

# **Gender Discrimination: A Problem Stunting Honduras' Entire Economy**

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## ***Abstract***

*Honduras is a developing country located in Central America that has been notorious for its maltreatment of women and the prevalence of sex and labor trafficking. However, in the last decade many laws have been put in place by the Honduran government to provide rights and protection to its women. Despite legislation, many women still face daily domestic violence and discrimination in the work place. The country still lives by its machismo values, meaning that it is a male-dominated society. Women are half the population, and thus have the potential to be a huge benefit in the economy. Until women can enter into the workforce the Honduran economy will stay as stunted.*

## **I. Introduction**

Honduras is one of the poorest countries in Latin America. According to the Human Development Index (HDI), Honduras is the sixth least developed country in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), after Haiti, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Guyana, and Bolivia. There is an unemployment rate of 40.7 percent and 17.9 percent of their population lives on less than \$1.25 per day.<sup>1</sup> An often overlooked contribution to these vast problems is gender discrimination.

Honduras is a patriarchal society, especially in rural areas. Men make all of the decisions in the household. The male population chooses when women become pregnant, how many children they have, what their daily chores are, and how far their education goes. This leaves the female population without confidence to take a stand against the many injustices done to them. It also hinders the economy because women are half the population and when they are allowed to enter the economy they often create sustainable jobs and better opportunities for their children.

The patriarchal society, or as called in Honduras, machismo, contributes to many problems. Honduras has become a center for sex trafficking where thousands of women and children are trafficked within the country each year. The government has adopted a number of policy

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<sup>1</sup> World Bank (2012).

reforms; however, they are not being implemented well due to the immense amount of organized crime and poverty within Honduras. The deeply rooted cultural system of machismo creates a patriarchal-power dynamic and leaves women behind.

This article argues that gender discrimination in Honduras is hurting the overall economy and keeping Honduras in the developing world. It provides an overview of why gender discrimination is so prevalent in Honduras and why all of the initiatives of the Honduran government have failed because of the ingrained gender roles. Following this introduction, the article is structured into a brief review of the literature, some empirical background, three discussion sections reviewing a) recent trends in fertility and maternal mortality, b) the contribution of Honduran women to the economy, and c) violence against Honduran women. The article closes with some conclusions.

## **II. Brief Literature Review**

In recent years, the issue of gender inequality has become a more pressing issue. Researchers and humanitarians have become intrigued in how the gender gap shapes development issues. There are a many studies on this topic; the following ones are some of the most influential ones specifically related to Honduras.

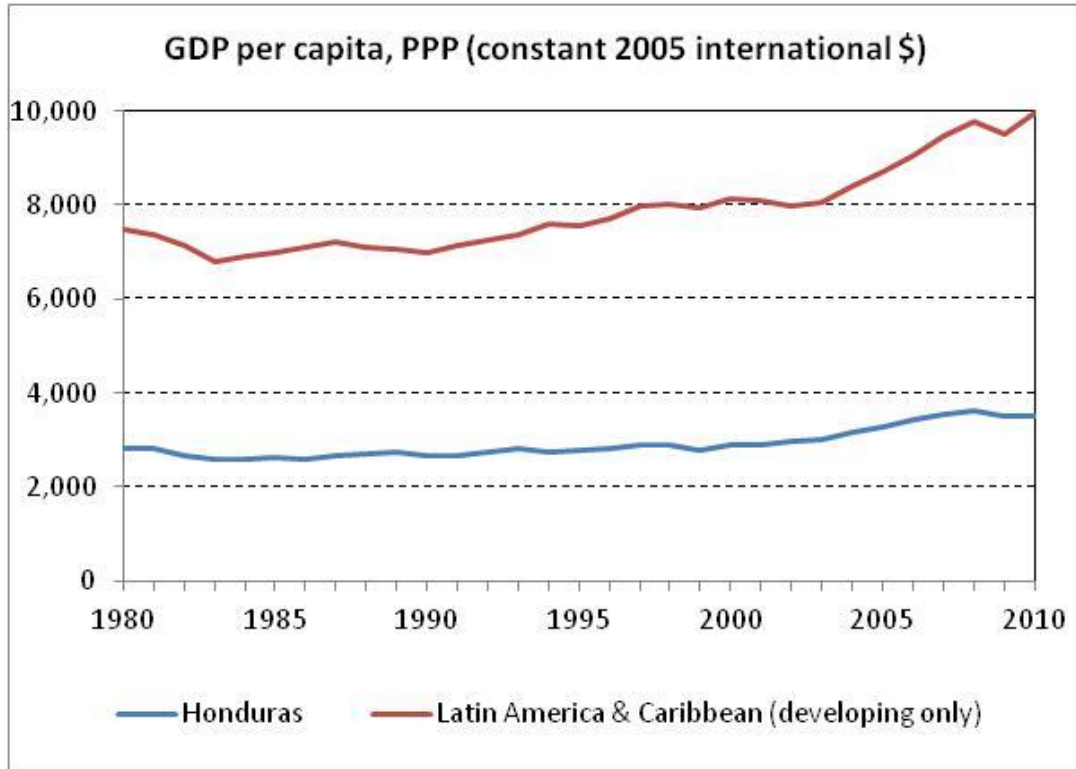
- Carmen Diana Deere, Gina E. Alvarado and Jennifer Twyman (2010) point out various gender gaps in Latin America, focusing on poverty, headship, and asset ownership. They provide a detailed discussion on the gender wealth gap within households. They conclude that the fact that women cannot make money or household decisions leads to a society accepting women's bodies as things to market.
- In a book entitled "Questioning Empowerment: Working with Women in Honduras", Jo Rowlands (1997) found that when women are empowered, the entire community becomes empowered. She also concludes that if there was more women empowerment, there would be less human trafficking.
- A book by David E. Guinn and Elissa Steglich (2003) goes into further details regarding the Honduran sex trafficking situation. It gives a detailed description of why sex trafficking happens in the region and why Honduras is such a large epicenter for sex trafficking. It also gives a variety of policy advice and examples. The preface holds a powerful first-hand story of a girl who was sex trafficked but escaped.
- A study entitled "Opening Cracks for the Transgression of Social Boundaries: An Evaluation of the Gender Impacts of Farmer Research Teams in Honduras" by Sally Humphries and Lauren Classen (2012) gives a concrete example of what can be done to empower women and keep them out of the sex trafficking industry. They also review a program, called CIAL (Comite de Investigacion Agricola Local or CIAL), which educated women on agricultural work and taught both men and women about the opportunity they would have if women enter the agricultural sector. The study shows that after increased knowledge and encouragement from their husbands and friends, women in Honduras were able to be productive in agriculture. Once the gender stereotype was broken down, both men and women were more confident and more productive in their work.

### III. Empirical Background

The problems Honduran women face with gender discrimination are mirrored by the slow socio-economic advancement of the country as a whole. Honduras is behind the average for Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) in most areas. This section provides some empirical background by comparing the evolution of Honduras' GDP per capita, life expectancy and adult literacy rates with that of the average of developing countries in LAC.

Figure 1 shows the evolution of GDP per capita adjusted for differences in purchasing power for Honduras and LAC from 1980 to 2010. During these 30 years, Honduras' GDP per capita has increased by \$699 (or 24.8 percent), while GDP per capita of the average developing country in LAC has increased by \$2501 (or 33.5 percent). Figure 1 also shows clearly that Honduras has fallen further behind LAC during the last decade. Several factors have caused the slow growth in Honduras; an often overlooked factor is the lack of women entering the economy.

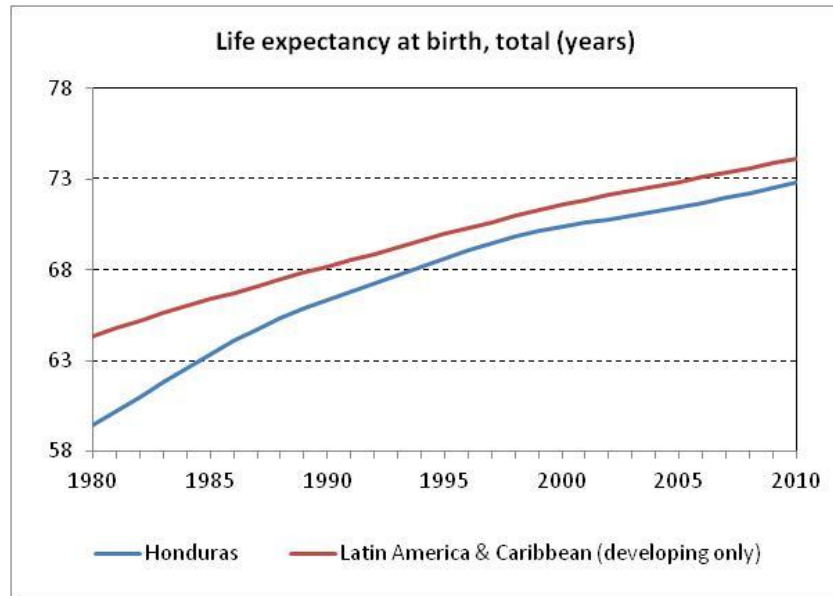
**Figure 1: Honduras' GDP per capita Compared to LAC, 1980-2010**



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2012).

Figure 2 shows life expectancy for Honduras and LAC from 1980 to 2010. It shows that Honduras was able to narrow the gap from 4.9 years in 1980 to 1.1 years in 1998, but since then, the gap has been increasing slightly, reaching 1.3 years in 2010.

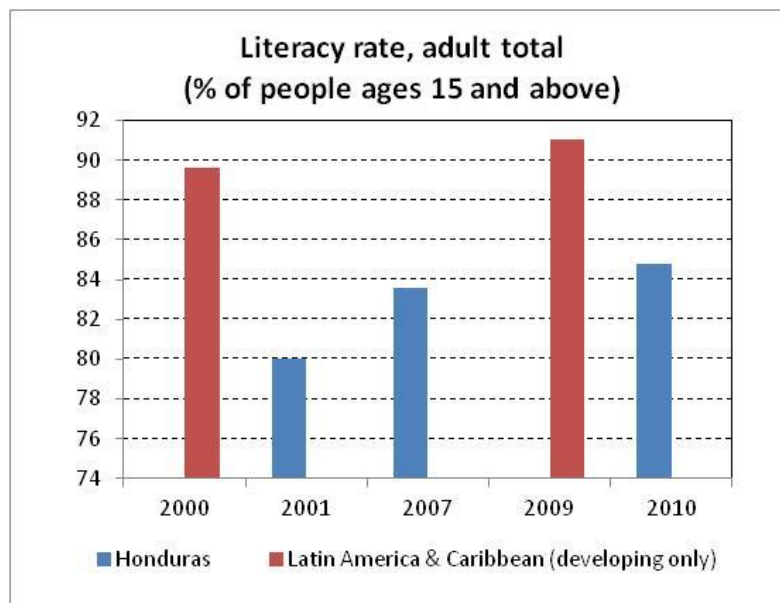
**Figure 2: Honduran Life Expectancy Compared to LAC, 1980-2010**



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2012).

Figure 3 shows that Honduras ranks behind LAC in terms of literacy. Between 2001 and 2010, Honduras saw an increase in literacy rates of less than 5 percentage points. In 2009, the average developing country in LAC had a literacy rate slightly above 91 percent, however, in Honduras, the most current data available (2010) shows that its literacy rate is slightly below 85 percent.

**Figure 3: Recent Adult Literacy Rates in Honduras and LAC**



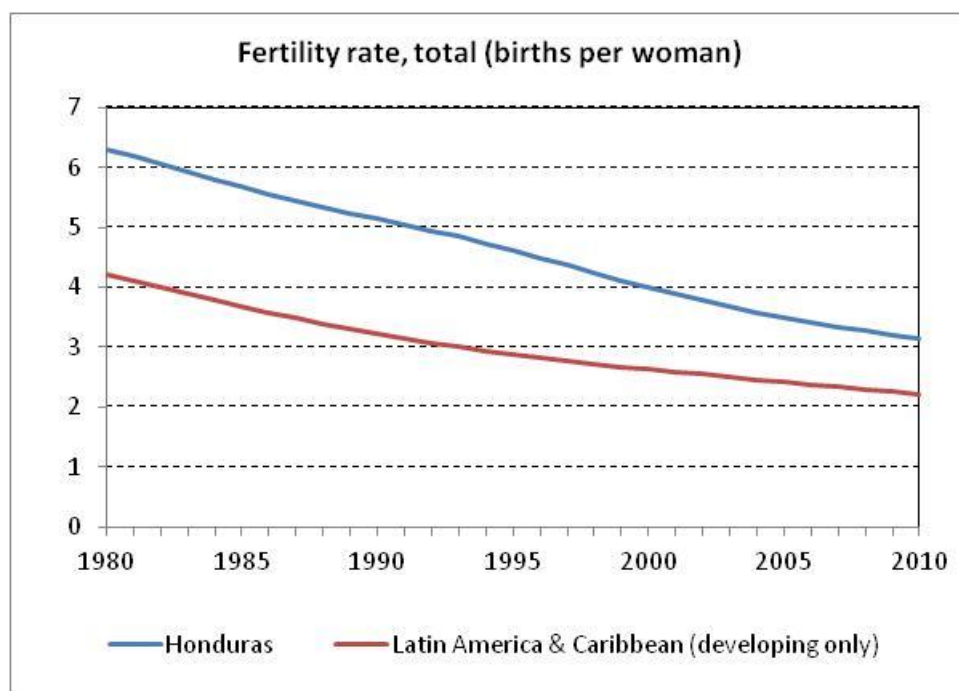
Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2012).

A main factor needed to increase GDP per capita in Honduras is to increase the availability of high-quality education. Thus far, Honduras has not created a good public education system, especially in the more rural areas. Students are forced to walk miles in order to reach their classrooms, which are overcrowded and often undersupplied. Similar to many other countries in LAC, women are not necessarily excluded from education (as male and female school enrollment ratios are basically the same, in Honduras, the female enrollment ratio is actually slightly higher than the male school enrollment ratios), but the quality of Honduras' education system is very poor.<sup>2</sup>

#### IV. Fertility and Maternal Mortality

Like in most developing countries, Honduran women have many children. This comes from either pressure from their husbands and/or the need for old-age social security. As seen in Figure 4, the births per women in Honduras are considerably higher than in LAC, though the difference has narrowed in the last two decades. Many Honduran women do not have access to modern contraceptives, either their husbands do not allow them to use modern contraceptives or they cannot afford them because they are too poor. The abundance of children keeps Honduras in the poverty cycle because poor families cannot afford to care for their children properly.

**Figure 4: Fertility Rates in Honduras and LAC, 1980-2010**



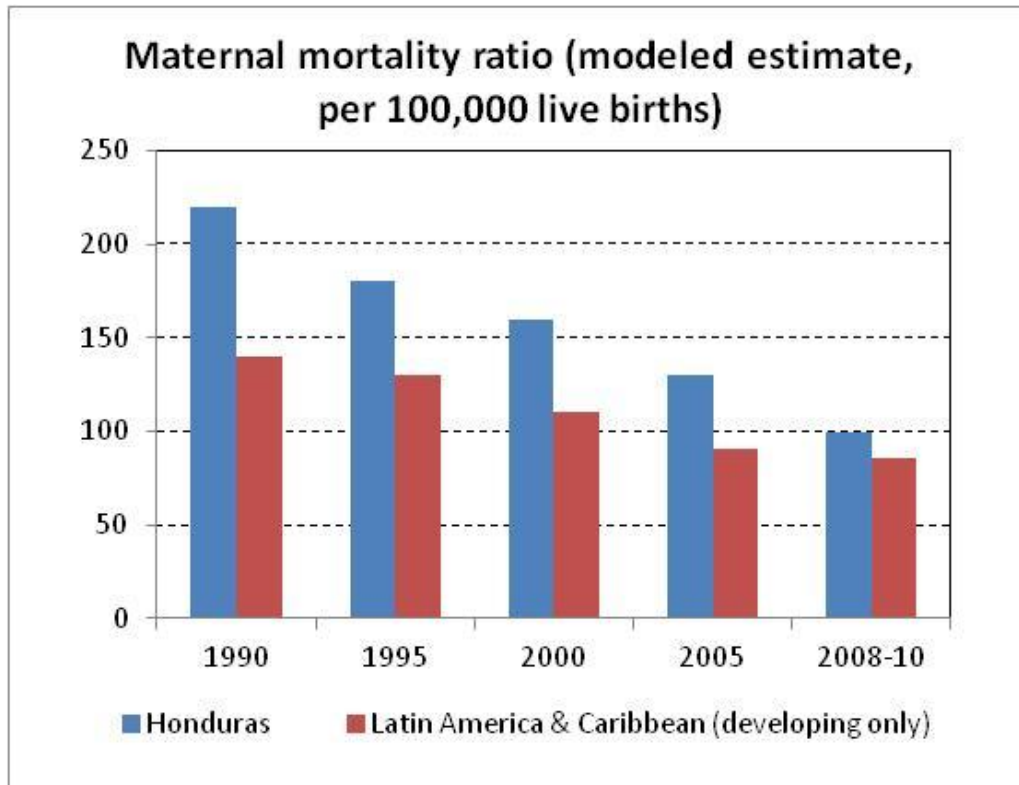
Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2012).

High fertility rates often coincide with high maternal mortality rates; and this certainly holds true in Honduras. As seen in Figure 5, Honduras has a much higher rate of maternal mortality than

<sup>2</sup> Based on data provided by the World Bank (2012).

the average developing country in LAC, though the difference has narrowed more recently. High maternal mortality leads to a variety of social complications, thus keeping GDP per capita growth low in Honduras.

**Figure 5: Maternal Mortality in Honduras Compared to LAC, 1990-2010**



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2012).

Maternal mortality is a significant gender issue of this century. In developing countries, women often become pregnant very young and go without adequate healthcare. As seen from Figure 4, Honduras has a high fertility rate, meaning that women are having many children and are more likely to face maternal mortality issues. However, according to a study by Syracuse University Professor Jeremy Shiffman (2007, p. 798) “safe motherhood has become one of the country’s foremost health priorities, and between 1990 and 1997, the country experienced a 40% decline in its maternal mortality ratio.” Although the maternal mortality ratio in Honduras is still significantly higher than Latin America’s average, it is a success story and the Honduran government should follow their policies with maternal mortality in all areas of gender issues.

When international actors interacted with local Honduran officials repeatedly, it made the message clear to the Honduras government that maternal mortality should be put on the agenda. Shiffman (2007, p. 1) states that the “case is revealing because international officials concerned with safe motherhood interacted repeatedly with Honduran health bureaucrats throughout the decade, and because these interactions resulted in successful policy transfer, implementation and

impact.” Gender issues are hard to approach, but with pressure from the international community Honduras can fight these issues.

As documented in Shiffman (2007), in the 1980s, safe motherhood emerged as a national priority after an international conference in Nairobi, Kenya, sponsored by international organizations such as the World Bank, the World Health Organization, the United Nations Population Fund (UNPFA), and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). After the Nairobi conference, Honduras became extremely involved in stopping maternal mortality. The health minister made various media statements about the critical situation in Honduras and reached out to UNFPA for funding a national program. Furthermore, the United States has been part of an active role in decreasing maternal mortality in Honduras. In 1968, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) supported a program by the Honduran government which worked to create a project for the health of Honduran mothers and infants. Shiffman (2007), states that between 1990 and 1997, seven new hospitals were opened, 13 birthing centers, 36 medical health centers and 266 rural health centers.

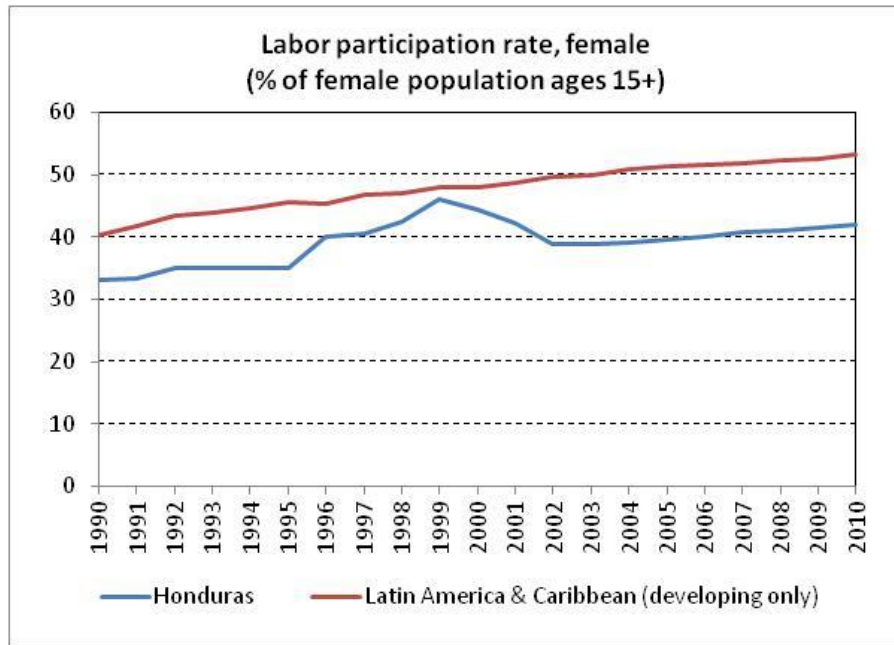
As seen in Figure 5 above, maternal mortality rates have continued to decrease since the 1990s. In 2008, the number of deaths per 100,000 births decreased to 110. From 1990 to 2008 the ratio decreased by about half and is nearly at par of the average developing country in LAC. Although gender inequality is still prevalent in Honduras, the safe motherhood infrastructure created during the 1990s shows that improvements can be made through international pressure and action.

## **V. Women’s Contribution to the Economy**

Women could be a great asset for Honduras and drastically raise their GDP per capita; however, the contemporary living style of Honduras promotes gender roles which do not allow women to enter the main workforce. In Honduran culture, especially in rural areas, women are seen as the workers of the home and are not to get jobs in the cities or work on the farms. There is little paid work available for women, and what is there is restricted to service industry and assembly plant work. Due to this, as seen from Figure 6 below, Honduran women have on average a much lower participation in the work force than Latin American women. Women are often controlled by their husbands, and unless he gives her permission to find a job, she cannot search for a job without fear of domestic violence. If women were given the same freedoms to choose their jobs as men are given, then they would be able to find work in all sectors, not just in the service industry or assembly plants. With women in the workforce the GDP per capita for Honduras would increase drastically.

Rowlands (1997) examines how little work there is for women in Honduras. She states (p. 35) that “paid employment in agriculture for women is not widely available.” Although there are employment opportunities in the urban areas, many women live in the rural areas and cannot access that work. Honduras is an agriculture-based economy, around one half of the 7.5 million Hondurans live in rural areas. The job market is limited when living in a rural area. However, being a woman in rural areas, the job market is almost non-existent.

**Figure 6: Women Labor Participation Rate in Honduras and LAC, 1990-2010**



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2012).

The limited job market for women leads them to either join informal sectors, such as prostitution, or to confine themselves to their households. Furthermore, due to limited economic opportunities for women in rural areas, many women attempt to search for jobs in the cities and become then victims of human trafficking. A survivor’s story in the book by Guinn and Steglich (2003, p. 4) tells how she was thrown into an unwanted job because she was in the city searching for work: “He deceived me by telling me that I was going to work at a factory where he was working in Guatemala, that it was a *maquilla* and I would be earning well...And he told us that we could come along without a problem, that he would pay for all the expenses.” Unfortunately, this is not an original story. Many young women go to the cities in search of work. In most cases, they are uneducated and do not know the difference between honest and false job offers. The lack of opportunity for women drives them to make these rash decisions and leads to unwanted outcomes, such as trafficking.

The article, *Poverty, Headship, and Gender Inequality in Asset Ownership in Latin America* by Deere, Alvarado and Twyman (2010) also describes how little economic opportunities there are for women. It notes (p. 2) that ‘there is ample evidence that women are generally at a disadvantage in the labor market due to occupational segregation, the characteristics of female employment—such as its more sporadic and part-time nature—and outright discrimination.’ As the article states, this is not because of women lacking ability, but because of static gender roles. Women are seen as below men and incapable of doing jobs other than housework or raising a family.

Similarly, Humphries et al. (2012, p. 2081) state that the “traditional notion of ‘paternity’ or masculinity, is conceived by respondents in biological terms, encompassing the idea that man’s role is that of indisputable family head and responsible—as the material provider—for the



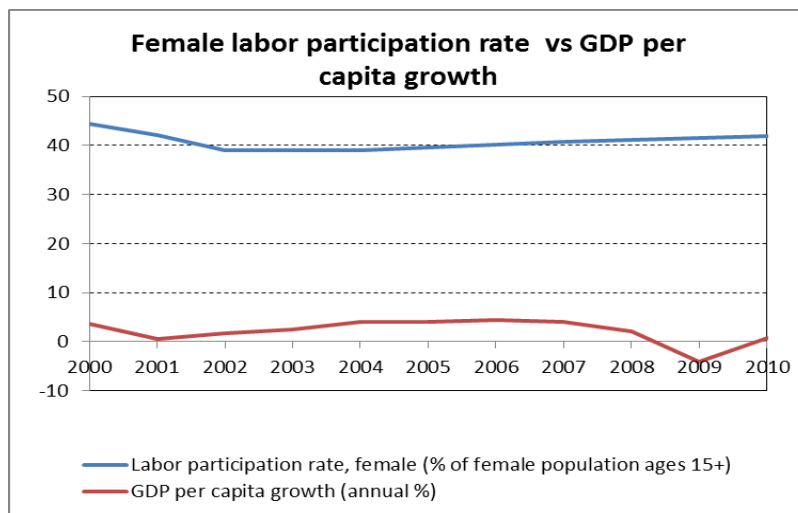
welfare of the family.” When this is the case women are continuously put down by their husbands or other male family members, forcing them to believe their work is not valued, which creates insecurities in the women and keeps them from searching for a job.

A poignant solution to this problem is to promote agricultural education for women. Honduras was part of a program (Comite de Investigacion Agricola Local or CIAL) that gave women the opportunity to work in agriculture. The CIAL program attempted to give women working in rural Honduras more self-confidence through providing them with the basic farming abilities. CIAL was a success. If this program were scaled up, women would not need to venture into the cities for economic opportunities, where they are more likely to be trafficked or led into prostitution. Humphries et al. 2012, p. 2083) came to the conclusion that an “overwhelming theme emerging from the responses was that women are increasingly making more informed decisions to leave the house, participate with local organizations, take on leadership roles in the community, manage household finances and make agricultural decisions.”

Furthermore, CIAL also helped educate men. It taught the husbands of these women that women could do the work, and once the men saw evidence of this, they were more willing to allow women to find agricultural work. One woman’s husband reported: “If the men humiliate the women, the women of the CIAL can defend themselves because they feel important, they feel like persons” (Humphries et al., 2012, p. 2084). With women entering the agriculture work force they will make Honduras more productive and, with the extra money, provide education for their children and thus advance the next generation to higher paying jobs.

As seen in Figure 7 below, when comparing Honduras’ GDP per capita growth from 2000-2010 the data follows overall the same pattern as Honduras’s percentage of female participation in the labor force. The only discrepancy is due to the 2009 world recession, which was too strong to reflect the slight increase in the female labor participation rate. Female labor participation is obviously only one contributing factor to how well Honduras’s economy does, but Figure 7 shows that there is some correlation. With programs to enhance women’s appearance in the labor force (like CIAL) Honduras’s economy has the potential to improve greatly.

**Figure 7: GDP per capita Growth Compared to Female Labor Participation, 2000-2010**



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2012).

## **VI. Violence against Women**

Static gender roles in Honduras have also allowed domestic violence to become prevalent throughout much of the country. Domestic violence keeps women out of the economy through the fear instated in them by their husbands or fathers. When women grow up with violence they accept violence, this creates an environment of low self-confidence and leads them to pursuing violent jobs. There are two main factors which come out of the frequent gender-based violence in Honduras: a large trafficking industry and women's self-exclusion from the job market due to low self-confidence.

### **VI.1. Sex Trafficking**

Honduras is an epicenter of trafficking in today's world. Thousands of women are trafficking out of and within Honduras each year. Langberg (2005, p. 133) states that "trafficking in Latin America is fuelled by several factors: poverty, political and social violence, gender attitudes leading to inequalities, and a general indifference toward women, adolescents, and children." When there is indifference towards women, the traffickers can use them as leverage for money rather than treat them as persons. Dehumanizing a group of people has always been a successful tactic to achieve power. In Honduras there is "social tolerance to sexual abuse, discriminatory stereotypes of women and children victims of sexual exploitation, and a culture that discourages reporting those suspected of trafficking make the crime less visible."<sup>3</sup> This social tolerance towards violence creates an environment where trafficking can be done visibly and without punishment.

In Honduras, there is legislation to sentence traffickers to jail, but it is not heavily policed and is often forgotten about. The contemporary social environment keeps the police force from looking into trafficking situations very heavily because they will not trust the young women who tell them the stories. It is very rare that young women tell their stories in the first place. However, unless their stories are told this industry will continue to prosper because the "responsibility for the prosecution rests almost entirely on victims, who are not coming forward with their experiences due to shame, lack of protection, and a lack of confidence in the system."<sup>4</sup> Girls feel constricted by the gender roles, they have been taught their entire lives to not speak out and to listen to their male counterparts. Often, girls who are sex trafficked have been abused domestically in the past and believe violence to be normal. Due to cultural factors, this industry is not being taken seriously and victims are staying victims.

### **VI.2. Women's Confidence**

Domestic violence is correlated to low self-esteem. In Honduras, women experience a significant amount of domestic violence because it is seen as the norm and husbands do not know how to 'control' their wives otherwise. Due to this environment, many women do not enter the workforce because they feel they cannot perform adequately.

As Figure 3 shows, Honduras has had a consistent lower rate of women in the labor force than Latin America since 1990. Women have the same ability as men to perform, however the environment created through violence shows otherwise. As reported by Humphries et al. (2012,

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<sup>3</sup> Langberg (2005), p. 135

<sup>4</sup> Guinn and Steglich (2003), p. 243.

p. 2085), one woman that participated in the CIAL program stated: “Before I couldn’t [attend workshops outside the community] because my husband didn’t like it and on top of that there was no opportunity to work with an organization and now yes, because my husband has become aware that I have a lot of capacity”. Without structured education programs, like CIAL, women have no way of understanding that they can do more than work in the house. Due to the social structure of Honduras’s rural environment, staying home is all women know.

Mental health problems are an often side effect from domestic violence, and with the prevalence it has in rural and urban Honduras it is not shocking that many women cannot enter the workforce. Domestic violence puts women down and causes her to lose all appreciation for herself, this often leads to depression. As Campbell (2002, p. 1333) notes: “Depression in battered women has also been associated with other life stressors that often accompany domestic violence, such as childhood abuse, daily stressors, many children, changes in residence, forced sex with an intimate partner, marital separations, negative life events, and child behavior problems.”

A study done in the nearby country of Nicaragua notes that 70 percent of women who report having emotional distress attribute the feeling to intimate partner violence.<sup>5</sup> Emotional stress placed on Honduran women has kept, and will continue to keep women from pursuing careers. Domestic violence is not the only reason women do not enter the workforce, but it is a large contributing factor.

## **VII. Conclusion**

The Honduran government has adopted many laws and regulations regarding gender issues. For example, the Honduran government accepted the United Nations (UN) Charter which abolished all forms of discrimination against women, it instated the Agricultural Modernization Law in 1993, which removed blatant work-related discrimination against women, and in 1989 a National Policy for Women was agreed upon.

However, gender inequality remains a huge problem in Honduras, especially in rural Honduras, because enforcement is low and laws are easily navigated around. Honduras needs a combination of grass-root programs like CIAL. Grass-roots programs can educate women and bring them success in their communities and confidence in their households. Furthermore, as proven by the success Honduras has had with reducing maternal mortality, when the government interacts with the international community they are pressured to accept certain standards.

Discrimination against women contributes to Honduras’s failing and unstable economy. If women were allowed to enter the job market and had safe jobs to apply for, each household could make twice as much and could be twice as productive. Children would be able to be sent to school and each generation’s productivity will increase. However, women are held back. Many of them cannot enter the workforce because of fear of domestic violence. Many times, they also cannot find a job because they lack self-confidence. They do not know how to work efficiently because they have never been trained to work. Women are left behind – and it is hurting the entire economy.

Gender discrimination is the issue of this generation. Countries like Honduras are facing dramatic problems such as poverty, maternal mortality, economic instability, and environmental

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<sup>5</sup> See Campbell (2002).

changes. Many have attempted to find solutions for these problems by looking thoroughly at each issue. However, the solution is simple: girls. When girls have the power to make their own choices they send their children to school, work hard at a job and contribute to their community. When the world decides to take a look at the real issue of gender inequality and the deeply rooted social norms that contribute to it, progress will be seen. Honduras is not an exception, when their female population is allowed to prosper they will find economic progress and stability.

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