

**Statement of Isabela Gonzalez, Before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee
on Foreign Affairs Hearing Entitled “Advancing and Protecting LGBTQI+ Rights
Abroad”**

Presented on June 24, 2021

Chairman Meeks, Ranking Member McCaul, and Esteemed Members of the House Foreign Affairs Committee:

Thank you for holding this hearing and inviting me here to testify today. My name is Isabella Gonzalez, and I am a transgender woman from El Salvador. My testimony is about my unjustified arrest carried out by the National Civil Police (PNC) and the Attorney General of the Republic of El Salvador (FGR) on June 17, 2017. My rights were violated. The police broke into my house at dawn claiming to have an arrest warrant, which I never saw, and accused me of being involved with criminal groups. The police verbally intimidated me and physically attacked me, forcing me to sign blank documents. During my subsequent detention, I was tortured. The police forced me to use a knife to remove my fake nails, leaving my fingers cut and bleeding. I was kicked in the ribs, legs, and buttocks. I was only allowed to use the bathroom once a day and I was not given any food. The police stole my personal belongings including, my cell phone, my wallet, and the cash in it. During my detention I suffered stigma and discrimination for my gender identity – I was bullied, harassed, and humiliated. The police offered me sexually to other inmates, forcing me to undress in front of the entire police force.

During my detention, the police officer in charge tried many times to persuade me to renounce my gender identity, alluding that I was being deceived by the devil, citing the bible, ignoring the fact that we are a secular state and that government officials should not employ their religious beliefs in this capacity (religious arguments are often used by conservatives to deny the rights of LGBTI people, including by public officials.) He stated that as a transgender person I was an aberration.

After six days I was released on bail and under alternative measures to provisional arrest, but I was always under investigation.

My arrest was reported to the office of the Human Rights Ombudsman, who did not respond to my filed complaint beyond indicating that the police station where I was detained did not mistreat me nor stigmatize or discriminate against me. Without doing a thorough investigation, the Ombudsman opted to believe the police report and ignored the evidence I provided along with my testimony.

Later in 2017, after learning that I had filed a complaint against the police, they harassed and persecuted me for two straight months, including an attempted assassination, shooting at me from a police car late one night when I was returning home from work. Due to these events, I was forced to abandon my home, family, friends, and dreams, and seek help from NGOs like COMCAVIS Trans who provided me with the necessary support and advice.

In El Salvador, LGBTIQ people are still being murdered because of stigma and discrimination. El Salvador has a historical debt to the transgender population, rejecting over and over again the proposed gender identity law. The new legislative assembly took this a step farther by archiving the proposed gender identity law, ignoring the effort and dedication of civil society organizations who worked to develop and advocate for this law through the Permanent Working Group for a Gender Identity Law in El Salvador.

There are many other cases like mine. For example, Camila Diaz, a transgender woman who was murdered by the National Civil Police after being deported from the United States of America where she was denied political asylum in 2019. Francela Mendez, a transgender activist who was murdered in cold blood in 2015, is a case that remains unpunished. And let's not forget about the 2017 massacre in the municipality of La Paz where four transgender women were brutally murdered by local gangs. Or the case of Jade Diaz in the eastern part of El Salvador in 2019 who was found dead in a river with her hands and feet tied to rock. There are so many more stories of rape, torture and death that if I start to enumerate them, I'll never finish.

Let's also add the patriarchal and sexist state that does not offer the slightest interest in investigating these cases of hate crimes, remaining in impunity.

The LGBTIQ population in El Salvador suffers day after day, including forced internal and external displacement because of violence perpetrated by gangs and the State, which does not provide laws that protect and enforce our human rights, showing total disinterest in the alarming situation that we are facing as a vulnerable population.

For this government, the LGBTIQ population does not exist. The government should pass a gender identity law so that we can have documents that reflect our identity and not suffer discrimination. The government should also push for investigations to hold those who violate trans people's rights, including public officials, accountable.

Thank you.