home gardens. Over 500 low income families now have access to vegetables and staple crops that improve their nutrition and quality of life. Women also serve a role in providing food while preserving local knowledge of indigenous agricultural practices (Díaz, 2020). When expanded on a national scale, local initiatives have the potential to significantly reduce poverty induced malnutrition, encourage female and indigenous community leadership, decrease economic reliance on the federal government, and become catalysts for beneficial change. Cultural transformation is more like steady rainfall than a flash flood; resilient, well nourished individuals can change a country one movement at a time.

All people have the right to life, safety, and food. Poverty and social equity are interconnected; one cannot be solved without the other. With equal opportunities for women, decreased gender-based violence, and a new culture of universal respect, a reformed future is possible. While people may resist such drastic changes, with international aid, suitable funding and research, and community support, this future is within reach and must be accomplished. All Salvadorans, women, and marginalized communities especially, deserve the opportunity to work for their property and food. National change is based on the support of the international community, and El Salvador is due for a country-scale social equality change.

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