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# Editorial: Contemporary Human Rights Challenges in Belize

Dion Daniels<sup>1</sup>  
Joyanne De Four-Babb<sup>2</sup>

Human rights are the rights and freedoms to which all individuals are entitled by virtue of being human (Skarstad, 2024). They are a country's measure of its protection of its citizens in terms of basic freedoms, including "freedom of expression, religion, assembly, and association and the fair and equal access to education, employment, housing, health care, and other vital necessities of life" (Moore, 2007, p. 200). In 2025, the University of Belize received a three-year grant to execute a 95% European Union funded project entitled Strengthening Human Rights Advocacy Among Youth in Belize Through Academic Research, Capacity Building, and Human Rights Education. This special issue actualizes one of the outputs of that project because it increases the availability of evidence-based data on human rights in Belize.

This special issue of the *Journal of Belizean Research* brings together a collection of eight articles that explore the current challenges, legal frameworks, and social dynamics of human rights in Belize. The contributions highlight several critical areas within Belize's human rights context and span diverse and pressing topics, from the implications of emergency governance to the persistent issues of discrimination faced by marginalized communities. The articles in the volume discuss issues pertinent to economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights. Multiple papers address the systemic exclusion and marginalization of persons in Belize. Together, these articles provide an in-depth look at how rights are lived and sometimes lost in Belize, using diverse methodologies and theoretical frameworks to shed light on ongoing challenges and opportunities for a more just and inclusive society.

Flavius tackles the issue of indigenous and land rights through her examination of the political economy of Garifuna rights. She uses theoretical-historical analysis to show how globalization and tourism contribute to the erosion of communal land tenure and cultural commodification of the Garifuna, in contrast to the more recognized Maya land claims.

Garcia and his co-authors focus on human rights in Belize in the age of artificial intelligence. They argue that the uncritical application of AI could result in increased surveillance, job losses, social inequality, thereby exacerbating existing problems.

Godoy-Guillen analyses the rise of the institutionalization of emergency governance in Belize during the COVID-19 pandemic and assesses how such "states of exception" potentially creates zones in which human rights are suspended.

Hartman and his colleagues examine the challenges in accessing healthcare and rehabilitation services, as well as employment discrimination for the disabled. Their research positions rehabilitation and inclusion

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<sup>1</sup> Editor-in-Chief   <sup>2</sup> Guest Editor

as fundamental human rights, exploring integrated legal and theoretical analyses to inform policy interventions.

Mano highlights the vulnerabilities faced by migrant sex workers in Belize resulting from the structural exclusion faced by migrant sex workers due to criminalization and social stigma. She explores three key themes of legal ambiguity, structural marginalization, and systematic invisibility. She concludes that risks are systematic and current protections may be insufficient for these sex workers.

Orozco and Anderson present the case of Grace, a working class woman who has become a human rights defender and advocate for her bi-sexual son. The article uses Grace's case to highlight the intersectional nature of inequality, highlighting the specific vulnerabilities that she faces as a woman who has had to address broader issues of gender-based violence and discrimination.

Vairez and his research team discuss the challenges faced by adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic through their research on well-being and human rights. The results showed that mental health among some adolescents deteriorated and adolescents were adversely affected by the verbal and physical abuse and loss of income in the home during the periods that they were at home during COVID-19.

This special issue increases the availability of evidence-based data on human rights in Belize. However, as De Four-Babb and Robertson conclude in their paper that mapped the trends in human rights research in Belize between 2000 and 2025, human rights research remains wide open for future work.

We would like to thank the 22 authors and 13 anonymous reviewers who contributed to this work. We also wish to thank Dr. Kieran Ryan and his copyediting team for ensuring the timely production of this special issue of the Journal of Belizean Research.

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# Mapping Trends of Research on Human Rights in Belize (2000-2025)

Joyanne De Four-Babb<sup>1</sup>

David Robertson<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

*The overall purpose of the study was to map the trends in academic, peer-reviewed research on human rights in Belize, published between 2000 and 2025. This review was produced using a structured, reproducible, bibliometric methodology. The data was harvested from Google Scholar using Publish or Perish software. The initial search string “human rights” AND “Belize” generated over 330 articles. Follow-up searches using terms such as “violence” and “Belize,” “Garifuna and Belize,” and “disabilities and Belize” were used to ensure that key articles were identified. Duplicates, non-peer reviewed materials, doctoral dissertations, reports and other grey literature were excluded from this bibliometric analysis. After screening, 95 peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and book chapters were included for final analysis. The results showed that academic literature on human rights in Belize covered various topics such as indigenous land rights; indigenous people’s rights (non-land) (Afro-descendant/Garifuna and Maya); gender identity and LGBTQ+ rights; business/economic human rights violations; health and human welfare, including HIV/AIDS; women and children’s rights; crime violence and citizen security; gender-based violence; education social justice, and human rights; Inter-American Human Rights system; borderland rights; environmental injustice and human rights abuse; legalizing human rights in the Caribbean; gender identity and LGBTQ+ rights, and disabilities rights. Still, research on human rights in Belize remains wide open for future work.*

**Keywords:** bibliographic analysis, academic literature review, human rights, Belize, Publish or Perish

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## Introduction

Belize, a multicultural and multiethnic nation, with a complex postcolonial history, faces persistent human rights challenges amid its commitments to international conventions and periodic universal reviews. Despite growing global and regional scholarship on human rights, evidence-based research specifically focused on Belize is spotty and limited in its coverage. This study responds to that need by conducting a bibliometric mapping of peer-reviewed human rights literature on Belize published between 2000 and 2025. By systematically capturing the evolution, themes, and gaps in this literature, we aim to provide a foundational resource that encourages more targeted, context-sensitive, and impactful human rights research in Belize and the wider Caribbean and Central American regions.

Zahidi and Otherman's (2024) study on human rights in Papua New Guinea (PNG) provided inspiration for this paper. They used bibliometric analysis of data generated from a search of the Scopus database to identify the topics, trends, and geographical location of authors who had published research on human rights in PNG. The authors also used VOSviewer software to help them visualise, analyse, and evaluate the global trends in these publications. Both Belize, independent from Great Britain since 1981, and Papua New Guinea (PNG), independent since 1975, are Commonwealth countries, with postcolonial democratic structures, therefore, the PNG study was a fair choice for a comparison and guide for us as authors.

The overall purpose of our paper is to map the existing trends in academic literature (peer-reviewed journal articles, books and book chapters) on human rights in Belize, published between 2000 and 2025, using a structured, reproducible bibliometric method which we describe in detail in the methodology section of this paper. Even though we had no access to an extensive library system or expensive analytical software like VOSviewer, we still managed to conduct a bibliometric analysis on human rights in Belize by using the freely available software Publish or Perish (Harzing, 2016; 2023) to "retrieve and analyze academic citations from various databases" (Odunewu et al., 2025, p. 87). As Ruppap (2025) reminded:

Whatever approach authors use to review and synthesize the literature on a topic, there are several points to keep in mind: (1) Ensure that a review methodology is chosen that fits the review's purpose and research questions. (2) Follow the established methodological guidelines to ensure rigor in the review. (3) Provide rationales for methodological decisions (Ruppap (2025, p. 207).

We harvested references from Google Scholar, a freely available sociometric database that indexes academic papers from open access repositories and commercial sources and provides citations (Falagas et al., 2025). Our study addressed the following questions:

- i. What have been the major trends of the research as evidenced in titles, abstracts, and key words in the field of human rights in Belize between 2000 and 2025?

- ii. What have been some gaps in the areas studied?

We make recommendations for future research based on our findings. This paper will add to the body of human rights research in Belize by providing a baseline assessment of human rights literature spanning 25 years.

## **Bibliometric Analyses**

As a result of the increasing amount of scholarly information available through scientific databases such as Scopus and Web of Science, systematically planned reviews of published literature have been increasing in social science and humanities research. Such reviews provide comprehensive overviews and analyses of research published on a range of issues (Haddaway et al., 2023; Raitskaya & Tikhonova, 2020; Samnani et al., 2017). Ruppap (2025, p. 207) argued, “rigorous review articles are beneficial for summarizing and synthesizing literature, identifying gaps in the existing research, and proposing next steps to advance the science.” The authors also cautioned that reviewers should “ensure that they are using the right type of review for their intended purpose and are following the methodological guidelines for their review type to avoid introducing bias into the review” (p. 207).

There are many different kinds of literature reviews, each differentiated by its defining characteristics. Grant and Booth (2009) identified the key attributes of 14 types of reviews and mapped each against a Search, Appraisal, Synthesis and Analysis (SALSA) framework. Their list included: critical review, literature review, mapping review/systematic review, meta-analysis, mixed studies review/mixed methods review, overview, qualitative systematic review/qualitative evidence synthesis, rapid review, scoping review, state-of-the-art review, systematic review, systematic research and review, systematized review and umbrella review. The choice of the type of review depends on the kind of review authors can realistically do within the constraints of time, availability of data sources, access to databases and software, as well as the objective of the review.

Systematic literature reviews (SLR) are considered the “top of the literature review food chain” (Ruppap, 2025, p. 207) because they provide a comprehensive review of papers drawing from well-established databases such as Scopus, and Web of Science. SLRs “provide a ‘bird’s-eye’ overview of the ground covered in the subfield to date, the gaps that remain, the main trends, and the most pressing directions for further research (Zahidi & Othman, 2024, p. 109). SLRs are rigorous and seek to collate evidence that fits pre-specified eligibility criteria in order to answer a specific research question. They are usually carried out in 6 to 12 months, by more than one reviewer. They aim to minimize bias by using explicit, systematic methods documented in advance with a protocol guided by standards that address the format, structure and expectations of systematic reviews (Haddaway et al., 2023; Templier, & Paré 2017).

Systematic literature reviews are growing as a research methodology for human rights research. A quick Google Scholar search using the keywords: “systematic review” AND “human rights” in the title of the study revealed 68 studies between 2000 and 2025, 18 of which have been published since 2024. Some recent titles of systematic reviews included: human rights-based approaches to right to health (Patterson, 2024), fostering human rights in responsible ai: (Baldassarre, 2025); the intersection between energy justice and human rights (Basil & Heffron, 2025); Islamic Law and human rights controversies (Rumadan et al., 2023); human rights dynamics and consequences of COVID-19 control measures (Spasojevic, 2024); definitions of rights education for children (Gillet-Swan et al., 2025); and human rights protections and HIV prevalence among MSM who sell sex (Oldenburg et al., 2018). In the Latin American and Caribbean contexts, systematic reviews on human rights are also increasing. For example systematic literature reviews have been conducted on Latin American states' compliance with international human rights law (Danceanu, 2019); and human rights education in schools within the Latin American context (Fernández Fonseca et al., 2024). A Google Scholar search using the search terms “human rights” AND “Belize” “anywhere in the article” and time frame 2000 to 2025 identified 114,000 results, but same search “in the title of the article” generated only four studies between 2000 and 2025.

There is also growth in systematic reviews in Caribbean research. A Google Scholar search using the key terms “systematic review” and “Caribbean” yielded 294 hits of systematic reviews published since 2000, 62 of which were published since 2024. The systematic reviews in the last five years have tended to focus on health related issues including mental health stigma (Gallimore et al., 2023), intimate partner violence among LGBTQ+ adults in Latin America and the Caribbean (Huster, 2025); adolescent pregnancy (Ribas, 2021); adverse pregnancy and perinatal outcomes (Blanco et al., 2023); prevalence and incidence of stroke (Cagna-Castillo et al., 2023); Indo-Caribbean youth and suicidal behavior (Ruiz Camacho & Sukhram, 2024); factors associated with gaming disorder (Hernandez-Vasquez et al., 2022); and interventions and policies to deal with obesity among school-age students in Latin America and the Caribbean (Vega-Salas et al., 2023). There were also a few reviews on environmental research such as microplastic pollution on beaches in Latin America and the Caribbean (Mesquita et al, 2022), financial literacy research in Latin America and the Caribbean (Mendez Prado et al., 2022).

In terms of Belizean research, there were very few systematic reviews beyond a study on attitudes of primary school teachers towards inclusive education in Belize (Jones, 2020) and on environmental issues such as the impacts of soil and water pollution on ecosystems in Latin America and the Caribbean (Husaini et al., 2025). There was also some research on Belize in the context of other Caribbean countries e.g. establishment of a regional office of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights for the Caribbean Community (Lucia, 2023) and other draft resolutions.

Absent from the research is systematic review of any human rights research on specific Caribbean countries like Belize. Doing a detailed systematic literature review of human rights research in Belize would fill a

significant knowledge and empirical research gap; however, time and access to resources (software and paid databases as discussed in the methodology section) eliminated this enticing option for us as researchers at this juncture. Therefore, we opted for a form of evidence synthesis (Haddaway et al., 2023) that would provide an evidence map of the relevant research on human rights in Belize published since 2000. Through our process, we were able to map existing research and identify the kinds of published research on human rights in Belize. We highly recommend that future work be carried out on a systematic review of human rights research in specific Caribbean countries or the region, including Belize.

### ***Delimitation of the Study***

One delimitation of our study was the type of literature included in our bibliometric analysis. There is a plethora of publicly available literature on human rights in Belize available from a wide range of sources. Literature on any topic may be generated from academic or commercial publishing systems, as well as literature from unpublished, non-peer-reviewed sources. The latter type of literature is classified as grey literature (Damarell et al., 2025) and includes, blogs, podcasts; social media posts (e.g., tweets); conference abstracts, posters and proceedings, country profiles, dissertations and theses available from sites such as ProQuest; videos; publications/reports/white papers from governments, academics, think tanks, organizations, business or industry; institutional repositories; patents, pharmaceutical data, and unpublished trial data; unpublished research; statistics and datasets; news articles; trade and popular magazines; slide decks; or factsheets (see Damarell et al., 2025, Table 1, p. 3 for an even more-encompassing list). While this grey literature adds to the knowledge landscape of any topic, these writings may not go through the same scrutiny process as a peer-reviewed publication.

For this paper, we focused on literature published in traditional academic or commercial publishing systems, and included peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and peer-reviewed book chapters published by reputable publishing houses. However, we advise that the information included in grey literature is still a valuable source of information and we recommend that future research explores these areas to get a more complete picture of human rights in Belize.

In the next sections we provide a brief background on human rights climate in Belize before describing the methodology of the bibliometric analysis used in this paper. We then discuss our findings in terms of the main trends in research on human rights in Belize between 2000 and 2025. We close the paper with our recommendations for future research agendas on human rights in Belize.

## **Human Rights in Belize**

Belize is a linguistically and culturally diverse nation characterized by complex multiethnic demographics. It is the only country in Central America where English is the official language; however, Belizean Kriol, Spanish, Garifuna, and at least three Mayan languages are widely spoken. The country is sparsely

populated, with approximately 44 persons per square mile and a total population of 397,483 (2022) distributed across 22,970 square kilometres (8,867 sq mi). Belize ranks 115th on the Human Development Index, with an HDI of 0.721, placing it among the lower-ranked countries in the Latin American and Caribbean region (UNDP Human Development Reports, 2025). Demographically, mestizos constitute the largest ethnic group at 51.7% of the population. Other major groups include Creole (25.2%), Indigenous Maya (Yucatec, Mopan, Q’eqchi’) (9.8%), Garifuna (Afro-descendant) (4%), East Indian (1.55%), Mennonite, and several smaller communities (Statistical Institute of Belize, 2024).

Human rights are the rights and freedoms to which all individuals are entitled by virtue of being human (The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2025). These rights represent the “ethical standards for how governments should behave toward citizens” (Skarstad, 2024, p, 299). Since its independence in 1981, various Belize governments have recognized, respected, and upheld human rights through its constitutional, legal, and international obligations. As shown in Table 1, Belize has a good treaty ratification record, having ratified several Human Rights treaties (Moore, 20027; United Nations, 2025). Ratification implies that a country is expected to regularly report on these obligations through the Universal Periodic Review. Yet, many treaties remain not ratified (see Table 2). Additionally, Belize has denounced five of the 49 ILO conventions it had ratified, so that Belize is currently subject to 44 ILO conventions.

<b>Table 1: International Obligations Ratified by Belize</b>		
<b>Year</b>	<b>International Human Rights Treaties</b>	
1986	CAT	Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment
1990	CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
1990	CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
1996	ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
2001	ICERD	International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination
2001	ICRMW	International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families
2003	OP-CRC-AC	Optional Protocol to CRC on the involvement of children in armed conflict
2003	OP-CRC-SC	Optional Protocol to CRC on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography

2011	CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
2015	ICESCR	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
2015	OP-CAT	Optional Protocol to CAT
2015	ICPPED	International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance

<b>Table 2: Other Main International Instruments Not Ratified by Belize</b>	
OP-ICESCR	Optional Protocol to ICESCR
ICCPR-OP 1	Optional Protocol to ICCPR
OP-CEDAW	Optional Protocol to CEDAW
OP-CRC-IC	Optional Protocol to CRC on a communications procedure;
OP-CRPD	Optional Protocol to CRPD
ICCPR-OP 2	Second Optional Protocol to ICCPR, aiming at the abolition of the death penalty
	International Labour Organization Convention No. 169 concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention
	International Labour Organization Convention No. 189 concerning Domestic Workers and Convention
	International Labour Organization Convention No. 190 concerning Violence and Harassment.

Every four to five years, Belize, like all UN Members states, undergoes a unique peer review of its human rights records called the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), a mechanism established by the Human Rights Council (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2025a). Belize’s last UPR was completed by the HRC in January 2024. Belize received 166 recommendations and it supported 127 recommendations at the adoption of its UPR outcome at Human Rights Council 56, in July 2024 (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2024; 2025b). Many of the recommendations revolved around ratifying the international conventions, listed in Table 2, including the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No. 169). Belize was also asked by several nations to establish a national human rights institution in accordance with the principles relating to the status of national institutions for the promotion and protection of human rights (the Paris Principles) and provide it with adequate human and financial resources to carry out its mandate. Another recommendation from Paraguay was to “establish a national mechanism for implementation of, and reporting and follow-up on, human rights recommendations, considering the

possibility of receiving cooperation for this purpose” (United Nations Human Rights Council [UNHRC], 2024). A final group of recommendations revolved around strengthening “political, administrative and legislative measures to eliminate discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex persons, persons with disabilities, Afrodescendant people and Indigenous Peoples, ensuring their equal access to all basic services (Mexico); abolishing the death penalty (France); and strengthening the protection of human rights defenders (France) United Nations Human Rights Council (2024).

Belize’s human rights record remains complex. According to the US Department of State (2025) and United Nations Human Rights Council (2024) many human rights violations have persisted unchecked, including arbitrary or unlawful killings; abuse and inhumane treatment by security and prison officers; arbitrary arrests and detentions; backlog of judicial cases; children’s rights; child sexual abuse; death penalty; extensive gender-based violence, including domestic and intimate partner violence; lack of a national human rights institute; people trafficking; protection of migrant children; reparations for people of African descent; refoulement of refugees to a country where they would face serious harms, such as a threat to life or freedom or other mistreatment that would constitute a separate human rights abuse; serious corruption by government officials; and substantial barriers to accessing sexual and reproductive health services.

Belize has failed to regularly report and inform the public about its adherence to the rights covered in the various human rights treaties it has signed (Moore 2007). This prevents the established international monitoring mechanism from assessing Belize’s adherence to the rights covered in the treaties. Moorex theory of human rights into everyday practice that will improve and fundamentally transform the lives of people so that the dignity of all in Belize is respected (Moore, 2007, p. 232).

Moore argued that it is the world of human rights organizations and other members of civil society, the continuing process of dispelling the myths and misconceptions about human rights has been largely successful over the years. Many in Belize have been inspired by a world movement to fight for their rights and have become increasingly energized and emboldened in their attempt to hold the government accountable for its violations of human rights. While the possibility for topics for research on human rights is expansive, we wondered to what extent were these varied issues taken up in the human rights research in Belize? While Belize has ratified human rights conventions, is there enough information available for reporters to make informed reports and to enact the recommendations. Could the lack of response be as a result of limited evidence-based research? These are questions that helped propel the need for this study.

In the next section, we discuss the methodology used for this study because as Donthu et al. (2021) argued “the techniques chosen and the decisions associated with each step to perform bibliometric analysis are critical because they influence the results obtained and the inferences that can be drawn from the analysis” ( p. 295).

## **Methodology: Bibliometric Analysis**

While the numbers of systematic and other kinds of reviews have been increasing in academic research, the methodological, procedural, and technical decisions used in a majority of literature reviews need to be better documented so as “to increase trustworthiness, get meaningful results, and develop a cumulative body of knowledge” (Templier & Paré, 2017, p. 503). Therefore, in this section, we describe our steps of our protocol: data identification and harvesting, data screening and inclusion, data analysis and visualization; and coding protocol and analytical criteria.

Bibliometric analysis is quantitative analysis of large amounts of academic literature which is frequently used to summarize and synthesize literature and identify emerging trends, collaboration patterns, and impact (Donthu et al., 2021; Odunewu et al., 2025; Zahadi & Othman, 2024). The publications, citations, and authors are typically sourced from reputable databases such as Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus. Donthu et al. (2021) provided a detailed description of their bibliometric methodology, its different techniques, and reliable, step-by-step guidelines to help other researchers conduct rigorous bibliometric analysis with confidence. We were guided by their process in (i) searching for literature (ii) reviewing the title and abstract based on specified criteria, in this case a Belize focus and human rights, published between 2000 and September 2025.

### ***Phase 1: Data Identification and Harvesting***

We defined our search strategy and search strings (Vizarreta & Betta, 2022). We used combinations of terms and Boolean operators e.g. “human rights” AND “Belze” in title, keywords, abstract, and full article in the title, abstract, body of the article, and key words. The aim was capture as much of the relevant literature as possible. We used accessible, open-source tools such as Google Scholar and Semantic Scholar to locate our primary sources of data, because we had little access to paid versions of Scopus and Web of Science.

For data retrieval, we used Harzing’s Publish or Perish software (version 8.18.5091) (Harzing 2016, 2023), which is also open-source. We opened PoP, selected Google Scholar as the data source, pasted the search string into the query box. We set the number of results to the maximum (e.g., 1000). We then clicked search and PoP pulled in all the articles, their titles, authors, years, journals, and citation counts. Non-substantive items (for example conference abstracts, or items where the search terms only appeared in the references) were discarded. We opted to use Google Scholar because as shown in the screenshot (see Figure 1), without paid Scopus access, the database only yielded 21 items, less than a tenth of the yield using Google Scholar’s subscription-free service. Part of the limitation to accessing the articles is the paywall; additionally, many regional journals are not included in Scopus or Web of Science. Once the search was complete, in PoP, the results were exported and saved in CSV format. This file served as the the raw data for analysis.

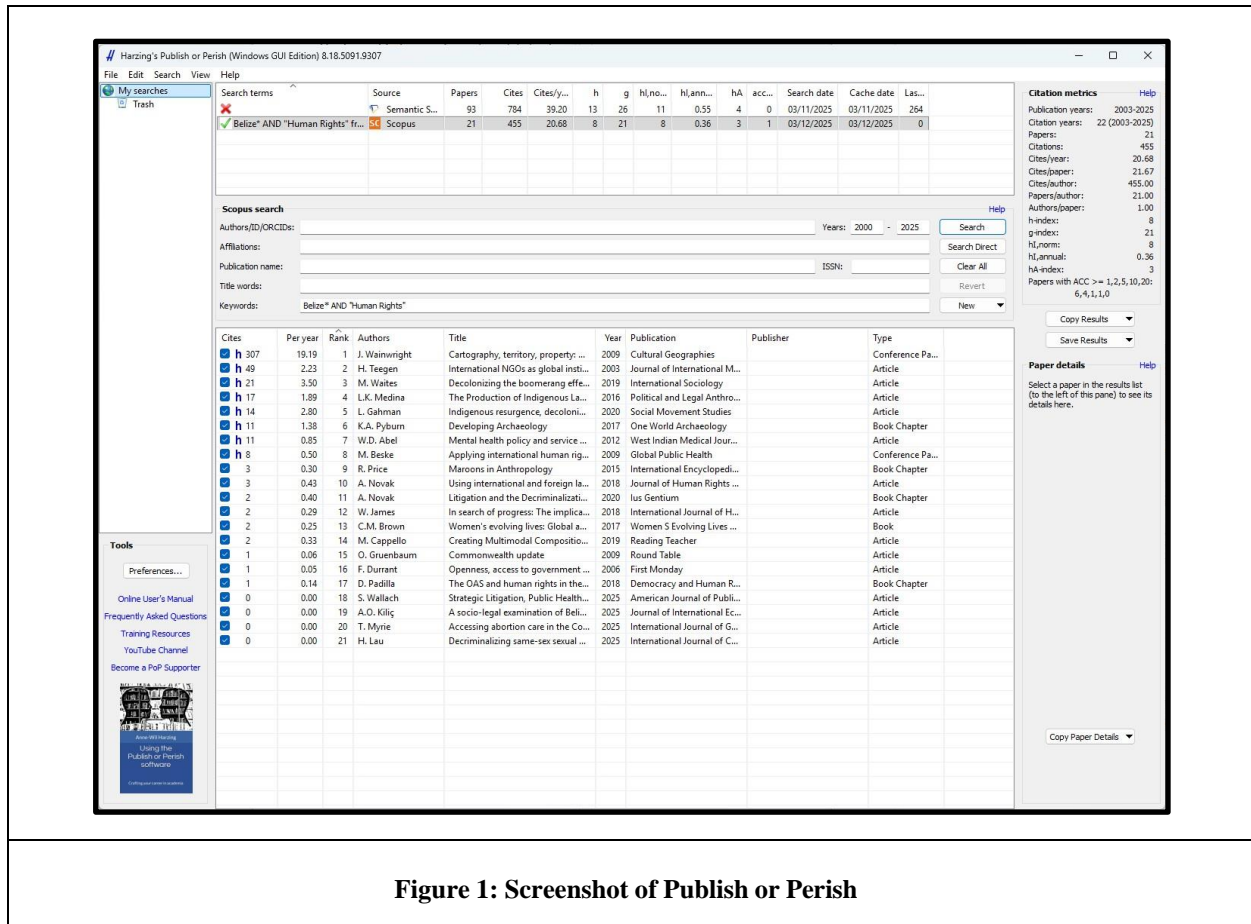


Figure 1: Screenshot of Publish or Perish

**Phase 2: Data Screening and Inclusion**

The resulting listings from Phase 1 were stored in free applications, LibreOffice Calc, a comma separated values (CSV) file like Google sheets or Excel. We then conducted alternative searches by scouring databases such as EBSCOHOST, Semantic Scholar, PubMed, Medline, and JSTOR for traditional academic or commercial published articles and book chapters. Most of these searches generated information overlapped with the PoP, Google Scholar findings. The records were then screened for duplicates, which resulted in 367 unique sources.

Each author then screened the titles, keywords and abstract in the PoP list. We used our eligibility criteria identified in Tabe 3. We included academic articles, books, book chapters that directly addressed human rights in Belize or used Belize as a primary case study. Sources that only cited Belize without meaningful exposition were excluded, for example 39 sources had a regional focus, such as Caribbean or Central America. Sources that did not involve identifiable human rights themes were excluded. We included only English-language, peer-reviewed articles published between January 2000 and October 2025. We stuck to English because neither of us spoke Spanish, which would be the next largest published language for human rights in Belize. We excluded all dissertations, theses, articles that only mentioned Belize in passing, news

articles, published reports and travel guides. These exclusions were marked in the spreadsheet against a column "Belize" and marked it with a one for Belize-related and a zero otherwise. We also included works that focused explicitly on Belize, not regionally in CARICOM or Latin America. In this way we can document the research in Belize.

<b>Table 3: Eligibility Criteria</b>	
<b>Inclusion Criteria</b>	<b>Exclusion Criteria</b>
Peer reviewed journal articles, reputable published books and book chapters	Grey matter: reports etc.
Published in English	Published in languages other than English
Published between 2000 and 2025	Published before 2000
Conducted in Belize or Belize a significant part of a regional case study	Non-Belizean focus
Focus on a human rights in Belize	Focus on regional or international human rights issues in which Belize is a minor case

**Phase 3: Data Analysis and Visualization**

Descriptive analysis was carried out using RStudio, to compute tallies by year of publication, by author to determine the most prolific authors, and by publication type. Initially, each source from the review set was identified as being a peer-reviewed journal article, a chapter in an edited volume or book, a technical governmental or NGO report, a thesis, or a conference abstract. The Belize-specific sources were sorted by publication type and only peer-reviewed journal articles, books and book chapters were retained for further textual analysis. The articles were screened individually by the first author and then the second author to identify themes for each source. The titles and abstracts for articles were considered. The opening paragraph or introduction was considered for book chapters that did not have an abstract. If articles had multiple themes, then up to three dominant themes could be identified for each source.

**Phase 4: Analytical Criteria**

For our datamapping we used the R statistical programming language in R-Studio. As discussed above, other tools exist that can be used to compute tallies and create visualizations. We used R because of our own familiarity, but also that it is the de facto standard platform for data analysis, which supports replicability. Most of the analyses can be done using basic functions in R such as filter() and count(). We were also interested in examining which themes co-occur. For this we used the Jaccard index (Leydesdorff, 2008), which is a descriptive statistical measure used to quantify the similarity between two sets by comparing their overlap relative to their combined size. In this analysis, we applied the Jaccard Index to measure thematic co-occurrence patterns in Belize-focused research articles. Specifically, for each pair of

themes, we calculated the proportion of articles containing both themes relative to the total number of articles containing at least one of them. This approach ranges from 0 (no co-occurrence) to 1 (perfect co-occurrence), providing a normalized measure that accounts for differing theme frequencies.

Methodologically, our analysis involved several systematic steps. First, we extracted thematic data from Belize-focused articles and created a binary matrix indicating theme presence in each publication. We then computed pairwise Jaccard indices for all theme combinations using the formula  $J(A,B) = |A \cap B| / |A \cup B|$ , where A and B represent sets of articles containing each theme. The resulting similarity matrix can be visualized as a heatmap with a grey-scale gradient representing index values. Conceptually, this approach is similar to a simple cross-tabulation table, except that the Jaccard normalizes cooccurrences with the overall frequencies. Consequently it is possible for two themes that are very uncommon to nonetheless have a high Jaccard value if they nearly always appear together. The Jaccard index can be generated using basic functions, such as `matrix()` and `filter()` in R and displayed using `ggplot()` functions.

We decided on a structure for the presentation of findings, that is similar to the Papua example (Zahidi & Otherman, 2024). We chose various presentation techniques including bar charts, line graphs and tables to present the data. We also theorised about what the trends and clusters in the dominant tell us about the state of human rights research in Belize, the dominant areas of research and the gaps in the published literature.

### ***Limitations of the Methodology***

In the absence of access to resources, we had to rely on open-source tools to replicate in principle the approach that Zahidi and Othman (2024) took. David found an open-source tool offered by a professor (or maybe emerita) at Middlesex University of London called Publish or Perish (PoP). PoP served as a good choice for data retrieval and getting citation metrics. PoP acted like the librarian to retrieve and organize the data. However, we acknowledge that databases and search strings have constraints (Vizarreta & Betta, 2022) and may contain errors. Therefore we carefully cleaned the bibliometric data (Donthu et al. (2021, p. 295) that we acquired, by doing searches to ensure that the paper really existed and was from a credible source. We removed all duplicates and erroneous entries.

The phase of harvesting and screening the data could have been enhanced through the use of a fee-based systematic review tool like Covidence (Kellermeyer et al., 2018). We could have used a free tool like Rayyan to speed up the citation sharing and double scoring process (Kellermeyer et al., 2018), and track our decisions to include or exclude articles. In this way our review protocol could have been independently verified (Patterson, 2024). We highly recommend that future reviews employ such software to produce verifiable protocols.

The data for this literature review was based on peer-reviewed journal articles published in English only. The research only canvassed English language, peer-reviewed articles available in full text online available from Google scholar. Belize is a multilingual society and some researchers may have written in another language. Furthermore, cost and accessibility made us unable to compare our Google Scholar results with paid versions of Scopus, and Web of Science; hence the utility of Publish or Perish and Google Scholar (Repanovici, 2010).

Finally, we note that “assertions of bibliometrics can be quite subjective given that bibliometric analysis is quantitative in nature, wherein the relationship between quantitative and qualitative results is often unclear” (Donthu et al., 2021, p. 295). It is recommended that the assertions should be supplemented by content analysis. Additionally, we did not engage in any of the advanced techniques of bibliometric analysis toolbox identified by Donthu et al (2021) such as citation and/or publication related metrics or science mapping, citation analysis, co-citation analysis, bibliographic coupling, co-word analysis, co-authorship analysis (Donthu et al., 2021 p. 288). This is an area for future research.

In the next section, we discuss the findings of our study in relation to the research questions: the major trends of the research as evidenced in titles, abstracts, and key words in the field of human rights in Belize between 2000 and 2025; and the gaps in the areas; and our recommendations for future research.

### **Main Trends in Research on Human Rights in Belize (2000-2025)**

The initial list of items retrieved by PoP from Google Scholar was screened according to our criteria. Duplicate items were removed from the generated list, resulting in 367 unique items, which were then inspected for inclusionary and exclusionary criteria described above in Table 3. Screenings of title, key words and abstract were done independently, by the first author followed by a screening by the second author. Items were required to address some aspect of human rights, and specifically apply to Belize. For example, some (n=39) were excluded that were human-rights related but were regional or global, rather than specifically involving Belize. One item was excluded that involved animal rights. What remained were and initial 114 items, which were then categorized by type of publication as shown in Table 4.

<b>Table 4: Publications by Type</b>		
<b>Type</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Journal Article	69	60.5%
Chapter	26	22.8%
Tech Report	9	7.9%

UN Report	5	4.4%
Thesis	3	2.6%
Conference paper	2	1.7%

The Technical Reports, UN reports, theses and conferences papers were then excluded leaving 95 journal articles and chapters as “the review set” (Patterson, 2024, p. 608) to be analysed.

### Themes in Human Rights Research in Belize

Each of the 95 items was then considered for its themes. The total number of themes was 285 from the 114 sources; on average each source had 1.5 themes. Table 5 lists the themes in descending order of frequency of occurrence and some examples of the papers reflecting those themes. The two most frequently research themes were on the issues of indigenous land rights, and indigenous people’s rights, including Afro-descendent and Maya peoples. Studies on disability rights were present but few. Absent from the published research were studies on migrants, trafficking, many of the areas listed as concerns in the UPR 2024. Maybe research on these areas is reported in the grey literature, but not in published academic journals and peer-reviewed books and this is a gap that can be filled within the next few years. Additionally, we noted that the theme was published if picked up by international researchers that relevant to developments in the region e.g. the publications on LGBTQ+ after the Belize ruling rippled across the Caribbean and was mentioned and compared by many researchers. This resulted in a systematic evolution of publications on a theme.

<b>Table 5: List of the Themes</b>		
<b>Theme</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Some Examples</b>
Indigenous Peoples’ Rights (non-land) (Afro-descendent /Garifuna and Maya) (see MacKay, 2002)	22	Barrett, E. E. (2024). Baines, 2011; Gahman, Penados, and Greenidge, 2020; Norales, 2003; Gough, 2022; Bonner, 2001
Indigenous Land Rights	20	Anaya, 2008; Cain and Leventhal, 2017; Campbell and Anaya, 2008; Gahman et al., 2020; Grandia, 2016; Haines, 2016; 2018; Nettheim, 2007; Novogrodsky, 2012; Parks, 2011; Wainwright & Bryan, 2009; Medina, 2024
International Human Rights Norms	17	Shoman, 2019; Balboni et al., 2007; Gray et al, 2018

Gender Identity and LGBTQ+ rights	16	Bulkan and Robinson, 2017; Caserta and Madsen, 2016; Evans, 2012; Novak, 2018; 2020; Lazarus, 2020; Orozco, 2018; Tisdale, 2018; James, 2017.
Health & Human Welfare (including HIV Aids)	13	Choi-Fitzpatrick, 2006; Gray and Mishtal, 2019; Killion and Cayetano, 2009 Andrewin & Chien 2008; Pope & Shoultz, 2012.
Business/Economic Human Rights Violations (see Bantekas, 2021)	11	Duffy, 2000; Gould, 2017; Krylova & Rico, 2024; Moberg, 2000; Pisani & Pisani 2018; Henry, 2010; Mustafa & Reeder, 2009
Women & Children's Rights	10	Edberg et al., 2011; Gray & Mishtal, 2019; Myrie, 2025; Rich, 2017; Uzwiak, B. A., & Curran, S. (2016).
Crime, Violence, and Citizen Security	7	Hanson et al., 2004;
Education Social Justice & Human Rights	7	Almendarez, 2013; De Four-Babb, et al., 2024; Penados, 2019.
Inter-American Human Rights System	7	Dulitzky, 2010;
Borderland Rights	6	Jones, 2012;
Environmental Justice	6	Duffy, 2000; Gould, 2017; Jiang and Cao, 2024
Gender-based Violence	6	Beske, 2009, 2014, 2016; Pargass & Clarke, 2003.
Death Penalty & Privy Council	4	Fiadjoe 2003; Tittlemore, 2004.
Legalizing human rights in the Caribbean	4	Bascombe, 2005; Biholar, 2023; Caserta, 2018; Hefler, 2002.
Disability rights	3	Magnusson et al., 2017.

### ***Co-occurrence and Distribution of Themes over Time***

We were interested to see which themes occurred in the same publications. Several interesting patterns emerged from this analysis. Notably, articles related to environmental justice coincided with articles involving business-related violations. Sexual orientation and gender identity were associated with

international human rights norms. Women and children’s rights were more strongly associated with crime and health than they were to gender-based violence. These patterns provide valuable insights into the interdisciplinary landscape of Belize-focused human rights research and highlight opportunities for more integrative scholarship.

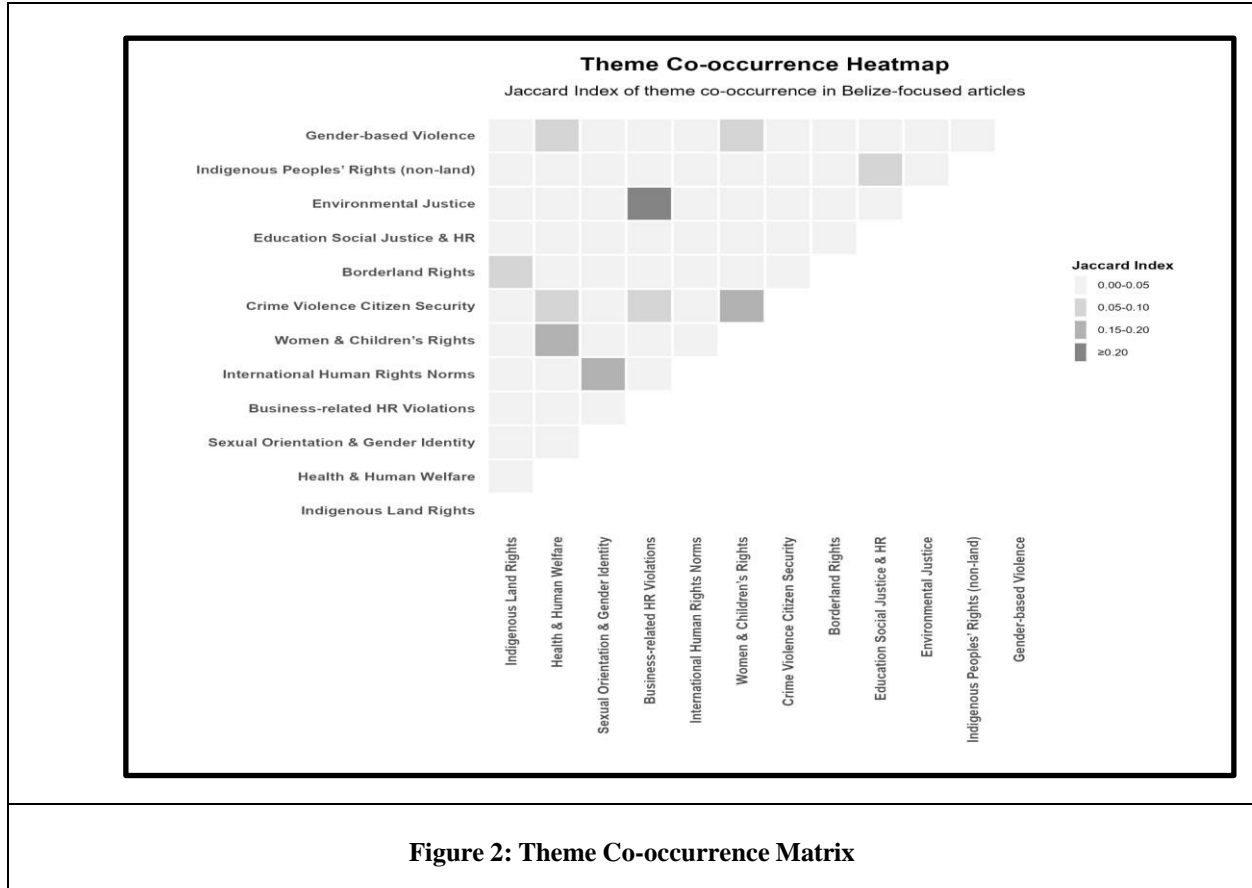


Figure 2: Theme Co-occurrence Matrix

The themes of publications were not equally-distributed over the time period (2000 – 2025). Figure 3 shows a display of the frequencies of the themes by year. The number of items ranged from zero to a high of ten per year. Indigenous land rights, one of the most common themes, only had publications in the years from 2005 to 2021, and business-related human rights only appeared after 2009.

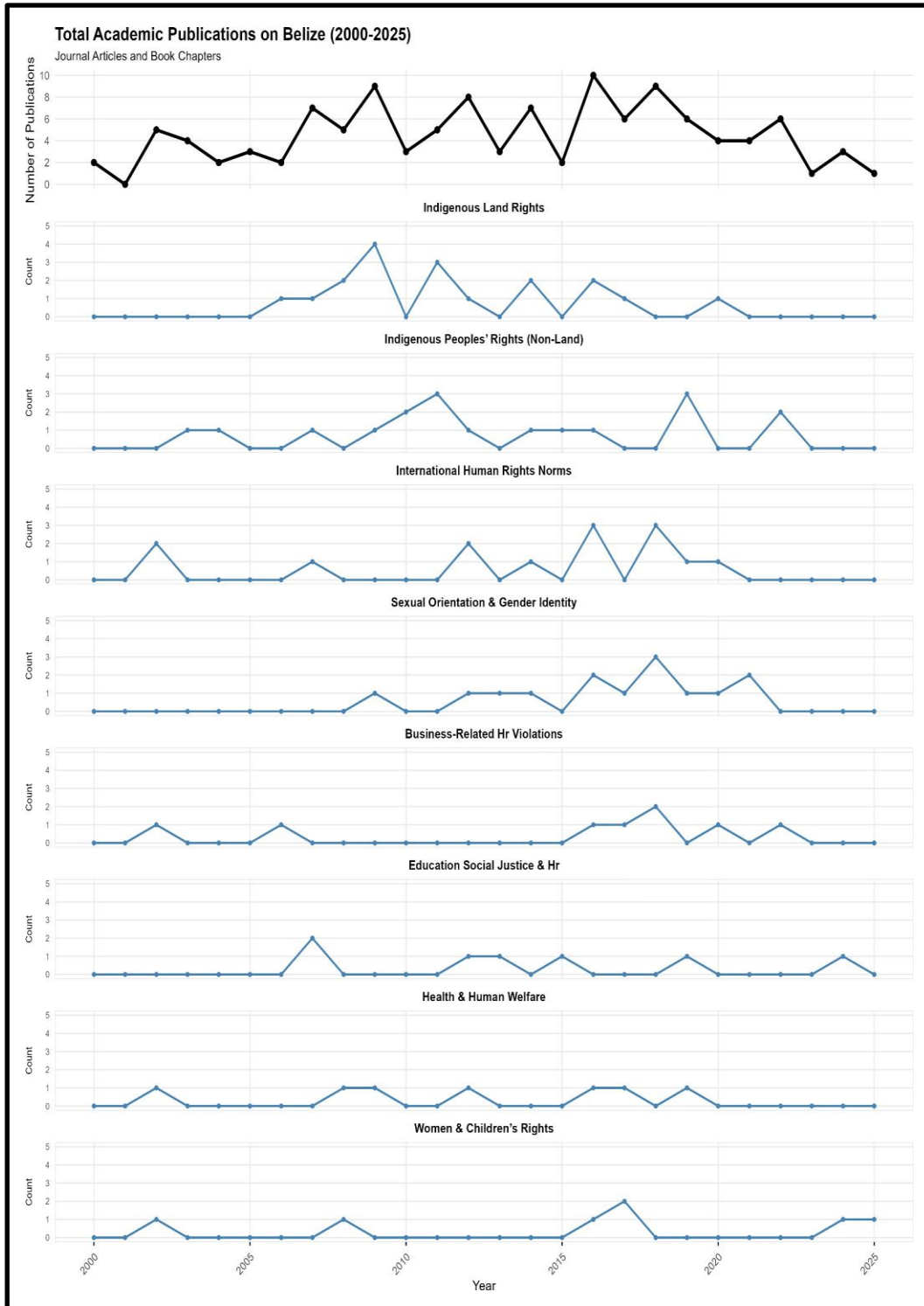


Figure 3: Publication Themes by Year

### Authorship of Publications

We also wanted to find out, who has been publishing peer-reviewed human rights research about Belize. To address this, we examined the publications and identified authors with more than one publication. The author’s affiliations were determined via a web search. In cases of ambiguity, we prioritized the institutional page if possible or else relied on social media (ResearchGate, ORCID, or Google Scholar). The top authors and their affiliations are listed in Figure 4. Notably, none are based in Belize, and only one is based in the Caribbean region. The top countries for affiliations are the USA (8) and the UK (5).

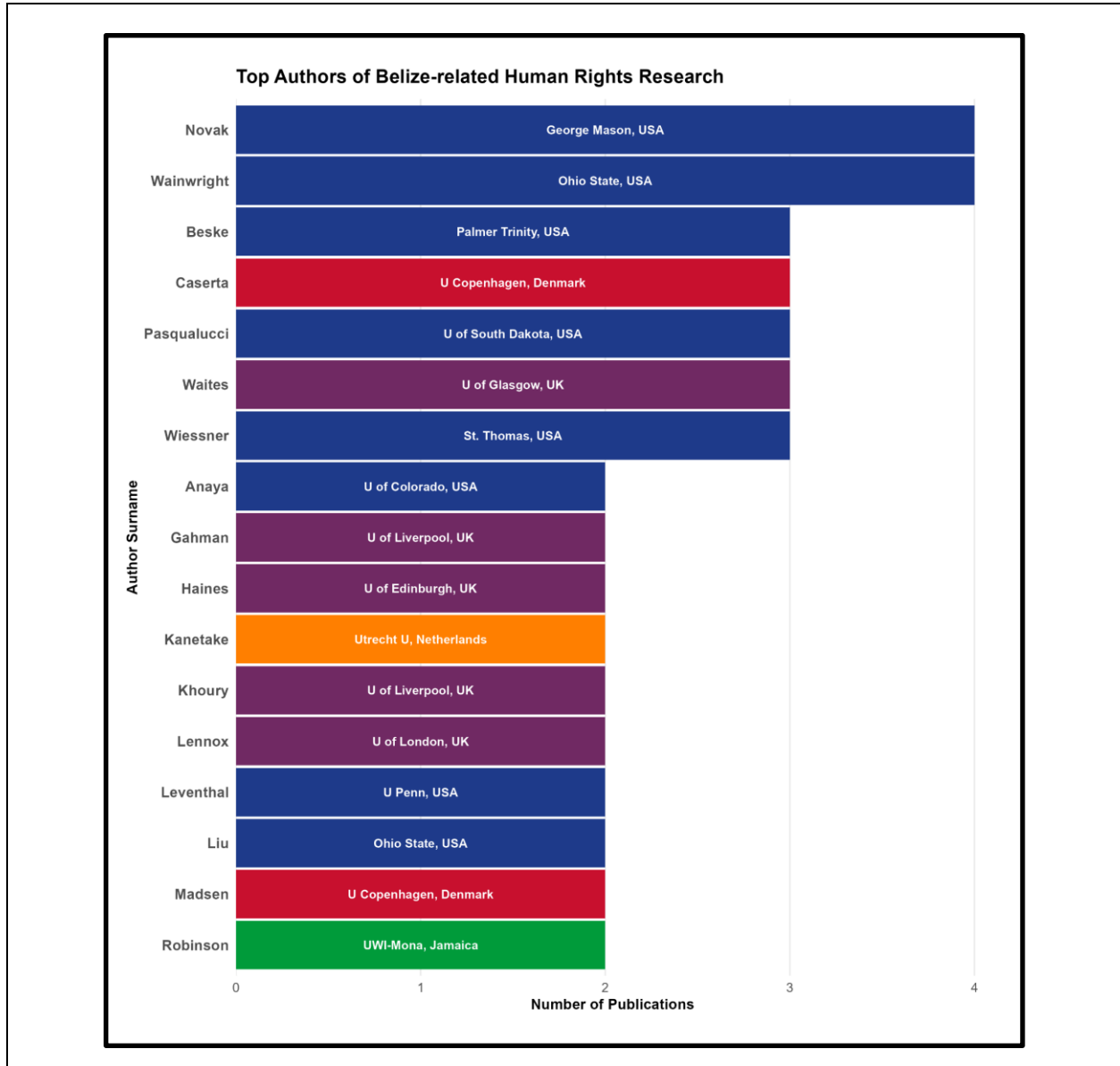


Figure 4: Authorship of Peer-Reviewed Research on Human Rights in Belize

This showed that more local researchers need to get involved in the publication process of research on human rights in Belize.

## **Discussion of Findings**

The most prevalent themes in human rights research in Belize have been associated with Indigenous People's Rights. This focus reflects Belize's demographics, with Maya and Garifuna people constituting significant portions of the indigenous population. It also reflects Belize's history, both colonial and post-colonial, underscoring how territorial sovereignty, cultural preservation, and self-determination remain central to the country's human rights discourse. Scholarly work in this area has largely examined the interplay between domestic courts, the Inter-American human rights system, and international norms, particularly the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and ILO Convention 169. Studies such as Anaya (2008), Campbell and Anaya (2008), and Grandia (2016) illustrate how legal advocacy and transnational litigation have shaped domestic policy and community-led resistance. Notably, the thematic co-occurrence analysis (see Figure 2) indicates that indigenous rights scholarship frequently intersects with environmental justice and business-related human rights violations, highlighting the tensions between extractive development, land dispossession, and the right to free, prior, and informed consent.

Research on Women's and Children's Rights appears eight times in the analysis, representing a significant but not dominant focus within Belize-specific human rights literature. The co-occurrence analysis reveals that Women's and Children's Rights research is more strongly associated with Crime Violence Citizen Security and Health & Human Welfare than with Gender-based Violence specifically. This suggests that scholarship tends to frame these rights within broader contexts of public security, health systems, and social welfare rather than primarily through a gender-based violence lens. Notably lacking were sources exploring the intersection of women and children's rights with employment or education.

Sexual Orientation & Gender Identity emerged as a significant theme with 10 occurrences in Belize-specific research, indicating substantial scholarly attention. However, the literature is predominantly concentrated on international legal norms (strong thematic co-occurrence) and the landmark decriminalization case (*Orozco v. Attorney General of Belize*, 2016). Studies such as Novak (2018), Caserta & Madsen (2016), and Tisdale (2018) focus heavily on transnational litigation strategies, Commonwealth legal frameworks, and the role of the Inter-American human rights system in advancing LGBTQ+ rights. This reflects a "top-down" analytical focus on legal reform and international advocacy. A notable gap exists regarding lived experiences, societal attitudes, and everyday discrimination faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in Belize. While the introduction notes that discrimination and violence persist, the peer-reviewed literature captured in

this analysis provides limited empirical insight into the socio-cultural realities, stigma, intersectional vulnerabilities (e.g., related to ethnicity, class, or rural/urban divides), or what community-led resilience strategies may exist. Future research would benefit from grounding the legal achievements in the everyday contexts they are meant to transform.

Disabilities Rights as a theme appeared four times in Belize-specific research, indicating it is a recognized but relatively underdeveloped area of scholarship. The literature identified includes mental health system assessments (e.g., Pan American Health Organization, 2013), community-based rehabilitation evaluations (Magnusson et al., 2017), and broader disability-inclusive analyses within health and welfare studies. This suggests that existing research has primarily been framed through a health and service-delivery lens, focusing on systemic needs, gaps in care, and program implementation—aligning with Belize's ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2011. As noted by Robertson (in press), Belize is comparatively delayed in creating protections for people with disabilities in the context of inclusive employment.

Belize has distinctly multicultural and multiethnic demographics. Mestizos, the largest ethnic group, make up just under 52% of the population (Statistical Institute of Belize, 2024). The remaining population include Creole, Indigenous Maya (Yucatec, Mopan, Q'eqchi'), Garifuna (Afro-descendant), East Indian, Mennonite, and other communities. The multicultural setting makes intersectional analysis essential for human rights research. The thematic co-occurrence matrix (Figure 2) shows some clustering such as Indigenous Land Rights with Environmental Justice and Business-related Human Rights Violations. Yet, few studies deliberately examine how, for instance, gender, age, or disability intersect within those contexts. Even in prominent domains like sexual orientation and gender identity, research has prioritised legal decriminalisation over how LGBTQ+ identities are lived across ethnic, religious, and rural-urban divides. This represents a significant gap, as Belize's human rights landscape is characterised by layered inequities that single-axis frameworks cannot adequately capture. It is not just a gap in the literature, but also points to a great opportunity to study intersectionality in Belize, where identity, rights, and inequality converge in many context-specific contexts.

## **Conclusion**

We have noted through this study there is while published work on the human rights in Belize exists, it is critical for researchers to have a better understanding of the research landscape and how it has evolved between 2000 and 2025; hence our decision to map the field of human rights research in Belize. We conclude by making recommendations for topics for research and strategies that may be employed to extend the published literature in this area.

In terms of what to research, we found that the recommendations from the UPR 2024 are a great place to begin a systematic plan for deciding on topics for research. For example, one area of research can focus on

why Belize's has failed to ratify certain conventions such as the the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No. 169) and the Inter-American Convention against Racism, Racial Discrimination and Related Forms of Intolerance. Another area of focus could be Belize's legal adherence to the death penalty. Belize had not taken any decision to abolish it or to accede to the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Why does Belize still have the death penalty, despite not have used it for over 30 years? Another UPR recommendation includes the establishment of "a national mechanism for implementation of, and reporting and follow-up on, human rights recommendations, considering the possibility of receiving cooperation for this purpose." What progress has been made in this area? Other recommendations involve strengthening political, administrative and legislative measures to eliminate discrimination, ensuring their equal access to all basic services (Mexico). The research gap is: To what extent are marginalised groups in Belize (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex persons, persons with disabilities, Afrodescendant people and Indigenous Peoples) discriminated against? France recommended the strengthening of the protection of human rights defenders in Belize. To what extent are human rights defenders in Belize protected? A last area is despite the calls for Belize to establish a national human rights institution, in accordance with the principles relating to the status of national institutions for the promotion and protection of human rights (the Paris Principles) and provide it with adequate human and financial resources to carry out its mandate, there are significant delays. Researchers may explore the historical evolution of this recommendation and the factors that enable and constrain its establishment of the national human rights institution. The 166 recommendations of the UPR are fertile ground for researchers to identify topics. These research gaps need to be filled to support the evidence-based reporting needed.

Having identified the topics for research, researchers need to have a systematic approach to conduct the research. From our review, much of the research has been done by independent researchers, that are outside of Belize. There have been some clusters of research around indigenous land rights and LGBTQ+ cases. We also observed a strategy by Beske to extend doctoral work into peer-reviewed published papers. We therefore recommend that for those researchers currently engaged in doctoral work, to create publications to contribute to comprehensive, accessible peer-reviewed research on human rights in Belize so as to add to the publication record.

Finally, we noted that research on particular topics comes in waves. So another strategy is to anticipate research that can be done on the evolution and developments of human rights legislation in Belize. Currently, there is an absence of research on Occupational Safety and Health or a framework for the protection of asylum seekers. Little has been done on disabilities or the implementation of specific Acts. These are wide open field to build a body of research that will make a significant contribution.

To conclude, it is critical that researchers capture the historical evolution of human rights in Belize, as well as the lived experience of those who may be discriminated against or who have their human rights

infringed. This project provided us with a glimpse of the state of research on human rights and Belize. For interested scholars, it is a case of “every sweet have its sour” in that our search demonstrated only a modest amount of scholarly work has been done on the relevant human rights topics. The sweet part is the scholar will face is having little trouble to find relevant gaps in the literature for further research.

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# **The Political Economy Crisis of Garifuna Rights in Neoliberal Belize**

**Faith Flavius<sup>1</sup>**

## **Abstract**

*This article offers a theoretical–historical analysis of the political economy crisis facing Garifuna communities in neoliberal Belize. It argues that contemporary globalisation operates as retooled colonialism, commodifying Garifuna culture while systematically eroding communal land tenure. Drawing on archival records, legal texts, and illustrative community vignettes, the paper traces the longue durée of Garifuna dispossession from their 1797 exile to post-independence development regimes. It advances the concept of “displacement in place” to describe how privatisation, tourism, and selective heritage recognition undermine economic autonomy without necessitating physical removal. While Belizean courts have affirmed Maya customary tenure, Garifuna land claims remain marginalised, revealing a racialised and selective recognition of indigeneity that sits uneasily with constitutional guarantees and international human rights commitments. The article concludes by theorising reparative futures grounded in Garifuna epistemologies, including community-based tourism, Afro-Indigenous trade networks, and the extension of communal tenure protections. In doing so, it foregrounds the paradox of a culture celebrated as national heritage while denied the material conditions of land, sovereignty, and self-determination.*

**Key Words:** Garifuna, Indigenous Rights, Human Rights, Globalisation, Neoliberalism, Land Dispossession, Belize, Reparative Futures.

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## Introduction

The Garifuna of Belize live in the shadow of maps drawn for empire; they remain on the land but are displaced from pursuing their full identity. Under the pressures of neoliberal economic policy frameworks, the Garifuna have experienced cultural atrophy and land dislocation. This pervasive attack on indigenous rights has taken a dualistic form, both building on the forerunning legacies of colonial logics. This encompasses: the ethos of globalisation and its logics, both producing a form of peripheral positioning that is at once, cultural, economic and juridical. Thus, this paper contends that the Garifuna are subjected to a contemporary form of displacement-in-place, a process by which neoliberal development dislocates indigenous identity and agency without physical removal.

To understand this process, it is first imperative to recognise Garifuna culture as the praxis of their ontological reality. Culture matters because it underscores a people's lived experience and foregrounds how the Garifuna have survived persistent dispossession from exile of St. Vincent in 1797 to present. To lose that is to lose their cultural continuity, but also agency. Simultaneously, land needs to be understood as more than an economic resource. For the Garifuna, land is seen as an ontological ground and centre of Garifuna life. It comprises burial grounds, fishing zones, canoe trees, and drum woods that are all anchors of communal identity. Under neoliberal development however, these practices have been stripped of their relevance. Quijano (2000) suggested, that globalisation did not erase colonialism but retooled it. The ethos of globalisation, a one global village, individualism and Western ideals have recast Garifuna culture into a marginalised heritage and deepened assimilation to Belizean dominant culture, while its logics, market logics, privatisation and tourism, have commodified Garifuna culture and stripped communal bases.

Human rights frameworks reveal this paradox with clarity. In 2001, international recognition was given to the Garinagu by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), proclaiming the Garifuna culture as a "masterpiece of oral and intangible heritage of humanity," with the recognition of their indigenous struggle (Stone, 2008). Albeit celebrated by the Belize Tourism Board, state policy underfunds the development of Garifuna communities, schools and overlooks communal enterprises. Similarly, in 2015, Belize's own courts acknowledged Maya customary tenure. Yet, formal recognition of Garifuna communal land practices ceases to exist. This reflects Achille Mbembe's *Necropolitics* which asserted that sovereign powers determine who may live and who must die, and under what conditions life is allowed to persist. This places Garifuna existence into "zones of precarity" as restrictive laws, exploitation and cultural tokenism allow for culture-as-performance but actively undermine culture-as-life, exposing the community to a slow social death.

This article advances four interlinked arguments that together articulate a political-economic critique of Garifuna dispossession in neoliberal Belize. First, it traces the historical lineage of dispossession from the 1797 exile to post-independence development regimes. Second, it examines how neoliberal development, Westernisation, and tourism function as tripartite enclosures that materially reproduce dispossession while commodifying Garifuna culture as exportable heritage. Third, it argues that the continued denial of communal land ownership constitutes a breach of both Belize's constitutional commitments and international human rights law. Fourth, informed by Garifuna epistemologies of communalism and sustainability as articulated through historical records and contemporary narratives, the article outlines reparative possibilities and alternative futures oriented toward economic and land sovereignty.

## Originality Statement

This article, *The Political Economy Crisis of Garifuna Rights in Neoliberal Belize*, is an original piece of scholarship that has not been previously published in whole or in part, nor is it under review or consideration for publication elsewhere. The content of this manuscript has not been presented in any other venue, except as acknowledged herein. All citations and references are duly credited, and the work presented here is the author's own contribution to research on the Garifuna of Belize and Human/Indigenous Rights.

## Methodology

This article is structured as a theoretical-historical intervention informed by archival materials, legal texts, and situated community narratives. Its methodological orientation is deliberately non-extractive and interpretive, aligned with decolonial critiques of positivist social science that treat marginalised communities as sources of data rather than sites of knowledge (Smith, 2012; Santos, 2014). Rather than constituting a formal empirical study aimed at producing generalisable findings, the interviews incorporated here function as illustrative vignettes that foreground Garifuna perspectives and lived articulations of political-economic marginalisation, interrupting abstraction and anchoring critique in historically situated experience.

Engagement with community narratives follows the ethical orientation of Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR), understood not as a technique for data generation but as a framework of relational accountability and epistemic respect (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008). Within Indigenous and Afro-descendant research traditions, CBPR has been mobilised as a corrective to extractive research practices, emphasising co-presence, reciprocity, and responsibility to community-defined priorities rather than methodological exhaustiveness (Israel et al., 2010; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). In this article, CBPR principles inform how knowledge is approached, contextualised, and represented, rather than serving as a procedural template for empirical claims.

Five semi-structured conversations were conducted between October and November 2024 with Garifuna community leaders in Dangriga and Hopkins. Participants were identified through collaboration with the National Garifuna Council, with subsequent introductions facilitated organically through community networks. This relational mode of engagement reflects CBPR’s emphasis on trust-based access and community mediation, particularly within contexts shaped by long histories of dispossession and research fatigue (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008). Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, were conducted with informed consent, and are referenced using pseudonyms. Rather than subjecting narratives to formal thematic coding or presenting them as “findings,” the article draws selectively on these accounts as situated articulations of how tourism-led development, land privatisation, and cultural commodification are experienced and interpreted within Garifuna communities. These narratives are read alongside archival records and legal documents and placed in dialogue with critical political–economic and decolonial theory, including analyses of racialised capitalism, coloniality, and necropolitics (Quijano, 2000; Mbembe, 2003). This approach reflects a growing body of scholarship that treats narrative not as evidence to be extracted and classified, but as epistemic intervention, knowledge that speaks *with* theory rather than being subordinated to it (Escobar, 2008; Wynter, 2003). Community narratives thus function as sites of theorisation, illuminating how macro-structural forces are lived, contested, and re-imagined at the local level.

The limited number of interviews is intentional and explicitly acknowledged. The aim is neither representativeness nor empirical saturation, but to resist abstraction by grounding political–economic critique in lived articulation. This methodological restraint aligns with decolonial scholarship that cautions against claims of total knowledge, particularly in research involving Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities historically subjected to epistemic extraction (Smith, 2012; Santos, 2014). By positioning Garifuna knowledge not as supplementary evidence but as epistemic grounding, the article seeks to enact rather than merely claim its decolonial commitments. Theory is rendered accountable to history and lived experience, while community narratives are preserved as expressions of sovereignty, memory, and critique rather than reduced to data points within an analytic apparatus.

**Table 1. Participants**

Pseudonym*	Sex	Occupation
Ms. Fuentes	Female	Educator
Ms. Alvarez	Female	Community leader and educator
Mr. Cortes	Male	Community leader
Ms. Ramirez	Female	Community leader
Mr. Rodriguez	Male	Community leader and drummer

\*All participant names are pseudonyms. Participants were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling. Quotations from these participants are used in the paper with a reference to their pseudonyms.

## Historical Context and Lineage

The ethnogenesis of the Garifuna people begins on the island of Saint Vincent (Gonzalez, 1988). Gonzalez (1988) noted that their origin goes back to the early seventeenth century, with the unapologetic defiance to enslaved labour by Africans who fled the plantations of Saint Vincent, joining the maroon Kalinagos or Karifuna. Curating a novel ethnic disposition, their history stands on the pillars of resilience and resistance. Following their forced exile from Yurumein (St. Vincent) in 1797, the Garifuna were initially deported to Roatán before dispersing along the Central American Caribbean coast in a series of staggered migrations. By the early nineteenth century, Garifuna communities had established coastal settlements in present-day Belize under conditions of British colonial tolerance, while additional movements into Honduras, Guatemala, and Nicaragua unfolded unevenly across the nineteenth century, shaped by labour demands, land access, and regional political transformations. Twentieth-century migrations, particularly to the United States, emerged

later and reflected a distinct phase of Garifuna mobility linked to banana economies, Cold War displacements, and neoliberal restructuring (Palacio, 2005). Nevertheless, Gonzalez noted the gradual atrophy of the Garifuna since their deportation from Saint Vincent, with the fear of “cultural annihilation being imminent” (Gonzalez 1988, p.42).

In historicising the socio-economic context of the Garifuna, the calamities of colonialism have been located as the primary driver of the marginalisation of the Garinagu of Belize. The pervasive tentacles of colonialism created a hazardous ecology of systems, structures, and beliefs that attacked non-Christian ontologies and relied on the suppression of Black autonomy and enfranchisement to uphold white supremacy and plantation economics. González (1988) introduced the theoretical construct of “*the politics of survival*”, a dialectical strategy underpinning the contradictions within Garifuna migratory patterns as they sought to evade Spanish colonial extractivism while also adapting to ecological precocity (p. 29). They maintained indigenous methods of life in uncharted territory while in a state of [mental, ancestral, and physical] exile. However, the threat of marginalisation exacerbated upon settlement of the diaspora, as they were forced to comply within a developing North Atlantic economy and ideology of mercantilist capitalism, which the Garifuna call “*mihagabuhuleera*” [keeping to oneself to amass], that eroded all prior systems of livelihood like the Garifunaduü [the Garifuna way] or its particular tenant of communalism or “*Aü bu, Amürü Nü*” [roughly translated to me for you, and you for me] (Servio-Mariano, 2010).

### ***Land dispossession***

Garifuna land dispossession can be traced to their forced exile from St. Vincent; however, this article centres its analysis on how dispossession has been reproduced and reconfigured within Belize. Iyo et al., (2003, p. 5) asserted that “state policy, race, class and ethnicity have, at different historical periods, dictated land ownership in Belize.” This included Spanish occupied Belize in the eighteenth century under two primary premises being: the 1765 Location Laws Act, which permitted a [white] settler to claim unoccupied land for logwood work, and the 1785 arrangement where land was ceded to the British by Spanish authorities, and shared amongst 30 settlers (Iyo et al., 2003; Bipolar, 2023). However, legal evidence of land displacement of the Garifuna took fruition under British rule. In 1817, the Superintendent of Belize declared all “unclaimed” land to become Crown Land, requiring settlers to register claims within six months or lose them (Iyo et al., 2003). By 1857, the colonial elites made amendments to the 1854 Land Titles Act so that the Garinagu had no entitlement to their land by law. Consequently, the Garinagu were forced to lease their land from the crown (Servio-Mariano, 2010).

These laws functioned as mechanisms to suppress the economic agency of the Garifuna, marking early institutional formations of economic injustices and inequalities. Moreover, Moberg (1992) delineated the structures of the Alcade System. Extended to Garifuna villages in 1877, the Alcade System was a form of indirect colonial rule that appointed local headmen with limited judicial and administrative powers but inserted colonial authority into the heart of village customs (Moberg, 1992). At first glance, a minor detail of colonial administration, the Act transformed headmen into colonial functionaries, and dismantled land and justice as internal matters within the Garifuna community, but to be adjudicated under colonial law. Consequently, by the late 1800s, a massive concentration of land ownership belonged to the Belize Estate Company, holding over 1 million acres, while 30 other English owners controlled much of the rest of Belize (Iyo et al., 2003; Gough, 2018). The colonial state consolidated authority through laws like the Crown Lands Ordinance (later Crown Lands Act), which vested large areas of land in the Governor and empowered the Crown to grant, lease, or sell at its discretion, sidelining Garifuna customary land practices grounded in communal tenure, ecological reciprocity, and kinship-based governance of territory. Even after independence, measures such as the Aliens Landholding Ordinance of 1973 reinforced the colonial mindset of land as a regulated commodity tied to sovereignty. The National Lands Act of 1992 replaced this framework, introducing reforms like standardised leases and environmental assessments but still privileging formal claimants and entrenching state authority. Taken together, these shifts reveal that land dispossession in Belize has been structured and maintained through law.

In more recent scholarship, Gough's (2023) detailed archival and ethnographic reconstruction of the so-called “Carib” Reserve at Punta Gorda demonstrates that Garifuna land insecurity is not a residual artefact of colonial neglect, but the deliberate product of a legal architecture engineered to keep Indigenous tenure perpetually conditional. His research traces how, although Garifuna settlement at Punta Gorda predates any formal assertion of British sovereignty, their lands were repeatedly subjected to contradictory ordinances, irregular surveys, and shifting administrative interpretations that oscillated between acknowledging Garifuna occupancy and denying their ownership. The creation of “reserves” under the 1872 Crown Lands Ordinance was followed by decades of inconsistent enforcement, bureaucratic confusion, and the eventual erosion of Garifuna control through leases, escheat proceedings, and colonial reclassification. Even the remarkable 1924

return of the 960-acre St. Vincent Block, achieved only after Garifuna leaders mobilised legal representation and navigated a labyrinth of conflicting wills, missing documents, and escheat claims, did not establish permanent security, as the land remained vulnerable to taxation regimes, administrative reinterpretation, and public misunderstanding of its status. Gough's reconstruction therefore reveals a juridical pattern in which Indigenous occupancy is tolerated so long as it does not impede state priorities, yet never elevated to the category of stable, inviolable property, a pattern that persists into the postcolonial era and continues to shape Garifuna territorial precarity today. These conditions underscore that without sustained lobbying, organised leadership, and consistent legal representation, Garifuna land rights remain structurally vulnerable.

### ***Economic marginalisation***

While the Garifuna were not enslaved like the English-Creole enslaved persons, it was the ideological and legislative mechanisms of colonialism that created a systemic economic struggle for the Garifuna of Belize. According to Servio-Mariano (2010), the Garinagu emerged as an important and flexible labour source for the British colonial elites who owned the means of production across the emerging New World, and in particular Belize. Thereby, the Garinagu were subjugated to selling their labour to earn a livelihood (Servio-Mariano, 2010). In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, following their deportation and exile, they served as soldiers for wage labour in British Royalist armies. Logging was close second for wage opportunities but was accompanied by seasonal unemployment that corresponded with external demands (Servio-Mariano, 2010). This created a system of structural dependency as the economy of Belize became based on the extraction of labour and resource to facilitate the industrialisation of other nations. Belize was then, interwoven into a global economic system of mercantilist capitalism, wherein the populace and bio-resources served as a peripheral colony, enriching core or metropolitan nations with fluctuating international market demands. Catapulting this experience into the contemporary epoch, Wallerstein (1974) detailed the formation of capitalism as a bounded, historically unique, and economically distinctive world-system that emerged in Europe in the sixteenth century through the projects of colonialism, the transatlantic slave trade, and mercantilist capitalism (Wallerstein, 1974). Thus, globalisation, as argued by Wallerstein (1974) and Quijano (2000), is not a new concept but rather an extension of these economic systems; developing from empires to several sovereign states, categorised by geopolitical divisions of labour. The compounding effect of global forces were exasperated by the implementation of legislation that impeded the economic development of the Garinagu and exasperated poverty. In 1812, British planters were fined by the Crown if they employed Garinagu persons. Servio-Mariano (2010) suggested that this was a mechanism to safeguard the institution of slavery and free labour after the end of the transatlantic slave trade in 1807.

### ***Ontological displacement***

Ontological displacement refers to the uprooting of a people's sense of being and belonging. At the corner of the twenty-first century, (Cayetano & Cayetano, 2005; Gough 2018) explored the decreasing political economy among the Garinagu. Cayetano and Cayetano (2005) assessed globalisation as a mechanism of symbolic violence, arguing that Garifuna cultural identity has been increasingly mediated by exogenous actors who redefine their ontological realities and structurally marginalise them. They stated, "their [Garifuna's] vulnerability has extended to allowing others to define them and their rights further widening an alienation from their own roots" (Cayetano & Cayetano 2005, p. 237). This precipitated an existential rupture from the communal praxis, as North Atlantic cultural and economic hegemony overshadowed indigenous customs. A byproduct of colonialism and white supremacy was the systematic psychological conditioning that encouraged a preference for European cultural norms and values. The peripheral state became a market for selling excess of manufactured goods only crafted in the Atlantic North due to the mercantilist policy of no industrialisation in colonies (Cayetano & Cayetano 2005). The result of this was a further deepening of dependency syndrome and a conditioning for a socioeconomic milieu that did not encourage economic prosperity for the Garinagu. Gonzalez (1988) critiqued culinary acculturation, land displacement, and systemic displacement of subsistence diets by imported commodities and manufacturing plants. She purported that globalisation has exported opportunities to indulge in overseas markets, while widening the gap between those who are enriched and those who consume. This has consequently exacerbated the proliferation of commodified consumables like Coca-Cola, which destabilised traditional delicacies, and replaced the communal praxis, local food production, use of existing ecosystems, and subsistence farming (Gonzalez, 1988). The influx of Coca-Cola in Belize, replacing local drinks like cassava beer represents a contemporaneous manifestation of colonial trading customs, by which peripheral states such as Belize consumed manufactured goods while being exploited for biopiracy. Gonzalez (1988) in fact highlighted the evolution, or perhaps erasure, of the Garifuna diet before exile, during colonialism, and in the late twentieth century.

Already, it has become evident that the moribund institutions of British colonialism infringed on the Garifuna's access to markets, trading abilities, and denied certain legal and economic enfranchisements. However,

Bourdieu also signified the concept of cultural capital, loosely defined as formal education, informal everyday cultural habits and experiences that enhance an individual's cultural competence and dictate their level of social stratification (Dillon, 2001). In line with this, Servio-Mariano highlighted that there was a prevailing preference for English creole blacks as they were more "Anglo-postured" in growing economic and administrative sectors, while the Garinagu were left unemployable and racially inferior (2010, p.137). Thus, this cultural marginalisation and institutionalised invalidation, reinforced existing inequalities that contributed to the marginalisation of the Garifuna community.

The outgrowths of colonialism have persisted as a destructive force. Colonisation played both an active and latent role in the decline of Garifuna enfranchisement and culture. Colonial arrangements of land ownership, and judicial practices erased any legitimacy of communal land tenure and indigenous practices, while re-routing ownership into colonial hands. Simultaneously, Gonzalez (1988) posited that colonisation has systematically undermined Garifuna cultural practices and language, leading to gradual cultural annihilation. Her analysis exposed the systematic psychosocial violence and trauma, which fostered an environment conducive to cultural atrophy and a diminishing political economy. Therein, it is imperative to consider the contemporary structural condition of the Garifuna as being produced by the continuum of colonial logics under the guise of new-aged globalisation.

## **Globalisation and Neocolonial Land Dispossession**

Upon analysis of the narratives, it is evident that the Garifuna people of Belize are often marginalised in the state's development projects, which prioritise foreign investment. The region has long had the world's most unequally distributed income due to the highly unequal distribution of farmland, government development and education policies, and demography, leading to intense land privatisation. Mollet (2014) argued that Belizean government prioritises land privatisation under the assumption that it may help alleviate poverty by allowing individuals to access credit and integrate into the modern economy. However, this approach has conversely disregarded communal land tenure systems that have historically sustained the Garifuna. The Garifuna's economic activities, such as subsistence farming and artisanal fishing, are thus undermined by state policies that favour private land ownership (Mollet, 2014).

The intersections of globalisation, racial and ethnic displacement herein become clear when examining the neoliberal agenda driving Belize's development policies. The push to make the country 'open for business' aligns with global economic trends where land and resources in the Global South are repurposed for foreign investment, often at the expense of marginalised indigenous populations. Belizean law has historically recognised communal land rights for Maya communities, but the Garifuna have struggled to gain similar legal protections. In 2018, Garifuna Barranco villagers marched on Belmopan to protest logging concessions granted to outsiders while their own applications were denied (Gough, 2018). Similarly, the coastal town of Dangriga, the cultural heart of the Garifuna in Belize, has seen increasing gentrification, with beachfront properties being sold to wealthy foreigners for tourism development. This is a process of spatial racialisation, where space is reorganised to reflect racial and economic hierarchies, the beachfronts become sites of elite tourism, while the Garifuna are pushed into informal labour markets with limited rights. For example, Ms. Fuentes, in her October 2024 interview, expressed that government officials, affluent individuals, and international corporations "exploit gaps in documentation to take Garifuna land, which is then used for hotels and other tourism projects...many people in our communities don't have legal proof of land ownership, making them more vulnerable to displacement" (Mrs. Fuentes, transcript). Moreover, as Mr. Cortes shared in a November 2024, in areas like Hopkins Bay, the Garifuna sell their houses to hotels, larger corporations, or Syrian and Chinese business owners, fleeing to urban areas to seek economic opportunities and betterment. Albeit only enhancing temporary gain and diminishing their political economy, economic pressures continue to push communities to retreat and exacerbate Garinagu displacement.

These contemporary dynamics mirror the state, corporate alliances documented by Purvis (2013), who shows that as recently as 2011 to 2013 the Belizean government continued to authorise seismic testing and oil drilling on Maya and Garifuna ancestral lands without free, prior, and informed consent, despite clear Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) and Court rulings requiring the protection and titling of communal territory. The state's "drill we will" posture, coupled with last-minute, exclusionary consultation meetings and the distribution of politically charged corporate gifts, demonstrates how development policy functions as a tool of contemporary dispossession. These practices reveal that land alienation is not a relic of colonial history but an active feature of Belize's neoliberal governance, one that continues to destabilise Garifuna tenure and displace communities through legal circumvention rather than overt force. Mollet's paper introduced the concept of "displacement-in-place", where the Garifuna are not physically removed but are structurally and economically marginalised within their own lands. Though focusing on Honduras, (Mollet 2014, p.29) demonstrated how privatised areas, such as the Punta Sal National Park, have restricted Garifuna access to

natural resources, further limiting their ability to sustain traditional livelihoods (Mollet, 2014). Displacement thus becomes racialised, with development narratives suggesting that their cultural and economic survival depends on integration into the state's vision of modernisation. Together with the case narratives presented, these findings also echo Achille Mbembe's (2003) necropolitics, where the state determines which populations have the right to flourish and which are left in conditions of disposability. The Garifuna are not physically exterminated but are systematically stripped of land and rendered quasi-citizens with diminishing rights.

By drawing from these lived experiences, it is evident that Garifuna displacement-in-place is not merely an unfortunate consequence of globalisation but a deliberate racialised economic strategy embedded in colonial histories of dispossession. Their displacement is thus not just economic but epistemic, reflecting a deeper negation of black autonomy and land sovereignty within a global system that privileges whiteness, capitalist logistics, and neoliberal governance (Quijano 2000; Mbembe 2003). The coastal town of Dangriga, the cultural heart of the Garifuna in Belize, has seen increasing gentrification, with beachfront properties being sold to wealthy foreigners for tourism development. In Hopkins Village, a historically Garifuna fishing community, land privatisation and foreign-owned resorts have pushed many Garifuna into low-wage tourism jobs while restricting their access to coastal resources.

## **Globalisation and Economic Displacement**

Globalisation, posed as an inevitable economic trajectory and universal law, has had severe consequences for the Garifuna of Belize. Conventional globalisation writers strongly suggest that export growth and incoming foreign investment for Latin America and the Caribbean have reduced poverty. However, Servio-Mariano (2010) warned of engaging in theories of globalisation that “do not affirm hybridity, resistance, and democratic self-determination against forms of global domination, subordination and the continuities of colonialism” (Servio-Mariano, 2010, p. 184). Globalisation as he noted, has led to western invasion of the periphery, and the free-market economy model has undermined agency and global democracy that is ironically promoted by western society. Similarly, Harrison noted that while many economists predicted that developing countries with great numbers of unskilled workers would benefit from globalisation through increased demand for their unskilled-intensive goods, this view was gravely simple and often inconsistent with the facts (Harrison 2006). Cross-country studies document that globalisation has been accompanied by increasing inequality within developing countries, suggesting an exacerbation of structural poverty. The existence of such contradictions thereby, emerges as a central theme through studies on globalisation in Latin America and the Caribbean, particularly on considerations of poverty and political economy. Globalisation has instead further marginalised the agency of indigenous, subaltern communities from the periphery, in the world-wind of the cemented praxis of neoliberal policy and international networks. Interviewee John Cortes asserted ardently that since their exile, the Garinagu of Belize have experienced a social death that worsens annually. Based on the vignettes presented, this phenomenon requires understanding their positionality, the intersections of race and ethnicity, and how these intersect in the existing neoliberal logistics of Belize, leading to their cultural atrophy and diminishing political economy.

Existing literature on the political economy of the Garifuna remains uneven, with studies such as Mollet (2014) focusing primarily on land struggles, neoliberal development, and ethnic mobilisation in Honduras and Nicaragua, while comparatively marginalising the experiences of smaller Garifuna communities in Belize. Based on the narratives presented, the Garifuna express a lack of economic capital and resources due to their rural disposition and stigmatisation. There seems to be an inability to adapt to a growing industrialised economy, exacerbated by economic challenges such as dependency syndrome and underfunding. This financial instability has forced Garifuna families to prioritise economic survival over cultural preservation. Servio-Mariano (2010) highlighted that economic pressures driven by globalisation compelled younger Garifuna in the twentieth century to prioritise Western education and employment opportunities over traditional cultural practices, resulting in cultural erosion and exodus from their rural communities (Servio-Mariano 2010, 185). This postulation was mirrored by interviewee, Mr. Rodriguez, in his November 2024 interview, elucidated that economic constraints have forced the Garinagu to abandon traditional livelihoods. Canoe-making or drum-making, traditional Garifuna occupations, could not sustain their families. As jobs that reflected a growing neoliberal global market became more financially viable available in urban areas, many people, especially younger generations, have moved away from these cultural crafts in favour of employment that provides economic stability. These findings mirrored the Cayetano's (2005) postulation that migration forces the Garinagu to assimilate into dominant economic and cultural systems such as English Creole and North Atlantic cultures, eroding traditional practices and producing a brain drain that extracts valuable human capital, skill, and knowledge. This assimilation ultimately also weakens Garifuna identity while undermining local continuity. Interviewees echoed these dynamics, stressing that migration is often the only option to avoid destitution in rural and coastal communities of Belize, even as it accelerates cultural erosion.

However, those that remain in traditional Garifuna occupations or are unable to migrate to urban areas face the negative effects of this economic shift. Moreover, Mr. Rodriguez asserted that some of their practices have been disrupted due to legal restrictions and policies that ignore the economic plight of the Garifuna and their use of natural materials. He gave instances of canoe-makers giving up their speciality and facing destitution due to new legal provisions by the Ministry of Agriculture, which now mandate permission from the authority to cut down trees. He explained that due to Belize's large landscape and gas prices, simply commuting to the Ministry of Agriculture to acquire this permit inflates the cost of production, making their goods not competitive with internationally made, mass-produced canoes. This legislation also poses an issue for drum-making. While he understands and endorses the urgency of environmental conservation and sustainability, he also called for a bargain to balance cultural preservation and sustainability for the Garifuna to also prosper. These incidents highlight the challenge of maintaining a livelihood in the face of economic necessity due to Western capitalism and neoliberal policies. Moreover, in her October 2024 interview Ms. Alvarez, noted that these trends have had negative implications for social and economic development of the Garifuna. As development is centralised in urban areas while rural regions are neglected for not fitting neoliberal priorities. Consequently, she expressed the struggle Garifuna persons face as their coastal towns are neglected or not prioritised as it pertains to infrastructural development, the building of schools, proper water flow, and economic development. The Garifuna thus stand at the crossroads of Quijano's enduring colonial matrix and Mbembe's necropolitical order, where globalisation masks old violences in new language, rendering livelihoods precarious and cultural life perpetually at risk.

### ***The paradox of tourism***

Tourism projects exemplify the paradox of neoliberal development and Garifuna underdevelopment. Interviewed both in October 2024, both Ms. Fuentes and Ms. Luez shared that there is an inequitable distribution of financial gains from tourism. Conveyed by Ms. Luez, "even when Garifuna culture is showcased, the people performing or participating often receive minimal compensation" (Ms. Luez, transcript). While the Garifuna's cultural identity is commodified for the benefit of the tourism industry, they do not share in the financial gains but their traditions are showcased in advertisements and resort entertainment. Mbembe's notion of necropolitics helps illuminate the paradox of Garifuna tourism. In places like Hopkins Bay, Garifuna culture is showcased as spectacle through dance, cuisine, and claims of "authentic" Afro Indigenous identity, yet this visibility masks deeper erasures. What is preserved for tourism is culture as performance, stripped from its foundation in land, subsistence, and communal practice. Culture as life, meaning the drum woods, fishing grounds, and kinship economies that sustain continuity, is rendered disposable under neoliberal development. In this way, the state and market determine which aspects of Garifuna culture are allowed to survive as heritage and which are left to die, reproducing the logic of dispossession under the guise of preservation. The interviewees all highlighted that the celebration of Garifuna music, dance, and cuisine as a major draw for international visitors, with festivals such as Garifuna Settlement Day on November 19th promoted as key tourist attractions. However, Garifuna performers and artisans often do not benefit economically from the tourism industry, as resorts, tour operators, and foreign investors control much of the market, reinforcing patterns of racial labour exploitation. In Hopkins, Ms. Luez and Ms. Ramirez noted that many Garifuna work as hotel staff, tour guides, or cooks in foreign-owned resorts serving as waiters and janitors in the tourism economy. These jobs offer limited upward mobility and keep the Garifuna in positions of servitude within industries that appropriate their culture, while diverting economic benefits away from Garifuna communities, reinforcing dependency on external markets.

In a similar manner, ecotourism and neoliberal paradigms of sustainable development demonstrate these paradoxes. Mr. Rodriguez for example noted the expansion of ecotourism areas along Belize's coast, such as the South Water Caye Marine Reserve, has had effects like the Punta Sal National Park in Honduras, limiting Garifuna access to traditional fishing grounds. The park, accessed from traditional coastal Garifuna areas such as Dangriga, Hopkins and Placenia, now forbids subsistence fishing by local communities. Mr. Rodriguez further stated that "even within the context of sustainable development, cultural sustainability must be remembered too!" claiming that in an attempt to align Belize with neoliberal sustainability projects and eco-attractions, Garifuna culture is not just ignored but actively destroyed. It further puts into question: what are authentic conceptualisations of sustainability? And sustainability for what and whom? For the Garifuna, this results in a double displacement: their land is privatised, and they also face symbolic and cultural displacement. While their identity is celebrated as part of Belizean tourism brand, they are denied actual ownership over their cultural and economic future. The Garifuna are thus caught in a paradox of globalisation: their cultural distinctiveness makes them valuable as a tourism attraction, but their existence as autonomous landholders is seen as an impediment to modernisation. This dynamic mirrors broader global patterns where indigenous and Afro-descendant communities are simultaneously marginalised and exploited within neoliberal development frameworks. In this way, Garifuna tourism becomes a stage where, beneath the

choreography of “heritage,” the deeper architecture of Quijano’s coloniality and Mbembe’s necropolitics quietly persists, determining which parts of Garifuna life may be displayed and which may be allowed to wither.

The contemporary condition of the Garifuna in Belize can be understood as a form of social and economic death produced through cumulative historical and structural processes. From their forced exile from Yurmein to the present, successive regimes of dispossession have eroded the material foundations of cultural reproduction and economic autonomy. Community narratives, read alongside historical and legal records, illuminate how these processes manifest today through constrained livelihood options, migration pressures, and exclusion from national decision-making. Marginalisation thus operates not as a singular event but as a multidimensional condition that renders Garifuna presence culturally visible yet politically and economically peripheral. This condition reflects what necropolitical frameworks describe as slow social death: the systematic depletion of life chances under racialised capitalism, wherein communities are neither fully expelled nor fully incorporated, but instead maintained in a state of managed precarity.

## **A Legal Case for the Garifuna**

A legal case for the Garifuna rests on both constitutional precedent and historical settlement patterns that reveal the inequities of Belize’s recognition frameworks. Unlike Maya land claims grounded in subsistence agriculture and inland occupation, Garifuna claims centre on coastal livelihoods, fishing, canoe-making, and communal settlement, rendering their tenure more vulnerable to tourism and maritime regulation. Yet *both* traditions share the principle of collective stewardship, underscoring the need for constitutional parity. However, the struggle for Garifuna constitutional recognition resonates with broader critiques of the international human rights system. As Biholar (2023) argues, global human rights law remains structurally ill-equipped to address historical injustices such as chattel slavery because its foundations are shaped by a “colonial imagination” that privileges the state over Afro-descendant peoples. Moreover, that reparations for chattel slavery require a reorientation of international human rights law toward the perspectives of Afro-descendant communities traditionally positioned at the margins of legal discourse which was echoed by the interviews in this study. Caribbean demands for reparations therefore emerge not only as moral appeals but as a human rights claim: a demand that the state address the structural conditions, economic and territorial, that generate cultural decay. Integrating this perspective into the Garifuna context reveals how land dispossession, cultural erosion, and constitutional neglect form part of a wider pattern in which Afro-Indigenous rights are recognised rhetorically yet denied substantively within postcolonial legal orders. This call resonates with Garifuna demands for constitutional protection of land tenure, cultural rights, and political inclusion in Belize.

The landmark decision in *Maya Leaders Alliance v Attorney General of Belize* (CCJ, 2015) affirmed that indigenous customary tenure is protected under the Belize Constitution and international human rights law. The CCJ held that “the right to property includes the protection of rights and interests in land whether or not these are registered or otherwise formally recognised” (para. 60) and that Belize is obliged “to respect and protect Maya customary land tenure” (para. 102). Crucially, the CCJ stressed that constitutional provisions, especially those concerning fundamental rights, must be interpreted generously, a principle reaffirmed in *McEwan & Others v Attorney General of Guyana* (CCJ, 2018), where the Court stated that constitutional rights must be read broadly to give them “the full measure of the protections they are intended to confer” (para. 46). Applying this logic to Garifuna communities would be consistent with the regional jurisprudence: a generous interpretation should likewise extend constitutional protection to Garifuna customary tenure. Despite this jurisprudence, Garifuna claims remain unrecognised, even though coastal villages such as Barranco and Punta Gorda have been continuously occupied since the mid-nineteenth century. Archival records note Barranco’s first recorded birth in 1862, predating several inland Q’eqchi’ and Mopan Maya communities later central to Maya rights litigation (Gough 2018). This does not negate the ancient continuity of Maya presence in Belize; rather, it exposes the selective application of indigeneity. Garifuna tenure, no less historical, no less communal, has been sidelined within state frameworks of recognition. This selective recognition becomes more troubling when mapped onto Belize’s constitutional architecture. By its acts and omissions, Belize has violated customary land tenure rights protected under sections **3(a)** (protection of the law), **3(d)** (the right to property), **16** (non-discrimination), and **17** (freedom from arbitrary deprivation of property). Under these provisions, the Garifuna could claim compensatory damages for impairment of their use and enjoyment of customary property, as well as *moral and vindicatory damages* for violation of their constitutional rights, especially the right to equality and the right to protection of the law. The CCJ’s reasoning in *Maya Leaders Alliance* drew on these provisions to affirm that the Constitution applies to “all peoples within Belize’s borders” (para. 103). Extending that logic to Garifuna communities would bring consistency to constitutional interpretation. Failure to do so entrenches what Hendrix (2008) calls the “fiction of state sovereignty,” whereby indigenous tenure is selectively acknowledged when convenient but denied when inconvenient.

The CCJ itself has emphasised that failure to protect indigenous land rights can amount to extinguishment. In *Belize Sugar Industries Ltd v Attorney General of Belize*, the Court observed that “implicit in the CCJ’s analysis is the understanding that the government’s failure to act to protect indigenous rights may result in the frustration of those rights to the point of extinguishment.” This reinforces the argument that without state intervention, and without robust, continuous implementation, customary tenure cannot survive the pressures of tourism development, privatisation, and neoliberal governance. The outcome of *Maya Leaders Alliance* further demonstrates the gap between judicial recognition and substantive change. The CCJ ordered that the Government of Belize establish a fund of BZ\$300,000 as a first step toward fulfilling its obligations under the April 22, 2015 Consent Order to protect Maya customary land tenure. While symbolically important, this amount represents only a modest beginning. For parity to be achieved, similar commitments must be extended to the Garifuna, whose historical tenure and constitutional protections mirror those upheld for the Maya.

This obligation is not solely domestic but rooted in regional and international law. The Inter-American Court of Human Rights in *Awas Tingni v Nicaragua* (2001) held that Article 21 of the American Convention protects collective indigenous land rights even in the absence of formal title. Moreover, *Maya Leaders Alliance* (para. 53) affirms that the rights of indigenous peoples are recognised across major human rights treaties, including:

- the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (inherent dignity clause),
- the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide (Article 2),
- the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Article 27),
- the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (Article 1), and
- the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 30).

As a party to these instruments, Belize is bound by a broad constellation of international norms affirming that indigenous land rights, cultural integrity, and equal protection are not discretionary entitlements, but obligations rooted in customary international law. As para. 53 of *Maya Leaders Alliance* notes, “international law recognizes and protects the rights of indigenous peoples. This is implicit in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which records and protects the inherent dignity of all human beings.” Taken together, this legal landscape reveals that the exclusion of Garifuna communal tenure is not simply a bureaucratic oversight; it reflects what Quijano (2000) names the coloniality of power, where certain forms of indigeneity are rendered legible while others are relegated to the margins. And in the persistent vulnerability of Garifuna lands to privatisation, tourism, and state omission, one can observe what Mbembe (2003) terms the management of life at the edge of disposability, a juridical economy where cultural survival depends not on law’s promises but on the political will to enact them.

Corrective measures could also honour the 1999 Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of Belize and the National Garifuna Council, which promised recognition of Garifuna contributions and land concerns yet has never been fully implemented (Gough, 2018, pp. 307–308). Internationally, Belize is further bound by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007), which affirms in Article 26 that “Indigenous peoples have the right to the lands, territories and resources which they have traditionally owned, occupied or otherwise used or acquired” (United Nations, 2007, art. 26(1)). Recognition of Garifuna communal tenure would therefore not be a novel legal innovation but a necessary act of parity, aligning Belize’s constitutional framework with both Inter-American jurisprudence and international obligations. Such recognition would not only address historic marginalisation but also provide a legal bulwark against the ongoing pressures of privatisation, tourism, and gentrification that continue to displace Garifuna communities.

## Policy Alternatives and Reparative Futures

In *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, Walter D. Mignolo conceptualised the phenomenon of coloniality in tandem with the existing epistemic terrain that is a unilateral Euro-American position (Mignolo 2011, p. 5). Moreover, he posited the need for dewesternisation or decolonial thinking or deconstructing how coloniality appears in the threads that make up our ontological and epistemic fabrics (Mignolo, 2011). Decolonial thinking then can become pivotal in beginning to conceptualise alternative solutions for the crises produced by globalisation. Mignolo discussed the idea of removing the parenthesis of global linear thinking, and engaging what he coined, ‘zero point.’ Zero-point epistemology is defined as the ultimate grounding of oneself in knowledge, by seeking original and unbiased inquiry or thought, that is dewesternised and thus has the potential to be curated from indigenous perspectives and acknowledges the array of diversity that exists (Mignolo 2011). Thus, indigeneity is conceptualised as a point of ground zero, where one attempts to understand their existing contexts, and method of being rooted in local histories rather than the universalising

gaze of the Global North. Within this context, it represents a bottom-up approach in which one attempts to understand their existence, challenges and solutions, that acknowledges their intricacies.

Cavanagh and Mander (2004) called for a 'bottom up' approach; a process of correction and adjustment to tackle the impact of globalisation, stressing a shift from global to local. This represents a method that promotes indigeneity and indigenous development. Under the current circumstances, globalisation as evidently seen the widening gaps of comparative advantage economics, trade liberalisation, dependency and imports. Within the Garifuna context, globalisation has threatened the existence of small-scale farmers, Garifuna livelihoods based on ecological principles of agricultural subsistence, and thereby food security for the Garinagu. However, the authors suggest fighting the juggernaut of globalised industrial agriculture and the monopoly on food farming (Cavanagh & Mander, 2004). New rules of trade which recognise the high value of food production from local communities should be at the top of considerations. Regional Afro-Indigenous trade is also integral for indigenous Garifuna development. Strengthening trade links between Garifuna communities in Belize, Honduras, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, can foster self-sustaining trade networks. The expansion of cross-border economic partnerships with indigenous and Afro-descendant groups, further bypassing the exploitative nature of multinational corporations that disregard the environment, and other factors that drive marginalisation of indigenous communities. Alternative financial institutions such as local credit unions have also been integral in Afro-Caribbean development as seen by the efforts of self-determination by newly liberated African peasants in Jamaica (Marshall, 1996). The National Garifuna Council can setup Garifuna-run micro-finance institutions to provide low-interest loans for local business and entrepreneurial development. The state must also be integral in subsidies and incentives to help foster this development.

Cavanagh and Mander (2004) also expressed the salience of living democracy and subsidies. They affirmed that while democracy is associated with elections, civil society organisations and citizens should promote a newer meaning to democracy (Cavanagh & Mander, 2004). The essence of this is to hold governments and key stakeholders accountable to those who will bear the costs when decisions are made. It also means limiting the powers of absentee owners, ensuring that marginalised groups are represented and mobilising their members in advocacy. As the authors expressed, globalisation entails the "delocalisation and disempowerment" of local communities and economies (Cavanagh & Mander, 2004, pp. 79-81). The marginalisation of indigenous communities, subaltern voices and exaltation of absentee populations must be addressed by prioritising the populace that governments represent. In this sense, new democracy respects the notion that sovereignty resides in people. Subsidies are also essential to the development and success of the Garifuna. According to Cavanagh and Mander (2004), local, community-based activities such as small-scale farming, local markets, local production for local consumption have been impacted by the large-scale nature of globalisation. These traditional systems however, had enabled the Garinagu to remain in control of their economic and food security, while maintaining viability of their communities and cultures. Economic globalisation is rapidly dismantling this, favouring instead economies based on export, comparative advantage, and profit maximisation with global corporations in control. For Cavanagh and Mander (2004), it is thereby necessary to create policies that consciously favour the local and follow the principle of subsidiarity, being the decision that activities can be undertaken locally should be and whatever power can reside at the local level should reside there. Only when additional activity is required that cannot be satisfied locally should power and activity move to the next higher level, that of region, nation, and finally the world (Cavanagh & Mander, 2004).

Furthermore, Ian Boxill (2003) put toward a form of alternate tourism for Belize. He purported that Belize is at the appropriate stage in its development to forge an alternative model for tourism. Boxill suggested that Belize would benefit greatly by utilising a tourism development policy which respects people's way of life, and sustains ecological systems for it to be sustainable (Boxill, 2003, p. 147). He noted that there is also the possibility for festival-type tourism such as the Garifuna Festival of November 19th, which draws from the culture of the country. However, measures should be taken to ensure that the festival, organisation, employment opportunities and expression remain in the hands of the Garifuna, or as primary collaborators with civil organisations and government ministries. This is to preclude what already takes place being the commercialisation of sensitive aspects of people's cultures, in addition to exploitation. Expanding on Boxill, community-centred tourism remains a central focus for alleviating issues of exploitation and structural poverty.

Presently, Belize is heavily controlled by foreign investors. Instead of serving as performers of their culture for tourists, the Garifuna must own and control tourism enterprises on their land. There can be collectively owned lodges, boat tours, and eco-friendly stays that provide direct income to the community rather than foreign corporations. Homestays and agro-tourism can also be part of this. Homestay networks can allow tourists to immerse themselves in Garifuna daily life, ensuring that tourism profits remain in the hands of families rather than corporations. The development of farm-to-table tourism is also a possibility where visitors engage in traditional Garifuna farming and fishing, strengthening food sovereignty and cultural continuity. This permits

a switch to community-based and ecological tourism, from present extractive tourism models. The utilisation of Garifuna ecological knowledge is also integral for sustainable fishing, forestry, and herbal medicine tourism, positioning them as experts rather than employees, while also focusing on sustainable, organic, and indigenous food systems that resist dependence on global agribusiness. These sentiments were recurring theme in the interviews, expressing the potential for Garifuna-led tourism as a means of economic sustainability, poverty eradication, and cultural preservation. Mr. Rodriguez stated for instance, “Tourism, if done correctly, can support us. A canoe-maker could create workshops where visitors learn and contribute to the craft...Visitors who engage meaningfully with the culture, such as learning traditional crafts or attending rituals, could help spread awareness and bring financial benefits to us” (Mr. Rodriguez, transcript). These ideas highlight cultural tourism as a form of economic empowerment. Instead of simply entertaining tourists, Garifuna community members could offer immersive experiences, such as language classes, drumming lessons, and guided heritage tours.

Nevertheless, scholar Núñez (2019) underscores the salience of legal support in the re-imagining of Garifuna preservation. Núñez’s (2019) study of culture-based intervention programs in Belize makes clear that Garifuna cultural revitalization cannot be decoupled from the structural conditions that determine whether cultural life can endure. While educators and community leaders deploy language, music, spirituality, and heritage as tools of youth empowerment, these initiatives operate within institutions that valorise culture rhetorically yet fail to secure the material foundations that sustain it. Fragmented funding, inconsistent state support, and political ambivalence render cultural programs acts of endurance rather than expressions of flourishing. In this sense, the constraints Núñez identifies echo the legal and epistemic critique advanced by Biholar (2023): that Afro-descendant communities remain constrained by human rights regimes shaped by a colonial imagination that recognises identity without guaranteeing the conditions for its reproduction. Together, these insights reveal that revitalisation alone cannot secure a reparative future; reparations must take the form of stable rights, protected lands, and durable public investment, conditions without which Garifuna cultural labor remains structurally overburdened and perpetually at risk.

## **Conclusion**

Globalisation in Belize has not functioned as the great leveller promised in development rhetoric; it has reproduced and refined the racialised cartographies established under colonial rule. For the Garifuna, the neoliberal project manifests not as opportunity but as an *aggiornamento* of historical dispossession, a tightening of the same structures that once exiled their ancestors from Yurumein. Far from ushering in prosperity, globalisation has deepened structural inequalities through land privatisation, extractive tourism, and the reorganisation of coastal space in accordance with foreign capital rather than Indigenous stewardship. What appears as modernisation becomes, upon closer scrutiny, a continuation of the “coloniality of power” that Quijano identifies as the organising grammar of the modern world.

Within this terrain, Garifuna life is governed through a quiet calculus of tolerable precarity: communities may dance for tourists, but they shall not own the ground beneath their feet; they may perform culture, but not exercise territorial autonomy. Mbembe’s insights on necropolitics and zones of precarity help clarify this contradiction. The Garifuna are not annihilated, yet their capacity to flourish is systematically curtailed, confined to narrow economic roles within industries that depend on their cultural labour while eroding the material conditions that sustain that culture. Displacement-in-place thus emerges as a distinctly twenty-first-century mode of Garifuna marginalisation, a form of slow dispossession that disrupts subsistence, reorders cultural space, and restricts communal tenure without the spectacle of forced removal. Yet Garifuna epistemologies persist as living sites of resistance. Articulated through practices of *Garifunaduáü*, cooperative labour, ecological reciprocity, and kinship economies, these worldviews continue to offer alternative visions of autonomy that defy neoliberal metrics of value.

Thus, the Garifuna crisis is neither accidental nor peripheral; it is symptomatic of a deeper global pattern in which Afro-Indigenous communities occupy the fault lines of neoliberal expansion. Addressing this crisis requires more than recognition or inclusion; it requires structural transformation. Constitutional parity for Garifuna communal tenure, legal protections against displacement, state support for community-based tourism, and the creation of Afro-Indigenous trade networks represent necessary steps toward a reparative horizon. These interventions do not constitute charity but justice; they align contemporary governance with Belize’s constitutional commitments and international human rights norms. In attending to these epistemic traditions, Belize can move beyond symbolic multiculturalism toward a genuinely decolonial project, one that affirms that development without justice is merely a refined mode of dispossession, and that the future of the nation rests on the flourishing of all its peoples, not only those rendered legible to capital. Such a shift is not only necessary for the survival of the Garifuna; it represents a broader ethical imperative for the Caribbean: to

imagine development not as the continuation of colonial logics, but as the collective labour of building futures rooted in justice, memory, and self-determination.

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# **Digital Horizons and Dignity: A Critical Analysis of Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights in Belize**

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## **Abstract**

*The Government of Belize embarked on an ambitious digital transformation to leverage artificial intelligence (AI) to boost the economy. The primary focus is to improve the Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) sector and kickstart a high-value “Orange Economy.” Well-known human rights challenges, however, are at the heart of the country’s governance, problems with the rule of law, accountability and oversight to be specific. This paper examines the intersection of old and new and argues that unless the Belizean government introduces a firm, human rights-based management framework, the uncritical application of AI could exacerbate the problems they already have. The results of such an unchecked use of AI could be devastating, with increased surveillance, entrenched social inequality, job losses and erosion of digital sovereignty. Technological determinism is rejected, and a critical theoretical framework is adopted that is grounded in the social construction of technology and the primacy of international human rights law over vague ethical principles. It analyses the effects on privacy, discrimination, freedom of expression, and workers’ rights, and concludes that a rights-based approach is not a barrier to progress, but a necessary prerequisite for fair and sustainable growth. Finally, concrete guidelines are provided for the Belizean government, the private sector and international partners to develop a governance framework that will ensure Belize’s digital future is a future of dignity and opportunity for all its citizens.*

**Keywords:** Artificial Intelligence, Human Rights, Belize, Digital Rights, AI Governance, Data Colonialism

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## **Introduction**

To reposition the country within the global digital economy, the government of Belize has embarked on a comprehensive campaign that is based on economic vulnerabilities and opportunities assessments, and envisions a future where the primary engine for growth and diversification is technology, particularly artificial intelligence (AI). This vision is based on a multifaceted policy architecture that is comprised of national strategies, targeted investments, and educational reforms. However, a critical analysis reveals that these initiatives are overwhelmingly centred on economic imperatives and that considerations for human rights, rather than being foundational design principles, function as secondary or parallel concerns. This framing creates a critical tension for Belizean society — a conflict between the promise of economic growth through AI and the risk of a future defined by increased surveillance, discrimination, and job losses.

Considering the rapid technological advancements in Belize, it's hard not to see the collision of this digital push with a national context that has long been plagued by well-documented and persistent human rights problems (*Coc v. The Attorney General of Belize*, 2015; Human Rights Commission of Belize, 2021; U.S. Department of State, 2023, 2024; World Justice Project, 2023). The deep-rooted governance issues, lack of accountability and protection for the most vulnerable all form the landscape on which new AI systems will be deployed, and the uncritical adoption of AI would only make these existing problems even worse, through increased surveillance and entrenched inequality. Rejecting technological determinism (Smith & Marx, 1994; Tacheva et al., 2025), this paper adopts a theoretical framework grounded in the Social Construction of Technology (SCOT) (Amrollahi & Abedin, 2024; Pinch & Bijker, 1984) and Critical Theory of Technology (Feenberg, 1991, 2002; Kirkpatrick, 2020) to argue that these emerging systems are not neutral tools but sites of political contestation. Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative analysis that juxtaposes Belize's digital policy documents against its binding international human rights obligations to assess potential impacts on privacy, non-discrimination, and labour rights (United Nations, 2011). At the heart of the argument is that the allure of technological progress shouldn't lead us to forget the State's primary and non-negotiable obligation to protect the fundamental rights of its citizens. Without a fundamental reorientation of its strategy to place human rights at the core of its digital agenda, Belize's pursuit of a technologically advanced future risks deepening social divides, eroding democratic integrity, and creating a digital landscape where dignity is sacrificed for efficiency (Eubanks, 2018; Feenberg, 1991, 2002; O'Neil, 2016; United Nations, 2011).

## **Literature Review and Theoretical Background**

### ***The Belizean Context: Digital Aspirations and Human Rights Realities***

#### **Charting the Digital Future: Policy, Ambition, and the Orange Economy**

Looking at the future of Belize's digital landscape, the Global Digital Services Investment Policy and Strategy is at the forefront of the country's transformation. Initiated by the Office of the Prime Minister and the Ministry of Investment (Government of Belize Press Office, 2025; Outsource Accelerator, 2025) and funded by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), this landmark initiative will catapult Belize's established Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) sector from its current state to a high-value, globally competitive digital services hub (Government of Belize Press Office, 2025). The strategy explicitly identifies advancements in artificial intelligence as the key to this evolution, aiming to move the BPO industry "up the value chain" away from traditional call centre operations and towards more sophisticated services, including data analytics, AI-driven customer relationship management, and specialised software development (Outsource Accelerator, 2025). The policy's focus is unmistakably economic, creating an "enabling environment" for the growth of global digital services, attracting foreign direct investments, and generating high-value employment opportunities (Government of Belize Press Office, 2025; Outsource Accelerator, 2025).

Complementing this is the Belize National Digital Agenda 2022-2025, an essential component of the country's vision for state modernisation (E-Governance and Digitalization Unit, 2022). The agenda's key pillars are investments in digital infrastructure, the creation of centralised digital platforms and the systematic adoption of innovative technologies across the public sector. Objectives of this agenda include bridging the urban-rural divide by expanding internet connectivity, developing a suite of e-Services for

citizens and businesses, and creating a national digital identity system to simplify access to government procedures. The aim is to create open, inclusive, and transparent institutions that will make the digital government a tool for building public trust (E-Governance and Digitalization Unit, 2022).

When considering the digital agenda in Belize, a key strategic element is the focus on the Orange Economy, which is comprised of creative and tech-driven sectors, such as animation, software development, digital art, gaming and social media entertainment that are identified as having immense growth potential (Government of Belize Press Office, 2025; Outsource Accelerator, 2025). The government is also using various education programs to build the necessary human capital, like the ConnectEd program and the U-Spaces initiative, which provides computer-equipped facilities in rural districts (Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Technology, n.d.-a; Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Technology, n.d.-b). The government's commitment is signalled by the Cabinet's approval for Belize to sign the Santiago Declaration, a regional initiative to promote AI systems that put human rights at the forefront (UNESCO, 2022). However, economic incentives function as the main drivers of the digital agenda, while human rights and ethical considerations are relegated to supplementary commitments. This separation creates a potential fault line where economic expediency may be prioritised over protecting fundamental rights.

### **The Human Rights Baseline: A Landscape of Pre-existing Vulnerabilities**

The optimistic digital ambitions of Belize are in stark contrast to its burden of persistent, foundational human rights challenges that predate digital concerns, including issues of indigenous land rights and the rule of law (Coc v. The Attorney General of Belize, 2015; Human Rights Commission of Belize, 2021; U.S. Department of State, 2023, 2024; World Justice Project, 2023). The adoption of powerful data-driven technologies into the existing environment threatens to amplify these risks—specifically state impunity (U.S. Department of State, 2023, 2024), systemic discrimination (Human Rights Commission of Belize, 2021; U.S. Department of State, 2024), and institutional corruption (World Justice Project, 2023)—making these systemic violations more efficient and scalable.

A foundational weakness is the deficit in state accountability, specifically the performance of the country's security forces. There are credible reports of arbitrary or unlawful killings, and “inhuman and degrading treatment by security officers” (U.S. Department of State, 2023, 2024), and the successful prosecutions of officials are rare, which fosters a climate of impunity that corrodes the rule of law (Freedom House, 2024; U.S. Department of State, 2024; World Justice Project, 2023). This situation is compounded by severe delays in the justice system, where pretrial detention can take an average of three to four years for murder accusations, which effectively undermines the constitutional right to a fair trial within a reasonable time (Freedom House, 2024; World Prison Brief, 2024).

When we look beyond the State in Belize, we can see that the country has deeply ingrained patterns of systemic discrimination. The pervasiveness of gender-based violence is described as an “endemic problem,” and the public's perception is that official responses are insufficient (Belize Crime Observatory, 2024; U.S. Department of State, 2024). Women in Belize also face severe economic injustices, evident in the persistent pay gap and the woefully low number of women in leadership positions (Human Rights Commission of Belize, 2021; U.S. Department of State, 2024). Spanish-speaking immigrants from Central America report serious, and all too often, ill-treatment from the police (U.S. Department of State, 2024). Indigenous people, such as the Maya, have been fighting for their rights to their traditional lands and resources, a struggle they've been waging for years that is intrinsically linked to their cultural survival (Coc v. The Attorney General of Belize, 2015). Workers' rights too have not been respected. There are numerous credible accusations of antiunion discrimination and harassment, especially in the agricultural sector (U.S. Department of State, 2024). As a whole, these issues paint a portrait of a society where legal protections are unevenly applied, leaving marginalised groups exposed to structural abuse.

It is within this context of inequality that the deployment of AI systems presents a unique danger. These well-known economic and social fissures in Belize cannot wait for future “reform” before technology is introduced; rather, the immediate risk is the “algorithmic amping up” of existing problems. As researchers O'Neil (2016) and Eubanks (2018) warn, when AI models are trained on data from a society plagued by discrimination, they inevitably reproduce those biases. The critical danger is that these new digital systems can entrench inequality, such as rejecting qualified women for jobs (Dastin, 2018) or denying services to specific ethnic groups (Noble, 2018)—while masquerading as completely objective and mathematical decisions (Benjamin, 2019), making the discrimination harder to detect and challenge (Pasquale, 2015).

These challenges are underpinned by the pervasive problem of government corruption and a lack of transparency. The government does not effectively implement its anti-corruption laws, and officials "often engaged in corrupt practices with impunity," particularly within the Department of Lands and Immigration services (Freedom House, 2024; U.S. Department of State, 2024). This impunity is reinforced by an under-resourced Integrity Commission and a judicial system where successful prosecutions of high-level officials are virtually non-existent (Freedom House, 2024). Also, public trust in institutions is critically low; statistics show that a staggering 78% of Belizeans think that high-ranking officials would not face justice for embezzlement of public funds, and fewer than half the population retains confidence in the Judiciary (World Justice Project, 2023). This deficit in public integrity poses a severe threat as the nation moves toward digital transformation, as weak institutions are ill-equipped to manage the profound power of algorithmic tools. This context is critically relevant because there is a substantial risk of corrupt practices when large-scale AI systems and vast new datasets are involved. In order to prevent this, there is a need for robust, independent oversight and control of the systems.

Table 1 summarises this central tension, juxtaposing the government's key digital policy goals with the specific human rights risks they create or exacerbate in the Belizean context.

**Table 1. Juxtaposition of Belizean Digital Policy Goals and Associated Human Rights Risks**

<b>Policy Goal (Source)</b>	<b>Associated Human Rights Risk (Source)</b>
Develop a national digital identity system to simplify access to government services (E-Governance and Digitalization Unit, 2022, p. 53).	Risk of increased state surveillance, exclusion of marginalised groups without documentation, and misuse of data by security forces with a history of impunity (Magnone et al., 2024; U.S. Department of State, 2024).
Transform the BPO sector to higher-tier, data-intensive digital services (Government of Belize Press Office, 2025, para. 2).	Risk of invasive AI-enabled workplace monitoring infringing on worker privacy; risk of job displacement due to automation for a low-skilled workforce (United Nations, 2011; UNDP, 2024).
Utilise e-services to enhance government efficiency and create open, inclusive, and transparent institutions (E-Governance and Digitalization Unit, 2022, p. 55).	Risk of deploying biased algorithms that codify and scale existing discrimination against women, migrants, and ethnic minorities in public service delivery (Eubanks, 2018; U.S. Department of State, 2024).
Expand internet connectivity to remote and rural areas (E-Governance and Digitalization Unit, 2022, p. 39).	Risk of exacerbating the digital divide in terms of skills and literacy, not just access, leaving vulnerable populations unable to navigate the digital environment safely (UNDP, 2024).
Leverage foreign expertise and attract foreign direct investment for digital growth (Government of Belize Press Office, 2025, para 3).	Risk of "data colonialism" and "vendor lock-in":, where critical data infrastructure is controlled by external entities with limited accountability to the local population, undermining digital sovereignty (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; ICT Pulse, 2025).

### **The Legal Framework Under Pressure**

With respect to the protection of human rights, Belize has a clear and well-articulated legal framework, grounded in its Constitution and international treaties. The Constitution of Belize Part II (2021) specifically enshrines the fundamental rights and freedoms that are at the heart of human dignity, namely, the right to life, liberty, security, personal privacy (Section 14), and freedom of expression (Section 12). The legal system in Belize is, however, not limited to its Constitution. It is reinforced by adherence to international treaties like the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and others (United Nations, 1965, 1966, 1979; Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCHR], n.d.). To establish a direct linkage between international standards and local law, courts are instructed by the Interpretation Act of Belize to

interpret the Constitution in a manner consistent with these international commitments (Coc v. The Attorney General of Belize, 2015). This judicial mandate is invaluable because it ensures that Belize's constitutional protections remain dynamic. This allows the Judiciary to apply evolving international standards, such as digital privacy rights, to domestic cases even before specific local legislation is enacted.

Concerning giving effect to the laws that are in place in Belize, the institutional structures are fragmented and under-resourced and the country does not have a single, overarching national human rights institution (NHRI) (World Justice Project, 2022; U.S. Department of State, 2024) compliant with the Paris Principles, the international standard for independence and effectiveness (United Nations General Assembly, 1993), a deficit noted by local monitors (Human Rights Commission of Belize, 2021). Instead, small specialised bodies, like the Office of the Ombudsman, are overwhelmed, with complaint backlogs regarding the police department and matters before the courts (Office of the Ombudsman, Belize, 2023). The major issue, though, is the massive "implementation gap" between legal guarantees of these laws and their enforcement. These systemic backlogs hamper the justice system, leaving the public with little faith in court officials (U.S. Department of State, 2024; World Justice Project, 2023). This reality has dire implications for AI governance, as the already beleaguered system is profoundly ill-equipped to handle the novel technical and evidentiary challenges of attributing specific harms to the decisions of opaque and complex AI systems.

### ***The Regional Dimension: Caribbean SIDS and Digital Sovereignty***

The challenges Belize faces in adopting AI are inextricably linked to its status as a mainland Caribbean nation of the Small Island Developing State (SIDS) grouping. Structural weaknesses faced by SIDS, such as limited resources, small domestic markets, vulnerability to external events like climate change and economic dependency, are magnified when placed against the backdrop of a global AI race dominated by superpowers (specifically the U.S. and China) and tech giants controlling critical infrastructure (Maslej et al., 2024; UNCTAD, 2021).

According to a UNESCO survey in 2024, the disparities in AI and data readiness among SIDS are clear-cut, with many lagging due to limited resources - specifically a critical lack of quality training data and absent government strategies (UNESCO, 2024a). Of the SIDS, 71.2% lack quality data required for AI development, and 50% have no official initiatives for the use of AI (UNESCO, 2024a). These issues are compounded by infrastructural deficits and affordability challenges, creating a persistent digital divide (ITU, 2023; Magnone et al., 2024). In Belize, this divide is evident in rural districts where high-speed internet is often unavailable or expensive, forcing residents to rely on government-funded 'U-Spaces' for basic computer access rather than owning personal devices (E-Governance and Digitalization Unit, 2022; Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Technology, n.d.-b).

When it comes to the Caribbean region, one of the most concerning shared vulnerabilities is its reliance on external actors for technology, a dynamic which has been described by scholars Nick Couldry and Ulises Mejias as "data colonialism" (Couldry & Mejias, 2019). This is a new form of colonialism that operates not through the appropriation of land or resources, but through the extraction and appropriation of human life, in the form of data. As Caribbean nations become consumers rather than producers of AI, they jeopardise control over their own data, potentially exposing Belizean citizens' sensitive financial and biometric records to exploitation by foreign entities without any local legal recourse. Foreign tech giants, which have little accountability to our local communities, expropriate and process that data, and this can lead to vendor lock-in, where nations become dependent on foreign AI systems that may not align with local priorities or values. This reinforces economic dependency and erodes cultural identity. For Belize, economic dependency is reinforced by tethering the nation's digital infrastructure to costly foreign platforms, and cultural identity is eroded, as dominant AI models trained in the Global North often fail to recognise Belizean Kriol or Garifuna, effectively enforcing a digital assimilation that marginalises local heritage (ICT Pulse, 2025).

The antidote is to pursue digital sovereignty when faced with the threat of digital colonialism. The capacity of a state or region to control its digital destiny cannot be achieved by individual nations acting alone but instead requires a coordinated, regional approach focused on building local capacity through investment in STEM education and regional research hubs (ICT Pulse, 2025). Regional bodies such as the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and the Caribbean Telecommunications Union (CTU) can play an important part in this process by creating a harmonised regional AI regulatory framework and merging resources so they can bargain collectively with the Big Tech platforms, as suggested in the UNESCO Caribbean AI Policy Roadmap (UNESCO, 2024). For Belize, this regional alignment is existential: with a small population and

limited market leverage, Belize cannot effectively regulate global tech giants alone. Only by anchoring its digital strategy within this broader Caribbean bloc can Belize secure the bargaining power needed to demand AI systems that respect its specific legal standards and cultural diversity.

## **Development of the Conceptual Framework**

To move beyond a simple inventory of risks, a deeper theoretical framework is required. This paper rejects the simplistic notion of technology as a neutral tool and instead adopts a critical perspective, drawing from the sociology of technology and international human rights law to argue that technology is a site of political contestation where rights are either upheld or violated (Amrollahi & Abedin, 2024; Feenberg, 2017; Pinch & Bijker, 1984).

### ***Beyond Neutral Tools: A Critical Theory of Technology***

A common assumption when discussing AI is technological determinism or the notion that technology is the driving force behind social change and that societies must adapt to its dictates (Smith & Marx, 1994). This report does not subscribe to that view and employs the framework of the Social Construction of Technology (SCOT), where the dynamics of technology are influenced by the social forces on which they rely, and not the other way round (Amrollahi & Abedin, 2024; Pinch & Bijker, 1984; Klein & Kleinman, 2002; Van Baalen et al., 2016). The development of any technology is a social process involving negotiation among "relevant social groups" and is characterised by *interpretive flexibility*, where artefacts are culturally constructed and interpreted in different ways (Pinch & Bijker, 1984).

When the government of Belize decided to focus its AI strategy on the Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) sector, it wasn't a foregone conclusion. It was a deliberate social, political and economic decision that reflects the priorities of dominant actors - government and their international financial partners - such as the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and the World Bank - who see digital services as the engine that will drive the country's growth. Drawing from a Critical Theory of Technology, which has its roots in the Frankfurt School and has been championed by thinkers like Andrew Feenberg, we gain a framework that reveals these technological decisions as inherently political rather than merely technical (Feenberg, 1991, 2002). According to this perspective, technology isn't a neutral thing, but a powerful medium of control that embodies specific cultural and ideological values that shape our way of life (Delanty & Harris, 2021; Feenberg, 1991). Feenberg argues that the design of technology contains *technical codes*—the values and biases of the dominant culture that are inscribed into the technology itself (De Jong & Prey, 2022; Feenberg, 1991). For example, a system designed for maximum efficiency may have a technical code that devalues worker autonomy or environmental protection. This is a form of *substantive bias*, where the very architecture of the system reflects and reinforces a particular ideology.

Evaluating the drive towards AI in Belize through this critical lens, it is clear that the country is codifying a specific hierarchy of values - prioritising economic efficiency, global competitiveness and market-driven innovation - into its digital infrastructure. The introduction of a national digital ID, for instance, is not just a modernisation of systems, but a potential expansion of state power and surveillance, a scenario that's already being seen in other Caribbean nations (Access Now, 2022; Magnone et al., 2024). This critical lens reveals that AI is a very much a political process, and any new systems that arise could be optimised for the goals of a dominant coalition at the expense of other vital societal values, such as protecting the low-skilled workforce, ensuring equitable access for rural communities, and prioritising data sovereignty.

### ***International Human Rights Law as a Normative Anchor***

We often hear the terms "AI ethics," "responsible AI," and "trustworthy AI." While well-intentioned, these concepts often lack the precision, universality, and enforceability to be really effective in protecting people when discussing the governance of AI. In response to these limitations, this paper contends that international human rights law must be placed at the heart of AI governance, acting as its essential normative anchor.

Many corporate and governmental AI governance initiatives that are branded under ethics fail to mention human rights or treat them as just one value among many (Jobin et al., 2019). This is insufficient since ethics are often subjective, culturally relative, and voluntary, whereas human rights are grounded in

international law, considered universal, inalienable, and have very clear, legally binding instructions for states to respect, protect and bring to life the rights of their citizens. The concept of a state's duty to protect against abuses by third parties, such as private tech companies, is a principle that is firmly established in international law (United Nations, 2011), and that is not found within the loose concept of ethics. The human rights framework also comes with an existing ecosystem of institutions—courts, treaty bodies, and civil society organisations—for monitoring compliance and seeking remedy (OHCHR, n.d.).

There is a significant risk that the language of ethics could function as "ethics washing," which is a rhetorical exercise that creates a facade of moral guidelines that avoid the hard work of creating binding regulations and robust enforcement mechanisms. A widely recognised strategy for combating this is the human rights-based approach (HRBA). This approach is firmly grounded in the legally binding framework of human rights and integrates the principles, standards, and norms of international human rights law into the plans, policies and processes of development. An HRBA emphasises participation, accountability, non-discrimination, transparency, and empowerment, and it can be applied through frameworks like the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs). UNGPs rest on three pillars: the state duty to protect, the corporate responsibility to respect, and access to an effective remedy (United Nations, 2011). Private actors are required to conduct ongoing human rights due diligence, and governments are required to establish effective legislation and oversight, such as requiring mandatory Human Rights Impact Assessments (HRIAs) for high-risk AI systems (Brandusescu, 2021). For artificial intelligence, the right to an effective remedy is no less than paramount, as the damages caused by AI are often complex and difficult to trace. Consider a qualified person rejected for a bank loan or a job by a "black box" algorithm (O'Neil, 2016). If they are told only that the system flagged them as high-risk, they lack the evidence needed to ever challenge that decision in court. This poses a severe challenge to a judicial system like Belize's, which is struggling with delays and a lack of public trust (Senior Courts of Belize, 2025a; U.S. Department of State, 2025; World Justice Project, 2022).

This challenge is not theoretical; it is unfolding in Belize. While the executive branch's National Digital Agenda prioritises economic efficiency and digital modernisation—often reflecting the technical codes of international funders—the Judiciary has recognised the threat to due process. In August 2025, the Senior Courts of Belize issued Practice Direction No. 18, mandating strict human oversight and transparency for the use of AI in legal proceedings (Senior Courts of Belize, 2025b). This issuance marks a rare instance of a developing state attempting to impose binding regulatory standards rather than relying on voluntary corporate ethics. However, without broader legislative action to enforce similar standards on the private sector (such as mandatory HRIAs), these judicial measures remain a limited safeguard - protecting the courtroom, but leaving the wider society exposed to algorithmic harms.

To translate this framework from theory to practice, Table 2 demonstrates how key human rights, already enshrined in Belizean and international law, can be operationalised to address the specific challenges posed by AI systems.

**Table 2. Operationalising Human Rights for AI Governance in Belize**

<b>Right</b>	<b>Legal Source (Belize Constitution &amp; International Treaties)</b>	<b>Application to Artificial Intelligence</b>
<b>Right to Privacy</b>	Constitution of Belize, Pt. II, Sec. 3(c), 9; ICCPR, Art. 17	Protection against the unlawful collection, processing, and sharing of personal data by AI systems. Regulation of surveillance technologies (e.g., facial recognition) and AI-enabled workplace monitoring. Ensuring data protection by design and by default (Constitution of Belize, 2021; United Nations, 1966).
<b>Right to Non-Discrimination and Equality</b>	Constitution of Belize, Pt. II, Sec. 3, 16; CERD, Art. 5; CEDAW	Prohibition of algorithmic bias that leads to discriminatory outcomes in employment, credit, housing, social benefits, or the justice system. Requirement for auditing AI systems for biased impacts on the basis of race, sex, origin, or other protected

		grounds (Constitution of Belize, 2021; United Nations, 1965, 1979).
<b>Right to Freedom of Expression</b>	Constitution of Belize, Pt. II, Sec. 3(b), 12; ICCPR, Art. 19	Ensuring that AI-driven content moderation on digital platforms does not arbitrarily censor legitimate speech or political dissent. Combating AI-generated disinformation and hate speech while upholding principles of necessity and proportionality (Constitution of Belize, 2021; United Nations, 1966).
<b>Right to a Fair Trial and Due Process</b>	Constitution of Belize, Pt. II, Sec. 6; ICCPR, Art. 14	Guaranteeing human oversight, transparency, and the right to challenge decisions when AI is used in judicial or administrative proceedings (e.g., for risk assessments, evidence analysis, or sentencing recommendations) (Constitution of Belize, 2021; United Nations, 1966).
<b>Right to an Effective Remedy</b>	ICCPR, Art. 2(3)	Establishing accessible and effective mechanisms for individuals to seek redress when their rights are violated by an AI system. This includes ensuring that victims can identify who is responsible and obtain appropriate reparation (United Nations, 1966).
<b>Right to Work and Rights at Work</b>	Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Art. 23; ILO Conventions, No. 102, 111, 122, 142, 158	Protecting workers from job displacement due to automation without adequate social safety nets and retraining opportunities. Ensuring decent work conditions, including protection from unfair dismissal or discrimination by algorithmic management systems (United Nations, 1948; International Labour Organization, n.d.).

## **Discussion: Analysis of Key Intersections and Potential Impacts**

Applying the established theoretical framework, this section analyses the domains where AI deployment in Belize is likely to have the most profound and multifaceted impact on human rights.

### ***The Right to Privacy and the Spectre of Surveillance***

Regarding privacy in Belize, the Constitution and the ICCPR (Constitution of Belize, 2021; United Nations, 1966) provide a strong foundation for the protection of personal data. However, the government's digital agenda will dramatically increase the collection of personal information in a country that has no modern data protection framework and is plagued by weak institutional oversight. The Belize strategy's twin pillars are modernising the public sector and transforming the BPO industry, both of which are essentially processes that can be described as "datafication." The plan to introduce e-Services and a national digital ID will centralise an enormous amount of sensitive citizen data, which includes health, financial records, and biometric data, into government-controlled databases (E-Governance and Digitalization Unit, 2022). Simultaneously, private companies will be handling more sensitive data as the BPO sector in Belize transitions to higher-tier services (Government of Belize Press Office, 2025). This is occurring in a regulatory vacuum, as Belize lacks a comprehensive data protection law that aligns with international standards, such as the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), leaving citizens' data vulnerable (Data Sentinel, n.d.).

Belize faces the powerful temptation of mass surveillance when collecting and centralising data. The documented history of abuse and impunity within the country's security forces (U.S. Department of State, 2024) is a cause for concern, and the use of AI-enabled technologies, such as public facial recognition systems, social media monitoring, and predictive policing algorithms, compounds this concern. If left unchecked, this would be enough to decimate privacy and stifle freedom of expression and association (Amnesty International & Access Now, 2020; Zuboff, 2019). This threat is not limited to the State, though,

in the BPO sector, the drive for efficiency could lead to inhumane, AI-enabled monitoring at the workplace. As evidenced by the global rise of 'bossware', documented by the Electronic Frontier Foundation (Cyphers & Gebhart, 2020), and in the strict algorithmic control used by giants like Amazon and Teleperformance (Kantor et al., 2021). These technologies for algorithmic management, like keystroke tracking and sentiment analysis, become weapons of monitoring, analysis, and discipline that track employees' communications, movements away from the office and even their emotional states, creating a climate of constant scrutiny that infringes on worker privacy, dignity, and autonomy (United Nations, 2011).

### ***The Algorithmic Reinforcement of Inequality***

One of the most insidious aspects of AI is its capacity to absorb, replicate, and amplify existing societal biases and entrench discrimination under the appearance of technical objectivity (Eubanks, 2018; Noble, 2018). Often referred to as the *bias in, bias out* problem, this is based on the idea that if the data used to train an AI system reflects historical patterns of inequality, the algorithm will, in turn, inevitably produce biased and discriminatory outcomes (O'Neil, 2016).

In Belize, this risk manifests across several key fault lines, often in an intersectional manner:

- **Gender Discrimination:** In the BPO sector, which is a major employer of women, if AI systems used in the process of hiring, promotion, and performance evaluation are fed with historical data, they may very likely perpetuate the gender pay gap and the "glass ceiling" that limits women's access to management roles (U.S. Department of State, 2024). AI-driven credit scoring could also penalise women for historical economic disadvantages, limiting their access to capital.
- **Ethnic and Migrant Discrimination:** As for indigenous peoples and Spanish-speaking immigrants, it's a well-known issue that they're the target of systemic discrimination (U.S. Department of State, 2024). A predictive policing system fed with biased arrest data could result in over-policing and disproportionate surveillance directed at these communities. A bank's algorithm for deciding who gets a loan could very well learn to associate specific neighbourhoods and last names with higher levels of credit risk, effectively cutting off these communities from any access to financial services.
- **Linguistic and Cultural Bias:** When training large language models and other AI systems, most of the time, the developers rely on data from the Global North, and the models are fine-tuned for standard English (ICT Pulse, 2025). This means that those systems are less effective for speakers of Belizean Kriol, Garifuna and Mayan languages, and by extension, these languages are being pushed to the periphery, leading to cultural erasure in the digital sphere and practical exclusion from digital services. This perpetuates the marginalisation of local cultures and identities, and can be seen as a form of digital colonialism (Couldry & Mejias, 2019).
- **Intersectionality:** These biases do not operate in isolation. For example, an indigenous woman from a rural area could face compounded discrimination simultaneously from an AI system that is biased on the basis of gender, ethnicity, language, and geographic location. Belize's digital transformation risks becoming a powerful new engine for reinforcing old injustices. To avoid this, there should be a clear-cut system of auditing and fact-checking for bias in the digital space, a guarantee that the data being fed into the systems is representative and, above all, transparent.

### ***Freedom of Expression in the Digital Public Sphere***

When it comes to the public sphere in Belize, the growing trend is towards a digital one, and artificial intelligence presents two serious problems for freedom of expression. These are flawed automated content moderation and AI-generated disinformation.

Major social media platforms are using AI for content moderation, but these systems don't always have the cultural nuance to operate effectively in the Global South (Gillespie, 2018). As a result, these platforms face two distinct failures. The first is *over-removal*, where legitimate and lawful speech is censored, such as a politician's commentary in the local Kriol language. The second is *under-removal*, where genuinely harmful content like hate speech and incitement to violence goes unchecked. This dynamic effectively outsources crucial decisions about the boundaries of acceptable speech in Belize to foreign corporations with little or no local accountability, thereby creating a "chilling effect" on public discourse (Kaye, 2019).

Taking into account the rapid growth of AI, its ability to generate highly realistic disinformation and "deepfakes" is a major concern. Generative AI's potential to manipulate public discourse and cause social divisions is now very real, and if applied in the Belizean political arena, could have a severe effect on democratic integrity (Chesney & Citron, 2019). In an environment where public trust in institutions is low, well-placed and precisely-targeted AI-driven disinformation campaigns could find and exploit existing divisions and destroy faith in elections (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019; World Justice Project, 2023). In addition, traditional fact-checking methods are overwhelmed by the pace at which AI can release false narratives to huge audiences, which causes reality to become distorted.

### ***The Future of Labour and Economic Rights***

When the government's AI strategy is viewed through a socio-economic lens, it is clear that its economic promise of economic uplift for the people of Belize is fundamentally and potentially catastrophic, at odds with the nation's human capital realities.

Well-known globally, the BPO sector is highly susceptible to being automated by AI (ICT Pulse, 2025), and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) forecasts that job losses in the region could be as high as 36 to 43 per cent by 2030 (Estevadeordal, 2018; UNDP, 2024). The government's optimistic plan that workers will just move up the value chain does not hold up in the face of a jarring reality: a massive proportion of Belizean workers only have a primary school education (UNDP, 2024), and this is not a small skill deficit. This fundamental lack of human capital makes the transition to high-skilled digital work a formidable challenge for the majority of workers.

Looking at the future of the BPO sector in Belize, the most likely outcome is the emergence of a two-tiered labour market. Those at the top, a small well-educated elite that possibly includes foreign workers, will fill the high-skilled jobs in the fields of data science and AI management, but the lower-skilled, large segment of the workforce faces the very real threat of technological unemployment. This consequence undermines the right to work, and in a country where economic rights are still in their early stages of development, it specifically exacerbates poverty and social inequality. The digital divide in Belize is fundamentally a divide in skills and opportunities, and current educational initiatives - such as short-term digital literacy training and coding camps - while commendable, are likely insufficient to address a challenge of this magnitude (Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Technology, n.d.-b ; UNDP, 2024). Furthermore, the rise of the Orange Economy risks increasing precarious "gig work" managed by AI platforms. Lacking the support of social networks and the collective bargaining rights associated with traditional employment, this shift threatens to erode economic security and leave workers vulnerable.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

When it comes to its ambitious digital agenda, Belize is at a crossroads. There is the potential for economic progress, but it is being pursued within a context of profound human rights vulnerabilities and institutional weaknesses. The agenda is facing a very real risk that its application of AI will amplify inequality, erode people's privacy, subvert democratic processes, and dispossess a large segment of its workforce. The analysis presented in this paper reveals that Belize's digital plans lack a cohesive vision to address these pressing issues. In order for Belize to secure a promising future, we need to go beyond ethereal promises of "ethical AI." The building blocks of this strategy are in the shape of robust and accountable institutions, well-defined and legally enforceable laws and regulations, and an endogenous sense of digital self-determination. The hypothesis is that the framework of a rights-based method would not be an impediment; actually, it is the only way we can be sure that technological progress will be for the betterment of all Belizeans and lead to sustainable and just growth.

#### ***Forging a Rights-Respecting AI Governance Framework***

An effective AI governance framework for Belize must be tailored to its specific context and built on four essential pillars:

1. **Rights-Based:** The framework's foundation must be international human rights law, not vague or voluntary ethical principles. This gives us a clear, universally applicable, and legally binding standard for assessing and regulating the impact of technology on society (United Nations, 2011).

2. **Multi-stakeholder and Participatory:** Regarding AI development and oversight, government and corporate entities can't have a monopoly. Regular and meaningful contributions from civil society, academia, trade unions and, most importantly, the people who'll be most affected by AI systems are a must for generating public trust and identifying potential problems before they become major issues (Access Now, 2022).
3. **Adaptive and Precautionary:** As for adopting new technologies in Belize, the country should be a cautious "fast follower." Taking the time to observe what is working well elsewhere and adapting it to its own unique needs (World Bank, 2020). A precautionary approach means that where there are credible risks of severe or irreversible harm to human rights (e.g., in law enforcement or justice), the burden of proof should be on the proponents of technology to demonstrate its safety and necessity.
4. **Transparent and Accountable:** When it comes to accountability, the framework must have a clear mandate for transparency in the way AI systems are designed, trained and implemented. This includes requiring that all high-risk AI procurements must undergo Human Rights Impact Assessments (HRIAs) and that an independent oversight body is established. This body must possess the legal authority and technical capacity to audit systems, look into complaints, and give people access to fair redress (Brandusescu, 2021).

### **Concrete Policy Recommendations**

For the Government of Belize:

1. **Mandate Human Rights Due Diligence:** Enact legislation that requires independent and public HRIAs before procurement or deployment of any AI system in high-risk public sector contexts, such as law enforcement, justice, social benefits, and border management.
2. **Establish an Independent Oversight Body:** Create a Digital and Human Rights Commission that is sufficiently resourced with legal and technical expertise, and grant it the statutory power to investigate complaints, conduct forensic audits of algorithms, issue binding recommendations, and levy fines.
3. **Enact and Enforce a Modern Data Protection Act:** Urgently pass a comprehensive data protection law aligned with the highest international standards and establish an independent Data Protection Commissioner with robust enforcement powers to ensure compliance by both public and private entities.
4. **Launch a National Human Capital Investment Strategy:** Address the critical human capital deficit through a massive, long-term investment in strengthening foundational education (literacy and numeracy), expanding vocational training for mid-level digital skills, and increasing access to higher education in STEM fields to build a domestic talent pipeline.
5. **Champion Regional Cooperation:** Actively work through CARICOM and the CTU to develop a harmonised Caribbean AI governance framework, a regional data strategy, and collective mechanisms for engaging with global technology companies to strengthen the region's digital sovereignty.

For the Private Sector (including BPO operators and tech investors):

1. **Adopt and Implement the UNGPs:** Proactively adopt the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights as the core framework for all AI-related activities. This includes conducting ongoing human rights due diligence and establishing accessible grievance mechanisms.
2. **Invest in the Local Workforce:** Partner with Belizean educational institutions to co-design curricula and fund retraining and upskilling programs for workers at risk of displacement from automation. This is both a social responsibility and a long-term business imperative.

For International Partners (including the IDB, UN, and bilateral donors):

1. **Condition Funding on Human Rights Safeguards:** Make funding for digital transformation projects conditional on the recipient government conducting robust, independent HRIAs and establishing credible, independent oversight and accountability mechanisms. Support should not enable ethics washing.

2. **Support Regional and Indigenous Capacity Building:** Prioritise funding for regional initiatives that build collective digital sovereignty, such as shared data infrastructure, regional research hubs, and programs that support the development of AI solutions by and for the Caribbean region.

By embracing a governance model firmly anchored in human rights and pursuing these concrete actions, Belize and its partners can better navigate the profound challenges of the AI era. The goal must be to ensure that the pursuit of a digital future does not come at the cost of human dignity but rather serves as a means to enhance human dignity for all Belizeans.

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# States of Exception: *Policing, COVID-19, the 13th Amendment, and the Suspension of Human Rights in Belize*

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## Abstract

*This paper examines the rise and institutionalization of emergency governance in Belize through the lens of the COVID-19 pandemic, subsequent states of emergency in response to crime, the proposed Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, and the 2025 High Court decision in *Staine v. Attorney General*. The paper situates Belize within the broader international context, touching on questions of sovereignty, surveillance, and rights. By drawing on Agamben's theory of the state of exception, Foucault's concepts of governmentality and biopolitics, and Mbembe's examination of necropolitics, the paper analyzes how power operates through legal, political, and embodied forms of control. Furthermore, it advances the claim that emergency powers are evolving into customary law, and spatialized policing tactics are now disproportionately affecting marginalized groups. The analysis foregrounds ethnographic evidence of how rights are lived and lost, showing the disjuncture between state narratives of crisis and the ordinariness of daily life. Furthermore, by placing these developments alongside Belize's international human rights law obligations, it is evident that the Thirteenth Amendment risks constitutionalizing exceptionalism and creating geographical zones of suspended human rights.*

**Keywords:** State of exception, biopolitics, governmentality, necropolitics, emergency powers, human rights, constitutional law, spatialized policing, postcolonial governance

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## **Introduction**

The COVID-19 virus was a 21st-century public health crisis of unparalleled proportions and an almost surreal global moment. On March 11, 2020, WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic and triggered a global institution of states of emergency at an unprecedented scale (Adhanom, 2020; Greene, 2020). This response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which numerous critical theorists have noted, served as a momentous political turning point that redefined the relationship between individual rights and state power (Agamben, 2020; Coradetti & Pollicino, 2021; Smith, 2023). It was one in which extraordinary powers were granted, or seized, by governments across the globe in the name of human security and public safety. Under the guise of prevention, containment, and necessity, governments worldwide implemented emergency measures, including curfews, lockdowns, vaccine passports, and increased policing, thereby enacting what critical theorist Giorgio Agamben identified as the state of exception (Agamben 1998, 2005). These state actors justified these actions as extraordinary, short-term solutions to an unprecedented medical crisis.

Belize was not immune to the medicalization of politics and the politicization of medicine; hence, exceptional political measures were adopted to “fight” the pandemic. As such, through public statutory instruments, the government implemented curfews, stay-at-home orders, and substantial police powers during the pandemic (SI. 46, 52, 56, 2020). These measures were largely accepted as essential public health protections, even as they reshaped Belizeans’ expectations of state authority and altered the relationship between citizen and sovereign. Fundamental freedoms of movement, assembly, and association, ordinarily safeguarded by the Constitution, were suspended, and daily life was monitored and disciplined under a legally sanctioned apparatus of control.

However, before the COVID-19 pandemic, Agamben (2005) already argued that the state of exception would become a dominant feature of contemporary politics a claim that the pandemic dramatically substantiated. In other words, once the emergency apparatus is put in place, it rarely disappears; it persists, normalized and ready for redeployment. In Belize, this migration of emergency authority shifted from pandemic management to crime control. The proposed 13th Amendment to the Constitution grants the government new powers to impose localized states of emergency in areas deem crime-ridden by the state (13th Amendment Bill, 2025). Residents become subject to curfews, warrantless searches, heightened police presence, and the suspension of due process rights in these emergency zones. In essence, the Amendment would formalize into the Constitution what has previously been defined as extraordinary, short-term measures and make them law. What was unique during the COVID-19 pandemic now risks becoming a recurring aspect of Belizean governance and daily life.

This transformation raises profound human rights questions. Under international law, mechanisms such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which Belize has ratified or in other words formally agreed to, it is very clear which rights are derogable or can be suspended and which rights are non-derogable and can never be suspended. The ICCPR is further supplemented by frameworks like the Siracusa Principles that make it clear that derogations from certain rights are allowed only during genuine public emergencies that “threaten the life of the nation,” and only to the extent strictly required by the situation. However, in Belize, crime is increasingly framed as a permanent emergency, creating the conditions for indefinite suspension of rights, particularly in specific marginalized communities. Moreover, regional evidence suggests that states of emergency have limited and often temporary effects on crime reduction. The turn toward SOEs as a default policing tool is thus unsupported by strong evidence, even as the human rights costs intensify.

This paper highlights this issue at a critical juncture. While emergency powers have been legally analyzed in many other national contexts, in Belize there is substantial commentary (Vernon, 2025; Vasquez 2026) but an overall lack of academic scholarship examining how such powers evolve within small postcolonial states. Where a legacy of colonial policing architectures, racialized governance, and limited institutional oversight influence how exceptional authority is exercised. Across the Caribbean, states such as Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, and the Bahamas have periodically relied on states of emergency, most often framed around crime control, yet these measures are typically treated as temporary responses rather than

constitutionally entrenched governing tools (Pellegrini 2025). Belize offers a pivotal case through which to explore these dynamics. Unlike much of the region, Belize is moving toward encoding emergency powers into the constitution as a routine mechanism of governance. Accordingly, the central research question guiding this study is how have emergency powers in Belize, initially justified by COVID-19, become normalized as an instrument of governance, and what are the implications for human rights in a small postcolonial democracy?

To address this question, this study draws on Giorgio Agamben's theory of the state of exception (Agamben, 1998, 2005), Michel Foucault's analytics of governmentality and biopolitics (Foucault, 1991; 2003), and Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics (Mbembe, 2003, 2011). Agamben illuminated the legal architecture through which rights are suspended in the name of preservation. Foucault clarified how population management operates alongside disciplinary technologies, such as surveillance, normalization, spatial enclosure, and the regulation of bodies, to produce compliant subjects through everyday practices of control. Mbembe, attended to the racialized and classed dimensions of state power, exposes how specific populations become disproportionately governed through violence, abandonment, and disposability.

The legality of a single constitutional amendment is not the only issue at hand. Belize is an example that demonstrates how emergency governance becomes institutionalized, normalized, and spatialized once it is implemented, a pattern observable across diverse global contexts. From counterterrorism regimes in France (Chalkiadaki, 2015) and the United States (Robinson, 2007), to pandemic governance and crime-control measures in parts of Latin America (Llanos & Marsteintedet, 2023), states increasingly invoke crises to legitimate the restriction of rights and the expansion of police authority, particularly in marginalized and underprivileged areas. Belize thus exposes how emergencies, whether framed as public health threats or surges in criminal activity, become enduring apparatuses of rule. Furthermore, it forces us to confront the difficult question of what happens to human rights when the exception becomes the rule.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This research employs critical theory (Race, 2022) to investigate how Belize's emergency powers transition from short-term solutions to crises, ultimately becoming accepted governance practices that compromise human rights. The framework is required because traditional legal or policy analyses cannot adequately consider the 13th Amendment's broader implications for changes in sovereignty, legality, and life. The Amendment's reasoning aligns with deeper theoretical currents regarding how contemporary states govern through suspension, surveillance, and disposability, even though it positions itself as a practical security tool. Furthermore, it enables a more comprehensive examination of the 13th Amendment, not just as a legal change, but also as a reorganization of Belizean sovereignty and citizenship, where security imperatives are employed to address persistent rights violations through a triangulated lens.

### ***The State of Exception***

According to Agamben (1998, 2005), the state of exception is a political paradigm where the law suspends itself to protect itself. In this context, people's rights are restricted not to preserve the entirety of social life but rather to reduce them to what he refers to as "bare life," or life devoid of legal and political safeguards. Despite being advertised as short-term, extraordinary measures often continue, establishing a permanent state of emergency. Recent scholarship continues to engage Agamben's theory of the state of exception to analyze contemporary crises. For example, Flohr's (2025) work explores how pandemic governance reconfigures sovereign emergency powers considering Agamben's framework to create comparative studies that examine how exceptionalism operates across different national contexts.

This reasoning is best illustrated by Belize's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The government enforced stringent curfews, limited travel, and granted police the authority to detain individuals who violated these measures under Statutory Instrument No. 46, effective April 1, 2020 (Belize Government Press Office, 2020). The Statutory Instruments used during the COVID-19 pandemic suspended fundamental rights guaranteed in Belize's Constitution, including the freedoms of movement, assembly, and association. As a result, individuals were arrested for violations of emergency regulations. Primarily breaches of curfew,

unauthorized movement, and noncompliance with police directives leading, according to national media, to 105 arrests in April 2020 alone (PlusTV, 2020).

Now the State of Exception is seeking to be extended beyond the pandemic by the proposed 13th Amendment. The amendment enshrines in the Constitution the same suspension of rights that was previously framed as temporary by giving the state the authority to impose localized states of emergency in so-called “special areas” (The Belize Constitution 13th Amendment Bill, 2025). Curfews, prolonged detention, and warrantless searches are actions that can be legally imposed on residents in these areas. This is the institutionalization of the exception, where emergency becomes the method of the law rather than the deviation from it.

### ***Biopolitics, Governmentality, and Spatial Surveillance***

While Agamben explains the legal framework of emergency powers and exceptionalism, Michel Foucault provides the language to examine how these measures operate across different populations and geographical locations. For Foucault, biopolitics refers to a form of power that takes the biological life of populations as its object, seeking to regulate, optimize, and manage life processes such as health, reproduction, morbidity, and longevity (Foucault, 2003). In the name of health protection, a classic Foucauldian biopolitical moment occurred as states regulated daily life during the COVID-19 pandemic by restricting mobility, monitoring bodies, and regulating social interaction.

Governmentality, or the “conduct of conduct,” a concept also developed by Michel Foucault, refers to how biopolitics is implemented through techniques that shape and regulate citizens’ behavior by accustoming them to new norms and standards (Foucault, 1991). During Belize’s lockdowns, patrols and checkpoints became commonplace as police monitored neighborhoods, enforced curfews, and arrested individuals for being outside after hours. Through these everyday practices, the public became accustomed to extraordinary forms of governance, normalizing heightened surveillance, and disciplinary control.

In Belize, the plague conditions resulted in the “dream of the perfectly governed city,” a space in which public health crises justified meticulous control over bodies, behaviors, and urban life (Foucault, 2003). The pandemic exposed a new order apparatus in Belize. The long-term extension of this apparatus, which blurs the distinction between emergency management and routine policing, is now one of the desired outcomes of the 13th Amendment.

### ***Necropolitics***

Mbembe (2003, 2011) conceptualizes necropolitics as a form of power through which sovereignty is exercised primarily through the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die, governing populations through exposure to death, violence, and abandonment. In contrast to Foucault’s biopolitics, which focuses on the management and optimization of life, necropolitics foregrounds the production of death worlds, particularly in colonial and postcolonial contexts. Under such conditions, sovereignty frequently entails determining whose lives are deemed disposable and whose are protected. Marginalized groups are therefore disproportionately affected by emergency powers, especially when these powers are spatialized, leaving them vulnerable to violence and instability.

Residents of Southside Belize City, where young Black men are frequently portrayed as “suspect bodies,” are disproportionately impacted by the proposed emergency zones in Belize. More than 100 men were arrested without being charged during the 2018 Southside State of Public Emergency, with some of them being held in the Belize Central Prison in appalling conditions for extended periods of time (Amandala, 2018). By removing residents’ legal protections, these actions normalized arbitrary detention and stepped up police enforcement.

Mbembe’s necropolitics helps us see that the 13th Amendment does more than suspend rights; it also undermines them. To secure others, it essentially renders some populations disposable by selectively removing their protection. This is demonstrated in the overwhelming cases of police brutality in Belize and

socially in the deterioration of living conditions brought on by ongoing monitoring, harassment, and a lack of legal options (U.S. State Department, 2021).

In summary, this study deliberately applies the state of exception as a conceptual bridge linking biopolitics to necropolitics. Contemporary scholarship emphasizes that emergency powers increasingly migrate from temporary crisis responses into permanent legal and administrative frameworks, where biopolitical techniques of regulation intersect with racialized and spatialized forms of control (Collier, 2009; Puar, 2017). In Belize, COVID-19 represented a critical rupture: a public health emergency that normalized extraordinary governance in a state already reliant on states of exception to manage crime and insecurity. Pandemic governance did not introduce exceptional rule but rather expanded, normalized, and legitimized it, allowing emergency logics to be reframed as necessary, routine, and ultimately constitutional. For example, no one questions permanent check points in Belize City because it has become normalized and routine. This normalization of exception, however, does not operate evenly across the population. Thus, Belizeans biopolitical regulation hardens into permanent security governance, and gives way to necropolitical outcomes in which certain communities are rendered disproportionately vulnerable to detention, violence, and abandonment. Read together, Agamben elucidates how the suspension of law becomes normalized within constitutional order; Foucault reveals how that suspension is operationalized through techniques that discipline and regulate life; and Mbembe exposes how these processes ultimately determine whose lives are protected and whose are made disposable. Examined through this triangulated lens, Belize’s 13th Amendment emerges not as a neutral security reform but as the culmination of a longer trajectory in which crisis governance restructures sovereignty, redefines citizenship, and transforms emergency powers into enduring instruments of rule.

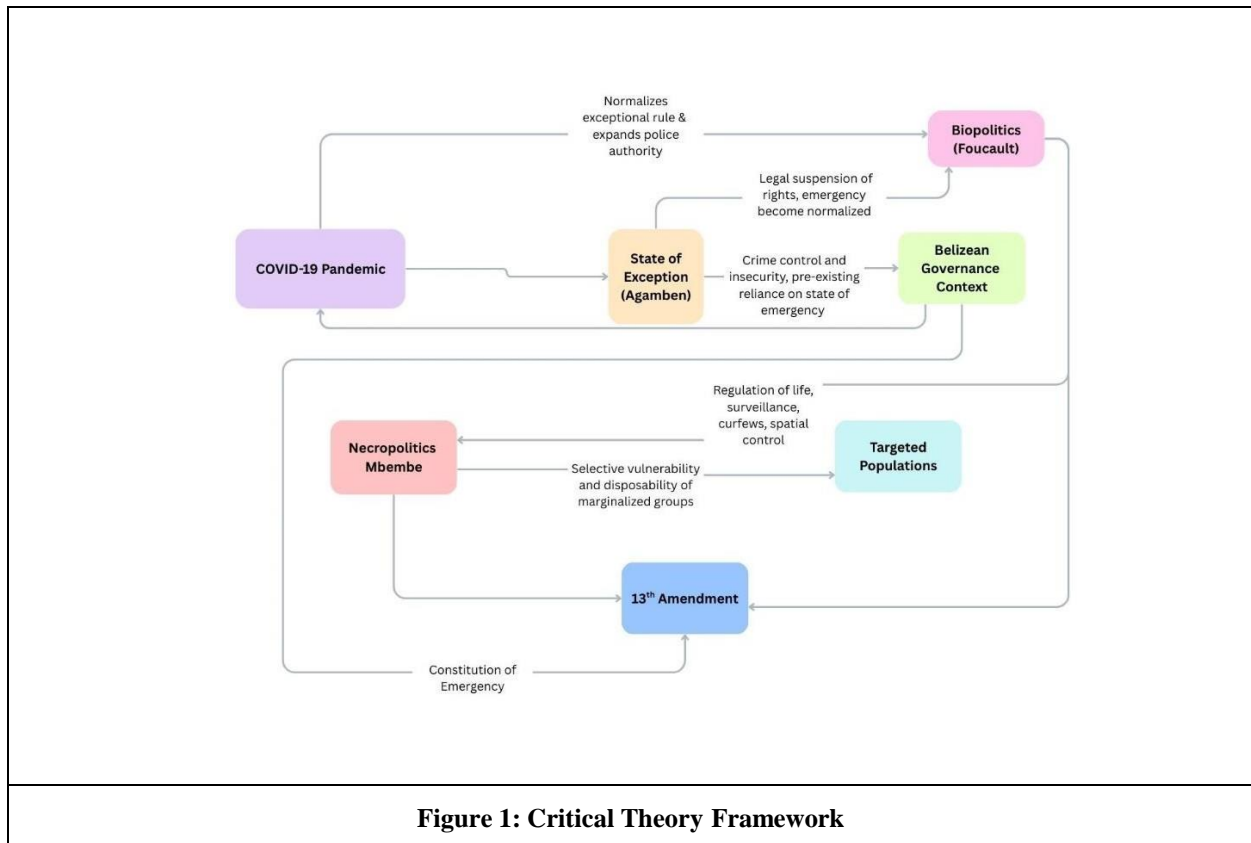


Figure 1 represents the critical theory framework illustrating how Belize's emergency governance operates. The state of exception (Agamben) provides the legal mechanism for suspending rights; biopolitics (Foucault) explains how these powers regulate and discipline everyday life; and necropolitics (Mbembe) highlights the uneven, racialized exposure of populations to harm. COVID-19 is depicted as a critical moment that amplifies exceptional governance, setting the stage for constitutionalization of emergency powers through the 13th Amendment.

## **Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative socio-legal documentary case study design, using critical discourse analysis to examine how emergency powers in Belize have been framed, enacted, and contested between 2018 and 2025. A socio-legal approach is appropriate because the research question concerns not only the formal legality of emergency powers but also how law operates as a social and political practice that reshapes citizenship, space, and authority (Banakar & Travers, 2013; Sarat & Kearns, 1995). A document analysis method allows for an in-depth examination of a bounded national context where legal texts, institutional practices, and lived consequences converge (Salminen, 2003).

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) was selected because the study investigates how “crisis,” “security,” and “necessity” are constructed through official language to legitimize the suspension of rights. This method enables attention to how state actors produce authoritative narratives of emergency and how these narratives structure legal and political action (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). It is therefore well-suited to analyzing emergency governance, where the power to name a situation as a crisis is itself a central political act. While CDA has been critiqued for its potential subjectivity and textual interpretation over material outcomes (Hammersley, 1997; Breeze, 2011), this research employs CDA strategically to uncover how language and legal narratives surrounding Belize's 13th Amendment both reflect and reproduce broader power structures. Therefore, making it a necessary tool for linking legal changes to socio-political and human rights impacts.

Data was drawn from four sources:

1. Statutory instruments and constitutional amendments (SI Nos. 46, 52, 56, 170 of 2020; Belize Constitution Thirteenth Amendment Bill, 2025);
2. Judicial decisions, including *Staine v. Attorney General* (2025);
3. Recordings of readings from the House of Representatives and press releases, accessed through the Belize National Assembly digital archive, and the Government Press Office database;
4. Media and human rights reports, retrieved from national and regional media houses, government sources, and regional/international repositories (OAS, Amnesty International).

Documents were included if they directly addressed emergency powers, rights restrictions, or pandemic- and crime-related governance in Belize. These materials were collated through a systematic review of official government documents, legislative records, public addresses, and parliamentary proceedings, including recordings of readings in the House of Representatives. The documents were read iteratively, with multiple rounds of close reading undertaken to allow patterns and points of emphasis to emerge over time.

During these readings, analytic notes were recorded to identify recurring themes in state justifications for emergency powers, the framing of rights restrictions, spatial targeting, and security discourse. Analysis proceeded through a combination of inductive and deductive coding: inductive coding was used to capture themes emerging directly from the texts, while deductive coding was guided by existing theoretical frameworks on emergency governance (Saldana, 2013). Coding was conducted manually and documented in a structured set of reading notes.

### ***COVID-19 Emergency Powers to States of Emergency***

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 marked the beginning of a significant expansion of governmental power in Belize. Several legislative measures, including SI No. 46 of 2020 and SI No. 170 of 2020, enforced curfews, limited public gatherings, mandated the use of masks, and shut down businesses,

schools, and universities. Ordinary freedoms of movement, association, and assembly were suspended, and quarantine regulations strictly restricted entry into Belize. The Government of Belize promoted these actions as essential public health measures.

Enforcement of these measures relied heavily on the police. Who played a key role in enforcing these laws, as they had the authority to stop, interrogate, punish, and detain people for breaking curfews and other emergency laws. Constitutionally guaranteed rights were made conditional on adherence to executive orders. This signaled a significant rebalancing of the citizen-state relationship. During the pandemic, bodies were regulated, spaces controlled, and populations disciplined. Curfew hours, police patrol visibility, and the control of daily life under threat of punishment were all things that Belizeans grew accustomed to.

Between 2024 and 2025, Belize proclaimed multiple states of emergency (SOEs) in response to the rise in gang-related violence. Broad police powers were granted by these emergency measures, which included curfews, warrantless searches, prolonged detention without charge, and the arrest of suspects. The arrests were carried out under the expanded powers granted by the declared states of emergency, which allowed law enforcement to detain individuals on suspicion of involvement in gang-related activity rather than on the basis of specific criminal charges. These measures temporarily suspended ordinary procedural safeguards, permitting warrantless searches, mass arrests, and prolonged detention without charge. Similar practices were documented during earlier states of emergency. A 2020 Country Report on Human Rights Practices (U.S. Department of State) noted that, although Belizean law and the constitution prohibit arbitrary arrest and guarantee the right to challenge detention, the government repeatedly failed to observe these requirements during SOEs. In that period, law enforcement targeted alleged gang elements through house raids and preventive detention, resulting in over 100 individuals being imprisoned without trial (U.S. Department of State, 2020). Media reports and legal challenges further alleged that these arrests were often indiscriminate, lacked individualized evidence, and were conducted without the establishment of legally required review tribunals, raising concerns about arbitrariness and due process violations. Belize City, Ladyville, Roaring Creek, Eight Mile Community, and Camalote Village were the neighborhoods most impacted by these actions (Greater Belize Media, 2024).

This shift highlights the conflict between state security measures and the protection of individual rights. To combat crime, the authority granted during the pandemic was reactivated, illustrating how emergency governance can adapt to meet social and political demands. This process, as Foucault's theory of *governmentality* (1991) suggests, is not merely about enforcing the law but about reorganizing the social and political fabric of areas marked by poverty and marginalization. Curfews, raids, and increased surveillance are examples of measures that not only control behavior but also restructure daily life for residents of impacted neighborhoods. This machinery was refined during the pandemic and deployed seamlessly in the years that followed. These SOEs are a type of state-sanctioned necropolitical disposability. Where restrictive policies disproportionately affect members of particular communities who are already economically and socially marginalized. A larger reality is brought to light by the disparate effects of surveillance and incarceration, where the state decides whose lives are considered disposable and who is safeguarded. This is a purposeful reorganization of society in which young Creole men are constantly subjected to state control and repression, moving beyond the simple restriction of individual freedom.

The legal and political implications are profound. When states of emergency are invoked, the fundamental rights enshrined in both national and international law are jeopardized. This raises critical questions about the balance between security and human rights. While the government's duty to protect public order is undeniable, this must not come at the expense of constitutional guarantees. The SOEs in Belize represent a broader pattern of policing and surveillance that disproportionately affects the poor, reinforcing existing inequalities and perpetuating cycles of disposability. As international human rights law continues to evolve, Belize must prioritize the protection of fundamental rights, ensuring that responses to crime do not undermine the very liberties they seek to defend.

### ***The 13th Amendment: Constitutionalizing the Exception***

The Belize Constitution Thirteenth Amendment Bill, 2025, marks a decisive constitutional turning point. For the first time since independence, the Constitution would confirm the legality of previous states of

emergency and expressly permit the suspension of fundamental rights in designated “special areas.” The proposed Bill raises serious concerns for constitutionalism and human rights. The Government of Belize presents the Bill as a necessary response to the rising crime and gang-related violence (Greater Belize Media, 2025). However, the Amendment runs the risk of making emergency governance a permanent aspect of Belize’s constitutional order by enshrining extraordinary powers within the regular legal framework. This section closely examines the Amendment to show how it might jeopardize judicial oversight, the principle of proportionality, and rights protections.

The Amendment’s Section 18A establishes that the Governor General, on the advice of the National Security Council, can declare any part of Belize a “special area” for up to one month, with extensions possible for up to twelve months at a time, provided a two-thirds majority in the House of Representatives is achieved (Belize Constitution 13th Amendment Bill, 2025). An emergency governance regime is imposed on the area once it has been declared an emergency zone. Security personnel are permitted to:

- Perform searches of people, property, and automobiles without a warrant;
- Confiscate and hold property;
- Arrest people based on “reasonable suspicion”;
- Enforce cordons and curfews that limit access and departure.

These provisions directly implicate a range of fundamental rights protected under Belize’s Constitution and binding international human rights treaties. The power to arrest on “reasonable suspicion” without charge or warrant engages the right to liberty and security of person and protection from arbitrary detention (Art. 3, 9, UDHR). Warrantless searches of homes, vehicles, and persons infringe the right to privacy and protection from arbitrary interference with family and home (Art. 12 UDHR). The imposition of curfews, cordons, and territorial restrictions limits freedom of movement and residence (Art. 13, UDHR). Property confiscation without prompt judicial oversight threatens the right to peaceful enjoyment of possessions (Art. 17 UDHR). The deeming of security forces conduct as presumptively lawful, combined with constitutional immunity clauses, weakens the right to an effective remedy and access to independent judicial review. Taken together, these measures create heightened risk of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment in detention environments where ordinary safeguards are suspended. Under international human rights law, while certain rights may be temporarily restricted during genuine emergencies, core protections, including freedom from torture, the right to life, and recognition before the law, remain non-derogable. The Amendment’s architecture therefore risks authorizing practices that approach or cross these non-derogable thresholds while simultaneously insulating state actors from accountability.

The allowance of extensions “from time to time” for up to twelve months at each renewal opens the door for perpetual renewal. This temporal elasticity deviates from the strict necessity principle in international human rights law, which states that emergency measures must be both extraordinary and short-term, as outlined in Article 4 of the ICCPR. Furthermore, states are required by Article 2 of the *Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment* (CAT) to take adequate measures to prevent torture and ill-treatment, and any extended suspension of rights may make these conditions worse. The “special area” mechanism establishes a type of localized constitutional suspension from a doctrinal perspective. The Constitution’s protections are limited in specific areas, but they remain in effect throughout Belize. The idea of constitutional supremacy, which holds that rights protections are applied uniformly throughout the nation, is compromised by this dual system. Furthermore, the Amendment purports robust immunity provisions that tip the scales of power. As it currently reads, Section 18A(16) states that unless proven differently, any Security Forces officer “shall be deemed to have acted lawfully.” It then contradicts itself in Section 18A(17) by stating that actions taken in accordance with a proclamation “shall not be held inconsistent with or in contravention of” constitutional rights, such as those that protect liberty, property, privacy, and freedom of movement.

These clauses have two profound implications. First, they undermine the accountability principle by protecting state actors from judicial scrutiny. The presumption of lawfulness essentially flips the burden of proof, even though remedies under public law typically enable people to contest unlawful detention, search, or seizure. This runs the risk of shielding abusive behavior from critical examination in a context where police brutality is a standard feature. Second, the enforceability of the Constitution itself is compromised

by the explicit exclusion of constitutional rights. Although rights protections are still present in the text, they no longer have the same normative weight in specific contexts. This is comparable to a type of constitutional dualism in which rights are established in theory but in reality, are conditional.

Interestingly, regardless of any flaw in their declaration, all previous states of emergency and emergency regulations issued between 2018 and 2025 are valid under Section 18B and Schedule 5 of the Bill. Potential claims for redress resulting from illegal detentions, warrantless searches, or other infractions under previous proclamations are eliminated by this retroactive clause. The retrospective validation of executive action seriously harms the rule of law. Belizean courts have previously ruled that emergency detentions are illegal due to a lack of judicial oversight, as demonstrated in *Staine v. Attorney General* (2025). Separation of powers issues are raised by the 13th Amendment's attempt to invalidate such rulings retroactively. Parliament limits the judiciary's constitutional role as a guardian of rights by shielding the executive from liability after the fact. Since access to justice and the right to an effective remedy are inalienable, international human rights law, such as the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (ICESCR) Article 2(3) and the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR) Article 8, typically forbids the retroactive suspension of remedies.

Additionally, Section 94A establishes a dedicated Gun and Gang Court (13th Amendment Bill). This Court's primary purpose is to speed up the trial of crimes involving firearms and gangs, and it has the authority of both the Magistrates' Courts and the Supreme Court. Although establishing specialized courts under emergency governance raises questions about the nature of justice, they are not inherently unconstitutional. However, by subjecting a particular group of defendants, disproportionately young men from Belize City's Southside to a unique judicial system, the Gun and Gang Court runs the risk of undermining the idea of equality before the law. Prosecutions may proceed more quickly if jurisdiction is concentrated in a specialized tribunal, but procedural protections may be compromised. Such courts could become tools of executive policy rather than impartial arbiters of the law if independence and impartiality are not strongly guaranteed, and these guarantees are not addressed within the Amendment or elsewhere currently.

Furthermore, targeting Creole communities that are primarily low-income runs the risk of being applied discriminatorily, which would be against both the *American Convention on Human Rights* (ACHR) and the ICCPR. Particularly concerning is the idea of stripping courts of their ability to enforce these rights in special areas, which would violate the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination* (CERD) by reinforcing racially discriminatory enforcement of emergency measures. Legally, the 13th Amendment signifies a reorientation of Belize's constitutional architecture rather than merely a modification. The idea that constitutional rights are unalienable is called into question by the strengthening of emergency powers. Instead, rights turn into conditional privileges that are dependent on executive discretion and geographic location.

This shift carries three systemic risks:

1. Normalization of the exception: what was once an emergency measure becomes an ordinary mode of governance.
2. Weakening of judicial oversight: immunity clauses and retroactive validation curtail the judiciary's role as a check on executive power.
3. Erosion of constitutional supremacy: By allowing rights to be suspended through executive proclamation, the Amendment subordinates constitutional guarantees to the dictates of political expediency.

These risks are very real. Once normalized, exceptional powers can be applied across various contexts, as evidenced by the transition from COVID-19 statutory instruments to crime-related SOEs. This migration is codified in the 13th Amendment, guaranteeing that future administrations will inherit a pre-made constitutional toolkit for suspending rights.

### ***The Case of Staine vs. Attorney General***

The 2025 High Court ruling in *Jahreem Staine et al. v. Attorney General of Belize* (Claim 613 of 2023) encapsulated the dynamics of emergency governance in Belize. The logic of exceptionalism, which developed during the COVID-19 pandemic, persisted after the health crisis subsided, as discussed in the preceding sections. Moving into other areas of government, particularly those related to crime control and prevention. The most significant legal challenge to this migration to date is the *Staine* case. Therefore, in addition to being a legal ruling, it also provides an ethnographic window into how states describe crises, how communities are suspended, and how rights are both taken away and vaguely restored.

The background to the case is familiar from earlier discussions where the government is increasingly reliant on the state of emergency to manage gang-related violence in Southside Belize City. In 2023, authorities declared yet another SOE, citing a “sporadic increase” in violent crime and a “subtle resurgence” of gang activity (*Staine v. Attorney General*, 2025). These terms, notably, do not convey imminent collapse or existential danger; they convey unease, instability, and perhaps even irritation. However, on this thin rhetorical basis, the state suspended constitutional rights, empowered police to detain without charge, and cordoned off neighborhoods as sites of insecurity.

As Justice Sonya Young later observed, the government’s language did not demonstrate a threat of such gravity that ordinary law could not address it. “The use of the words ‘sporadic’ increase in violent crimes and ‘subtle’ resurgence by ‘some’ gang members does not suggest to me that the criminal activity was of the gravity that could not be dealt with by the ordinary law” (*Staine v. Attorney General*, 2025). This judicial observation is crucial, as it reveals the constructed nature of the emergency. Agamben’s claim that the exception emerges not from necessity but from sovereign decision finds vivid confirmation in this context (Agamben, 2005).

Sixteen claimants, three of whom were dismissed in the trial, were young men from Southside Belize City who offered testimony and brought forward the abstract question of sovereignty into everyday life. They described their neighborhood at the time of the SOE as “normal.” People moved freely, businesses operated, schools and churches remained open, and courts continued their work. There was no sense, in their lived experience, that life was collapsing under a wave of violence.

This contrast between government discourse and community testimony illustrates the anthropology of the state in action. Das (2007) has written of how state violence becomes woven into the fabric of the ordinary, not only through spectacular acts but through its intrusion into everyday life. Here, the ordinary acts of buying food, walking to school, and attending church continued unabated, even as the state insisted that the same space had become an emergency zone. The SOE thus appeared less as a response to crisis than as an intervention in a functioning social order. For the young men detained, however, ordinariness gave way to rupture. They were detained, accused of being gang members, and arrested without being charged. Overnight, they lost their personal security, freedom of association, and freedom of movement. While the Court proceeding focused on the suspension of human rights and freedoms the experience of being taken into custody without cause presents social and psychological implications. Because rights are lived freedoms, their suspension caused trauma, shame, and fear, this lived experience transforms abstract entitlements into lived realities. Critical anthropologist Dyzenhaus described experiences like this as one where rights under a state of exception are not merely postponed but extinguished for the duration of the suspension (2006). A retroactive award of damages, however welcome, cannot reconstitute the lived time of rightlessness.

Furthermore, the *Staine* case highlights a familiar tension in postcolonial governance between security claims and constitutional rights. The government presented itself as the guarantor of public safety, arguing that gang violence necessitated exceptional measures. Yet the evidentiary basis for the emergency declaration was, as Justice Young observed, weak and internally inconsistent, suggesting a political rather than existential justification for invoking emergency powers. The consequence was the suspension and infringement of concrete constitutional and human rights protections, including the right to personal liberty, freedom from arbitrary arrest and detention, freedom of movement, protection from unreasonable search and seizure, and the right to due process (UNDHR). Several claimants were detained without charge, denied timely access to legal counsel, and subjected to restrictions on movement without individualized judicial authorization. These measures directly engaged Belize’s constitutional guarantees and

corresponding protections under international human rights law, particularly the prohibition of arbitrary detention and the requirement that any limitation on rights be lawful, necessary, and proportionate.

In essence, Carl Schmitt's well-known quote, "Sovereign is he who decides on the exception" (Schmitt, 2005), takes an unsettlingly literal turn. The proclamation of an emergency was not an impartial legal procedure based on objective standards. Instead, the executive exercised its power to suspend regular law in a political act of decisionism. This was interrupted by the Court's intervention, but only after the fact. The young men's detention was not an error; it was a predictable outcome of a system that normalizes the use of emergency powers. The spatial politics of SOEs are equally important. Southside Belize City has historically been stigmatized and racialized as a place of poverty, crime, and marginalization. By designating this area as an emergency zone, colonial control mechanisms are replicated, transforming impoverished urban areas into test sites for coercive policing (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2006). The testimonies of the detainees also show how Southside's young Black men are inherently treated like suspects. Their lives are placed in a state of suspended legitimacy, but they are not put out. Their rights are conditionally revoked, and their bodies are viewed as expendable.

This is not mere policing. It is the production of what Mbembe (2003) called "death-worlds," where populations are kept in conditions of precarity and vulnerability. Detention without charge, even if temporary, situates these young men in a liminal zone between legal subjecthood and bare life. They are citizens on paper, but rightless in practice. International human rights instruments have long cautioned against such practices. Crime, however concerning, does not pose an existential threat, and the detainees' testimonies themselves bear witness to this gap between law and practice. On the surface, the High Court's ruling appeared to be a victory for rights. In addition to awarding damages and ruling that the detentions were unconstitutional, Justice Young stressed that even under SOE, judicial oversight cannot be waived (*Staine v. Attorney General*, 2025). However, there are apparent limitations to this intervention. The state only provided post-event compensation; this did not stop the violation of the claimant's human rights. Second, the Court did not completely prohibit the use of SOEs. Although it disapproved of this specific declaration, the larger framework permitting the suspension of rights was left unaltered. Third, the claimants cannot reverse the lived trauma of being unjustly taken by the state. The state's use of coercive power is both material and symbolic, as Fassin (2013) reminds us. Even if one is later found not guilty, being imprisoned as a "gang member" carries the stigma of criminality, which alters social interactions long after one is released.

Here, Das's (2007) observation on how violence becomes commonplace is relevant. Once invoked, the exception becomes an integral part of daily existence. That is why the regular use of SOE's has now become a component of a larger system of policing and surveillance, rather than a singular anomaly. The fear of re-arrest, the memory of confinement, and the acceptance of police intrusion into neighborhoods cannot be eliminated by damages granted. The case of *Staine vs Attorney General* is underpinned by international human rights standards. The fundamental principles of liberty, personal security, and protection from arbitrary detention are enshrined in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Subject to the specific exceptions mentioned above, the ICCPR restates these in a legally binding manner. Belize being party to the American Convention on Human Rights (1969) must follow key principles that forbid arbitrary detention and mandate judicial supervision. Although these tools were not explicitly mentioned in the ruling, they serve as the standard by which the case must be interpreted. Their existence highlights the seriousness of the state's abuses: a group of young men's rights, which are acknowledged as universal and inalienable, were in fact suspended due to their location and social identity. As a result, the *Staine* case serves as an example of how easily the politics of domestic emergency governance can undermine international human rights obligations.

## **Human Rights, International Law, and Limitations in Belize**

Even during emergencies, international human rights law establishes a foundation of inalienable rights. Under no circumstances can the rights to life, freedom from torture, and freedom of thought, conscience, and religion be suspended. Only when measures are essential, proportionate, temporary, and non-discriminatory may other rights, like liberty and freedom of movement, be restricted (*Siracusa Principles*, 1984). However, this framework is complicated by the logic of "human security." Human security, which

first appeared in the 1994 UNDP Human Development Report, focused on shielding people from “fear” and “want,” but it has frequently been used to defend securitized interventions that increase state power at the expense of human rights (UNDP, 1994). According to critical theorists, human security discourses run the risk of elevating state-centric ideas of safety, order, stability, and protection above the lived realities of people with rights. According to Duffield (2007), the concept of human security may evolve into a form of biopolitical governance, where people are controlled rather than liberated.

Belize’s 13th Amendment is a vivid example of this tension. Although presented as a human security measure to shield communities from gang violence, it authorizes the designation of legally defined “special areas”, typically low-income urban neighborhoods subject to intensified policing and mobility controls, where constitutional protections may be suspended. Within these zones, residents may be subjected to curfews, warrantless searches, and prolonged detention without charge or trial. These measures are defended as necessary to secure public safety. Yet they permit routine infringements of rights international law treats as foundational, including liberty, privacy, personal security, and due process (UDHR). This reveals a fundamental paradox within human security governance. When security is framed primarily as territorial control and risk management, it legitimizes the restriction of rights for populations constructed as dangerous. Scholars of emergency governance and postcolonial policing have long noted how such frameworks disproportionately target racialized and economically marginalized communities, reproducing colonial logics of spatial containment and surveillance (e.g., Agamben, 2005; Mbembe, 2003; Dillon & Reid, 2009). In Belize, young Creole men in underprivileged urban areas become the primary subjects of this securitized governance, illustrating how emergency powers reconfigure citizenship through selective exposure to state coercion.

The legal architecture that governs states of emergency is not peripheral to the rule of law but a safeguard. International human rights instruments grant states an acknowledged, yet tightly constrained, capacity to respond to genuine public emergencies while simultaneously protecting a core of inalienable rights and requiring procedural safeguards to prevent abuse. That architecture rests on several complementary pillars: the International Bill of Rights (the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights), the ICCPR and its jurisprudence and General Comments, the Siracusa Principles on derogation and limitation, and, in the region, the inter-American corpus and practice under the American Convention on Human Rights. These instruments articulate a core set of principles: legality, necessity, proportionality, temporality, nondiscrimination, and effective oversight. Together, these delimit the legitimate exercise of emergency powers and bind states to procedures that minimize the risk of “exception” becoming ordinary governance.

The fundamental starting point is Article 4 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which permits derogation only “in time of public emergency which threatens the life of the nation” and only to the extent “strictly required by the exigencies of the situation” (ICCPR, 1966, Art. 4). Such derogations must be exceptional, temporary, and formally announced; they must also be reasonable and non-discriminatory, and states must inform the UN Secretary-General of any derogation and its termination, as stated in General Comment No. 29 of the Human Rights Committee. These formal requirements are designed to ensure transparency and facilitate international scrutiny; they are not merely procedural niceties. Additionally, this underlying normative logic is made clear by the Siracusa Principles, which are frequently cited as authoritative interpretive guidelines. Even in times of crisis, actions must be legal, pursue a legitimate goal, be necessary, and be proportionate. They also cannot be founded on discrimination based on social origin, race, color, or religion. In summary, sweeping and permanent suspension of protections cannot be justified by emergencies, because international human rights law requires that derogations remain exceptional, temporary, and subject to continuous necessity and proportionality review.

Similar requirements are made regionally by Article 27 of the American Convention; certain guarantees, particularly those related to humane treatment and specific judicial protections, cannot be suspended, and derogations are allowed “to the extent and for the period of time strictly required by the exigencies of the situation.” (1969). Through the Commission and the Court, the Inter-American system has consistently emphasized that emergency measures must be strictly limited and that executive declarations of necessity cannot render judicial review illusory.

Belize is bound by the substantive protections and the supervisory framework established by the ICCPR, having acceded to it in 1996. Belize must justify any deviation under Article 4 in light of the stringent standards outlined by the Covenant and clarified in General Comment No. 29 as an ICCPR State Party. The requirement is strict—a public emergency must be real or imminent. It must endanger national life, or, in accordance with domestic constitutional language, must be demonstrated to “endanger public safety” to the point where suspension is warranted. That threshold is not always met by a localized crime problem or just-public unease.

Two aspects of Belize’s present course are particularly concerning in that context. First, the government’s recent actions show a functional and geographic narrowing of the emergency tool. Rather than granting nationwide, time-bound derogations, emergency powers are being used to grant broad powers to state actors. Who then enact warrantless searches, prolonged detentions, curfews, and movement restrictions that infringe fundamental rights and freedoms to liberty and privacy. Additionally, these restrictions are being directed geographically at low income urban neighborhoods. Second, there is temporal elasticity in the practice. Meaning declarations can be frequently renewed or transformed into a standing statutory authority. The proposed Thirteenth Amendment would increase the availability and renewability of exceptional powers, thereby reducing the temporary nature required by Article 4. This is precisely what the international regime was designed to guard against: temporal expansion and spatially selective exceptionalism.

Therefore, when viewed through the prism of international obligations, Belize’s course of action exhibits three distinct shortcomings. First, on threshold, gang violence in particular neighborhoods do not, by law, automatically qualify as an Article 4 derogation under the ICCPR, which requires a genuine national emergency to trigger such measures. To maintain the Covenant’s protective function, it is essential to resist the temptation to equate persistent crime with the existential threshold Article 4 contemplates. For the average Belizean citizen, this means that ordinary insecurity is being used to justify extraordinary powers that suspend everyday rights, even though international law reserves such suspensions for truly exceptional national crises. Second, on proportionality and necessity, unless strictly tailored and time-limited, measures such as blanket powers for warrantless searches or indefinite renewals are disproportionate. The Siracusa Principles and General Comment No. 29 make clear that less restrictive alternatives must be exhausted first. In practical terms, this means citizens in designated communities may experience invasive policing, curfews, and detention as routine conditions of life, rather than as last-resort measures, with little assurance that these intrusions are either necessary or temporary. Third, on discrimination, both regional and international human rights systems prohibit emergency measures that systematically target socioeconomic, racial, ethnic, or religious groups. The proposed “special areas” in Belize City, predominantly Creole neighborhoods shaped by concentrated poverty, create a substantial risk of discriminatory impact and thus breach non-discrimination norms. For residents, this translates into a reality where constitutional rights depend on postal code: some citizens live under ordinary law, while others live under permanent suspicion and restricted freedom.

Read in combination, this is precisely why international law does not permit permanent or selective derogation—because it would erode equality before the law, undermine citizenship itself, and convert emergency rule into a normalized mode of governance. These international commitments operationally translate into precise, verifiable guidelines that can be incorporated into legislation and customs. However, any lawful use of emergency powers must have a clear legal foundation:

1. Having a statute or express constitutional provision;
2. Only being used after the executive has declared the emergency and notified treaty bodies;
3. Having a strict time limit with automatic, narrowly defined renewal mechanisms that are subject to legislative approval and public reporting;
4. Maintaining fundamental judicial guarantees (unfettered habeas corpus and effective access to courts);
5. Having independent oversight (parliamentary review, ombudsman, or NHRIs);
6. Being monitored for discriminatory effects and subject to remedies where rights are violated.

These responsibilities are not merely suggestions for consideration but have a legally binding nature under the ICCPR, Siracusa Principles, and Inter-American Jurisprudence.

## **Conclusion**

This paper began with the puzzle of what happens to human rights when emergency powers migrate from temporary measures into the fabric of governance as this becomes normalized for every Belizean. By tracing Belize's trajectory from COVID-19 public health responses to crime-related states of emergency, culminating in the proposed Thirteenth Amendment and the landmark *Staine v. Attorney General* judgment, it has become clear that Belize is at a constitutional and political crossroads. The exception has been normalized; extraordinary powers once justified as urgent, temporary, and limited are now poised to become an enduring feature of Belizean sovereignty.

The analysis demonstrates that the amendment is not simply a technical legal reform, but part of a more profound transformation in the relationship between state, space, and citizen. While states of emergency in Belize often fail to produce sustained reductions in violence. Research from Trinidad and Jamaica indicates that some SOEs have been associated with short-term decreases in homicides and gun violence, even as they have failed to achieve lasting structural change or address root social conditions (Pellegrini 2025). These cases highlight that emergency powers may generate temporary incapacitation effects but rarely deliver durable public safety outcomes. This broader Caribbean context underscores the importance of empirically grounded, rights-respecting interventions, especially for small postcolonial states where emergency tools can too easily become normalized policy instruments.

The *Staine* case crystallized these dynamics in legal and ethnographic terms. The decision to suspend rights was made even though the government's justification of "sporadic" crime and the "subtle" resurgence of gangs did not satisfy the requirements for an emergency outlined in the Constitution or internationally. Although the High Court restored their rights retroactively and awarded damages, Dyzenhaus's (2006) insight remains that once suspended, rights are extinguished in lived time. Compensation cannot undo the experience of rightlessness. What emerges, then, is not merely a legal problem but a profound human rights one. Emergency governance has become spatialized and racialized. Entire neighborhoods are designated as suspect spaces, their residents subjected to heightened policing and curtailed freedoms. The social fabric of Southside Belize City, which encompasses the everyday life of schools, churches, and markets, is reframed as a crisis by state decree, even as residents attest to its ordinariness. This gap between the state narrative and lived experience highlights the performative nature of emergencies, where crises are not only responded to but also constructed and perpetuated.

International human rights law provides clear benchmarks against such overreach. Article 4 of the ICCPR permits derogations only when the life of the nation is at stake, and only to the extent strictly necessary in the particular situation. The Siracusa Principles emphasize the importance of nondiscrimination, proportionality, and timeliness. Furthermore, these limitations are echoed in the American Convention on Human Rights. However, Belize's present course, which includes localized emergency zones, the ongoing renewal of SOEs, and the retroactive approval of unconstitutional measures, falls woefully short of these responsibilities. The proposed Amendment, therefore, risks placing Belize in direct conflict with its treaty commitments.

At the same time, the analysis complicates the human rights framework itself. As critical scholarship has long argued, the discourse of "human security" can be mobilized to justify precisely those practices that erode human rights (Duffield, 2007). Although the Amendment is portrayed in Belize as a means of shielding communities from violence, in reality, it leaves them more vulnerable to government monitoring and intrusion. The rights of the marginalized are sacrificed in order to secure security for the majority. This paradox highlights the need to prioritize lived experience through the accounts of people who have been imprisoned, harassed, and stigmatized as proof of the actual costs of emergency governance and highlights the peril of confusing human security with state security.

The Belizean case is not unique, but it is emblematic of a broader issue. Small postcolonial states often inherit policing models rooted in colonial control, where emergency powers were designed to manage racialized urban populations (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2006). In the post-COVID era, these legacies combine with global trends in securitization to produce a governance model in which exception becomes ordinary. Belize, then, is both a local case and a global warning: once emergency powers are constitutionalized, they become available for any future government to wield, regardless of context or justification.

The stakes are clear. If enacted, the Thirteenth Amendment would mark a decisive erosion of constitutional supremacy, where rights are conditional privileges that rely on executive discretion, geography, and social identity, rather than being universal entitlements. Retroactive validations and immunity clauses will weaken judicial oversight. Practices that risk discriminatory application and are neither necessary nor proportionate will result in the forfeiture of international obligations. The danger is not only legal but also social through the stigmatization and disposability of already marginalized communities.

Nevertheless, the *Staine* judgment also shows that resistance is possible. Courts can and do play a role in challenging the construction of crisis and restoring rights. Testimonies from detainees provide powerful counter-narratives that expose the lacuna between state discourse and the lived reality. While international law is imperfect, it continues to provide a vocabulary and set of standards that activists, lawyers, and communities can mobilize to contest exceptionalism. The challenge is to ensure that these tools are not sidelined by constitutional reforms that seek to normalize exception.

In conclusion, the Belizean case sheds light on the central question posed at the outset: what happens to human rights when the exception becomes the rule? As this study has demonstrated, the answer is that rights run the risk of being reduced to conditional grants rather than unalienable protections. With the help of crisis rhetoric, the state redraws the lines between security and liberty in ways that disproportionately affect the marginalized members of society. The task for scholars, lawyers, and citizens alike is to insist on the fragility of this balance and to contest its erosion. Belize stands at a crossroads. It can choose a path that affirms constitutional supremacy, judicial oversight, and adherence to international human rights norms. Alternatively, it can establish emergency governance as regular law, establishing a constitutional order in which rights are conditional and the exception is a permanent feature of government. This decision will impact both Belize's democratic identity and its legal system. Whether it becomes a state governed by exception or remains a state bound by rights is yet to be seen. However, the government's recent public consultation process surrounding the Thirteenth Amendment signals an acknowledgment, at least procedurally, of the need for public participation and human rights safeguards in the development of emergency measures.

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# **Rehabilitation and Inclusion as Human Rights: Disability, Access, and Equity in Belize**

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## **Abstract**

Disabled populations are among the most marginalized globally, facing long-entrenched, persistent barriers to accessing healthcare, rehabilitation services, and full societal inclusion. These disparities have led disabled populations to face increased risk of adverse outcomes, including chronic health conditions, financial instability, diminished quality of life, and even shortened life expectancy. Such outcomes are highly prevalent in low- and middle-income (LMIC) countries, whereas few as 5-15% of disabled people may have access to rehabilitation services or assistive technologies and rehabilitation is often considered a secondary, optional service. In the Latin American and Caribbean regions—including Belize—persistent rehabilitative access gaps, lack of local specialist providers, limited inclusive infrastructure, under-resourced health systems, and incomplete commitment to inclusive policies all negatively impact outcomes for disability-affected populations. Rights-based frameworks, such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), as well as programs emerging in other LMICs, show promising examples of ways by which Belize may move away from inconsistent, charity-based models and embrace holistic methods grounded in human rights and a commitment to participatory, inclusive approaches for meeting the needs of disability-affected Belizeans. This conceptual paper aims to highlight the interconnected relationship between disability, rehabilitation access, and human rights by examining the scope and impacts of disability in Belize, identifying gaps in health and rehabilitative services and their rights-related implications, reviewing rights-based frameworks from other LMICs that may be relevant to Belize, and outlining opportunities for strategic planning and policy improvements at both community and governmental levels.

**Keywords:** Disability, Rehabilitation, Inclusion, Justice, Equity, Human Rights, Belize

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## **Introduction**

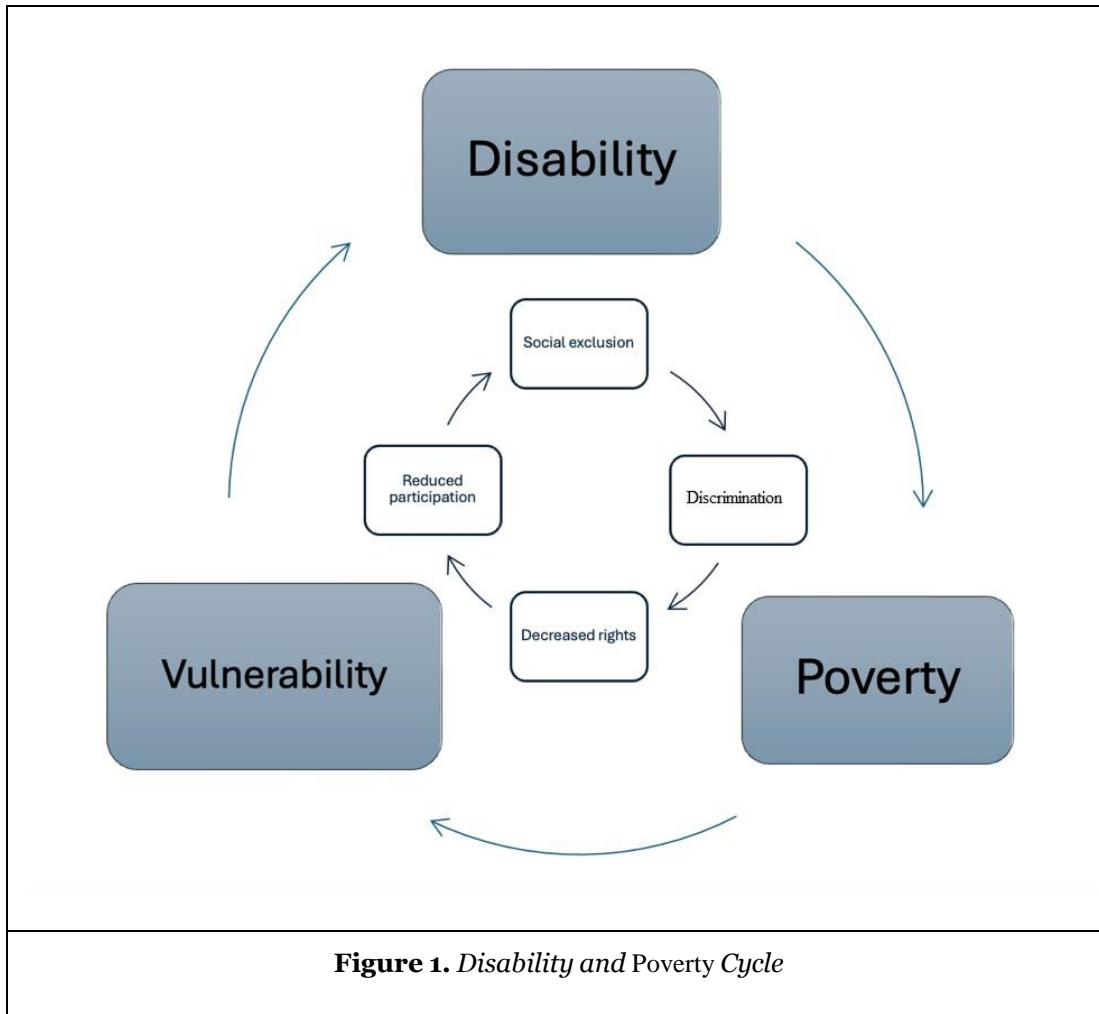
Belize faces persistent and systemic challenges in ensuring equitable access to healthcare and rehabilitation services for persons with disabilities (PWD), (Hartman et al., 2021). Despite growing global recognition of disability inclusion as a public health and human rights priority, rehabilitation in Belize remains limited in availability, unevenly distributed, and insufficiently integrated into the national health system (Hartman et al., 2021; Garcia Mora et al., 2023). These gaps have profound implications for the health, functional independence, and social participation of Belizeans living with disability and reflect broader patterns of underinvestment in disability-responsive health policy within the country.

Disability in Belize, as elsewhere, is not solely a medical condition but arises from the interaction between health conditions and social, environmental, and structural barriers. The World Health Organization defines disability as the result of this interaction, shaped by factors such as inaccessible infrastructure, negative societal attitudes, and limited social supports (World Health Organization [WHO], 2025). In the Belizean context, these barriers are compounded by limited rehabilitation infrastructure, shortages of trained providers, and weak policy enforcement mechanisms, resulting in the systematic marginalization of PWD from healthcare, education, employment, and broader social life (Garcia Mora et al., 2023; Gréaux et al., 2023; Hartman et al., 2021).

Globally, an estimated 1.3 billion people—approximately 16% of the world’s population—live with significant long-term disabilities (WHO, 2022). Persons with disabilities experience disproportionate health inequities, including higher rates of chronic conditions, greater exposure to catastrophic health expenditures, and, in some contexts, substantially reduced life expectancy (WHO, 2022). These inequities are not incidental; rather, they stem from structural neglect within health systems that routinely deprioritize disability-inclusive care and rehabilitation in policy and financing decisions (Ferrari & Santomauro, 2024). Belize reflects these global trends, but with heightened consequences due to its small health workforce, constrained fiscal space, and limited rehabilitation capacity.

The burden of unmet rehabilitation needs is particularly acute in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), where access to essential services remains severely constrained (Khan et al., 2018). Globally, more than 2.4 billion people could benefit from rehabilitation, yet in many LMIC settings only 5–15% of those in need have access to appropriate rehabilitation or assistive technologies (Cieza et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2018; WHO, 2022). In Belize, the shortage of disability-specific specialists and rehabilitation professionals significantly limits the health system’s ability to address complex functional needs (Hartman et al., 2021). Consequently, some individuals are compelled to seek care outside the country, most commonly in Mexico or Guatemala (United Nations, 2017). Such options, however, are financially and logistically inaccessible to most Belizeans, reinforcing inequities within an already marginalized population.

The absence of accessible rehabilitation services in Belize has implications that extend beyond health outcomes alone. Rehabilitation is critical to the realization of fundamental human rights, including the rights to health, dignity, autonomy, equality, education, and work. When rehabilitation services are unavailable or inaccessible, individuals face preventable disability, increased dependency, and exclusion from social and economic participation (WHO, 2011). These dynamics contribute to the “disability–poverty cycle,” in which functional limitations, lack of services, and socioeconomic exclusion mutually reinforce one another (Gréaux et al., 2023;). See Figure 1. While these patterns are observed across the Latin American and Caribbean region, Belize’s limited rehabilitation infrastructure and policy gaps render PWD particularly vulnerable.



**Reference:** (modified from) Department for International Development (DFID). (2000) Disability, poverty, and development. London: DFID

Across Latin America and the Caribbean, PWD are consistently more likely to report unmet health needs and are up to twice as likely to forgo care due to financial, geographic, or infrastructural barriers compared with persons without disabilities (Jones & Serieux-Lubin, 2018; WHO, 2022). Health systems in Central America and the Caribbean remain under-resourced with respect to rehabilitation, and Belize is no exception (Cieza et al., 2021). However, Belize’s small population and centralized health governance also present opportunities for targeted, rights-based reform if rehabilitation is explicitly prioritized within national policy and planning frameworks.

This conceptual paper examines the intersection of disability, rehabilitation, and human rights within the Belizean context. It argues that access to rehabilitation in Belize must be recognized not as a discretionary or auxiliary service, but as a core component of the right to health and a critical driver of social and economic inclusion. This framing aligns with the World Health Organization’s ‘Rehabilitation 2030 Call to Action’, which emphasizes the integration of rehabilitation into health systems as essential to achieving universal health coverage and the Sustainable Development Goals (WHO, 2020).

This paper aims to briefly summarize the interconnected nature of disability, rehabilitation access, and human rights in a broad sense, and then to more closely examine the scale and impacts of disability in Belize at individual and community levels. Existing gaps in access to health and rehabilitative services for disability-affected Belizeans will be demonstrated—including related human rights implications—and a

summary of existing rights-based frameworks and programming underway in other countries which may be applicable to the Belizean context will be provided. Finally, the authors will identify potential areas for strategic planning and positive changes in Belize's disability policy at community and governmental levels.

## **Disability, Rehabilitation, and Human Rights**

From a public health perspective, the scale and impacts of disability are impossible to overlook (Lancet Public Health, 2021). Disability is widely recognized as both a global public health priority and a pressing human rights concern (Kuper & Heydt, 2019; McDonald & Raymaker, 2013). Prevalence of disability continues to rise, driven by factors such as aging populations, chronic disease burden, injuries, and the long-term effects of medical conditions such as COVID-19 (Ferrari & Santomauro, 2024; Stucki et al., 2018). As a central determinant and driver of health system demand, resource allocation, and workforce planning, disability is by no means an issue of marginal importance. Appropriately addressing disability within health systems requires consistent access to rehabilitation services, assistive technologies, programs which promote inclusion, and preventive measures to reduce avoidable impairments.

Rehabilitation is a comprehensive set of specialized interventions including physiotherapy, occupational therapy, speech and language therapy, prosthetics and orthotics, and psychiatry. The WHO defines rehabilitation as “a set of interventions needed when a person is experiencing or is likely to experience limitations in everyday functioning due to aging or a health condition, including chronic diseases or disorders, injuries or traumas” (WHO, 2019). Like the barriers facing effective implementation of disability policy, challenges to effective rehabilitation delivery are especially acute in LMICs—where services are concentrated in urban centers, often provided privately, and largely inaccessible to rural, Indigenous, and/or otherwise marginalized populations (Cieza et al., 2021; Kamenov et al., 2019).

Alongside the aforementioned barriers to rehabilitation services, the experience of disability is itself a fundamental matter of human rights. People with disabilities have historically been largely excluded from access to education, employment, healthcare, political participation, and meaningful participation in community life—not solely because of their impairments, but also due to systemic discrimination, outdated stereotypes, and inaccessible (physically or otherwise) environments (WHO, 2011). In 2006, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) reframed disability through a rights-based lens, shifting away from biomedical models that define disability as solely attributable to individual pathology (United Nations, 2006). Instead, the CRPD emphasizes the interaction between impairments and societal barriers, mandating state action to guarantee equality, participation, and dignity. Articles 25 (Health) and 26 (Habilitation and Rehabilitation) explicitly affirm the right to timely, affordable, and high-quality rehabilitation services (United Nations, 2006).

In the years since its inception, the CRPD has spurred legal and policy reforms worldwide. Kenya's 2010 constitution, for example, enshrined protections for persons with disabilities (The Government of Kenya, 2010), while countries such as Colombia and Peru have restructured guardianship systems toward supported decision-making (Center for Public Representation, 2020). National development plans increasingly seek to integrate disability inclusion across health, education, and labor sectors. Courts throughout several African countries (International Commission of Jurists, 2025), India (Atrey, 2018), and Argentina (Aiello, 2018) have invoked the CRPD in efforts to strengthen rights PWD to inclusive education, accessibility, and participation. Despite this promising momentum, implementation gaps remain significant—particularly in LMICs, where efforts toward reform are often constrained by factors such as persistent structural inequities, resource limitations, and other internal executive structures (Gréaux et al., 2023; WHO, 2022). Belize is no different.

Recognizing the reality of these inequities, the WHO's World Report on Disability (WHO, 2011) and the Rehabilitation 2030 initiative (WHO, 2020) emphasize rehabilitation as essential for promoting universal health coverage, social inclusion, and economic development. Scholars argue that rehabilitation must be understood not only as a means of improving individual functioning, but also as a prerequisite for equality and participation (Gutenbrunner et al., 2020; Stucki et al., 2018).

As crucial as both rehabilitation and human rights protections are, the needs of those living with disability cannot be fully addressed by access to only one or the other. A comprehensive approach must integrate public health systems with human rights commitments—ensuring that rehabilitation services are available, affordable, and inclusive, while also dismantling the structural barriers that perpetuate exclusion. This dual framing has shaped international development agendas, most notably the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which link universal health coverage with the more holistic principles of “leaving no one behind” and which “endeavor to reach the furthest behind first” (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2024).

## **Impacts and Realities of Disability in Belize**

Belize presents a case study of global disability and rehabilitation trends at a national level. As far back as 2004, the International Disability Rights Monitor’s regional report of the Americas concluded that Belize was one of the least inclusive nations in the Americas with regard to disability, lacking the basic elements necessary for the social inclusion of people with disabilities (International Disability Network, 2004). This was partly due to the divestment of funding for disability services which was enacted by the Belizean Government from the late 1990’s into the early 2000’s (Skeen & Cowo, 2010), as well as the exclusion of accessible rehabilitation from Belize’s 2001 launch of its National Health Insurance (NHI) program (Saunders, 2012). As of 2021, rehabilitation was still listed as an excluded service under the NHI (National Health Insurance Committee, 2021) and no uniform definition or classification of disability currently exists in Belize (United States Department of State, 2024). High-quality statistics related to disability and rehabilitation-specific human resources also continue to be lacking (Abualghaib et al., 2019). Incomplete census data, as well as disruptions in data collection due to the COVID-19 pandemic, present significant barriers to accurately quantifying the proportion of Belizeans living with disability. However, it is known that the challenges of disability inclusion in Belize are intensified by factors including structural inequities, limited healthcare infrastructure, and persistent social stigma. Although the government ratified the CRPD in 2011 (UN, 2020) and more recently enacted national legislation, including the Disability Bill of 2024 (Government of Belize, 2024), substantial gaps in implementation continue to undermine progress. Moreover, the legislative landscape contains outdated conceptualizations of disability that are misaligned with contemporary human rights norms. The Unsoundness of Mind Act, which regulates the treatment and detention of individuals deemed to have mental impairments, exemplifies a custodial and protectionist framework that prioritizes control over autonomy, rehabilitation, and community-based inclusion. The Act, admittedly outdated by the Belize Ministry of Health and Wellness leadership (Diaz-Musa, 2025), contains no explicit provisions for rights-based mental health care, supported decision-making, or access to rehabilitation and psychosocial supports, thereby perpetuating stigma and structural exclusion of persons with psychosocial and intellectual disabilities. Its continued coexistence with more recent disability legislation underscores the fragmented and internally inconsistent nature of Belize’s disability policy and regulatory environment.

Rehabilitation remains one of the most underdeveloped areas of the Belizean healthcare sector (Hartman et al., 2021; Trejo et al., 2021), despite the central role these services play in restoring function, fostering independence, and supporting social participation for those affected by disability (Stucki et al., 2018). A 2020 workforce analysis revealed that Belize had only 0.44 physiotherapists per 10,000 people—an alarmingly low ratio (Hartman et al., 2021). Regional comparisons highlight Belize’s high level of disparity: St. Lucia, with a population numbering less than half of Belize’s, boasted nearly the same number of physiotherapists (World Physiotherapy, 2020); while Bermuda, with just 63,968 residents, employed 54 physiotherapists (~8.5 per 10,000 people) (Department of Statistics, Bermuda, 2020). The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) lists a regional median number of rehabilitation professionals per 10,000 population at 2.7 (mean=8.6) (Pan American Health Organization, 2022). Within Belize, there are no in-country educational programs for training therapists—and physiotherapy remains markedly underrepresented (18 physiotherapists) compared to other healthcare professions (Hartman et al., 2021). In contrast, in 2020 there were 412 medical doctors (10.4 per 10,000 people) and 797 registered nurses (20 per 10,000 people) practicing in Belize (Statistical Institute of Belize, 2020). When physiotherapy services are available, they are predominantly provided by the private sector in highly populated regions. Only 2 of the 18 physiotherapists work in government-operated hospitals, rendering services largely inaccessible for rural and Indigenous populations and for those with limited incomes (Hartman et al., 2021). These

imbalances echo the conclusions of Belize's 2014–2024 National Health Sector Strategic Plan (Government of Belize, Ministry of Health, 2014), which identifies the shortage of physiotherapists as a serious constraint on both the quality and availability of rehabilitation services.

Concerningly, the aforementioned workforce analysis found a complete absence of in-country licensed professionals practicing in the other rehabilitation disciplines (such as occupational therapy or speech-and-language pathology), leaving Belizeans heavily reliant upon short-term, foreign volunteers for any such services (Hartman et al., 2021). While such volunteerism is not inherently negative, it does raise significant ethical concerns which have been extensively documented in the literature (Bauer, 2017; Berry, 2014; Crump & Sugarman, 2008; DeCamp, 2007; Hartman & Dholakia, 2023; Langowski & Iltis, 2011; Lasker, 2016). Such risks may include inconsistent service delivery, lack of continuity of care, and (in some cases) volunteers practicing outside their scope of practice due to inconsistent oversight (Doobay-Persaud et al., 2019a, 2019b; Hartman & Dholakia, 2023). The lack of such rehabilitation services can lead to adverse outcomes such as (in the case of occupational therapy) a lack of early childhood intervention, which can hinder children from enrolling into school and accessing an education (Barillier & Jaegers, 2020).

National initiatives have sought to address these challenges. Belizean efforts at the governmental level have included establishment of the National Resource Center for Inclusive Education (NaRCIE), the Special Education Unit within the Ministry of Education, development of a National Disability Policy, and support for The Inspiration Center (TIC)—an outpatient rehabilitation center for children with disabilities headquartered in Belize City. In addition, there have been recent statements made by Belize Ministry of Health and Wellness leadership about efforts to update the national mental health policy and legislation related to the delivery of services to people with mental health concerns (Diaz-Musa, 2025). However, these initiatives remain either in the early stages of discussion or at most, limited in scope and sustainability due to funding constraints, a persistent shortage of trained professionals, and incomplete integration into national health systems (Trejo et al., 2021). As seen in other small states, national commitments often lack the ongoing monitoring, financing, and institutional support required for sustained success (Cieza et al., 2021; Gréaux et al., 2023). Despite ratifying international treaties and passing national laws, Belize continues to struggle with effective implementation. The absence of comprehensive rehabilitation policies, fragile data systems, and underinvestment perpetuate gaps in service delivery (Mora & Carrasco, 2023). Hartman et al. also highlight a considerable reliance on national and international NGOs and charity-based donor funding to provide rehabilitation services, which—while helping to fill critical gaps—often creates fragmented and unsustainable systems (Hartman et al., 2021). Furthermore, limited awareness and stigma surrounding disability reinforce barriers to both demand and supply of rehabilitation services (Gréaux et al., 2023).

Although Belize has made notable progress over the past 20 years, PWD continue to face structural and systemic barriers which undermine equal societal participation. Stigma and discrimination further exacerbate these barriers. Despite growing recognition of rehabilitation as a core component of health systems, (Cieza, 2019; Stucki et al., 2018) access in Belize remains constrained. These barriers are interconnected and reinforce inequities, particularly for rural, Indigenous, and low-income populations.

Four persistent, key limitations include:

- 1. Workforce Shortages:** Belize faces an acute shortage of rehabilitation professionals, reflecting broader global patterns in LMICs where workforce density falls far below WHO-recommended thresholds. Rehabilitation specialists are few, largely concentrated in Belize City and/or in private practice. This creates inequitable access, with rural and Indigenous communities structurally excluded.
- 2. Financial and Systemic Constraints:** Rehabilitation financing in Belize is limited, dependent upon donor contributions and private-sector engagement. Government allocations remain minimal- only those with permanent work-related disabilities assessed at 25% or higher qualify for a Disablement Pension, with a minimum weekly payment of \$47 (Belize Government, Social

Security Board, 2025). This reality mirrors trends in other LMICs where rehabilitation is considered peripheral to universal health coverage. High out-of-pocket costs compound exclusion, as families must often pay privately, travel extensively, and absorb indirect expenses such as lost income. These financial burdens disproportionately affect low-income households.

- 3. Fragmented Government and Implementation Gaps:** The absence of a comprehensive rehabilitation strategy within the national health system contributes to fragmentation and incomplete integration of services. Rehabilitation support in Belize remains a legal blind spot not due to policy neglect but to structural omission. While the country's legislative instruments acknowledge disability rights in principle, they fail to translate those commitments into enforceable entitlements. The continued validity of the Unsoundness of Mind Act and the aspirational nature of the Disability Act together produce a regime of partial recognition and systemic exclusion. Bridging this gap requires a paradigmatic shift toward a rights-based rehabilitation model grounded in equality, autonomy, and participation—principles already embedded within the CRPD yet unrealized in Belizean law.
- 4. Cultural and Attitudinal Barriers:** Significant and persistent stigma against Belizeans with disabilities undermines both social inclusion and policy prioritization. Cultural perceptions often associate disability with dependency, pity, or even shame (Gréaux et al., 2023; Rohwerder, 2018). These attitudes not only hinder social inclusion but also impede political will to prioritize investment in rehabilitation by viewing disability as a private burden rather than a shared societal responsibility. Addressing stigma requires embedding disability inclusion within education, community engagement, and policymaking. In Belize, limited awareness campaigns and inconsistent enforcement of anti-discrimination measures allow negative stereotypes to persist, further hindering the integration of rehabilitation into broader health and development agendas (Trejo et al., 2021). Framing disability as a matter of charity rather than rights results perpetuates a cycle where PWD are simultaneously underserved by the state and socially marginalized within their communities

These realities position Belize at a critical juncture: while inclusive policy frameworks do exist, meaningful implementation requires moving from aspirational rhetoric to implementation of systemic reform. By intentionally situating rehabilitation within a human rights framework, Belize has the potential to build a more equitable and disability-inclusive health system.

## **Right-Based Frameworks and Inclusive Programming Examples**

The conceptualization of rehabilitation as a right, rather than a privilege, is increasingly emphasized in both academic and policy discourse (Gréaux et al., 2023; Jesus et al., 2017; United Nations, 2006; WHO, 2022). The CRPD, alongside instruments such as the SDGs, affirms that health and disability inclusion are integral to achieving equity and development. Some argue that rights-based health frameworks compel states to adopt participatory, transparent, and accountable approaches to service delivery (WHO, 2019). By contrast, charity-based models—still prevalent in Belize—position rehabilitation as an optional, benevolent service, reinforcing dependency and stigma (Dholakia et al., 2024; Dholakia et al., 2021).

The rights-based approach to health integrates international human rights law with public health practice, establishing that access to health services is grounded in principles of dignity, equality, and accountability rather than mere policy preference (Gréaux et al., 2023; London, 2008; United Nations, 2006; UN, 1966). It draws heavily on instruments such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (UN, 1966) and the CRPD, both of which enshrine the right to the “highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.” Importantly, the CRPD extends this commitment by explicitly recognizing rehabilitation as integral to realizing this right.

Operationalizing a rights-based approach to health requires adherence to the AAAQ principles, developed by the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Campbell et al., 2013; Jesus et al., 2017). Grounded in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, this framework defines the right to health through four interrelated dimensions: availability, accessibility, acceptability, and quality. “Availability” requires that health services, facilities, essential medicines, and trained personnel exist in sufficient quantity to meet population needs. “Accessibility” ensures that these services can be reached by all people without discrimination—physically, financially, and through access to reliable health information. “Acceptability” demands that care be delivered in ways that respect cultural values, uphold dignity, and follow medical ethics. Finally, “quality” requires that services be scientifically and medically appropriate, safe, and effective. Together, these dimensions clarify that the right to health encompasses far more than the mere presence of services; it requires that care be equitably reachable, culturally respectful, and of consistently high quality for all.

On an implementation level, the literature would suggest that shifting toward a rights-based framework requires significant structural reforms: scaling rehabilitation workforce training, decentralizing services, and embedding disability inclusion into health and social systems (Hartman et al., 2021; Kamenov et al., 2019). Evidence from Latin America highlights how integrating rehabilitation into national health agendas can improve access and equity, particularly when supported by professional associations and participatory governance structures (Mactaggart et al., 2016; Hickey et al., 2019). In Chile, the government has advanced rehabilitation through the ‘RehabPHC’ program, launched in 2007, which expands access via community-based rehabilitation rooms and rural teams. Centered within primary care and backed by Ministry of Health leadership and funding, the program delivers timely, equitable services across the disease continuum (Seijas et al., 2023). Similarly, Brazil has promoted inclusive rehabilitation through its Unified Health System, strengthened by the Living Without Limits plan. This initiative expanded rehabilitation centers and improved access to assistive technologies for low-income populations, illustrating how national policy and targeted investment can enhance equity and social inclusion (Lyra et al., 2022).

Other regions also provide instructive examples. Uganda has strengthened its rehabilitation workforce and established a national strategy with dedicated Ministry of Health structures (Neill et al., 2024), Thailand has included rehabilitation services such as physiotherapy and assistive devices within its universal health coverage scheme (Kuper & Heydt, 2019), and India has recently emphasized the integration of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation into national health policy through awareness campaigns and workforce initiatives (Swarnakar, 2025).

Collectively, these examples show that, when rehabilitation is integrated into universal health coverage benefit packages and delivered across levels of care, significant positive impacts—including financial protection, improved service availability, and advanced equity for persons with disabilities and chronic health conditions—may result.

When applied to the Belizean context, the rights-based approach exposes existing implementation gaps between formal ratification of human rights treaties and the lived experiences of persons with disabilities. Despite the Disability Bill and CRPD ratification, limited rehabilitation infrastructure, urban concentration of available services, and persistent financial barriers continue to undermine AAAQ standards (Hartman et al., 2021). In this sense, the rights-based approach is not merely normative but provides a potential diagnostic tool to measure state accountability.

The social model of disability, developed in the 1970s and widely adopted in disability studies, shifts the primary focus away from individual impairments toward the barriers created by society for those with disabilities (Goering, 2015; Oliver, 2013). Disability is thus not simply a medical condition but, rather, the result of inaccessible environments, discriminatory policies, and social stigma. In contrast to the pathology-focused medical model (Hogan, 2019), the social model underscores systemic responsibility—both in producing exclusion and in effectively addressing it (See Table 1). This concept is particularly relevant in Belize, where physical geography (e.g., remote rural and island communities), underfunded healthcare, and cultural stigmas collectively “disable” individuals by curtailing access to rehabilitation services and societal participation.

<b>Table 1. Medical vs Social Model of Disability</b>		
<b>Models of Disability</b>		
	<b>Medical Model</b>	<b>Social Model</b>
<b>Core view</b>	Disability is a problem within the individual, caused by disease, injury, or impairment	Disability arises from barriers in society (physical, social, attitudinal) that prevent full participation
<b>Focus</b>	Focus is on the diagnosis, treatment/cure/rehabilitation of impairments identified through examination	Focus is on removing societal barriers and promoting accessibility, inclusion, and rights
<b>Responsibility for change</b>	The individual must adapt, recover, or be “fixed” by healthcare providers and/or healthcare systems.	Society must adapt by removing barriers and ensuring equality of opportunity, regardless of ability
<b>Outcome/goals</b>	To ‘normalize’ the individual to a societal norm and minimize physical/functional limitations	To enable full participation, autonomy, and inclusion
<b>Role of Professionals</b>	Physicians, therapists, and other specialists contribute expertise in clinical assessment and treatment.	Persons with disabilities contribute expertise through lived experience to drive advocacy, policy, and community change.
<b>Risks</b>	Can be paternalistic, reductionist, and/or stigmatizing	May ignore the role of the medical situation and personal needs of individuals
<b>Example</b>	A person using a wheelchair is disabled because they cannot walk	A person using a wheelchair is disabled because buildings lack ramps/elevators

The rights-based approach and the social model are mutually reinforcing frameworks (Lawson & Beckett, 2021). The rights-based approach provides legal and normative grounding, mandating that governments fulfill obligations to provide rehabilitation. The social model offers a sociological critique, exposing the ways systems and environments disable individuals. For example, the lack of trained physiotherapists or speech therapists in Belize does not merely reflect a shortage of professionals but also perpetuates structural exclusion by denying persons with disabilities equal participation in education, employment, and community life.

Applied together, the rights-based framework lens demands accountability for the state’s commitments under the CRPD, and the social model lens reveals that barriers are overwhelmingly rooted in structural inequities rather than individual deficits (Lawson & Beckett, 2021). For example, the disproportionate concentration of rehabilitation services in Belize’s urban centers can effectively be critiqued both under the AAAQ framework (accessibility and availability failures) and through the social model (systemic exclusion of rural/Indigenous communities).

In addition to the previously discussed health systems, other LMIC’s have drawn explicitly upon both a rights-based approach and the social model of disability to guide reforms, demonstrating that these

principles are not solely confined to high-income settings. For example, Nepal's Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2017) recognizes disability as shaped by social barriers, with reforms decentralizing rehabilitation services through primary care and CBR networks (Dahal et al., 2025). In the Philippines, the Magna Carta for Persons with Disabilities, strengthened after CRPD ratification, established disability as a matter of rights and social inclusion, with rehabilitation and assistive device provision integrated into national health programs (Republic Act No. 9442, 2006). Costa Rica's Equal Opportunities Law for People with Disabilities, enacted in May 1996, is grounded in international human rights frameworks. It emphasizes non-discrimination and equal opportunities, aiming to adapt environments, services, information, activities, and societal attitudes to meet the needs of all people (Montero, 1998).

Some countries with similar resource constraints have addressed service gaps through task-shifting and community-based rehabilitation programming (Gilmore et al., 2017; Jesus et al., 2016; MacLachlan et al., 2011). In Belize, such approaches are currently being implemented by several non-profit organizations, including Hillside Healthcare International and the Inspiration Center. Expanded efforts on a governmental level could be considered in Belize, where higher education for rehabilitation training is non-existent and the non-urban population is highly geographically dispersed.

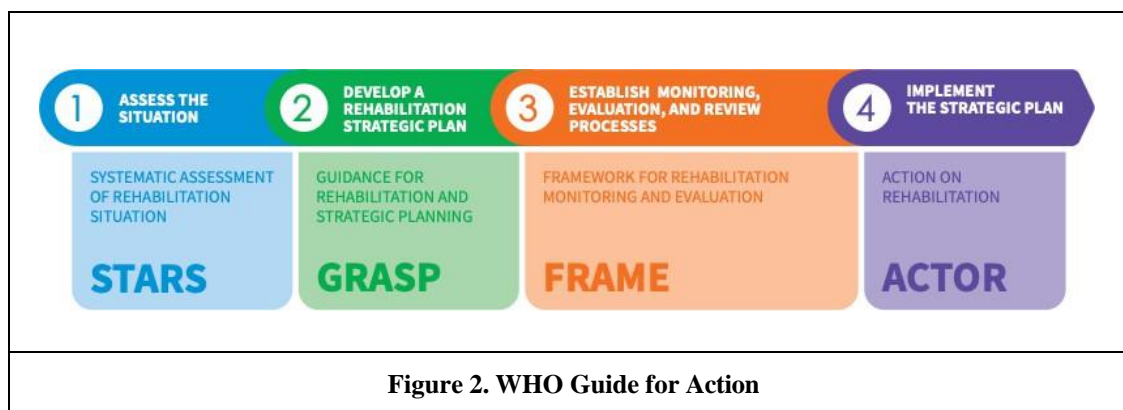
The aforementioned examples demonstrate that grounding rehabilitation in human rights and the social model has practical implications across diverse contexts. Grounding the Belizean case within these frameworks allows the potential for commentary to move beyond surface-level critiques of "lack of services." Instead, it situates rehabilitation as a crucial matter of justice—and emphasizes the urgency of fulfilling international obligations and dismantling socially-constructed barriers. With commitment and consistency, this analytical foundation has the potential to develop actionable recommendations that are legally mandated, socially necessary, ethically urgent, and highly beneficial to disability-affected Belizeans.

## **Potential Pathways for Positive Change in Belize**

International frameworks such as the CRPD and SDGs provide a normative foundation for strengthening Belize's rehabilitation infrastructure across multiple fronts. The CRPD explicitly calls upon states to ensure access to rehabilitation (Article 26), while the SDGs emphasize universal health coverage, equity, and the principle of "leaving no one behind."

By aligning national policies with these human rights-based frameworks, Belize has the potential to transform rehabilitation from a discretionary service into a state-level priority and obligation. This alignment requires moving beyond mere ratification and into full-scale implementation of CRPD commitments and AAAQ standards, with robust monitoring mechanisms installed to promote government-level accountability and the progressive realization of rights.

WHO's Rehabilitation 2030: A Call for Action provides further guidance, emphasizing the integration of rehabilitation into primary healthcare. Their 'Guide for Action' offers actionable means for governments to strengthen their health systems to provide rehabilitation resources. This four-phase process begins with a formal Systematic Assessment of Rehabilitation Situation (STARS) and progresses through the development of a formal rehabilitation strategic plan, via implementation, monitoring and evaluation of said plan. The purpose of tools like the STARS assessment is to help strengthen rehabilitation leadership, planning, and integration and directly supports the government in meeting AAAQ aligned obligations (Figure 2).



**Reference:** World Health Organization, (2019). Rehabilitation in health systems: A guide for Action. WHO Kobe Centre.

Adopting these tools could potentially guide Belize's efforts to map current capacities and plan strategically for expansion.

Based upon existing rights-based and social model frameworks, several emergent key recommendations are offered to help improve rehabilitation and disability inclusion in Belize:

### 1. Workforce Development and Training

Strengthening in-country capacity could be significantly enhanced through the development of training programs for rehabilitation professionals such as physiotherapists and occupational therapist, led in collaboration with the University of Belize School of Medicine and other academic programs in-country. Academic institutions play a pivotal role not only in expanding the availability and quality of rehabilitation professionals but also in fostering research, raising social awareness about disability and inclusion, and informing evidence-based health and social policy. By integrating education, clinical training, and policy engagement, universities can help address chronic workforce shortages while simultaneously creating career pathways for Belizeans and promoting a culture of inclusive, rights-based healthcare. The feasibility of task-shifting strategies, whereby community health workers or other medical professionals receive training in the delivery of basic rehabilitation services to rural areas (increasing geographic accessibility), may also offer potential bolstering at the local capacity level. At the organizational level, fostering of professional associations that advocate for rehabilitation disciplines may promote ongoing visibility and representation of disability-specific issues in national health dialogues.

### 2. Financial and Government Investment

Improving financial accessibility is critical. Integration of rehabilitation-related services into Belize's universal health coverage package and/or specific allocation of a dedicated budget line for rehabilitation within the Ministry of Health and Wellness could directly help reduce out-of-pocket patient expenses for Belizeans who experience disability. In order to supplement potential funding limitations at the governmental level, there is need for exploration of additional innovative financing mechanisms, such as international development partnerships or social impact bonds, could also be mobilized to facilitate sustained investment in services for disability-affected Belizeans.

### 3. Governance and Policy Integration

Policy coherence is essential for ensuring quality, acceptability, and equitable accessibility of services. Integration efforts could be strengthened by the incorporation of rehabilitation explicitly into Belize's National Health Plan and alignment of efforts with the Disability Bill and CRPD commitments, while the

World Health Organization's STARS tool could potentially be useful in assessing current rehabilitation gaps and longer-term development of evidence-based policy responses. Strengthening of cross-sectoral coordination between health, education, and social protection systems could also help to promote holistic support for persons with disabilities.

#### **4. Community Engagement and Anti-Stigma Campaigns**

Promoting social acceptability of rehabilitation involves transforming attitudes towards disability. Initiation of nationwide awareness campaigns to challenge disability stigma and promote inclusion could potentially promote incremental change at the community level. Support for community-based rehabilitation programs that empower individuals, families, and communities to participate actively in rehabilitation processes can promote shared decision-making for local-level stakeholders. Most importantly, ensuring that persons with disabilities and their representative organizations are meaningfully included in decision-making processes at all levels may promote inclusion, agency, and self-determination for Belizeans with disabilities.

Adopting such strategies in the Belizean context requires contextual sensitivity—acknowledging the nation's small population size, geographic dispersion, and limited tertiary education infrastructure. Those challenges notwithstanding, the previously discussed examples illustrate ways in which even resource-constrained countries may make significant progress when rehabilitation is prioritized as a rights-based obligation grounded in the AAAQ framework.

Ultimately, framing rehabilitation as a human right serves to transform the conversation surrounding disability—from one of charity to one of justice. It reframes access not as optional—but, rather, as a human right mandated by Belize's commitments under the CRPD and broader international law. The social model of disability further highlights that many barriers faced by PWD are not inherent to impairments, but to social systems that fail to provide them with available, accessible, acceptable, and high-quality services.

As with many other countries, Belize's path forward involves not only expanding services but also transforming attitudes, governance, and financing structures. This requires deliberately and meaningfully embedding rehabilitation into the core of health and development policy and ensuring that every citizen has the opportunity for full, thriving participation—both within their individual communities and within society.

## **Conclusion**

Persons with disabilities in Belize live at the intersection of health inequities, social stigma, and structural exclusion. While international human rights frameworks such as the CRPD and the SDGs provide powerful commitments to inclusion, the translation of these obligations into everyday practice remains incomplete. Rehabilitation must be recognized as more than a clinical intervention: it is a human right central to dignity, autonomy, and participation in society.

This paper has attempted to lay out how rehabilitation in Belize is constrained by multiple, overlapping barriers. These include the shortage of rehabilitation professionals, insufficient government financing, geographic inequities that exclude rural and Indigenous populations, and persistent stigma that frames disability as a matter of charity rather than justice. Such barriers are not unique to Belize, but their persistence underscores the urgency of reframing disability policy through a rights-based lens. Without intentional reform, rehabilitation will remain fragmented and inequitable, perpetuating cycles of exclusion for persons with disabilities.

Despite persistent challenges, Belize has important foundations upon which to build. Ratification of the CRPD, the recent Disability Bill, a proposed update of the National Mental Health Policy (Mental Health Act), a new medical school, and support for initiatives such as the Inspiration Center and the National Resource Center for Inclusive Education demonstrate political will and recognition of the need for reform.

However, without robust implementation mechanisms, these initiatives risk becoming symbolic rather than transformative. To move beyond rhetoric and positive aspirations, Belize must institutionalize rehabilitation as a core component of its health and academic systems, integrating it into national strategic planning and universal health coverage frameworks.

International guidance offers valuable pathways forward. WHO's Rehabilitation 2030: A Call for Action and the Guide to Action provide technical tools for governments to identify gaps and set priorities. By adopting tools such as the Systematic Assessment of Rehabilitation Situation (STARS), Belize could systematically assess its rehabilitation infrastructure, workforce needs, education capacity, and financing mechanisms. This process would not only generate evidence for reform but also establish a vision and allow transparency and accountability signaling a concrete commitment to fulfilling obligations mandated under international law.

The comparative experiences of other LMICs offer valuable lessons. Belize could potentially adapt some of these approaches, emphasizing community-based strategies, professional training pipelines, and cross-sectoral collaboration. The key lies in tailoring such models to Belize's unique demographic, geographic, and institutional contexts.

Ultimately, the challenge is not only technical but also normative. Reframing rehabilitation as a right rather than a privilege requires shifting mindsets across government institutions, health professionals, academic institutions, and society as a whole. It requires dismantling stigma, amplifying the voices of persons with disabilities, and ensuring their participation in decision-making processes. A rights-based and social model perspective demands that rehabilitation be embedded in national development agendas, not merely relegated to the margins.

The recommendations proposed are not aspirational ideals but actionable strategies—aligning with Belize's existing policy commitments and international obligations and offering a clear roadmap for reform. If pursued with sustained political will and inclusive partnerships, these actions can transform rehabilitation services from fragmented and underfunded programs into a robust, equitable, and rights-based system.

Belize is at a crossroads. The country can continue with piecemeal, charity-based approaches that leave persons with disabilities underserved and the government disincentivized. Or it can seize the opportunity to lead by embedding rehabilitation as a pillar of health, development, and human rights. The path forward requires courage, innovation, and investment at all levels of society, but the potential is profound: a Belize where every person, regardless of disability, has the opportunity to thrive, contribute to their community, and live with dignity. By answering the WHO's Rehabilitation 2030 call to action and harnessing international frameworks, Belize can transform rehabilitation from a peripheral concern into a central expression of its commitment to justice and inclusion.

Such a transformation would not only fulfill global obligations but also affirm a simple, yet powerful truth: rehabilitation is not charity, it is justice; it is not optional, it is essential; and in Belize, it must become a reality for all. And when this happens, everyone wins.

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# **Structural Exclusion and the Human Rights Crisis of Migrant Sex Workers in Belize**

**Avekadive Parasramsingh Mano<sup>1</sup>**

## **Abstract**

*Migrant sex workers in Belize face multiple vulnerabilities arising from criminalisation, migration status, inequality, and social stigma. Despite regional attention to sex work, Belize-specific research on undocumented migrant women remains scarce. This study addresses that gap by synthesizing secondary data from government documents, NGO reports, and regional and international literature. It applies a modified thematic network analysis to integrate insights from texts, policy documents, and regional research, ensuring a systematic and triangulated approach. Using a theoretical framework combining intersectionality, structural violence, and international human rights law, the paper identifies three key themes: legal ambiguity, structural marginalization, and systemic invisibility. Findings show that risks are systemic rather than individual, and current protections are insufficient. The study provides actionable, rights-focused recommendations that integrate legal, economic, and social reforms, offering a framework for both local and regional interventions. These interventions include decriminalisation, recognition of labour rights, inclusive access to health and social services, and enhanced monitoring and research.*

**Keywords:** migrant sex workers; Belize; human rights; intersectionality; structural violence

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## **Introduction**

Belize is situated along key migratory routes and serves as both a destination and a transit country for migrants from Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, and other Central American countries. These patterns reflect broader trends in trafficking and migration noted in international reports (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2014; United Nations Human Rights Council, 2023). Economic instability in their home countries, along with comparably higher wages and steady demand for informal labour in Belize, drives migrants to urban areas. Belize City, San Pedro, and several municipalities in the south depend on tourism and informal economies, pushing migrant women toward transactional sex when other support options are scarce. However, official statistics are limited, making it hard to gauge the full scale of migrant sex work and revealing a critical gap in evidence.

For many migrant women, engaging in transactional sex becomes one of the few effective ways to cope with overlapping challenges, like gender-based marginalization, migration issues, and economic hardship. Even with its visibility, the scope and effects of migrant sex work in Belize are not fully documented. The fear of legal consequences, social stigma, and lack of institutional support hinder data collection, leading to uncertain estimates of migrant women involved in informal sexual labour (Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 2024).

Belize's legal framework adds to these vulnerabilities. Although consensual adult sex work is not directly criminalised, provisions under the *Summary Jurisdiction (Offenses) Act* (Cap. 98) including offences related to public solicitation and loitering for the purposes of prostitution and the *Criminal Code* (Cap. 101) which prohibits operating brothels and benefiting from another person's earnings create indirect pathways to criminalisation (Belize, 1981; U.S. Department of State, 2024).

In practice, this legal uncertainty puts migrant sex workers at risk of arrest, harassment, and deportation, with undocumented women being particularly vulnerable. Belize has also been included in broader regional analyses that examine migration, exploitation, and sexual economies. For example, Guinn (2003) and Kempadoo (2006) identify how Belize's legal and social environment has long been shaped by regional migration pressures and anti-trafficking discourses. Although the report focuses on trafficking, its analysis of legal precarity, immigration enforcement, and policing practices offers important context for understanding why undocumented migrant women engaged in consensual sex work face heightened risk of detention, harassment, and social exclusion in Belize. Similar patterns of legal ambiguity and selective enforcement have been documented internationally, with Nordic countries showing how policies framed as protective can still create vulnerabilities for migrant sex workers (Vuolajärvi, 2019).

While research across the Caribbean has documented the challenges faced by sex workers, studies focusing specifically on undocumented migrant women in Belize remain scarce. This paper aims to fill that gap by exploring the structural, legal, and social challenges that shape the lives of migrant sex workers in Belize. Structurally, economic precarity and limited access to social services affect health outcomes and overall well-being (Yang et al., 2025; Mano, 2018b). Legally, indirect criminalisation through laws on solicitation and brothel-keeping, as well as selective policing, increases exposure to exploitation and harassment (Graham, 2017). Socially, stigmatization, discrimination, and exposure to violence further marginalize sex workers and restrict their ability to seek protection or social services (Argento et al., 2021; Kempadoo, 2004). The paper leverages secondary data from government publications, NGO reports, and regional and international research to place Belize within a broader Caribbean and Central American context.

The study revolves around three research questions:

1. How do Belize's legal and policy frameworks create vulnerability for migrant sex workers?
2. How do criminalisation, structural inequality, and migration status interact to limit their human rights?
3. What would a rights-based approach to protecting and including migrant sex workers in Belize look like, considering regional experiences and existing challenges?

By answering these questions, this research addresses a significant gap in Caribbean scholarship, where discussions about migrant sex work often lack connection to national legal and institutional frameworks (Kempadoo, 2004; Platt et al., 2018; Argento et al., 2021).

### ***Context of Sex Work and Migration in Belize***

Sex work in Belize is mainly found in urban areas, coastal tourist zones, and informal settlements. Demand in these areas is influenced by tourism, temporary labour populations, and local economic instability (United Nations Development Programme, 2023; Pan American Health Organization, 2023). Many migrants come to the country through informal jobs, such as domestic work, agriculture, and tourism support. These roles often provide unreliable income, limited protections, and little chance for advancement. Informal work is common across the Caribbean and Latin America due to structural labour market constraints, leaving migrant women vulnerable to exploitation and limited social protections (Freije, 2002; Sassen, 1998). For many women facing restricted job options, transactional sex becomes a practical way to survive in a difficult economic situation. Regional migration patterns documented by Guinn (2003) show that many women migrate to Belize due to economic precarity, limited opportunities, and demand for service-sector and sexual-economy labour. These structural pressures help explain why some migrant women enter consensual transactional sex as a livelihood strategy rather than through coercion.

Undocumented migrant sex workers face increased risks, including economic exploitation, unsafe living conditions, and difficulties accessing healthcare. Sex workers globally face disproportionate health risks, including limited access to HIV prevention and sexual health services, highlighting the need for targeted interventions in Belize (UNAIDS, 2014). The literature indicates that sex workers experience elevated risks of violence, sexually transmitted infections, and other health vulnerabilities due to criminalisation and structural inequalities (Shannon et al., 2015; Platt et al., 2018; Decker et al., 2015). Reports from NGOs and international organizations frequently document incidents of police harassment, arbitrary detention, immigration raids, and limited access to essential services (Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 2024; Amnesty International, 2022). Although exact statistics are hard to come by, estimates indicate that numerous migrant women work in informal sex roles in Belize's main urban and coastal areas. This highlights the importance of this group, despite the scarcity of official data (Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 2024; United Nations Development Programme, 2023).

Mano's (2018b) qualitative research offers rare insights into these realities. Using interviews with migrant sex workers and other persons involved with the industry from Belize City and coastal towns, the study sheds light on the complex challenges tied to informal work, legal uncertainty, and social stigma. It highlights how undocumented migrant women navigate selective law enforcement, fear of deportation, and social exclusion, often relying on informal networks for support and survival. These detailed accounts reveal the day-to-day realities behind statistical and policy reports, providing a nuanced understanding of systemic vulnerabilities that are frequently overlooked in government or NGO documentation. Such insights are essential for informing context-specific interventions and shaping a conceptual model that captures the interplay of legal, economic, and social risks faced by migrant sex workers in Belize. While many migrant women engage in transactional sex voluntarily, structural vulnerabilities increase the risk of exploitation and trafficking, a dynamic documented in modern slavery research (Bales, 2012).

Belize's legal system exacerbates this situation. The 1981 Criminal Code and the Summary Jurisdiction (Offences) Act make solicitation, managing a brothel, and profiting from someone else's sexual labour illegal (Belize, 1981). As a result, migrant sex workers find themselves caught between criminal and immigration laws. This makes them highly vulnerable to strict enforcement, threats of deportation, and limited access to legal assistance. Their social invisibility adds to their marginalization. Undocumented migrants tend to avoid authorities and public services due to fear of deportation, and their exclusion from national labour registries leaves policymakers with little data, which in turn strengthens systemic risk.

Evidence from the Caribbean region highlights similar issues, including legal uncertainty, police abuses, and unequal access to healthcare. Structural challenges, such as economic instability and limited access to social services, constrain sex workers' well-being and agency (Mano, 2018b; Yang et al., 2025). Legal vulnerabilities, including indirect criminalisation through laws on solicitation and brothel-keeping, and selective policing, increase exposure to harassment and exploitation (Platt et al., 2018). Social marginalization, manifested in stigma, discrimination, and exposure to violence, further limits access to protection and health services (Kempadoo, 2004; Argento et al., 2021). In the Dominican Republic, for example, economic precarity and informal employment constrain migrant women's agency and access to protections (Rocha-Jiménez et al., 2016). Migrant sex workers across the region, therefore, face systemic risks shaped by legal, economic, and social factors. Examining Belize within these contexts helps to situate its struggles, as selective policing, reliance on informal work, and limited access to social protections are common challenges (Mano, 2018b; Platt et al., 2018; Rocha-Jiménez et al., 2016).

## **Literature Review**

Research on sex work in the Caribbean shows that structural inequalities, shaped by history, economics, and societal norms, significantly affect women's experiences in sexual labour (Kempadoo, 2004; Kempadoo, 2006; Kempadoo, Sanghera, & Pattanaik, 2005). Migration, informal labour, and broader social exclusion combine to increase vulnerability, particularly for women with limited education or undocumented status. These women often enter informal sex work due to a lack of safe or adequate formal employment options. Gendered labour markets, economies driven by tourism, and ongoing stigma add to these risks. For many, sex work is less a choice and more a survival strategy.

A central focus in the literature examines how migration status interacts with legal and economic vulnerability. Law enforcement practices often exacerbate risks for sex workers, particularly undocumented migrants, through inconsistent enforcement and harassment (Shannon et al., 2015; Mano, 2018a; Graham, 2017). Migrant sex workers face unclear laws, selective policing, and limited access to healthcare and labour protections (Platt et al., 2018; Rocha-Jiménez et al., 2016; Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 2023). For example, Belizean laws on solicitation, brothel keeping, and profiting from another's earnings (Belize, 1981) are applied inconsistently, often targeting undocumented migrant women while local sex workers comparably face minimal enforcement (Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 2024; Amnesty International, 2022). This illustrates how legal frameworks can blur the line between consensual sex work and trafficking, creating disproportionate risks for migrants. Evidence from Jamaica, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic reveals similar patterns, underscoring the regional significance of these vulnerabilities (Platt et al., 2018; Rocha-Jiménez et al., 2016).

Guinn's regional assessment shows that Belize's prostitution-related laws mirror broader Central American patterns where anti-trafficking and prostitution laws operate interchangeably. This legal overlap, highlighted by Guinn (2003), helps explain the punitive environment migrant sex workers continue to face today. Even though Guinn's focus is on trafficking, the documented conflation of consensual sex work with

exploitation demonstrates how undocumented adult women can be targeted under enforcement strategies not originally designed for them.

Increasingly, these vulnerabilities are recognized as systemic rather than individual in nature. While informal peer networks may provide temporary support or protection, meaningful change requires structural reforms that address the root causes, including legal reform, labour protections, and social inclusion (Standing, 2011; UNDP, 2023). The concept of structural violence, as described by Farmer et al. (2006), elucidates these dynamics: social systems and entrenched inequalities limit life opportunities and exacerbate suffering. Evidence from the literature further indicates that migrant women experience compounded vulnerabilities at the intersection of gender, migration status, and social inequality (Cho et al., 2013; Farmer, 2004; Goldenberg et al., 2021; United Nations Human Rights Council, 2023). When applied to migrant sex work, this framework illustrates how legal marginalization, economic precarity, selective policing, and social stigma collectively restrict access to healthcare, labour protections, and justice.

The debate between criminalisation and decriminalisation further highlights these systemic risks. Criminal laws can create conditions for violence, harassment, and exploitation, while informal networks sometimes provide protective support. Comparative research from Sweden suggests that criminalizing the purchase of sex may reduce demand but can push sex work underground, increasing risks for workers (Dodillet & Östergren, 2011; Vuolajärvi, 2019). Comparative evidence from Asia and the Pacific demonstrates that punitive legal frameworks exacerbate vulnerabilities for migrant sex workers, highlighting the need for rights-based and decriminalized approaches (United Nations Population Fund, 2020). Scholars argue that effective policy should combine legal reform with targeted protections to reduce systemic vulnerability (Kempadoo, 2004; Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 2024). This is especially critical for migrants; whose undocumented status exacerbates the effects of selective law enforcement and social exclusion.

Another important issue is visibility in research and policy. Many studies treat sex workers as a single group, overlooking the distinct challenges faced by migrants (Argento et al., 2021; Shannon et al., 2015). Belize-specific research is limited, resulting in gaps in understanding how legal, economic, and social factors intersect to shape the risks faced by migrant women (Mano, 2018b). While regional studies provide valuable insights into the structural vulnerabilities faced by migrant sex workers, they do not fully account for Belize's distinctive legal, economic, and social environment. Belize's small population of approximately 397,483 people (Statistical Institute of Belize [SIB], 2024), concentrated urban centers, and reliance on tourism and informal labour create localized dynamics that differ from larger Caribbean nations. For instance, Tikkun Olam Belize (2022) documents that targeted police raids in Belize City disproportionately affect undocumented migrant women, often resulting in temporary detention, confiscation of personal belongings, and heightened fear of engaging with authorities. These enforcement patterns, coupled with limited social protections and small informal networks, illustrate risks that are amplified by Belize's unique socio-economic and regulatory context. Such localized trends emphasize the necessity of Belize-specific research to accurately capture the lived experiences of migrant sex workers and to inform tailored interventions and policies.

Belize's small population, concentrated urban and coastal job markets, and specific migration flows create localized risk patterns that may differ from those documented in Jamaica, Haiti, or the Dominican Republic. The scarcity of Belize-specific, migrant-focused research limits understanding of how undocumented women navigate these risks, the strategies they employ to survive, and the impacts of selective law enforcement. This gap underscores the novelty and necessity of the present study, which synthesizes available Belizean sources alongside regional evidence to generate contextually relevant

insights and inform rights-based interventions. This study addresses that gap by explicitly focusing on undocumented migrants and connecting structural vulnerabilities to rights-based frameworks.

Critical engagement with sources further shows how regional research highlights both patterns and gaps. While Caribbean studies document economic precarity, social marginalization, and ambiguous legislation, few studies disaggregate the experiences of migrants from those of local populations. Comparisons across the region reveal that selective enforcement, informal labour networks, and lack of access to health and justice services are recurrent themes. Yet, there is little evidence on how these factors interact specifically in Belize, reinforcing the need for localized, evidence-informed policy and advocacy (Platt et al., 2018; Rocha-Jiménez et al., 2016; United Nations Development Programme, 2023; International Labour Organization, 2024).

Rights-based approaches are increasingly emphasized, underscoring the importance of labour recognition, access to health services, and participatory governance (Laing, Pilcher, & Smith, 2015; Wijers, 2024). Integrating intersectionality clarifies how vulnerabilities are compounded by gender, migration status, and socioeconomic position, while structural violence theory explains why systemic, rather than individual, factors perpetuate risk. Together, these frameworks provide a foundation for comprehensive interventions that combine community support, legal reform, and policy changes.

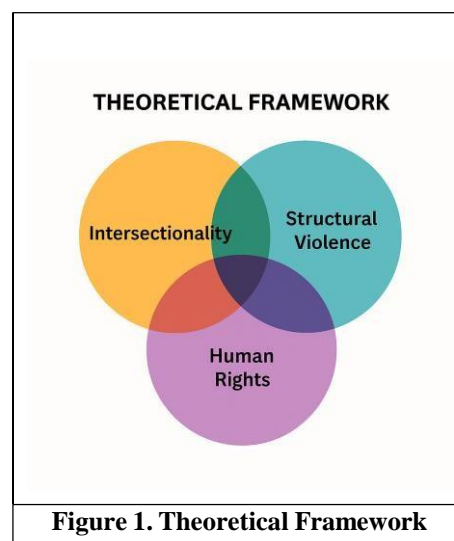
Significant gaps remain. Limited Belize-specific research on migrant sex workers, aggregation of migrant and local populations, and an under exploration of the links between legal ambiguity, economic instability, and social invisibility all constrain policy and practice. Few studies explicitly connect these structural vulnerabilities to human rights initiatives. This paper attempts to address these gaps by applying a rights-focused framework, grounded in both Belize-specific and regional evidence, to inform policy, advocacy, and service provision.

### ***Theoretical Framework***

Building on Kempadoo's analysis of Caribbean migrant sex work, this study uses intersectionality, structural violence, and human rights frameworks to understand the vulnerabilities of migrant sex workers within social, legal, and economic systems that vary across the region (see Figure 1).

Intersectionality enables us to understand how overlapping social identities, such as gender, migration status, socioeconomic class, and occupation, interact to create distinct forms of marginalization (Crenshaw, 2013; Hancock, 2007). In Belize, migrant sex workers face multiple vulnerabilities. Undocumented status limits their access to legal protection and formal jobs, and gender norms affect the risks associated with their work. Moreover, economic instability restricts their mobility and bargaining power. By focusing on these interconnected factors, intersectionality shows how systemic inequalities increase individual risks.

Structural violence adds context to these vulnerabilities. It highlights how harm is rooted in social structures rather than stemming only from individual behavior (Farmer et al., 2006). Guinn's (2003) findings also align with a structural-violence analysis of Belize's context. His regional overview shows how



broad anti-trafficking frameworks can institutionalize vulnerability by exposing undocumented women to policing and immigration detention regardless of consent (Guinn, 2003). When migrant women engaged in consensual sex work must avoid authorities due to fear of deportation, this reflects systematic harm generated by the state rather than individual actors.

Laws that criminalize solicitation, brothel keeping, and profiting from sex work create indirect legal threats, increase exposure to violence, and create barriers to health and social services (Abel et al., 2009; Dodillet & Östergren, 2011; Krüsi et al., 2021). Selective law enforcement and immigration practices deepen this instability. Structural violence underscores how the state and institutions perpetuate inequality through neglect or punitive measures, such as limited access to health, social, and legal services.

International human rights law offers standards to evaluate protection gaps for migrant sex workers (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2023; Amnesty International, 2022; Wijers, 2024). Rights frameworks assert that everyone, regardless of their occupation, migration status, or documentation, has the right to safety, health, labour protections, and freedom from discrimination. This perspective puts Belize in the context of global standards and highlights the gaps between legal obligations and real-life circumstances.

## **Methodology**

Migrant sex workers, especially those without documentation, face risks of detention, deportation, police harassment, and social stigma. To address these issues, this study employs a qualitative secondary data approach, involving the synthesis of publicly available materials. Figure 2 illustrates the process. Secondary data analysis allows for a systematic examination of existing information while maintaining confidentiality, triangulating government, NGO, and academic sources to construct a reliable understanding of structural vulnerabilities.

Sources were selected based on relevance to sex work, migration, labour rights, or human rights in Belize and the wider Caribbean. Priority was given to publications from 2004 onward to reflect contemporary legal, social, and economic contexts. Comparative regional studies were included to situate Belize within broader Caribbean patterns, while foundational texts on structural inequalities (e.g., Kempadoo, 2004; Farmer, 2004) informed the theoretical framing. Materials that only focused on trafficking, coercion, or contexts outside the Caribbean were excluded unless they provided relevant comparative insights.

Data were analyzed using a modified version of Attride-Stirling's thematic network analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001), adjusted for a supra-regional context (Mano, 2018a). Textual data were coded to identify recurring concepts related to legal grey zones, economic precarity, and social invisibility. These codes were clustered into four themes: basic, organizing, global, and supra-global, forming a hierarchical network that illustrated the interplay of legal, social, and economic vulnerabilities.

This approach allowed the research to systematically address the three research questions, linking structural factors to human rights implications.

Differences in the literature, such as varying reports on informal peer support networks or law enforcement practices, were noted to highlight the diversity in migrant sex workers' experiences (Platt et al., 2018; Rocha-Jiménez et al., 2016). Triangulation across legal texts, policy reports, and regional case studies enhanced analytical rigor, placing Belize's realities within the wider Caribbean and Latin American context (United Nations Development Programme, 2023; Pan American Health Organization, 2023).

**Ethical Considerations**

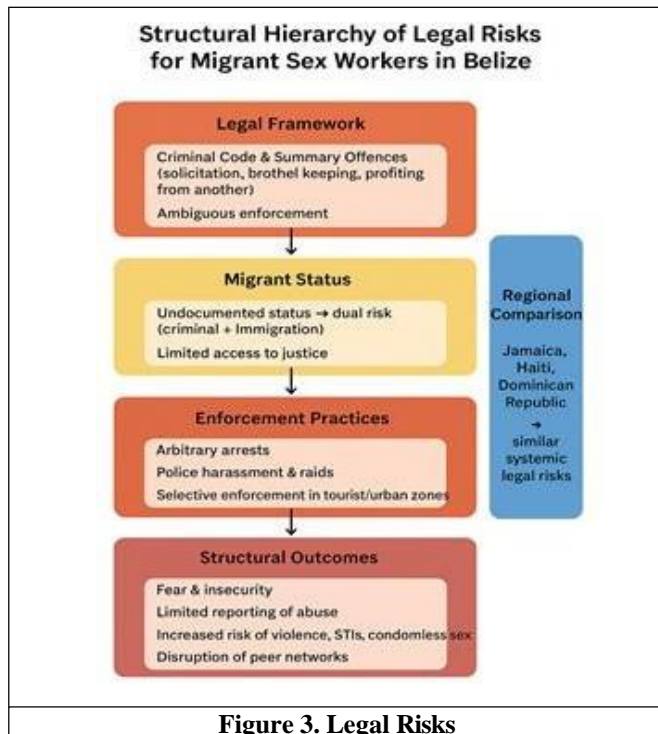
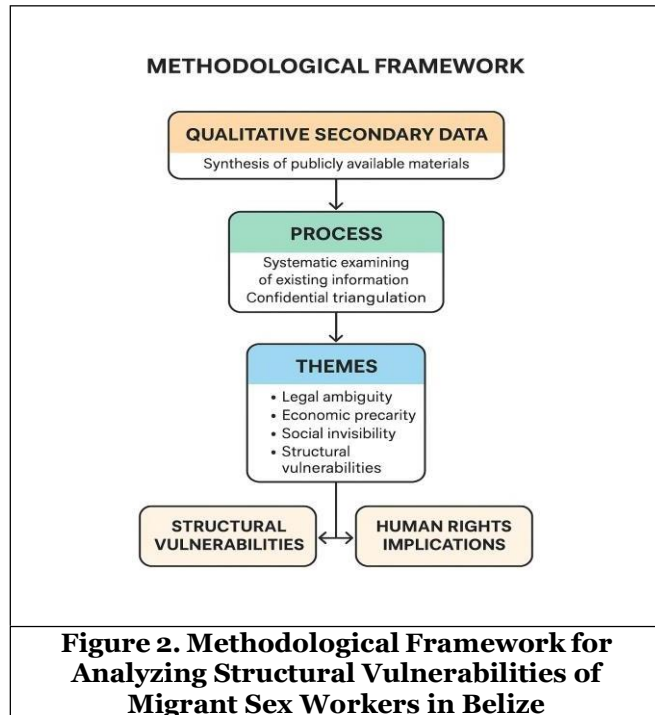
This study prioritized ethical responsibility by avoiding primary data collection that could place participants at risk. Instead, secondary data were carefully selected to ensure the protection of privacy, confidentiality, and safety. The analysis focused on human rights, legal frameworks, and social factors that shape vulnerability, particularly for undocumented migrant sex workers. By relying on publicly available government, NGO, and academic sources, the study generated insights into structural risks while upholding the ethical principle of minimizing harm (Amnesty International, 2022; Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 2024; United Nations Human Rights Council, 2023).

**Limitations**

The study is limited by its reliance on secondary sources, which may not fully reflect the experiences of migrant sex workers, especially undocumented individuals who are often overlooked in official records. Although triangulation and thematic analysis help address some gaps, the findings are restricted by the quality and range of the available materials. Future research that incorporates primary data could enhance the understanding of local experiences and inform targeted interventions.

**Findings**

Analysis of secondary data shows that migrant sex workers in Belize face overlapping structural vulnerabilities. These can be grouped into legal uncertainty, economic instability, and social invisibility. These challenges are systemic and made worse by undocumented status, gender norms, and restrictions of informal work.



### ***Legal Ambiguity***

Although adult consensual sex work is not explicitly illegal, laws on solicitation, running a brothel, and profiting from someone else's earnings put migrant sex workers at risk under criminal and immigration law (Belize, 1981). Undocumented migrant women are hit hardest; they face selective enforcement, arbitrary arrests, police harassment, and threats of deportation (Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 2024; Amnesty International, 2022).

Reports from NGOs and the government indicate that enforcement is inconsistent. Raids in urban and tourist areas often target undocumented women, while documented local sex workers are frequently ignored. Figure 3 further demonstrates the structural hierarchy of these legal risks for migrant sex workers in Belize. These patterns create ongoing insecurity, limit access to justice, and discourage reporting of abuse (see figure 4). In Belize City, Tikkun Olam Belize (2022) reports that undocumented migrant women were disproportionately targeted during police raids in 2021, with multiple cases of temporary detention and confiscation of personal belongings. Similarly, Amnesty International (2022) documents instances where migrant sex workers were threatened with deportation following complaints of abuse, illustrating the practical consequences of ambiguous legal frameworks. These concrete events highlight how selective enforcement compounds vulnerability, beyond theoretical legal risk. These incidents exemplify structural violence, showing how institutional arrangements, rather than individual behavior, produce harm and constrain agency (Farmer et al., 2006).

### ***Economic Precarity***

Limited formal employment, lack of social protections, and migration barriers force migrant women into informal sex work for survival. Their earnings are uneven, their negotiating power is limited, and middlemen often take a big cut of their income (United Nations Development Programme, 2023; Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 2024). Informal work setups limit access to health services, social insurance, and legal support, which deepens economic dependence and structural vulnerability. The link to theory here is clear: Evidence suggests that financial instability is exacerbated by unclear laws and social exclusion, resulting in systemic risks rather than personal choices (Platt et al., 2018; Rocha-Jiménez et al., 2016).

### ***Social Invisibility***

Migrant sex workers face multiple layers of stigma linked to their gender, occupation, and migration status. This stigma often discourages them from interacting with authorities, health services, and support networks (Amnesty International, 2022; Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 2024). They fear deportation and social exclusion, which increases their invisibility and restricts access to healthcare, legal aid, and social services. Reports show that these overlapping vulnerabilities create added risks, further marginalizing migrant sex workers and making them underrepresented in data and policy efforts. From a theoretical perspective, social invisibility illustrates intersectionality in practice: overlapping stigmatized identities compound risk and reduce access to rights protections (Hancock, 2007; Crenshaw, 2013). Informal networks help mitigate harassment and financial uncertainty, but structural and legal protections remain lacking.

### ***Conceptual Model of Structural Vulnerabilities of Migrant Sex Workers in Belize***

Drawing on evidence from Belize and regional research, this study proposes a conceptual model that synthesizes the structural determinants of vulnerability for migrant sex workers. The model identifies three interrelated dimensions: legal ambiguity, economic precarity, and social invisibility, and articulates how their interaction produces compounded risk (Figure 5). Conceptually, the model explicitly links empirical

evidence to structural violence theory (Farmer et al., 2006), intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2013; Hancock, 2007), and human rights frameworks (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2023; Amnesty International, 2022; World Health Organization, 2019).

The model conceptualizes vulnerability as systemic and cumulative rather than additive. Legal ambiguity constrains access to formal employment, reinforces economic precarity, and discourages engagement with institutions due to fear of arrest or deportation (Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 2024; Belize, 1981). This demonstrates structural violence in practice, as legal frameworks systematically limit agency. Economic precarity limits bargaining power and access to social protections, which in turn amplifies social invisibility and dependence on informal networks (Platt et al., 2018; Rocha-Jiménez et al., 2016). Social invisibility, manifested through stigma, exclusion, and marginalization, operationalizes intersectional theory, showing how overlapping identities produce compounded risk (Crenshaw, 2013; Hancock, 2007). These dimensions interact multiplicatively, producing compounded risks that extend beyond individual choices to reflect systemic and institutional constraints.

By mapping these interactions, the model provides a theoretically grounded, empirically informed framework for understanding migrant sex workers' structural vulnerability in Belize. It highlights how legal, economic, and social forces intersect to produce cumulative harm, offering a lens for both scholarly analysis and practical intervention. The evidence-theory link ensures that each observed phenomenon is situated within established frameworks of structural violence, intersectionality, and human rights, making the analysis both robust and explanatory. The model can inform rights-based policy responses, target legal reform, economic support, and social inclusion, while also provide measurable constructs to guide future research on structural vulnerability in Belize and comparable regional contexts.



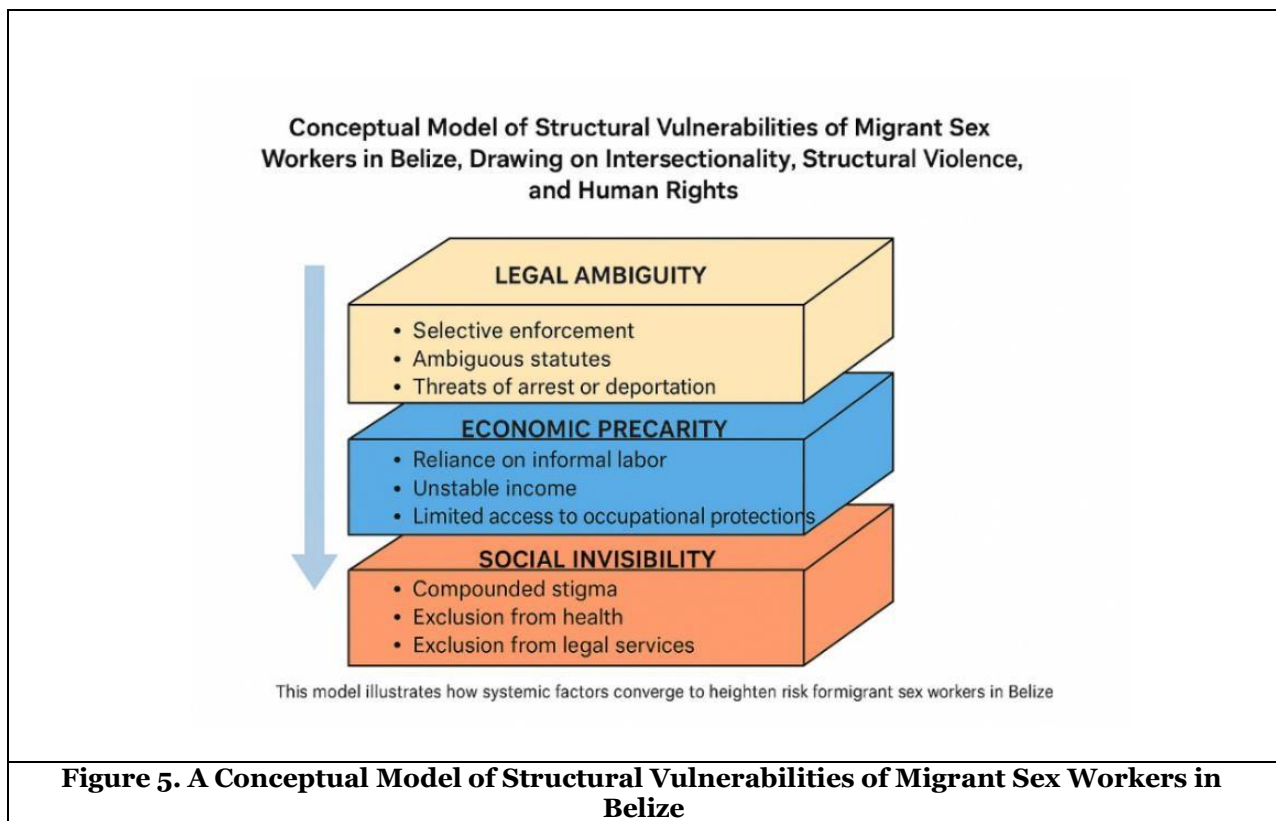
**Policy and Research Implications**

**Table 1. Policy/Research Implications**

Dimension	Policy/Research Implications
Legal Ambiguity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reform laws to clarify legal status of sex work</li> <li>• Ensure consistent enforcement</li> <li>• Create safe reporting channels</li> </ul>
Economic Precarity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognize sex work as formal labor</li> <li>• Enforce minimum protections</li> <li>• Improve access to banking, credit, and social security</li> </ul>
Social Invisibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduce stigma</li> <li>• Expand access to health and social services</li> <li>• Include migrant sex workers in policymaking and advocacy</li> </ul>

The conceptual model provides a structured framework for interventions and future research. Each dimension points to specific areas for action, as summarized in Table 1 and illustrated in Figure 5.

By grounding the model in Belize-specific evidence, regional literature, and theoretical frameworks, this study offers a rights-based approach to understanding vulnerability. It bridges the gap between empirical data, policy relevance, and structural theory, providing a foundation for both scholarly analysis and practical interventions.



## **Discussion**

The analysis shows that migrant sex workers in Belize face structural vulnerabilities linked to legal uncertainty, economic insecurity, and social exclusion. These risks are systemic, reflecting structural violence, gendered job markets, and migration-related marginalization rather than individual choices. Legal uncertainty, evident in laws around solicitation, brothel keeping, and profiting from another's earnings (Belize, 1981), disproportionately affects undocumented migrant women, creating fear, limiting reports of abuse, and restricting access to health and social services. Reports from NGOs and government sources indicate that enforcement is inconsistent: raids often target undocumented women while documented local sex workers may face minimal scrutiny (Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 2024; Amnesty International, 2022).

Guinn's regional overview suggests that Belize's situation aligns with broader Central American trends. Across the region, selective enforcement, blurred legal boundaries, and migration-related precarity create similar conditions of surveillance and marginalization for migrant women in the sex trade (2003). Comparative analysis with Jamaica and Haiti suggests that Belize's selective enforcement patterns are not isolated but part of a broader Caribbean trend where undocumented migrants face disproportionate policing (Platt et al., 2018; Rocha-Jiménez et al., 2016). Unlike these larger countries, however, Belize's small urban centers magnify the visibility of migrant sex workers, intensifying the effects of legal uncertainty. Evidence from New Zealand shows that decriminalisation of sex work can improve safety, labour protections, and access to health services for sex workers (Abel, Fitzgerald, & Brunton, 2009), offering potential lessons for Belize.

From the perspective of structural violence (Farmer et al., 2006), these vulnerabilities are embedded in institutional practices and legal systems, illustrating how state structures actively shape the distribution of risk. Intersectionality further explains how overlapping identities such as gender, migration status, occupation, and socioeconomic position compound marginalization, resulting in distinct patterns of exclusion for migrant sex workers (Crenshaw, 2013; Hancock, 2007).

Economic insecurity intensifies these structural risks. Informal sex work emerges as a survival strategy amid limited job opportunities, unstable income, and weak labour protections (Standing, 2011; United Nations Development Programme, 2023). Intermediaries and exploitative networks reduce financial independence, and a lack of formal recognition hinders access to social security, banking, and credit. Evidence from Belize aligns with findings in Jamaica, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic, where undocumented sex workers face similar economic vulnerabilities (Platt et al., 2018; Rocha-Jiménez et al., 2016). Community networks and peer support offer some temporary relief but cannot replace structural reforms, highlighting the need for interventions that address legal, economic, and social factors collectively. The reliance on informal labour networks in Belize demonstrates how economic precarity intersects with legal risk; unlike Jamaica or the Dominican Republic, where migrant sex workers may access larger informal support networks, Belizean migrants often face concentrated markets with limited negotiating power, exacerbating exploitation (United Nations Development Programme, 2023; Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 2024).

Social invisibility and stigma further increase risk by limiting access to healthcare, justice, and public services. Fear of deportation and social marginalization discourages interaction with authorities and health services (Amnesty International, 2022; Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 2024). This aligns with regional evidence, where undocumented migrant sex workers experience compounded vulnerabilities due to legal precarity, gender norms, and occupational stigma (Platt et al., 2018). The Belizean context, characterized by its small size, concentrated urban and coastal job markets, and specific migration flows,

underscores the importance of localized interventions informed by regional trends. The avoidance of public services in Belize reflects a calculated response to potential deportation, reinforcing systemic invisibility. Regional comparisons suggest that migrant sex workers' invisibility is both a survival strategy and a structural outcome of incomplete labour protections and selective law enforcement (Argento et al., 2021; Shannon et al., 2015).

Comparative analysis of the literature reveals gaps in both scholarship and practice. While studies in the Caribbean often address sex work broadly, few focus specifically on migrant populations in Belize, creating an evidence gap that this paper addresses. Legal frameworks often blur the line between consensual sex work and trafficking (Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 2024; U.S. Department of State, 2024), but local studies documenting this ambiguity are scarce. By linking findings to intersectionality and structural violence frameworks, the paper highlights how Ambiguous legal protections, precarious livelihoods, and social exclusion interact to produce systemic vulnerability.

Policy and practice implications are clear. Legal reform is essential to clarify laws that indirectly criminalize consensual adult sex work, ensuring consistent and fair enforcement. Recognizing sex work in labour protections and improving access to financial services could reduce economic insecurity. Interventions to address stigma, enhance visibility, and expand access to health and social services are vital to reducing cumulative vulnerability. Rights-based approaches, rooted in international human rights standards (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2023; Wijers, 2024), provide a framework for these interventions, emphasizing universal protection regardless of occupation or migration status.

Finally, the study identifies significant gaps for future research. Data on migrant sex workers in Belize, particularly regarding lived experiences, coping strategies, and health and labour outcomes, remain limited. Longitudinal studies could evaluate the impact of interventions over time, while analyses of legal and policy reforms would clarify ways to reduce structural vulnerability. Comparative Caribbean research can further guide context-specific strategies, ensuring interventions respond to both regional trends and local realities.

These findings directly address the study's research questions. Belize's legal and policy frameworks create vulnerability by leaving sex work in a grey area, allowing selective enforcement and placing undocumented migrant women at risk of arrest, harassment, and deportation (RQ1). The interaction of criminalisation, structural inequality, and migration status exacerbates these risks, underscoring how systemic factors influence vulnerability (RQ2). The evidence suggests a rights-based approach that combines legal reform, labour recognition, inclusive health and social services, stigma reduction, and systematic monitoring, informed by both Belize-specific and regional experiences (RQ3).

By making these connections explicit, the study situates its findings within broader theoretical and policy frameworks while demonstrating clear pathways for practical, rights-focused interventions.

## **Recommendations and Conclusions**

The analysis shows that migrant sex workers in Belize face structural vulnerabilities caused by unclear laws, unstable economies, and social invisibility. These issues reflect systemic risks rather than individual ones. Unclear laws about solicitation, brothel operation, and profiting from another's earnings (Belize, 1981) particularly impact undocumented migrant women. This creates fear, discourages abuse reporting, and limits access to health and social services. Understanding intersectionality reveals how overlapping identities, such as gender, migration status, occupation, and socioeconomic position, contribute to marginalization. Structural violence demonstrates how institutional practices and legal frameworks continue to perpetuate inequality (Crenshaw, 2013; Farmer et al., 2006; Hancock, 2007).

To address these risks, this study proposes six interconnected, evidence-based recommendations (see Figure 6). First, legal reform and decriminalisation are crucial for reducing systemic vulnerability. Laws that indirectly make consensual adult sex work illegal should be clarified or changed. New accountability measures should be established to ensure fair enforcement. These changes would enable migrant sex workers to seek justice, safely report abuse, and access formal support services without the fear of detention or deportation. Second, economic inclusion and labour recognition should take priority. Bringing sex work into official labour laws, with minimum wage protections, safety standards, and enforcement of labour rights, would improve financial independence. Access to banking, credit, and social security, along with the regulation of intermediaries, could lessen exploitation and create sustainable jobs. Third, creating pathways for migrant regularization is vital to reducing the vulnerabilities linked to undocumented status. Temporary work permits or official recognition of informal work, along with safe reporting channels, would strengthen protections and ensure access to health, legal, and social services. Fourth, access to health and social services needs to be broadened. Providing targeted sexual and reproductive healthcare, mental health support, and harm-reduction programs is essential, especially for individuals who may fear formal institutions. Mobile outreach, peer-led programs, and connections between health services and legal assistance would offer comprehensive support, minimizing cumulative risks. Fifth, addressing stigma and increasing visibility is crucial. Training for law enforcement, healthcare providers, and social workers, along with public awareness campaigns and including migrant sex workers in policy discussions, can help reduce discrimination and make interventions more relevant to their experiences. Sixth, strong monitoring, data collection, and research are necessary to guide evidence-based policy. Ethical methods for documenting the experiences of migrant sex workers, including undocumented individuals, along with comprehensive regional studies, will help clarify the impact of interventions and aid in developing suitable local and regional strategies.

Fourth, access to health and social services needs to be broadened. Providing targeted sexual and reproductive healthcare, mental health support, and harm-reduction programs is essential, especially for individuals who may fear formal institutions. Mobile outreach, peer-led programs, and connections between health services and legal assistance would offer comprehensive support, minimizing cumulative risks. Fifth, addressing stigma and increasing visibility is crucial. Training for law enforcement, healthcare providers, and social workers, along with public awareness campaigns and including migrant sex workers in policy discussions, can help reduce discrimination and make interventions more relevant to their experiences. Sixth, strong monitoring, data collection, and research are necessary to guide evidence-based policy. Ethical methods for documenting the experiences of migrant sex workers, including undocumented individuals, along with comprehensive regional studies, will help clarify the impact of interventions and aid in developing suitable local and regional strategies.

Future research could operationalize the conceptual model by collecting Belize-specific, primary data on each dimension of vulnerability. For instance, studies could systematically document legal encounters, economic precarity metrics, and experiences of social invisibility among migrant sex workers. Longitudinal designs would allow evaluation of interventions targeting decriminalisation, labour inclusion, and social support. By linking these dimensions to measurable outcomes, the framework provides a roadmap for both scholarly inquiry and evidence-informed policy development (Mano, 2018b; Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 2024).



Together, these recommendations incorporate intersectionality, structural violence, and human rights principles, forming a solid foundation for reform. By addressing legal, economic, and social factors that affect vulnerability simultaneously, Belize can pursue rights-based, evidence-informed actions that mitigate systemic risks while promoting inclusion. This study addresses a specific gap in the literature related to Belize and presents a framework that links interconnected structural vulnerabilities to practical policy and action steps. The integrated approach not only aligns Belize with wider Caribbean trends but also highlights the need for locally developed, rights-centered strategies to effectively protect and empower migrant sex workers.

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# Examining Intersections of LGBTQ+ and Women's Socio-economic Issues: A Belizean Case Study

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## Abstract

*Working-class single mothers are human rights defenders. They fight for their own rights and manage with limited access and resources to promote the equal treatment of others, including minorities. Currently there is little understanding of how these women navigate social and systemic barriers for justice and gender equality in Belize. Even less is known of what working class mothers experience when they challenge those same systems on behalf of LGBTQ+ people. Traditional gender roles and social norms ensure that women and LGBTQ+ community face similar economic, social, and sexual inequalities. Many of those socio-economic disparities are intersectional when we consider the impact of sexual orientation, gender, class, educational status, and ethnicity within the Belize context. This case study explores one woman's experiences, over six years, as she battled class stereotypes and gendered economic disparities, while fighting for the human rights, safety, and basic needs of her maturing bisexual son. This case documents her advocacy from the time he is eight years old and was assaulted by a teacher to the present as he continues to face bullying. It traces the mother's evolution as a human rights defender while she simultaneously traverses her own difficulties with discrimination, intimate partner violence (IPV), and economic instability. Her advocacy was shaped through various life events, including the sudden death of her husband, navigating social security benefits, her son's medical issues, resolving marital rights to property, and homophobic violence targeting her son. Throughout her engagement with various government institutions, the state appears complicit and indifferent. The case study highlights the lack of adequate investments to address Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ESC) issues impacting working-class single mothers and LGBTQ+ youth.*

**Keywords:** LGBTQ Youth, Belize, United Belize Advocacy Movement, LGBTQ Youth case study

*Note: The pseudonyms "Grace" and "Roy" are adopted to protect the privacy of the mother and son mentioned in this case study*

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## **The Scope of the Problem**

The case study of Grace presented and discussed in this paper helps to broaden the understanding of gender inequality in Belize. By tracing one mother's experiences with the judicial system, education system, law enforcement, her community and various public offices, the case outlines the intersectionality of gender, ethnicity, working class, and social status as major factors impacting women and sexual minorities. The study invites new questions about the state's preparedness to protect women's equality through law, regulations and policy (de jure) and their equality based on lived experiences based on socially and culturally constructed differences between men and women (de facto). The case study also highlights the state's attention to the rights of children and its constitutional obligations to protect lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ+) youths against stigma, harassment, and discrimination.

The combination of the mother's testimony and United Belize Advocacy Movement's (UNIBAM) documentation of her lived experiences over six-years, positions this case study as an intimate review of the socio-economic disparities working class mothers face; disparities that force them deeper into poverty. Without financial resources and social status, the study reveals that some working-class mothers are forced to become their own rights defender, leaning on ad hoc support systems and civil society organizations for help. This case demonstrates how human rights are violated at the court and community level, how gender biases and sexual- inequities are perpetuated within state systems, and the devastating impact left on women and children.

At the individual level, the case also reveals coping mechanisms developed by the mother and her son during a sustained period of discrimination and stress. It reveals how sexual orientation amplifies vulnerability to harassment and victimization, even when the victim is a minor child. Finally, it highlights the role of civil society and non-governmental organizations in maintaining human rights principle, underscored by UNIBAM's moral, financial, and logistical support of the mother and her son.

The issues identified in this case study were explored through the following research question and sub-questions. The driving research questions is:

*How does the state's limited investment and resource allocation reveal gaps in Belize's fulfilment of Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ESC) for working-class women and LGBTQ+ youth?*

This question is especially pertinent when we consider women's de jure rights in Belize and the de facto realities Grace experienced within the magistrate court. De jure rights refer to gender equality and non-discrimination through constitutional and other legislative guarantees and De facto rights refer to "Fit for Purpose" mechanisms that help to effectively monitor and implement the laws that safeguard women's equality (ICJ, 2014). As part of its commitment for the implementation of the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Elimination on all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Belize is legally obligated to ensure that women have substantive and cultural equality. Grace's experiences, as her son's rights defender, highlights an important epistemic gap. This study considers this issue within the following sub-questions:

1. *How do working-class mothers navigate systemic discrimination and operationalize personal agency to defend de jure rights?*

2. *In what ways do government institutions reinforce or fail to address inequalities experienced by working-class mothers and LGBTQ+ youth?*
3. *What reforms are needed to strengthen Belize's compliance with its national and international human rights obligations for achieving gender-equality?*

## **Positionality of the Authors**

### ***First Researcher: Caleb***

The spirit of the Garifuna people is that they fought the British Empire for the better part of a century, survived an attempt of genocide, and later arrived in Belize seeking refuge and a better life. As a gay man, who must fight the oppression of homophobia, I share similar values within the context of resistance against covert and overt forms of discrimination and assault. I believe in the principles of human dignity and if I will be discriminated against, then it will be for my beliefs on social justice and equality and not only for my sexual orientation.

This case study, emerging from my reflection on the advocacy provided by UNIBAM, highlights the promise of hope for marginalized populations, even in seemingly unsurmountable difficulties. The tenacity of the mother to improve her quality of life, her perseverance in confronting abuse, and her willingness to keep trying for solutions, embody a spirit of resistance that I share. While the mother's approach is survival, my position is grounded in civic advocacy, human rights, and as a change-maker. This case study is the representation of strength, inspiration, and humanity beyond the limitations of masculinity and femininity-guided by core principles of justice, parity, and equality that are innate to my beliefs. This case study carries forward the strength of mothers and the advocacy of 'bembe' women who helped to propel gender equality in Belize throughout the twentieth century. I write and analyse Grace's story through the power and history of resistance.

### ***Second Researcher: Jasmine***

I identify myself as Creole woman, a mother, and a feminist. I hold two post-graduate degrees, I am a former educator, and an entrepreneur. On the surface my background looks very different from that of the mother involved in this case study; however, my positionality is deeply entwined with the subject matter of this case. I was raised by a single mother who experienced extensive intimate partner violence and coercive control by multiple partners. My maternal grandmother's education ended at the secondary level, my mother never returned to a classroom after graduating primary school, and my eldest sister left school to help care for her younger siblings. The generational experiences of women in my family, shaped by their gender, economic status, educational attainment, and social class have impacted how I see and understand myself in the within Belizean society, the regard I have for 'gender' as a factor in everyday life, and how I view socio-economic disparities impacting Belizean women. My feminist views are grounded in academic research, theories, and lived experiences. I view the power relations between women and institutions, women and the law, and women and their intimate partners as being directly related to Belize's patriarchal norms, gender expectations, and the historic psycho-social subordination that women have faced under British rule and post-independence.

Rhode (1990) argued that feminist scholars must challenge the "tokenism" of political movements that solicit a "women's point of view" while maintaining the male perspective as the unstated norm (p. 618). Crucially, Rhode contended that traditional legal approaches often allow mandates of formal equality to

obscure substantive inequality-particularly when legal decision-makers fail to recognize gender bias (Rhode 1990, p. 630). Butler (1990) explored gender as a historical, performative construct, asserting that gender is not simply expressed but enacted through culturally sanctioned behaviours. From through this lens, I analyse the lived experiences of the mother and her son mentioned in this case study. Maintaining confidentiality and ethics for the mother's experiences are tied to my experience as an academic researcher.

## **Literature Review: *Centering De jure & de facto equality***

Belize bears constitutional, regional and international treaty obligations to addressing Economic, Social, and Cultural (ESC) concerns for its citizens. The International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), article I&II, recognize the self-determination of all people to freely pursue economic, social and cultural development and calls on states *not* to discriminate based on characteristics, including sex. The Belize Constitution preamble (e) has its own reference to ESC issues and notes that it will:

require policies of state which... eliminate economic and social privilege and disparity among the citizens...; which ensures gender equality; which protect the rights of the individual to... basic education, basic health (Belize Constitution, 2011, Preamble)

While the Belize Constitution section 6(1) is an equal protection clause, its implementation in statutory legislation remains devoid of the state's commitment to LGBTQ+ Belizeans who exists with multiple, intersectional identities which includes race, sexual orientation and gender identity. The 2012 Youth Policy and the 2020 Education Act complement the state's international and constitutional ESC obligations. The former establishes the need for a non-discriminatory approach to youth development initiatives while section 29(13) of the latter states that it shall

(d) "neither directly nor indirectly, or unfairly discriminate among persons on grounds of gender, disability, race, religion, ethnicity, socio-economic status, political affiliation, or any other forms of discrimination"

Nevertheless, language in The Education Rules (2012), that target non-discrimination, remains vague which helps to enable the institutional circumvention of Belize's non-discriminatory state commitments. Similarly, while The Educations Act (2012) commits to non-discrimination, the Education *rules* appear to cultivate language that undermines a child's right to an education if he or she is an LGBTQ+ youth. Under section 3 b(x) of the rules, there is reference to "action directed at subverting the democratic process or interests of the community" (p) - the community does not appear to include non-binary citizens.

Some of the discriminatory practices in educational institutions go beyond gender and sexuality. Incidences of hair discrimination, often tie to ethnicity, made the news coverage in 2018. Yet, no movement has been taken in Belize for 14 years after the National Youth Policy was endorsed by government in 2012. The High Court Ruling of Case 668 in 2010 (Orozco v The Attorney General of Belize) which decriminalized same sex intimacy, did not move the state in strengthening its ESC responsibilities or add urgency for passage of anti-discrimination bills, such as, the Equal Opportunities Bill (EOB).

The State's inattention to its obligations and its deficient investments for dealing with such complex issues, has had a significant impact on working class, single mothers and their children. These mothers have filled the void that state legislation and policy should protect, by asserting themselves as a rights defender for themselves and their children.

The Needham Point Declaration on criminal justice reform made recommendations that call for implementation of a holistic and inclusive Criminal Justice Reform Strategy as well as a need to have considerations of the impact of intersectional issues like youth, crime, gender, gender identity, economics in addressing stereotypes in the criminal justice system.

With statutory laws devoid of legal services support or strong mechanisms to support redress this case study, help to highlight the challenges to rights enforcement for a mother with limited resources to demand resolution of ESC concerns.

Next, we offer a brief understanding of the multiple identities working class, single women navigate as they experience economic marginalization within their role as rights' defenders.

### ***Advocacy: Human rights & Gender rights***

Advocacy is “the pursuit of influencing outcomes” (Carroll, 2010). For youth, advocacy resists oppression and upholds justice through marches, protests, digital campaigns, and public panels (Poteat & Kiekens, 2025). Those who engage in such ordinary, yet courageous acts are recognized as human rights defenders, holding those in power accountable and often risking their lives, liberty, and reputations in pursuit of equality (Nah, 2020). Nah and Smith (2019) found that the *gender* of rights defenders mattered significantly where women tend to grapple with more misogynistic attacks while lesbians, bi-sexual and trans women faced a particular threat from institutional discrimination. In the context of LGBTQ+ rights, advocacy applies international human rights standards to analysing issues, taking action, and amplifying voices.

Internationally, the need to protect human rights advocates is well established. The United Nations (UN) human rights protection regime offers safeguards at the individual, group, and community levels, yet their legitimacy is often challenged at the state level (Bennet, et al., 2015). In Belize, although gender equality is widely accepted as a priority of the state, there is tension around gender identity, sexual orientation, and the socio-cultural factors that continue to contribute to discrimination against women. This next portion of the literature review looks at some of the factors that outline women's de facto equality in Belize.

### ***Law and Labour: Women's socio-economic status & identities***

The status of Belizean women today as “somewhat paradoxical” (Brunot & Wainright, 2024). Considering the intersection of gender, economic status, motherhood, ethnicity, religion, and geographic location, the status of Belizean women would be better described as a myriad of paradoxes and oxymorons. One paradox is that women have made significant economic and educational advancements while their political and economic status has remained a sort of participation without representation (Lewis, 2012)- women make up only 4% of Cabinet (National Women's Commission, 2023).

The oxymoron is that Belizean women, who demographically have higher educational attainment than their male counterparts, remain one of the most underutilized segments of the labour force (Hadley et al., 2020). Women are the educated-unemployed and the freely entrapped whose economic advancement have not surpassed the over empowering influence of traditional gender norms, rooted in Belize's patriarchal culture (Gordon, 2020).

The statistics paint an even clearer picture. The Belize Census (2022) revealed that 33.5% of females were head of households in Belize. Females make up most secondary school students at (51.2%) as well as at the tertiary level being 62.8% of grandaunts. Nevertheless, more education for women has not translated into a smaller gender wage gap. In 2021 women made 24% less than men. Women make up 50.8% of the total population in Belize; however, even in 2025 the female employment rate was (41.7%) or 16.6% lower than men's which was 58.3% (SIB, 2025). Nearly sixty percent of women say that they have never married and 89.5% of women, not in the labour force, say that personal and family duties prevent them from working.

Women carry the bulk of the responsibility for unpaid domestic work and childcare. Submission to their male partners is expected and domestic violence against them is largely considered "no big deal" (Lewis, 2012, p. 37). Furthermore, domestic violence is endemic within Belizean society (CEDAW, 2024). Between 2009-2023, 185 women have been killed within domestic violence disputes- shooting and strangulation are the leading cause of death (Belize Crime Observatory, 2025). Just in September of 2025, five women were killed in a span of 20 days, placing intimate partner violence (IPV) at the forefront of women's struggle for equality and legal protection.

Despite economic and social pressures for women to contribute to national development, entrenched gender ideologies continue to limit support for women across class, ethnicity, and educational background (CEDAW, 2024, pp. 58–62). This lack of societal support has profound implications for women's collective identity and lived experiences. Arguably, women's vulnerability to gender-based violence, sexual exploitation, poverty, and the double burden of domestic labor is sustained due to this patriarchal norm. Women remained fearful of reporting sexual harassment in the workplace, struggled with low self-esteem when challenging traditional gender roles, and faced discriminatory attitudes within the judicial system. Belize's church-state education system further constrained progress on gender issues, sexuality, and family life education (United Nations, 2005).

The intersection of roles and identities compound their socio-economic issues which are largely misrecognized within the Family Court, the health system, the education system, and other government institutions that are supposed to be impartial and non-discriminatory.

### ***Motherhood: An Identity of Survival and Entrapment***

At the heart of working-class women's socio-economic challenges, gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, socio-economic status and class is intersecting with cultural expectations that complicates motherhood. Gordon (2020) argued that Belizean women are expected to become mothers the moment they enter a cohabiting relationship. She asserts that "motherhood" itself is a central gender identity. According to CEDAW (1999), "Belizean society assigns a strong value to mothering" and that "Gender roles are clearly defined and not questioned within the context of everyday life...children can be beaten for playing with the wrong kind of toy". The implications of having such strict expectations based on traditional gender roles, while there is a prevalence of gender-based violence, is that is that equality for women and LGBTQ+ citizens cannot be addressed without unpacking sexual inequality. This is especially true when women take on the role of rights defenders for other sexual minorities.

At times women are forced to become their own rights defenders due to the cost of legal representation. Access to justice continues to be limited due to the high cost for retaining an attorney (CEDAW, 2024). Arguably, women in Belize enjoy substantive de jure equality where legislation and policy continue to revise as a part of Belize's gender-quality goals. The Spotlight Initiative (2022) praises Belize's legislative and

policy framework for aligning with international human rights standards, noting the existence of training manuals for court officials and programs aimed at shifting inequitable gender norms. However, data from the Belize Crime Observatory (2025) paints a starkly different picture. In May 2025, intimate partner violence accounted for 51.7% of domestic violence reports. Of the 789 reports filed, 697 were made by women. Between January and October 2024, nine out of ten victims of gender-based violence were female, and 67% of perpetrators were identified as current or former intimate partners.

Economic hardship, motherhood, and domestic violence collectively shape the identity and living standard of Belizean women across ethnicities, race, class, socio-economic status, educational background, and geographic location. These intersecting and conflicting identities strain women emotionally and economically. Under these circumstances, how is it possible for the average woman and working-class mother to operationalize her personal agency for upward social mobility or to protect the rights of her children, and other marginalized groups?

To explore this question, this review now turns to the status of LGBTQ+ community in Belize and Belize's existing national, regional, and international obligations to safeguard all its citizens and vulnerable communities.

## **The Belizean LGBTQ+ Community: Beyond gender marginalization**

*The Belize Legal and Empirical LGBTQ+: Case Study* (Crehan, et al., 2024) reveals that vulnerability to violence and discrimination increases with low-economic status, but more resources equal a buffer to homophobia (p. 51). The Anti Sexual Harassment Act, the Inter-American Convention on Protecting the Human Rights for Older persons offer support to LGBTQ+ populations along with section 53 ruling of 2016. Section 53 judgement of 2016 referenced the United Nations Human Rights Council decision in 1992 in (*Orozco v The Attorney General of Belize*, 2016, pp. 35- 36) and spoke of sex in article 2 and 26 for the International Covenant for Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) was interpreted as including sexual orientation when Belize acceded to the ICCPR, as a result, it tacitly embraced the interpretation.

Yet, while the ruling was given on August 10<sup>th</sup>, 2016, advancement in new legislation remains limited to the Anti Sexual Harassment Act and the Inter-American Convention on Protecting Older Persons that acknowledge sexual orientation and gender identity in some form. The police policy for the treatment and detention of LGBTQ+ Belizeans was endorsed in 2024, a first, in the Police Department history. While the Ombudsman office is available for human rights reports by LGBTQ+ population, its authority is limited to public authority, not private authority and its ability to support constitutional concerns are limited to documentation and inquiry. While the High Court is accessible on paper, the reality for a working-class, single mother with limited resources to defend her son from homophobia or violence is affected by prohibited cost; she would have to go into debt to access justice for her son.

In Belize, the law does not define what is considered a family. Examining existing data about the value of family support to an LGBTQ+ person, establishes the buffering they received in the enjoyment of their ESC rights as citizens. In reference to dependency on family for support, the 2018 Belize summary report, *Estimate of Key Population Size of Men who Have Sex with Men and Transgender Women*, reveals that 38% of men who have sex with men stay with family/parent (Budhwani, Waters, & Hasbun, 2018, p. 23). Those who rent, stay with friends, or are homeless make up a combined 42%. establishing the importance of parents subsidizing housing access for LGBTQ+ populations at large. The report found that when support exists, there is a 69% achievement rate for acquiring primary and secondary education (p.19) regardless of

homophobic violence within the community. When family support deteriorates, the study found that 46.1% of young men who have sex with men (MSM) reported that their own families made discriminatory remarks reinforcing psychological violence. The Legal and Empirical Analysis of LGBTQ+ Economic, Social and Cultural Rights: Case Study (2024), offers two tables that highlights the relationship LGBTQ+ Belizeans have within families. The first speaks to discrimination and exclusion.

**Table 1: Experience with Discrimination (Crehan, et al., 2024, p. 33)**

ITEM AGREEMENT (%)	LGBQ	Trans	Hetero-Cis
I have experienced discrimination or exclusion from my family	34.7	41.4	16.3
This discrimination or exclusion was a result of my gender or sexual identity†	79.0	83.3	–
As a result of this discrimination or exclusion:†			
<i>I experienced shame as a result of interacting with family members</i>	63.9	83.3	26.7
<i>I was forced into a heterosexual relationship</i>	12.6	29.2	6.7
<i>I was denied the ability to live openly</i>	45.4	62.5	6.7
<i>I was deprived of financial resources</i>	14.3	25.0	6.7
<i>My family cut me off from generational wealth</i>	13.4	8.3	0.0
<i>I was kicked out of the house</i>	16.0	20.8	6.7
<i>I was forced into conversion therapy</i>	10.1	4.2	0.0

Table 1 shows that 63.9% of the sample size experience shame because of interacting with family and 45.4% who answered this question reported being denied living openly. Reliance on family comes with a double-edged sword. The table below speaks to reliance of family and the family reliance on them. It shows a pattern of dependency in housing, food, financial resources and other basic needs, but over time a co-dependency relation develops when the family relying on an LGBTQ+ person for food and financial resources.

**Table 2.: Reliance on Family for Support**

Item Agreement (%)	LGBQ	Trans	Hetero-Cis
I rely on my family for:			
<i>Housing</i>	33.5	42.0	42.0
<i>Food</i>	37.1	42.0	40.0
<i>Financial resources</i>	33.8	31.9	39.0
<i>Other basic needs (clothes, etc.)</i>	22.8	31.9	27.0
<i>I don't rely on my family for finances or resources</i>	27.1	33.3	27.0
My family relies on me for:			
<i>Housing</i>	6.9	4.3	18.0
<i>Food</i>	20.5	23.2	24.0
<i>Financial resources</i>	35.3	33.3	36.0
<i>Other basic needs (clothes, etc.)</i>	12.8	11.6	21.0
<i>My family doesn't rely on me for finances or resources</i>	30.7	31.9	36.0

Table 2 highlights the cyclical reality of meeting basic needs. It shows a time when a LGBTQ+ person is dependent on family and graduates to a time when they are self-sufficient and contributing to family.

Sociological theories offer insights into this case study. It can be noted that Structural Functionalism, according to American sociologist Talcott Parsons, requires that each gender fulfills distinct functions to satisfy societal cohesion (Parsons & Bales, 1955). The theory has been criticized for reinforcing stereotypical roles that limit personal freedoms (Bernard, 1964; Chafetz, 1997; Merton, 1968). Parson's view of the need for structural functionalism is right, but it is only part of the analysis in family investment. Conflict theory, on the other hand, argues that gender is a tool used to maintain dominance (Collins, 1975). In table 1, that dominance is reflected in forms of economic and psychological violence rooted in homophobia-often enacted to correct any perceived wrong to the traditional family structure.

While both tables do not speak directly to gender and social identity, the mother and son in this case study does. Symbolic Interactionism acknowledges that 'gender' is not fixed but instead is a social identity that is learnt and reinforced through socialization. This theory builds on Conflict Theory and Parsons Structural Functionalism as a pathway to better understand how heterogeneity affects the mother and son lived experiences.

In closing this section, we draw upon the work of Butler (1990) who critiqued judicial systems for producing subjects within imbalanced power structures. She warns that unless categories like "man" and "woman" are unpacked for their social and historical dimensions, legal systems will continue to constrain women's emancipation. Belize defines gender as "the socially constructed roles allocated respectively to men and women," acknowledging their historical and cultural context and the unequal power relations they often entail (National Women's Commission, 2024). However, gender is still interpreted within a strict binary. This binary framing means that the legal mechanism that exist as women's de jure equality, only protect their rights to the extent that the judiciary sees them as fixed gendered subjects.

Culturally, women are expected to provide for their children while surviving or escaping domestic abuse—a burden shaped by social norms around motherhood. Gordon (2020) found that rural women were oppressed by traditional gender roles, lacked support from family and authorities, and felt pressured to conceal their abuse. Gordon explains that for many women, motherhood and the safety of their children is the decisive factor when leaving an abusive relationship. Societal expectations in Belize place the full weight of child welfare and unpaid domestic labor on women which may explain why many women identify more strongly as mothers than as wives (United Nations, 1996, pp. 59–60). How are women equal in Belize when there is such a gap between their de jure rights and their de facto realities?

This next section explains the methodological design used in this case study to capture and analyse the lived experiences of Grace.

## **Methodology**

This case study employed a qualitative, interpretive, and feminist research methodology. Qualitative approaches prioritize open-ended inquiry and interpretive meaning-making (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Case study research involves the investigation of one or more cases within a particular setting or context, better referred to as a bounded system (Creswell, 2007). Its qualitative elements ensure a holistic approach

to the issue that is being studied (Chowdhury & Shil, 2021). Bounded parameters may include a specific location, timeframe, and the individuals involved while the type of case study will depend on what the researcher focuses the analysis on (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Using the mother's lived experiences as its focus of analysis, this investigation is a single instrumental case study (Creswell, 2007; Creswell & Poth, 2018) that presents an in-depth understanding of the intersectionality of class, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. It employs observation, documents, legal analysis, and direct correspondence as forms of data collection. The triangulation of the data, through these different forms of collection mechanisms, improves the confidence in the findings (Chowdhury & Shil, 2021). Qualitative sampling, such as those collected in this case, is not intended to be "representative" (Abrams, 2010); however, case study data can be theoretically generalizable (Chowdhury & Shil, 2021).

While the mother is the main unit studied in this case, the experiences of her young son are considered as an important component within the data analysis. The events highlighted in the study developed organically through the mother's interactions and advocacy. Using an iterative analytical process, themes emerged through close engagement with the mother and her son and through a review of the data. The case study research methodology allowed for an intimate understanding of the circumstances, experiences, and perspective of the mother and her son, explored through a feminist-legal perspective.

### **Consent & Confidentiality:**

The use of the case documents and lived experiences of the mother involved in this study was secured through a signed consent form. The mother was informed of the purpose and aim of the study, she was notified of the subject areas that it would discuss, along with possible risks it could cause to her and her son. She was notified that she could withdraw her consent at any point while the research; however, Grace opted for more and direct involvement in the case study. Her interviews, feedback, and opinions on the issues discussed in this research positions her as a co-creator of the investigation.

### **Data Collection**

The primary data used in this study is the accumulation of documents gathered over six years, interview recordings, and personal notes taken made by the director of UNIBAM. UNIBAM is an L.G.B.T.Q+ organization with a prolific reputation for operating on human rights advocacy principles. Grace first contacted UNIBAM in 2021 after feeling turned away by the magistrate court. UNIBAM's rights advocacy was paramount to her concerns for achieving justice for her son.

Over the last six years, UNIBAM has provided financial and moral support to the mother. The organization has also supplemented payments for food, bills, medical consultations, the son's prescription glasses, legal representation, and the cost for the son's counselling. The director of UNIBAM has also attended the son's school to speak with administrators over bullying targeting the boy. He has also been directly involved in communication with various individuals and parties involved in the mother's engagement with public institutions, helping her to maintain marital assets and social-security benefits after her husband had passed away. UNIBAM continues to be involved in matters relating to the son.

The documents were filed into five major categories and safely stored at UNIBAM's office. Only the main researcher in this case study has had and maintains access to the data to maintain confidentiality and anonymity. Consent to use the data and to conduct the study was given through a signed consent form. The

mother was informed of the purpose of the research, its aim, and the subject areas that it would discuss may include the personal information and events mentioned in the documents. The documents include:

1. *Media Reports*: primarily on the son's injury in 2018
2. *Land papers*: These are inclusive of the mother's registration for matrimonial land, notes on the barriers for processing her land title, copy of her application to get land title, lawyers letter to Lands Commissioner to investigate her claim, marriage certificate, receipts that showed we paid for the land, copy of land title.
3. *Social Security files*: Include medical papers, death certificate of husband, social security application for funeral grant, copy of marriage certificate,
4. *Son's Medical Files*- letters from Belize Council of the Visually Impaired (BCVI), Karl Huesner Memorial Hospital (KMH) and Belize Health Care Partners- including prescription for migraine, glasses, and cost for medical assistance
5. *Notes on son problems at school*: inclusive of voice recording from interviews

Each file chronologically traces major issues encountered by the mother, Grace, within her identity as a Garifuna, single, working-class mother and sole rights-defender of her self-identified bi-sexual son. Bhattacharjee (2012) emphasized the researcher's role as a data collection instrument through observation, relational engagement, and sensitivity to context. The observations and correspondences shared between the director of UNIBAM and various individual and institutions involved are also considered within the data collection and analysis.

## **Data Analysis**

The data analysis procedure used in this investigation was Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis method, chosen for its flexibility and alignment with feminist epistemologies. The objective of the research was to understand how a mother's access to justice, for her son, is impacted by her gender, ethnic, and socio- economic status.

The analysis was inductive, relying on the documents compiled over six-years and the researcher's observations to form themes and generate possible theories. As Reichertz (2014) explains, induction is a form of logical reasoning, not a tool or concept but a way of generating and connecting ideas. The analysis procedures were grounded in feminist principles, with a deliberate focus on amplifying the attitudes, beliefs, and lived realities of Grace as a working-class, Garifuna mother with a self-identified LGBTQ+ son.

The process involved direct engagement with the mother and son and document analysis. The coding process included analysing the information for semantic content and symbolic and affective undertones. Themes were developed iteratively, guided by the research question and sub-questions.

## **Limitations, Reliability, and Validity**

As a single instrumental case study, broad assumptions about discrimination and gender inequality cannot be made; however, as a case study methodology, this investigation can still represent a significant

contribution to knowledge, capturing the complexity of one individual over a period (Chowdhury & Shil, 2021).

Flick (2009) emphasize that reliability in qualitative inquiry depends on detailed documentation of the research process and data collection procedures. Validity, meanwhile, asks whether researchers “see what they think they see,” and can be judged through both the mechanisms of data production and the interpretive presentation of findings. The methodological and accurate documentation of Grace’s experiences inform the reliability and validity of this this investigation. While qualitative research may resist the statistical measurements of validity and reliability found in positivist paradigms, clearly established standards must still be upheld (Richards, 2005).

## **Grace: A mother and an advocate**

Grace, who is Garifuna, was born in Punta Gorda Town in 1980. At the age of four, she moved to Belize City with her grandmother and attended a local primary school. Seeing her grandmother struggle to provide, Grace decided to quit school at the age of 13 to ease the family’s financial burdens. She was in standard five at the time. At the age of 16, Grace met a 19-year-old young man who would go on to become her common-law husband and then her marital husband until the day he passed away in 2021. Grace had two sons, but the relationship was an unhappy from the start. Her husband was physically and emotionally abusive; however, Grace found it difficult to leave the home because her husband was the sole bread winner. Her husband struggled with alcoholism and was also known to her to be bi-sexual. Eventually, the physical abuse and danger to her children forced Grace to leave the relationship. She reflects in her decision that:

*“Ah try kip dis tuggedah but sumbadi mi wah end up dead”* (Grace)

### ***The Assault on her son***

At the time Grace first came to UNIBAM’s offices her youngest son Roy was eight years old, and she had been living with a new partner. In 2019, Grace received a call from her son’s school telling her only to “come” to the school immediately without sharing any other details. A teacher met her at the gate and directed her towards a building. Once she was inside, Grace observed that her son’s face was swollen to the extent that he could not open one of his eyes. The principal informed her that a teacher had struck him and that the teacher was still on the compound. Her son was struck in the face by a female teacher who used a wooden ruler to assault him.-Grace immediately asked why her son was not taken to the hospital as he was in obvious physical pain because he vomited from the discomfort. According to Grace, the assault was deliberate and personal.

Grace decided to take her son to a clinic where she was immediately accused of being the perpetrator of his assault. The doctor assumed that she had beaten him and refused to provide any medical assistance until the police were called to the clinic. Once the police arrived, they similarly assumed that Grace had beaten her son. The child told the police that it was his teacher who had hit him. The following day the police went to the school to speak with the teacher. The series of events that took place once Grace filed legal charges against the teacher, set in motion the start of her advocacy and fight for justice.

According to Grace, the magistrate overseeing the case, threatened to jail her and suggested that she take a monetary settlement instead of pursuing the case. During the trial, the case was adjourned nine times. The

conduct of the magistrate and police officers involved in the case resulted in Grace and her sons feeling isolated and “branded” within her community.

*“I mi feel like di perpetratah. We dah mi like di problem.”* (Grace)

The isolation and bias continue to impact Grace and her son. The teacher involved was eventually found not guilty of harm. Grace’s son is now 15 years old and attends high school. He continues to suffer from intense migraine, for which he takes medication, and is impacted by astigmatism in his left eye. He also experiences depression and passive suicidal ideation. Reflecting on the changes in her son’s behaviour, Grace shares that he told her:

*“Mami, I feel empty”* (Roy).

Feeling that the magistrate court was not taking the matter seriously, Grace confided in a friend who advised her to speak with United Belize Advocacy Movement (UNIBAM). Grace approached the organization and met with the founder to tell her story. Since that time, UNIBAM has continued to provide multiple forms of support for her and her son. Grace explained

*“Knowing Caleb has helped- Caleb educate yo in how to deal wit situashans- he listen”* (Grace)

## **UNIBAM: Advocating for rights defenders**

United Belize Advocacy Movement (UNIBAM) is a Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Trans, and Queer (LGBTQ+) organization with a prolific reputation for operating on human rights advocacy principles. Grace first contacted UNIBAM in 2021 after feeling turned away by the magistrate court. UNIBAM’s rights advocacy was paramount to her concerns for achieving justice for her son. Over the last six years, UNIBAM has provided financial and moral support to Grace. The organization has also supplemented payments for food, bills, medical consultations, the son’s prescription glasses, legal representation, and the cost for the son’s counselling. The director of UNIBAM, who is also the main researcher in this study, has also attended the son’s school to speak with administrators over bullying targeting the boy. He has also been directly involved in communication with various individuals and parties involved in the mother’s engagement with public institutions, helping her to maintain marital assets and social-security benefits after her husband had passed away. UNIBAM continues to be involved in matters relating to the son.

UNIBAM not only acted as a support system for logistical needs, but it also acted source for information that enabled Grace to operationalize her self-agency. main researcher in this case study is also the Director of UNIBAM who worked to empower Grace in her role as her son’s rights advocate. It was important that Grace understood that she had to right for and direct the justice she sought. This next section briefly outlines the themes that emerged from Grace’s fight for justice.

## **Findings: A series of discriminatory and biased events**

The primary data collected and used in this case study was extensive, deeply personal, and varied. It includes Grace’s recollection of events involving herself and Roy, documents collected from her engagement with various institutions, legal notes from her case before the magistrate court and the family court, engagements with school administrators, and her son’s experiences with bullying. Many of the events mentioned are told by Grace and observed by the main researcher.

The events in the case highlights four major themes: 1) Navigating Intimate partner violence and Inequality Before the Law; 2) Marital rights & Institutional; 3) Bias and bullying within the education system; and 4) Sexual Inequalities & compounded discrimination against mother and son. These themes demonstrate how, and to what extent, gender, sexual orientation, class, ethnicity, and economic status intersect within the Belize context, contributing to existing studies on gender -relations, gender- identity and gender -equality in Belize.

### **1. Navigating IPV & Silenced before the Law**

According to Stark (2007), domestic abuse persists because efforts to end it have focused too narrowly on physical violence. This has led to laws, education campaigns, and institutional frameworks that fail to recognize non-physical forms of violence rooted in patriarchal ideology. Stark argued that most legal approaches create gaps where intervention depends on the severity of physical injury, leaving psychological, emotional, and financial abuse largely unaddressed. He also emphasizes that there is no gender symmetry in intimate partner violence (IPV): women are overwhelmingly the victims of coercive control.

Belize's legal and public framing of GBV and IPV acknowledges that women and girls are disproportionately affected by gender-based violence; yet, there is a reluctance to centre the issue more directly on male socialization and behaviour. The 2007 revision of Belize's Domestic Violence Act (DVA) aimed to provide "prompt and equitable legal services for survivors of domestic violence" (United Nations, 2024); however, the disconnect between cultural norms, discriminatory laws, and the uneven application of legal protections persists. A major challenge to achieving women's substantive equality, in the context of IPV cases, is the narrow paradigm of wife battering from which domestic violence is understood. Women experience emotional, economic, psychological, and post-separation abuse without any legal redress for those forms of violence.

In Grace's case, she experienced sustained intimate partner violence and coercive control within her marriage and with her other partner. As stated before, she met her husband at the age of 16 but was not legally married to him until 2013. By 2015, she decided to go to the Family Court to get an Occupation and Protection order. Her complaint was dismissed for non-appearance.

In 2016 she managed to get an Occupation Order which was approved for six months- her application for a renewal was rejected in 2017. During this time, her husband accumulated a legal record for petty charges for incidents such as not wearing a mask during the COVID-19 pandemic. This led to his imprisonment on 16th August 2021. He died barely three months later 18<sup>th</sup> November 2021 from complications related to AIDS.

When her son was assaulted, Grace filed charges against the teacher and secured legal representation with UNIBAM's help. She recalls that the magistrate initially threatened to lock her up and that she would jail Grace's brother for speaking to the media about what had happened to his nephew. This case was adjourned nine times and Grace's attorney was not allowed into the court room at one point. Reflecting on all that had transpired Grace believes that:

*"The biggest fault is bias in the judishal system"* (Grace)

Her biggest worry about her son is that...

*“He gud just go ahn nuh com bak- maybe subadi wud just beat him”*. (Grace)

When she was in the Family Court, Grace felt that she was not being listened to or believed and so decided to deal with the post-separation abuse issues herself. In the Magistrate court, she felt that she was being coerced into signing a document without her attorney present and ultimately “branded” and a troublemaker by the magistrate and other court workers.

## **2. Marital Rights & Institutional Discrimination**

Once Grace’s husband had passed away in 2021, she filed an application at the Ministry of Lands to secure legal rights to the marital property. At the time the department was in the process of enacting new policies and procedures so there was some processing delay. Grace’s National Estate Section (NES) lease was already in the system having been filed 13 years prior. When the COVID-19 pandemic had hit in 2020, she was told that her application for the title had been lost in the system. There were processing delays before her husband’s death.

On 18<sup>th</sup> February 2020, Grace received a letter from a District Land and Survey officer at the Ministry of Natural Resources, that confirmed that she had been residing on the land for 20 years. Through the same channels of communication, with the Lands office in Belize City, Grace was made aware that the department did not have her file despite her routine visits to the Land’s Department in Belmopan City and Belize City since 2005.

Unfortunately, Grace discovered that some of her husband’s family members were seeking to remove her name from the marital property. During this time, she was able to confirm for an appointment for inspection of Property, scheduled for 13<sup>th</sup> December 2022. The inspection was never carried out.

To address the situation, an attorney was retained by UNIBAM. The attorney sent a letter, dated 6<sup>th</sup> January 2023, to the Commissioner of Lands and Surveys Department in Belmopan as well as the Land’s office in Belize City to advise that Grace’s “in- laws... have no interest vested in the property” and called for “urgent intervention in the matter.” In addition to the letter, the attorney requested a meeting with the Supervisor of Lands in Belize City. Following the intervention by the attorney, the supervisor notified the attorney that he had in fact recovered the land papers which, according to him, had been stacked at the bottom of a large pile of papers. The document was immediately scanned by phone for filing. The problem was not entirely resolved there.

Following notification about a Lands Clinic being conducted at the YMCA in Belize City, UNIBAM advised Grace to attend the event to speak with the minister about getting title for the property. Once at the clinic, Grace presented her marriage certificate and the NES lease. After the clinic, Grace discovered that her former in-laws had already succeeded in removing her name from the land title-this was never mentioned by the supervisor at the Land’s Department. The Minister ordered that the in-law’s name be removed and that Grace’s name be placed to the Ministry’s record.

At this point, Grace had been managing court visits, land disputes, taking care of her boys and the responsibilities of a full-time job. UNIBAM’s records show that she was earning \$9,739.92 in 2022 as an employee at a government institution. Grace needed money to apply for the land title. She did not have the \$250.00 instalment payment. On May 24<sup>th</sup>, 2023, UNIBAM secured the full \$1500 to ensure direct purchase of the property, securing it on 20<sup>th</sup> March 2023.

Following the matters around the marital property and land title, Grace became worried about housing. At the time, she and her boys lived in a house made of plywood that was damaged by a hurricane. UNIBAM worked with Grace to apply for a house. The name of the organization that provided the housing remains confidential: however, on 14<sup>th</sup> July 2023 a letter was received from this organization that read...

“After assessing your application, our selection committee have determined that you meet the qualification of a person in need and have therefore entered you into the courtship period. During that period, you are required to take initiative to actively participate in our building programs...and to attend the monthly education sessions” (Organization A)

On 16<sup>th</sup> November, Grace received another letter to say that she was a “successful applicant and would be receiving a house.” Grace learned that information about her family issues had been leaked and was being used to undermine her access to securing the house. A call had to be made to the director of the organization involved to explore how the agreement could be honoured. Grace was told that construction on her house was scheduled to start on Friday, 6<sup>th</sup> December 2023.

### **3. Bias & Bullying within the education system**

In 2021 Grace filed a report against her son’s primary school for medical neglect. A female teacher, at the school had assaulted her eight-year-old son with a ruler leaving his face bruised and one of his eyes visibly injured. Medical reports from the 16<sup>th</sup>, January 2019, noted”

“superficial abrasions to the right orbit. Hyperaemia of conjunctiva right eye, nil corneal lesions, PERRLA, EOML, visual acuity 20/25.”

At the time of the incident, the school neglected to immediately take the child to a hospital for care. Grace believed that this delay might have contributed to her son’s sustained ailments following the assault. He now suffers with periodic migraine.

Two medical examinations were conducted on her son in 2021 and 2022 respectively. It was later discovered that the child had astigmatism and needed specially prescribed glasses to support his vision. With UNIBAM’s help, the child was taken to Orange Walk to see a neurologist where he had a CT scan and another evaluation. It was confirmed on this visit that the child suffers from migraines. The doctor prescribed prednisone and fludriline. He had not had these issues prior to being assaulted by his teacher.

Grace decided to file charges against the teacher for harm as is her right under section 79 of the Criminal code, Chapter 101 of the substantive Laws of Belize. Revised edition 2003. On 13<sup>th</sup> May 2021, the teacher met bail of \$500 and one surety of the same amount- she pleaded not guilty. Grace made several appearances at the magistrate: first in October and November of 2020, then on March 15<sup>th</sup>, April 13<sup>th</sup> and December of 2021, and in January of 2022. Ultimately, the Magistrate Court ruled that the teacher was not guilty of harm. The teacher also refused to apologize for her conduct, even after she was told to do so by Ministry of Education. The injury to her son’s eye and the painful migraines he developed exacerbated Grace’s emotional and financial burdens.

### **4. Sexual Inequalities: Compounded Bias against Mother and Son**

Roy is fifteen years old now and continues to experience violence and bullying tactics from his peers and persons within his school system. At the time that UNIBAM started to work with Grace, Roy was nearly

nine years old. During those years, there have been numerous incidents at his schools where UNIBAM representatives had to attend as a means to support Grace's advocacy and protection of her son.

In one of the major incidents, Grace reported to UNIBAM that one of her son's classmates broke his glasses—the pair that was made especially for his eye and migraines. There was no compensation for the glasses. In a separate incident at his high school, Roy reported to his mother that he was called a “battyman” by a classmate. He admitted that he replied to the classmate by saying “you dah battyman!”

According to Roy, the classmate then walked up to him and he (Roy) decided to push the classmate out of the way. Roy received a suspension for pushing his classmate while the classmate was not held to account for his homophobic remarks.

Roy has also been targeted by teachers at his high school. In one meeting that was called by the vice-principal, two teachers made remarks about the Roy's competence and referred to him as being “disruptive”. These two teachers admitted they did not have classroom management training or the pedagogical background to recognize Roy's learning style, which was tactile, according to the counsellor at the school.

In a separate school meeting, one of Roy's teachers had decided to lodge a complaint about him stating that he (Roy) was “disrespectful during class.” The meeting included the principal, the school's Chief Disciplinarian, Roy, and a UNIBAM representative. Grace was unable to get time off to attend the meeting. During the meeting, Roy explained that the classmate, who sat behind him, would often disturb him during class. Instead of informing the teacher, he decided to throw a book at the classmate. Unfortunately, the teacher did not hear or notice the problem prior and Roy was immediately penalized for his actions.

Following several of these meetings and incidents, UNIBAM was made aware that Roy's former stepfather had posed questions to the school about UNIBAM's involvement and interest in Roy's care. The concerns were grounded in covert homophobia and micro-aggressions. The stepfather's comments were repeated at the meeting with the teacher who felt that Roy was “disrespectful”.

Roy was warned, by this same teacher, that he should be “careful” of UNIBAM and that it was a “REDFLAG” to have the organization represent his interest at the school. At the time Grace had already ended her relationship with the stepfather, but the gentleman had continued to harass her at her house. The principal reprimanded the teacher for his comments and agreed on a plan on how to move forward.

In 2024, Roy also reported to his mother that he was assaulted in his face while walking to a store near his home and had to run into a primary school yard to get away from individuals who were trying to attack him.

Roy has experienced multiple forms of attacks and assault while he was in the charge of other adults. The attacks were always charged with homophobic remarks. In mid-2025, Grace reported that her son was assaulted at a camp for youths by nine of his peers who were around age 15. The attackers proceeded to beat him due to his perceived “gayness”. One of his roommates saw the commotion and tried to intervene but he was also hit. Eventually, the organizer of the summer camp was informed and she called the police.

While the camp coordinator did ensure that Roy was given diagnostic care, she fell short of recognizing that she shared legal liability for the injuries that he had sustained. Furthermore, the coordinator of the camp facilitated the transport of the nine attackers allowing them to leave the camp before the police arrived. Her decision undermined the police investigation, and the assault remains stalled within the police department.

All of these incidents go directly to the heart of this study. They highlight how traditional gender expectations and ideologies surrounding 'femininity' and 'masculinity' increases bias and vulnerability- even when the victim is a child.

## **Discussion:**

The mother is a Garifuna woman, who left formal education at the primary level, but is also the main breadwinner and the head of her household. The son is male, of afro-descendant, bisexual and youth. While there is a historical context to mother and son to struggle to thrive and enjoy their ESC concerns, it is her access to limited resources, working-class status, deficient systems of justice support, community homophobia, the lack of institutional protection in law that impacts her quality of life issues to sufficiently deconstruct traditional ideas about gender and sexuality.

An interplay of identity and issues can be seen in the form of pay differential in SIB data collection processes for equal pay, employment rates, and reasons for not working that is grounded in taking care of the family along with data on violence. This working-class single mother overcame intersecting issues of intimate partner violence, family economic in the removal of title to her land, advocating for justice for her son at primary and secondary levels for the first fifteen years of The Youth life. While navigating the identity concerns of sexual orientation, socio-economic status, ethnicity and gender. She has sought to advocate for her child's access to school, health care and justice with limited knowledge of the justice system and have leveraged social networks and institutional support, despite having limited resources to provide for her son.

While the constitution and international obligations call for the state to invest in ESC concerns of its citizens, the state has been slow to extend resources to operationalize rights mechanisms that promote equity among its citizens. While the constitution has an equal protection clause working class single mothers and their children continue to navigate and demand enforcement of that equal protection clause.

What is clear the Education ACT and Rules are inconsistent with the equal protection clause of the constitution and need to be revised, change is not forthcoming. While the Anti- Sexual Harassment Act and the Inter-American Convention on Protecting Older Person are signs of progress by the state, its investment in comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation remains an aspiration for marginalized and vulnerable groups in this country.

The mother is part of a larger history of women health champions that can be acknowledged in HIV and recognized as contributors to the health response. Add union champions and justice advocates, all are born out of a need to solve ESC Rights violations with limited resources. This mother with limited resources navigated the barriers of structural functionalism, Conflict theory issues and unlearn symbolic interactionism. The mother specifically challenges the historical and societal inequality in protecting her son from harm and violence (a primary struggle) out of necessity leveraging all social or institution support that could be provided, even an L.G.B.T organization. Her emotional labour continues to be misrecognized within Belize's court system.

**Emotional labour** is the sustained, embodied, and often invisible work performed primarily by mothers to safeguard the psychological, physical, and developmental wellbeing of their children. It includes affective presence, nurturing, soothing, listening, and strategic caregiving: coordinating health care, education, nutrition, safety, and emotional regulation.

The Family Court and the laws used to adjudicate family cases implicitly affirm that mothers are tasked with this special labour, entrusting them with the full responsibility for their children's wellbeing. Yet this trust is conditional and heavily scrutinized. Socially, it is monitored through moral expectations and legally it is tied to women's financial management and perceived propriety. Despite this surveillance, women are still expected to perform the emotional labour of parenting, strategic, sacrificial, and invisible. It is this labour, shaped by contradiction and expectation, that this case study also seeks to make more visible by highlighting Grace's role as her son's rights defender.

It remains a battle for her son to overcome the social stigma associated with his sexual orientation. Only fifteen years old, he continues to struggle internally, not because he feels it is wrong, but because his peers and experiences at school have shown him that he is wrong and is the "other" at his school.

His mental and emotional wellness remains vulnerable. He has suffered from witnessing his father abuse his mother, he has had the bare the death of his father and now suffers with migraines that require weekly medication-demanding more financial strain on his mother.

The right to health care and dignity of life is found in the Belize Constitution and within the state's international obligations under several United Nations conventions. Yet, it has been Roy's mother who has advocated for his care and safety. In doing so, Grace had paid for it by being based in the court, ostracized at her workplace, and "branded" as a would be troublemaker within her community. Despite these hardships, Grace has not relented. Cultural norms would have us believe that Grace is simply doing her job as a "mother". Even if that is true, what is the responsibility of the state to her son and her when their constitutional and human rights are being ignore?

Why did the school keep eight-year-old son at the school instead of taking him to the hospital for care? Why did the school principal call Grace but did not call the police to inform them of the teacher's assault on her student? Why did the doctor, the police, and ultimately the magistrate point the blame at Grace instead of her son's perpetrator? Finally, how might Grace and her son remained silenced if not for the help of UNIBAM? All of these questions go towards a larger pervading question: How has Grace's ethnicity, gender, social status, and he son's sexual orientation contributed to bias and discrimination she has experienced?

This study underscores the gap between women's de jure and de facto equality. Grace's experiences outline how institutional processes fail to safeguard women and children, how processes without gender sensitivity reproduce emotional harm through procedural neglect, how victims of IPV can be silencing through legal misrecognition, and how mothers bare the silence, unpaid burden of emotional labour.

The case study exposes a profile of systemic coercion and gender bias within the judiciary. Court procedures minimized non-physical forms of abuse, the lack protections for post-separation abuse, they often re-victimize victims though a lack of sensitivity, and the exacerbate women's emotional and economic burdens through bureaucratic delay.

The case study remains ongoing and UNIBAM continues to document developments concerning Roy's struggles and experiences at school. The organization continues to be a support system for Grace as she fights for her son's human rights as she *also* comes to grip with her son's sexuality. The direction that these events will take is uncertain; what is clear is that This case study can go in any direction at this point depending on Grace's willingness and ability to keep fighting for justice and Roy's ability to cope with the treatment from his peers and school community. What is clear is the human rights for mother and son has been repeatedly violated and the state's is obligated to protect them.

## **Conclusion**

Currently Belize does not have hate crime legislation, any comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation, or anti-bullying guidelines in the Ministry of Education Regulations. There are also no enforcement mechanisms for protocols at the school level. The criminal code, as it stands, is separated into common assault, wounding and harm without regard for applying sentences for violence committed based on sexual orientation.

Age, sexual orientation, perceived gender expression and low socio-economic status are multiplying identities that play a role in the level of violence that both Grace and her son experience and the son depends on his mother to be his advocate for accessing health services, education and justice. The mother has tried to shield both of her sons from abuse by leaving her abusive marriage; however, the son mentioned in this investigation will have to navigate homophobia and bullying.

Sociological theories offer insights for how Grace can navigate intersectional discrimination and intimate partner violence as she advocates for her son. Grace experienced psychological and economic abuse from different partners who sought to control her through intimidation, criticism and complaints about her son's sexual orientation. Her son continues to struggle with internal conflicts over his sexuality, bullying from his peers, and difficulty with gender expression. He uses silence and anger to express his hurt and frustration with being treated differently.

The experiences of both mother and the son challenge societal norms about gender and sexuality as they confront these discriminations in court and refuse to be isolated from their human rights. Their actions for personal safety are defiant and traumatic. The mother uses institutional support to navigate the judiciary system while her son is left to confront his bullies at school. Grit becomes a commodity!

While sociological theory, specifically, bisexual theory argues that sexuality is fluid, the mother and son journey to internally accept, value and assert their right to dignity is confronted with societal attitudes that gender nor sexuality is believed to be fluid, both are binary in nature, leaves a systemic vacuum. The state investment in administrative data for marginalized populations remains limited to women experiencing domestic violence and binary approaches to data collection. Its inability to capture disaggregated data based on additional characteristics, is helping to cultivate an atmosphere of exclusion.

The son remains in a fragile place as his emotions, awareness, and experiences with socio-cultural stigma force him to seek clarity about his sexual orientation and character as a very young age. As the son comes to terms with his feelings about his sexual orientation and gender expression, Grace continues to worry about his safety and security.

Grace and son have experienced different forms of violence all based in misogyny. Sexism is the common thread where femininity is undervalued and considered weak. Due to his sexual orientation, this perceived weakness and undervalue is transferred to the son. Both are of afro-descendant which has another layer of barrier for full access to their Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

The state has not improved access to justice for working-class women. The Legal AID Act was to provide access; it remains suspended. While the Ombudsman Office is open to help, its function is limited in defending the rights of Grace's son to an education where he is not discriminated against or bullying at

school. The burden of justice remains with the mother going to court despite the lack of help and intersectional discrimination.

The experiences that Grace and her son have had as individuals and as a unit, have been traumatic- enough for her son to possibly induce self-harm, depression, and social isolation. Grace continues to advocate for her son despite the uncertainties- uncertainties underscored by Belize's de jure equality for women but its failure to address de facto disparities.

## **Recommendations**

1. Advance comprehensive Anti-discrimination legislation like the Equal Opportunities bill (EOB) and hate crime legislation to improve access to justice for vulnerable populations.
2. Produce a gender-sensitive legal report that looks at the Education Act and Rules to assess the institutionalisation of discrimination, inequalities impacting LGBT Youth access to education and to establish redress mechanism and data collection procedure in the education sector.
3. Develop an LGBTQ+ research agenda that establishes a population size estimate; the economic cost of discrimination; track ESC Rights inequality, leveraging a Knowledge Attitude and Perception Study of LGBTQ+ population; homophobia in the education sector impacting young people and a youth L.G.B.T. Q+ poverty study. This can be done in coordination with SIB, the NGO sector and University system.
4. Improve the education sector capacity in dealing with homophobic bullying and violence within the education sector that is impacting LGBTQ+ youth targeting teachers and managers of schools.
5. Conduct policy review for state policy and procedure that amplify discrimination in the accessing of state services affecting young people ability to fully enjoy their health, education or social services.
6. Increase the budget of the Belize Crime Observatory to develop a national administrative data collection strategy that feeds into the country sustainable development priorities by age, sexual orientation gender identity, race, socio-economic status.
7. Strengthen redress mechanisms that provides legal support services for working class, single mothers impacted by E.S.C injustices.
8. Establish a monitoring and evaluation system that looks at the impact of state national strategies that impact the ESC Rights of LGBTQ+ Youth and single working single mothers.

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# Adolescents' Well-being and Human Rights During COVID-19 in Belize

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## Abstract

*This study investigated the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the well-being and human rights of adolescents in Belize. A quantitative descriptive research design was employed. Data were collected from 676 adolescents enrolled in schools in Belize. The online survey, administered through Qualtrics, consisted of two sections: Demographics items and Items to measure well-being and human rights within the home environment. The results revealed that adolescents' well-being and human rights within the home environments were adversely affected during the pandemic: mental health deteriorated, and household income loss, hunger, and verbal and physical abuse were experienced. Results also showed that the well-being of females was more affected than that of males. Pearson's  $r$  correlation coefficients indicated a positive relationship between the well-being of adolescents and the human rights factors explored. This research can inform policymakers, educators, and parents on the importance of school and community programs that support the well-being and human rights of adolescents.*

**Keywords:** Adolescents, Well-being, COVID-19, Human Rights, Belize

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## **Introduction**

When COVID-19, the disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, was declared a global pandemic in March 2020, many measures were implemented to minimize its spread, including lockdowns and travel restrictions. Although these restrictions helped in controlling the spread of the disease, they resulted in unintended challenges, such as mental health issues. We know that classroom practices can offset negative home experiences, but this impact was nullified by the COVID-19 restrictions in Belize, which caused students to spend a significant part of their learning time at home. There is evidence that learning at home resulted in challenges to learners' well-being and human rights relating to their health, safety, and security (Bradbury-Jones & Isham, 2020; Groen et al., 2021; UNICEF, 2022; Simon, 2022); hence, it is important to understand the extent to which this occurred.

Additionally, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many family caregivers lost their jobs. One of the five commissions of the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (UN ECLAC) reported that job losses in tourism, commerce, distribution, and other sectors led to higher unemployment in 2020 (UN ECLAC, 2020). Inflation rose to 0.3% in September 2020, reflecting higher costs for food, health, and housing. Being unemployed could cause the adults in such families to experience emotional instability as they struggle to provide for their children. Tomassini (2020) highlighted that many children in Belize and, by extension, adolescents in Latin America and the Caribbean (UNICEF 2022) were vulnerable to abuse and violence and did not get the proper nourishment needed for their development. Young children and adolescents enter a developmental phase in which their peers play an important role; therefore, they were among those negatively affected during the pandemic lockdowns, as they were separated from their peers (Simon, 2022; Márquez-Aponte, 2020). Conversely, early indications suggest that some students who were already wrestling with emotional issues actually seemed to do better during the pandemic. These students welcomed the time to strengthen family bonds at home, avoiding problems such as bullying in school (Simon, 2022). Due to the contradictory research findings in some studies, this study aimed to specifically examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the well-being of adolescents and their human rights related to health, safety, and security in Belize.

Well-being and human rights are deeply interconnected. Two of the well-being domains, good health and a safe environment, as proposed by Ross et al. (2020), are directly linked to human rights. Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child asserts the rights of a child to the "enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health," thus, "States Parties shall strive to ensure that no child is deprived of his or her right of access to such health care services" (United Nations, 1989, p.9). Parallel to this, Article 27 "recognizes the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development" (United Nations, 1989, p.11). These articles affirm the right of all children to well-being and a safe living environment.

### ***Purpose of Study***

The purpose of this quantitative descriptive study was to determine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the well-being and human rights of adolescents within their home environment in Belize. The following three research questions were explored in this study:

1. What was the level of mental well-being of adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic in Belize?
2. How were the human rights of adolescents in regards to health, safety, and security within their home environment affected during the COVID-19 pandemic in Belize?
3. Is there a significant correlation between the mental well-being of adolescents and their human rights within their home environment during the COVID-19 pandemic in Belize?

## **Review of Related Literature**

### ***Adolescents***

UNICEF (2022) considered adolescence a phase in the child's development that is evident in their rapid physical and cognitive growth. It is also the time of pubescence that leads to sexual maturity. "It is a critical period for individual identity development when young people are figuring out who they want to be in the world, an opportunity for growth, exploration, and creativity" (UNICEF, p. 9, 2022). Adolescents are described as individuals between the ages of 10 and 19 years. This period of life is further divided into early (10–14 years) and late adolescence (15–19 years). In Belize, the adolescent population, which comprises approximately 97,000 individuals (aged 10-19), accounts for 20% of the total population (UNICEF, 2022).

Adolescence is a milestone in the lives of the young population, so it is important to find effective ways to measure the state of adolescents. Ross et al. (2020) proposed five interconnected domains that contribute to adolescent well-being. These domains are good health and optimum motivation; connectedness, positive values, and contribution to society; safety and a supportive environment; learning competence, education, skills, and employability; and agency and resilience. These domains are supported by gender, equity, and rights considerations, enabling the establishment and implementation of systems to support the well-being of adolescents, especially after COVID-19.

### ***Well-being***

Groen et al. (2021) provided strong evidence that students in Belize experienced moderate stress during the pandemic. Their survey, conducted among 200 participants (51 educators and students; 149 parents), indicated that the well-being of students was affected due to limited social interactions with peers, coping with the timely completion of schoolwork, and balancing labor with time for school. A report by UNICEF (2020) corroborates that COVID-19 had a significant impact on the mental health of adolescents and youth (13 to 29 years) in Latin America and the Caribbean. Adolescents and youth reported feeling stressed, anxious, and depressed, with more girls being affected than boys (UNICEF, 2022), mostly due to economic reasons (UNICEF, 2020). Physical activity and access to healthy foods decreased, as did limited access to health services (UNICEF, 2022). Motivation to engage in regular activities and chores was diminished, and so were perceptions of the future, especially among women facing difficulties (UNICEF, 2020). Similarly, Simon (2022) shared that in a longitudinal study in the United Kingdom, individuals aged 16 to 24 years, who included students in the adolescence stage, were anxious and depressed, especially if they were socioeconomically affected during the pandemic and were new to this type of experience. In a study among 7,202 adolescents (14 – 18 years) in China, those with medium and low levels of social support during the outbreak of COVID-19 were more prone to have mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety (Qi et al., 2020). Other factors affecting the mental health of adolescents included indefinite school closures, extended homestays, fewer sporting activities, sociodemographic variables (rural participants had lower income), and gender (more females than males were at risk) (Qi et al., 2020).

A study by Duckworth et al. (2021) conducted in America substantiates that high school students who attended school remotely exhibited lower levels of social, emotional, and academic well-being compared to students who attended classes in person during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this study, social, emotional, and academic well-being were differentiated. Social well-being refers to students fitting in and having positive relationships with adults in their community. Emotional well-being refers to feeling good about life, being relaxed and happy, whereas academic well-being refers to finding classes interesting and believing in one's ability to succeed in school (Duckworth et al., 2021). The results were consistent across gender, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, and were significantly wider among students in grades 10 to 12 compared to 9th graders, who may be younger; however, both categories included adolescent students (Duckworth et al., 2021). Márquez-Aponte (2020) affirmed that the impact of remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic may have resulted in lower levels of well-being in adolescents, as they had limited interaction with peers who were more influential than their parents during this developmental phase. Duckworth et al. (2021) suggest that adolescent students need to maintain intimate relationships with their peers, especially since older students are more vulnerable to social isolation associated with remote learning.

Reports indicate a significant decrease in mental health issues among other health and well-being indicators for adolescence before the COVID-19 pandemic in the USA (The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 2011-2021) and in Latin America and the Caribbean (UNICEF, 2022). Mental health issues became more pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic (CDC, 2011-2021; UNICEF, 2022). Both reports suggest that female students were more gravely affected than males. For instance, 60% of female students in the USA reported persistent feelings of sadness and hopelessness, evidenced by a large group of students across ethnic and racial groups, but were more pronounced among Hispanic and multiracial, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and other or questioning students (CDC, 2011-2021). UNICEF (2022) reported a higher perception of gender-based violence increase in 2020 in Latin America and the Caribbean, especially among those identifying themselves as a part of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer movement. Other research further points to an increase in mental health issues due to social isolation, anxiety, compulsive internet use, and diminished access to school-based mental health services due to remote learning (Duckworth et al., 2021; Márquez-Aponte, 2020). It is important to note that young people who experience persistent feelings of sadness and hopelessness are negatively affected by their inability to participate in daily activities and are more likely to engage in behaviors that place them at risk of HIV, STDs, and unplanned pregnancy (CDC, 2011-2021).

Adolescents who experience trauma and stress have a higher tendency to develop mental health issues. According to Márquez-Aponte (2020), trauma creates physical and psychological stress, which makes it difficult to cope. Its recurrence creates lasting adverse effects on their physical and mental capacity, which results in helplessness and terror. Acute trauma is less likely to change brain functioning and structures, while complex trauma (chronic and prolonged) is more likely to impair adolescent development and physical and mental health. Complex trauma is known to affect relationships, behaviors, and academic attainment of adolescents, and its effects are more severe for adolescents who do not have appropriate interventions and support. Students who experienced complex trauma were at higher risk of experiencing extreme anxiety, anger, a need for protection, and difficulty regulating their emotions during the stressors of the COVID-19 pandemic.

To lessen the psychological impact of quarantine for adolescents who experienced trauma during the COVID-19 restrictions, Brooks et al. (2020) suggested that the government and public health officials should be transparent in communicating the reasons for the measures taken, ensure the availability of basic supplies, including food and water, and offer suggestions for home activities. They further proposed that the long-term effects of quarantine could be offset by sending positive messages of altruism. Furthermore, Mesquita et al. (2024) advocate for inclusive health policies that consider how the social determinants of health (SDOH) affect the quality of life of adolescents. Their study found that SDOH, linked to demographic factors, physical activity, and difficulty sleeping, negatively impacted the physical and mental health of adolescents.

In examining mental health among adolescents in Belize post-pandemic, there is evidence to suggest that it remains an issue. The most recent evidence, as reported in Belize's Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS7) (Love FM, 2025), highlights "fresh concerns about youth mental health across the country" (p. 1). According to the results of the survey, 6.7 percent of youths (ages 15 and 24) are experiencing symptoms of depression and anxiety, alluding to increasing emotional and psychological strain. According to this survey, depression and anxiety include feelings of sadness, a depressed mood, not finding joy in anything, getting easily annoyed and irritated, feeling hopeless, and changes in appetite; and feeling nervous, anxious, on edge, and worrying, respectively. A majority of those affected reported that their mental health condition negatively impacted their ability to perform daily activities at home, work, or at school, and even their social relationships with their peers (Love FM, 2025). Of greatest concern is that very few of the youths with mental health challenges seek professional assistance (Love FM, 2025). This survey also pointed out serious issues relating to suicidal thoughts, where 1 percent of the respondents nationwide reported having suicidal thoughts, with females representing the largest percentage.

## **Home environment**

The home environment is important in the well-being and cognitive development of adolescents. At home, a stimulating physical environment, encouragement of achievement, affection, and a protective relationship between children and parents all play important roles in the socialization and psychological well-being of children (Kaur, 2013). With the onset of the pandemic in Belize in March 2020, many households faced financial difficulties, job losses, decreased pay, unemployment, and the challenges of working/studying from home (Groen et al., 2021), which impacted the stability of their home environment. Saraví (2024) found that during the COVID-19 pandemic, 45% of female students from an upper-middle school situated in the outskirts of Mexico City had symptoms of depression and anxiety compared to 33% of males, and in the non-binary population 70% experienced depression and 56% anxiety. Although some students welcomed the opportunity to strengthen and improve their family relationships, others found the intense coexistence to be stressful, leading to conflicts.

Interestingly, Simon (2022) reports that some adolescents who were already stressed before the pandemic due to school-related reasons, such as bullying, actually performed better with schooling from home than with face-to-face schooling, as they reported better sleep patterns and spent more time with family members. These students probably had higher social support at home, which tends to lessen anxiety when stressed, thereby reducing insomnia (Qi et al., 2020). A study by Pozzoli et al. (2021), which focused on the experience of youths with distance learning during the pandemic, suggests that a favorable home climate (calm, warm, and organized) is fundamental to managing stress and supporting successful learning.

## **Human Rights**

Four of the fifty-three Articles in the Convention on the Rights of a Child (United Nations, 1989) are interwoven with Ross et al. (2020) domains for adolescent well-being (good health and a safe environment). The domain of good health and optimum motivation is linked to Article 24 (right to best health care possible) and Article 27 (right to a standard of living to support child development). The domain of safety and a supportive environment is linked to Article 3 (right to protection and care for well-being) and Article 19 (right to protection from violence, abuse, and neglect).

The literature indicates that Human Rights have been discussed by the United Nations so that they can be recognized and respected. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 25, states

Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control (United Nations, 1948, p.7).

This article emphasizes that safety and health are integral to human rights. Wellness is compromised when these rights are violated. People thrive when these human rights are respected.

Similarly, Human Rights have been discussed by countries, such as Belize, to support the work of the United Nations. The Families and Children Act of Belize, Article 46, Part V, for instance, outlines the duties of the Government to:

safeguard and promote the welfare of children; and to mediate in any situation where the rights of a child are infringed upon and especially with regard to the protection of a child, the child's health and education, and the child's succession rights to the property of his parents (Families and Children Act, 2011, p.37).

It adds that any person who has custody of a child should maintain the child and protect the child from discrimination, violence, abuse, and neglect. This right to protection became challenging during the COVID-19 pandemic as the number of students experiencing violence in homes and those requiring social and economic help, increased (Bradbury-Jones & Isham, 2020; Marques et al., 2020). Adults and children who were already living with abusive or controlling individuals, pre-pandemic, found fewer avenues to seek help, with difficulty in speaking out against the abusers. Homes were no longer as safe due to increased domestic violence (Marques et al., 2020). Bradbury-Jones & Isham (2020) highlighted a troubling paradox: although staying home was meant to protect people from COVID-19, for some, it meant being confined to unsafe environments, thereby infringing on their fundamental right to safety.

A research report from Argentina by UNICEF highlights that some students were deprived of living in a peaceful environment free from violence prior to the pandemic, as physical and verbal violence was the second important analytical dimension (Paz, 2016, as cited in Guillén-Fernández, 2024). The author indicated that 31% of Argentine children were deprived of an environment free of physical and verbal violence. This deprivation was also evident post-pandemic in Belize, as Guillén-Fernández (2024) found that children in Belize had a 0.7 probability of being yelled at by parents when living in extreme poverty, and a 0.6 probability when living in moderate poverty or when they did not experience poverty.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child addresses children's right to the best healthcare system, clean water, food, clothing, and a safe place to live (United Nations, 1989). The COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected the safety and health of adolescents, especially those of vulnerable groups. Many, including migrants, refugees, people without housing, those in detention, or those living in crowded areas, lived in conditions that put them at greater risk of contracting COVID-19 (UNFPA, n.d.). The prolonged stress on the healthcare system due to the COVID-19 pandemic may have compromised access to adequate healthcare, posing an increased threat to the well-being of many, especially those in vulnerable groups and those living in vulnerable conditions. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic increased the risk of income loss and unemployment, especially among youths (OECD, 2020), which may have compromised their living conditions. Notably, the physical health and safety of adolescents were at greater risk during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Method**

A quantitative descriptive research method and design was applied to ascertain the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on adolescents' well-being and human rights within the home environment in Belize. The target population of this study consisted of adolescents enrolled in high schools, junior colleges, and universities across Belize ( $N \cong 22,300$  adolescents). Data were collected using a survey instrument that was administered online via Qualtrics. The survey instrument consisted of two sections. The first section of the survey instrument consisted of items to determine the demographic profile of adolescents, including age, gender (sex), ethnicity, and location. The second section of the survey instrument consisted of items adapted from the 2021 Adolescent Behavior and Experiences Survey (CDC ABES 2021) of the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The items adapted from the CDC ABES 2021 measured how the COVID-19 pandemic affected adolescents' mental well-being and human rights within their home environment. To ensure a representative and adequate sample, the survey was sent to as many adolescents as possible across Belize. Teachers, instructors, and undergraduate students assisted in distributing the link to the online survey to adolescents across Belize.

As with all studies there are limitations due to the method and research design applied. For this study, some potential methodological limitations include the potential biases of self-reported data such as social desirability, recall, sampling, and misunderstanding of items, which could influence the data collected.

## **Participants**

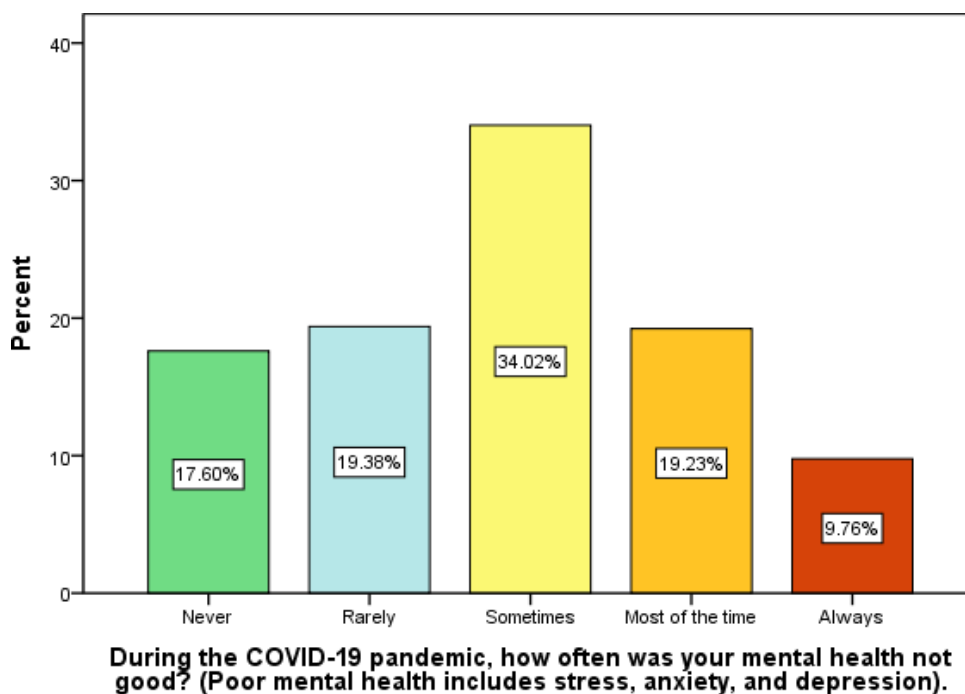
The sample consisted of 676 adolescents from across Belize, which resulted in a 95% confidence level with a 3.7% margin of error. The majority of the adolescents who participated in the study were females (66.7%), with only 33.3% males. Most adolescents who participated in the study were 16 (21.9%) years old. For location, 60.2% of adolescents were from urban areas and 39.8% were from rural areas in Belize. District-wise, the largest group of the adolescents were from the Belize (42.3%) and Stann Creek (27.5%) districts. The remaining adolescents were from Cayo (10.8%), Corozal (7.4%), Toledo (6.2%), and Orange Walk (5.8%) districts. For the distribution of adolescents by ethnicity, most adolescents were from the Mestizo (29.6%) and Creole (27.5%) ethnic groups. Only a few adolescents were from the Garifuna (10.8%), Multi-Ethnic (10.8%), Maya (8.3%), Hispanic (8.0%), East Indian (2.5%), others (2.1%), Mennonite (0.3%), and Asian (.01%) ethnic groups.

## Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data for this study. Specifically, frequency and percentage distributions were computed to describe the sample and determine the level of mental well-being among adolescents and how their human rights were affected within their home environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, Pearson's  $r$  correlation coefficients were computed to determine if there was a correlation between adolescents' mental well-being and their human rights within their home environment during the COVID-19 pandemic in Belize.

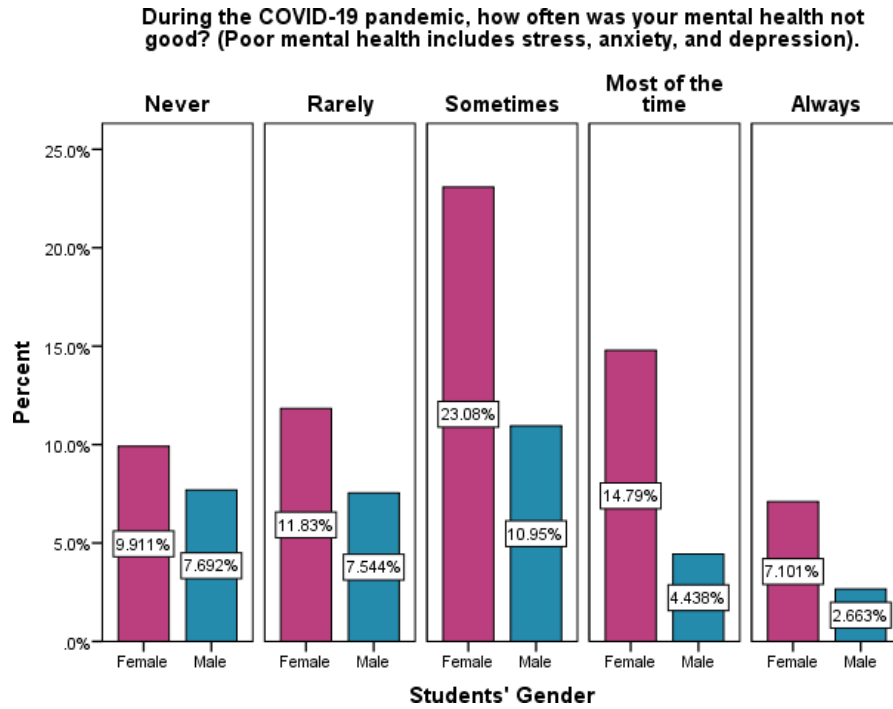
## Results

The first research question sought to determine the level of mental well-being among adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic in Belize. The survey item "During the COVID-19 pandemic, how often was your mental health not good? (Poor mental health includes stress, anxiety, and depression)" was used to answer this research question. As shown in Figure 1, 63% ( $n = 425$ ) of adolescents indicated that their mental health deteriorated during the COVID-19 pandemic. This result was obtained by adding the percentages for "sometimes," "most of the time," and "always." Using the results from the sample to estimate the effect on the population, 63% of the population ( $n \cong 22,300$ ) would result in approximately 14,049 adolescents in Belize who might have experienced a deterioration in their mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic.



**Figure 1. Distribution of Adolescents' Mental Health During COVID-19**

As illustrated in Figure 2, more female adolescents (45%) reported that their mental health deteriorated compared to male adolescents (18%). This result was obtained by adding the percentages from "sometimes," "most of the time," and "always" for female and male adolescents. Using the results from the sample to estimate the effect on the population, 45% and 18% of the population ( $n \cong 22,300$ ) would result in approximately 10,035 female and 4,014 male adolescents in Belize who might have experienced a deterioration in their mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is equivalent to a ratio of 2.5 female adolescents to 1 male adolescent who might have experienced a deterioration in their mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic in Belize.



**Figure 2. Distribution of Adolescents' Mental Health During COVID-19 by Gender**

Research question two aimed to capture how adolescents' human rights within their home environments were affected during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results were subdivided into four major human rights factors within their home environment: Loss of Household Income, Hunger, Verbal Abuse, and Physical Abuse. These four factors are linked to four of the fifty-three Articles in the Convention on the Rights of a Child (United Nations, 1989) – Article 24: right to best health care possible, Article 27: right to a standard of living to support child development, Article 3: right to protection and care for well-being, and Article 19: right to protection from violence, abuse, and neglect. The results of the frequency and percent distributions for the four human rights factors explored are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Based on the results, about 54% ( $n = 365$ ) of adolescents reported that they experienced loss of household income. The estimate of the effect on the population is that approximately 12,042 adolescents in Belize might have experienced a loss of household income during the COVID-19 pandemic. For the human rights factor hunger, 19% ( $n = 128$ ) of adolescents reported that they experienced hunger, which is approximately 4,237 adolescents in the population who may have faced hunger during the COVID-19 pandemic in Belize. For the human rights factor, verbal abuse, 33% ( $n = 223$ ) of adolescents reported that they experienced verbal abuse, which is approximately 7,359 adolescents in the population who might have experienced verbal abuse during the COVID-19 pandemic in Belize. For the human rights factor, physical abuse, 24% ( $n = 162$ ) of adolescents reported that they experienced physical abuse, which is approximately 5,352 adolescents in the population who might have experienced physical abuse during the COVID-19 pandemic in Belize.

**Table 1. Distribution of Adolescents: Loss of Household Income**

Experienced	No Job before COVID-19		Yes		No		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Loss of Household Income	41	6.1%	321	47.5%	314	46.4%	676	100%

**Table 2. Distribution of Adolescents: Hunger, Verbal Abuse, and Physical Abuse**

Experienced	Never		Rarely		Sometimes		Most of the time		Always		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Hunger	381	56.4%	164	24.3%	105	15.5%	18	2.7%	8	1.2%	676	100%
Verbal Abuse	281	41.6%	169	25.0%	150	22.2%	55	8.1%	21	3.1%	676	100%
Physical Abuse	512	75.9%	90	13.3%	56	8.3%	13	1.9%	4	0.6%	675	100%

The results of the frequency and percentage distributions, disaggregated by gender, for the four human rights factors explored, are presented in Tables 3 and 4. Based on the results, both female and male adolescents reported similar percentages of experiences with loss of household income, hunger, and physical abuse. However, a significantly greater percentage of female adolescents (37.5%) reported experiencing verbal abuse compared to male adolescents (25.3%).

**Table 3. Distribution of Adolescents by Gender: Loss of Household Income**

Experienced		Students' Gender							
		Female				Male			
		No Job before COVID-19	Yes	No	Total	No Job before COVID-19	Yes	No	Total
Loss of Household Income	n	30	213	208	451	11	108	106	225
	%	6.7%	47.2%	46.1%	100%	4.9%	48.0%	47.1%	100%

**Table 4. Distribution of Adolescents by Gender: Hunger, Verbal Abuse, and Physical Abuse**

Experienced		Students' Gender											
		Female						Male					
		Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Most of the time	Always	Total	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Most of the time	Always	Total
Hunger	n	258	109	67	14	3	451	123	55	38	4	5	225
	%	57.2%	24.2%	14.9%	3.1%	0.7%	100%	54.7%	24.4%	16.9%	1.8%	2.2%	100%
Verbal Abuse	n	181	101	109	45	15	451	100	68	41	10	6	225
	%	40.1%	22.4%	24.2%	10.0%	3.3%	100%	44.4%	30.2%	18.2%	4.4%	2.7%	100%
Physical Abuse	n	338	63	35	12	3	451	174	27	21	1	1	224
	%	74.9%	14.0%	7.8%	2.7%	0.7%	100%	77.7%	12.1%	9.4%	0.4%	0.4%	100%

The third research question sought to determine if there is a significant correlation between adolescents' mental well-being and human rights in the home environment during the COVID-19 pandemic in Belize. The results of the Pearson's r correlation coefficients are presented in Table 5. Based on the results, there are positive, significant correlations between adolescents' mental well-being and verbal abuse [ $r(676) = .321, p < .001$ ], and physical abuse [ $r(675) = .139, p < .001$ ]. Therefore, adolescents who experienced higher levels of verbal and physical abuse, experienced higher levels of poor mental well-being. Additionally, the

results indicated that there are positive, significant correlations between adolescents' experience of hunger and verbal abuse [ $r(676) = .218, p < .001$ ], and physical abuse [ $r(675) = .261, p < .001$ ]. Therefore, adolescents who experienced higher levels of hunger, experienced higher levels of verbal and physical abuse. Last, the results indicated that there is a positive, significant correlation between adolescents' experience of verbal abuse and physical abuse [ $r(675) = .466, p < .001$ ]. Therefore, adolescents who experienced higher levels of verbal abuse, experienced higher levels of physical abuse.

**Table 5. Adolescents' Well-being & Human Rights Factors Pearson Correlation Matrix**

	1	2	3	4
1. Experienced Poor Mental Health	1			
2. Experienced Hunger	.075	1		
3. Experienced Verbal Abuse	.321**	.218**	1	
4. Experienced Physical Abuse	.139**	.261**	.466**	1

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

## Conclusions

This study investigated the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the well-being and human rights of adolescents within their home environment in Belize. The results revealed that many adolescents in the sample experienced poor mental well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic in Belize, as their mental health deteriorated. Female adolescents' mental well-being was more adversely affected than that of male adolescents in the sample. Four major human rights of adolescents within the home environments were negatively affected since many adolescents reported that they experienced challenging home environments, such as loss of household income, hunger, verbal abuse, and physical abuse. These four human rights factors are linked to four of the fifty-three Articles in the Convention on the Rights of a Child (United Nations, 1989) – Article 24: right to best health care possible, Article 27: right to a standard of living to support child development, Article 3: right to protection and care for well-being, and Article 19: right to protection from violence, abuse, and neglect. Also, the results indicated that there are positive, significant correlations between adolescents' mental well-being and verbal and physical abuse. Thus, the escalation of the four human rights factors within the home environment during the COVID-19 pandemic in Belize had an adverse impact on the mental well-being of adolescents. While these findings highlight areas of concern, causal relationships cannot be inferred due to the descriptive research design of the study.

The well-being of adolescents (mental health and human rights – health, safety, and security) is incorporated into the domains of the adolescent well-being framework proposed by Ross et al. (2020). The mental well-being of Belizean adolescents in the sample was affected during the COVID-19 pandemic, as indicated in the results. Groen et al. (2021) corroborated this by asserting that Belizeans experienced moderate stress during the pandemic. Also, several other studies support the findings of this study, which indicate that adolescents' mental health was affected during the pandemic, as was their access to human rights, especially through the safety and security of their home environment (Qi et al., 2020; Duckworth et al., 2021; Simon, 2022; and UNICEF, 2022). Qi et al. (2020) substantiate the findings that more female than male adolescents experienced mental health issues. Likewise, the experiences of mental well-being, emotional support, and home safety and security reported among adolescents in this study closely parallel the CDC (2022) findings on adolescents in the United States, who faced challenges such as poor mental health, feelings of sadness or hopelessness, emotional isolation, experiences of physical abuse, and economic stress. Traumatic stressors, such as the pandemic, negatively affect the well-being of adolescents, directing community and national efforts to offer support to this vulnerable population.

## Recommendations

The well-being and human rights of adolescents are multidimensional and warrant a multi-sectoral approach to address support programs and interventions (UNICEF, 2022) in the various domains proposed

by Ross et al. (2020). The Government of Belize, non-governmental agencies, the private sector, families, communities, and educators can collaborate to address the well-being and human rights of adolescents post-pandemic. Social support for adolescents can be provided as Qi. et al. (2020) found that high social support can lessen the trauma and stress experienced by adolescents in new situations, such as a pandemic. Parents and communities can provide supportive environments to improve adolescents' mental well-being, and seek professional support for adolescents who have experienced trauma to help them improve their well-being. As the pandemic eased and schools returned to face-to-face instruction, Vairez et al. (2022) reported that adolescents' apprehensions were high about returning to face-to-face classes, as they were concerned that their families and teachers could contract COVID-19. As such, Vairez et al. (2022) emphasized that adolescents who experienced trauma during the pandemic need support from educators so that they can overcome their apprehensions to be able to succeed in school and life.

Márquez-Aponte (2020) suggested that trauma-informed strategies can be used to support adolescent students in schools facing traumatic experiences. These strategies would promote increased awareness of the signs and effects of trauma among the general population and professional educators, supporting better outcomes and enabling outreach to students. Educators in Belize can work on creating safe, supportive, and nonjudgmental environments. In these environments, students would feel free to communicate their thoughts and feelings verbally and nonverbally, addressing their needs for attention, behavioral modulation, academic engagement, and success (Márquez-Aponte, 2020).

Policymakers can ensure that the well-being of learners is a priority, so that educators become equipped to address the varying home insecurities that students face, thereby setting them on the path to success in school and life. Governments must institute policies and systems to protect children and adolescents from violence, abuse, and neglect (UNICEF, 2022). In Belize, policymakers and social service providers (the church and other community services) are called to prioritize the needs of vulnerable groups, inclusive of adolescents, and provide access to adequate health care. In addition, UNICEF (2022) highlighted the need to increase investment, quality, and access to mental health services and programs tailored specifically to address the needs of adolescents and end the stigma of accessing mental health services. Findings by the MICS7 (Love Fm, 2025) underscore "the urgent need for strengthened psychosocial support systems, expanded outreach programs, and continued efforts to reduce stigma surrounding mental health (p.1). Finally, UNICEF (2022) recommends integrating mental health services into primary healthcare systems.

There should also be strategies to support students' well-being and human rights post the COVID-19 pandemic. These can include pastoral care, trauma-informed practice, partnerships with parents and the community, and sharing stories as coping strategies to support others, among other programs aimed at addressing the mental health of students and teachers (Cahill et al., 2020). UNICEF (2020) emphasized the need to support and promote youth participation in issues affecting them, ensuring their voices are heard.

Further research can be conducted on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the well-being and human rights of adolescents on a larger scale. The various dimensions of adolescents' well-being can be used to investigate which one was most affected post-pandemic. There could also be a collaboration with other agencies to conduct regional research on the well-being and human rights of adolescents following the pandemic. Additionally, we can further parse the data to determine if we need to streamline interventions by gender, region of the country (districts), and by racial/ethnic groups.

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**SPECIAL ISSUE ON HUMAN RIGHTS**

This special issue of the Journal of Belizean Research examines contemporary human rights challenges in Belize through interdisciplinary scholarship. Contributions explore disability and rehabilitation rights, Indigenous land struggles, artificial intelligence and digital governance, gender and sexuality, migrant vulnerability, emergency governance during COVID-19, and adolescent well-being. Drawing on legal analysis, public health research, political economy, and social justice frameworks, the issue highlights structural inequities while identifying pathways toward inclusion, dignity, and equitable development. This special issue was supported by the European Union project Strengthening Human Rights Advocacy Among Youth in Belize Through Academic Research, Capacity Building, and Human Rights Education. Published by the University of Belize, this volume contributes evidence-based scholarship to national and regional policy dialogue.



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