

Three thousand and Counting: A Report on Violence Against Women in Guatemala

By Julie Suarez and Marty Jordan

•At the Morgue •

In May 2007, a mother of two small children left her house in Guatemala City to look for work. She never returned home. The woman's mother, at home watching her grandchildren, frantically called her daughter's cell phone. Finally, someone answered. An unidentified man said, "You can find your daughter at the morgue."

Unfortunately, stories like this are all too common in Guatemala. The brashness of a killer to answer his victim's telephone illustrates the impunity with which assailants commit murder, knowing that the case will never be investigated. It is a daily occurrence to read newspaper articles about women or girls that have been raped, tortured, mutilated, and killed. Their body parts are tied up in garbage bags or abandoned in ditches. This is Guatemala, where more than 3,000 women have been brutally murdered since 2000, and fewer than 2% of cases end in convictions. This is Guatemala, where femicide, or the murder of women, claimed the lives of at least 665 women in 2005, 603 women in 2006, and 306 women during the first seven months of 2007. The majority of the victims are young, poor women between the ages of thirteen and thirty. This is Guatemala, the most dangerous place for women in all of Latin America.

**Guatemala Human
Rights Commission/
USA (GHRC)**
3321 12th St., NE
Washington, DC 20017
Tel: 202-529-6599
Fax: 202-526-4611
ghrc-usa@ghrc-usa.org
www.ghrc-usa.org

To read more about violence against women in Guatemala, check out www.ghrc-usa.org

To take action on behalf of women and girls facing violence in Guatemala, sign up to GHRC's Free Listserve by sending us an email to ghrc-usa@ghrc-usa.org. GHRC will alert you when you can take a simple action to help stem gender-based violence in Guatemala.

• Guatemala Human Rights Commission/USA (GHRC) •

The Guatemala Human Rights Commission/USA (GHRC) has been closely monitoring this phenomenon of violence against women in Guatemala since 2005 with our campaign, "For Women's Right to Live." Through this Campaign, we strive to educate concerned citizens about the increase in gender-based violence in Guatemala and provide avenues so they can apply international pressure on Guatemalan authorities to adequately prevent the murder of women, investigate homicides, and bring the perpetrators to justice. GHRC's efforts have included mounting legislative pressure in the United States Congress and Senate; organizing speaking tours throughout the US with Guatemalan women's activists; mobilizing a postcard campaign that resulted in delivering thousands of postcards to Guatemala's President; holding a vigil in front of the Guatemalan Embassy in Washington; reaching out to thousands of Americans through speeches, presentations, and workshops; coordinating with women's rights groups on the ground in Guatemala; supporting women asylum seekers affected by violence; and leading fact-finding delegations to Guatemala.

This year's delegation (July 14—22, 2007) included nine concerned activists from around the US who wanted to learn

more about gender-based violence in Guatemala, particularly: Why has it increased? What cultural factors support the violence? Why is there so little justice? We met with women's rights organizations,

domestic violence shelters, a group of midwives, government officials, feminists, and family members of victims of femicide.

This is their story.

• Organized Crime on the Rise •

When posed with the question "Who is killing these women?," the most common response is members of organized crime. Guatemala ended a brutal 36-year civil war in 1996 that left more than 250,000 dead or disappeared. Many of those victims perished at the hands of "death squads" that roamed the country committing heinous, torturous acts on behalf of the US-funded Guatemalan military government. When the Peace Accords were signed officially ending the war, the death squads stopped serving as State sanctioned units, but maintained connections to Guatemala's power structure. Today, members of those death squads have emerged as participants in clandestine operations that have become entrenched in every facet of Guatemalan society. They have de facto control throughout communities, traffic drugs, buy off judges, and keep politicians in their back pockets. These illicit groups demonstrate their power through intimidation, violence, and terror.

Women suffered atrocious human rights violations during Guatemala's internal armed conflict. Females were seen as potential mothers for future guerrillas and were therefore deemed threats to the State. Pregnant women were butchered, and rape was commonly used as a tool of war. Ten years later, former death squad participants have not changed the way they view women. As they were trained to rape, dismember, and torture in the past, they continue to use the same tactics now. Although these organized criminals no longer have the State's explicit permission, the government's indifference has become a form of permission nonetheless.

Nine participants in GHRC's 2007 Fact-finding Delegation to Guatemala



Opinions differ as to how many murders can be attributed to organized crime. Congresswoman Nineth Montenegro, head of the Congressional Human Rights Commission, said, "I am not saying that all murders of women are organized crime, but organized crime has increased like never before and has infiltrated every part of society."

Giovana Lemus from the Guatemalan Women's Group (GGM) and coordinator of the Network of No Violence Against Women believes that organized crime is behind some of the femicide, but not a significant amount. She does, however, believe that organized crime units act without fear of punishment. "Guatemala went from war to peace but came out with organized crime and clandestine groups who deny the rights and integrity of all women and act with impunity," she said. "They control all areas of crime. Members of organized crime will arrive at a crime scene dressed up as police officers and remove evidence before the actual police arrive."

Edda Gaviola, executive director of the Center for Human Rights Legal Action (CALDH), noted that women are often killed, and then their bodies are moved to another area while the crime scene is invaded and evidence is eliminated. This reveals the work of an organized network. Whether or not these groups are responsible for a majority of the murders of women in Guatemala is unknown, but it is evident that this network of terror permeates the entire country and it acts without fear of prosecution.

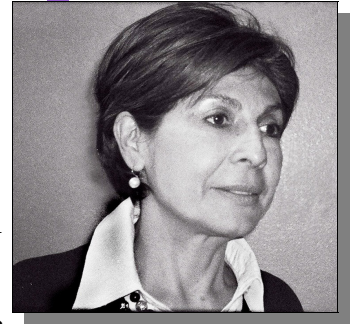
• Speculation without Investigation •

Another common group cited as a main cause of femicide is gangs. Gangs first appeared in Guatemala and other parts of Central America in the early 1990s while many of their countries were still plagued by civil war. However, the

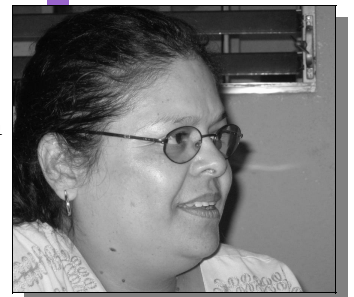
Central American gangs have their roots to the north in the United States, where they developed in the 1970s and 1980s. The two largest and most brutal gangs in Guatemala that developed in the US are the *Barrio Dieciocho* or 18th Street gang (also known as *Mara 18* or *M18*) and *Mara Salvatrucha* (also known as *MS* or *MS-13*). When the Central American gangs grew to a level that the US considered to be dangerous, the US government employed a massive deportation campaign. As a result, today there are an estimated 130,000-300,000 gang members in Central America and Mexico. In Guatemala's post-war era, street gangs have flourished, and their influence continues to grow. Gangs use horrific violence to wreak havoc on society. While we were in Guatemala, for instance, a young man was found cut into eighteen pieces, suggesting that *Mara 18* was responsible for the murder.

Much like other clandestine operations, gangs have infiltrated every aspect of Guatemalan society. In gang culture, women are often seen as property. If a gang member wants to retaliate against another gang member, he kills his enemy's girlfriend as if to destroy his most prized possession. However, the murder of a woman by a gang member is not necessarily "gang violence." As Giovana Lemus pointed out, "If a gang member kills his wife, the issue is domestic violence, not gang violence. To say that she is a victim of gang violence only revictimizes her."

These issues present a challenge for authorities – to thoroughly investigate these murders in order to correctly identify why women are being killed. Speculation without investigation only provides more incentive to the murderers, allowing them to act with impunity. This puts other women at risk.



Congresswoman Nineth Montenegro, *Encuentro por Guatemala (EG)*



Giovana Lemus, Guatemalan Women's Group (GGM), and Network of No Violence Against Women



Gang Member in Guatemala City, Photo by www.intergeneral.info.com



Norma Cruz, *Fundación Sobrevivientes* (Survivors' Foundation)

• Home Sweet Home? •

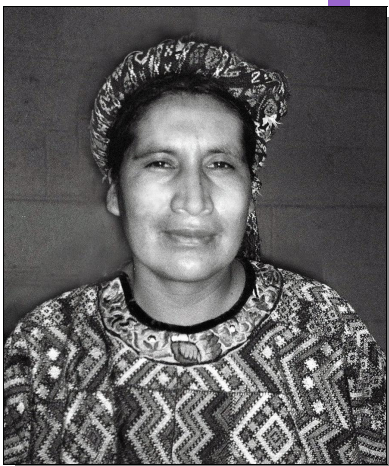
Another common factor given for the rise in femicide is domestic violence. Congresswoman Nineth Montenegro cited domestic violence as the principal cause of the murders of women in Guatemala. Edda Gaviola, on the other hand, believes that domestic violence only accounts for 35 – 40% of the cases.

As more and more women leave the home, attend school, enter the workforce, and gain more independence, they confront a male-dominated society. Many men blame their unemployment on the emergence of women in the academic and employment sectors. There is resentment among men who feel that a “woman’s place” is in the home. Therefore, men use violence to force women back into limited roles in the home and society. The emergence of feminism in Guatemala has hit head on with this entrenched *machismo* force, a force that has permeated Guatemala for centuries.



Promoters from *Nuevos Horizontes* (New Horizons) Women’s Shelter in Quetzaltenango

We visited two women’s shelters during the delegation. *Fundación Sobrevivientes* (Survivors Foundation) in Guatemala City was started by Norma Cruz after her daughter was sexually assaulted on several occasions at home. Nowhere to turn for legal or psychological assistance, Norma started a support group that eventually turned into the Foundation. In addition to providing shelter to battered women, the Foundation also provides legal and psychological support to victims and their families. According to Norma, 16,000 cases of sexual violence are reported each year in Guatemala,



CODECOT Midwife, Quetzaltenango

mostly by young girls and adolescents. She added that the staff must physically accompany women for protection when they decide to leave their partners. She commented that many women have been killed because they did not leave home in time. Last year, the Foundation took on 40 rape and murder cases and has so far won two murder trials because, says Norma, “We don’t lose cases.”

In Quetzaltenango, *Nuevos Horizontes* (New Horizons) has been sheltering women since 1993. Like *Fundación Sobrevivientes*, *Nuevos Horizontes* also focuses on prevention by raising awareness of women’s rights. The shelter, which houses up to twelve families, also provides job training and life skills. According to a staff member, most of the women who seek refuge do not officially report their cases to the Public Prosecutor’s office. Either the victims don’t recognize domestic abuse as violence, or they fear that in reporting the abuse, they will face further violence or lose their partner. The fear of speaking out against domestic violence further empowers the aggressors to express emotion through aggression.

Juan Pablo Arce of the Minister of the Interior’s office told us that domestic violence is an issue that used to be left at home and has only just recently been discussed in public due to changing mentalities. Mentalities haven’t changed all that much, however. A man from the town of Panabaj in Santiago Atitlán reminded us that, “The man is the head of the household, like Christ is the head of the church.” Midwives from the Departmental Coordinator of Traditional Midwives of Quetzaltenango (CODECOT) told us that midwives-in-training will sometimes face difficulty when leaving the home for work because their husbands are jealous and assume they are cheating.

A husband’s extracurricular activities don’t help. Ana Moraga and Tanya

Torres started the organization Women for Justice, Education, and Recognition (MuJER), which provides accompaniment and support to sex workers in Guatemala City. The women said that men who visit prostitutes become accustomed to treating women like sexual objects. Because they can do whatever they want with the prostitute, they in turn do whatever they want with their partners. This exhibition of violence and control extends from the bedroom into daily life. As Giovana Lemus told us, “Home sweet home is more lethal for women. It is not as sweet as it sounds.”

• **The Bullet and the Pill .**

Aside from murder and sexual abuse, other more subtle forms of violence against women exist in Guatemala. The right to adequate healthcare, for example, is denied to many women, especially in rural areas. The midwives at CODECOT told us that they often have to travel long distances, up to three hours, to visit women in their homes because there are no health clinics in their communities. This lack of access to adequate health care suggests institutionalized exclusion and discrimination. Furthermore, many indigenous women do not speak Spanish, which makes a visit to a hospital almost impossible. CODECOT is fighting this injustice by training midwives to serve women throughout the department of Quetzaltenango. Yet, one can only ask, “Who provides healthcare to women in the rest of the country?”

Women also suffer from a lack of access to contraceptives and family planning services. Sandra Morán from the Sector de Mujeres (Women’s Sector) told us that Cardinal Rodolfo Quezada Toruño put an advertisement on the front page of a prominent newspaper that showed a picture of a bullet beside a picture of a birth control pill with a caption that read “Killers.” Messages such as these

dissuade women from pursuing the right to manage their own bodies. If a woman is faced with an unwanted pregnancy, her options are limited.

Women also face violence in the form of child kidnapping. Children in Guatemala are kidnapped for adoption, prostitution, pornography, and even rumored organ harvesting. Norma Cruz explained that kidnapping a child is stealing the fruit of a woman’s body and her right to have children. “We export children like they are bananas,” she said. “We have to take on these cases because this is also a form of violence against women.”

• **Blaming the Victim .**

Who is at fault?: Organized crime? Gangs? Domestic violence? Why are women being killed with impunity? The main reason why there are no concrete answers to these questions is because the murders are not investigated. Only two percent of homicides in Guatemala are brought to justice. This means that of the 603 cases of femicide last year, potentially 591 murderers remain at large.

Rosa Franco, who lost her daughter Maria Isabel to femicide in 2001, told us that the police laughed at her and called Maria Isabel a prostitute. Jorge Velásquez, whose daughter Claudina was killed in 2005, said that authorities have still been unable to determine the time or place of her death and that police interrupted her wake to take her fingerprints. Tanya and Ana from MuJER told us that the authorities never investigate the murders of sex workers, which they estimate total 10% of all



Photos of recent victims of femicide in Guatemala



Rosa Franco, mother of Maria Isabel Franco—2001 victim of femicide



Jorge Velásquez, father of Claudina Velásquez—2005 victim of femicide

María Gabriela Nuñez,
Presidential Secretariat of Women
(SEPREM)



femicides. “Then again,” they said, “the police treat all murders of women like they are sex workers.”

A woman from Nuevos Horizontes said that victims are often brought to the shelter by firefighters rather than police because women trust the firefighters more. Who can blame them? Members of the National Civil Police (PNC) have been accused of raping and murdering numerous women. María Gabriela Nuñez from the Presidential Secretariat of Women (SEPREM) admitted that the police are being investigated for ties to organized crime and femicide. If women cannot trust authorities with their safety, families cannot trust authorities to investigate crimes.

Ana Moraga and Tanya Torres,
Women for Justice, Education,
and Recognition (MujER)



Officials in charge of investigating crimes in Guatemala often cite a lack of resources as the primary impediment to bringing justice. Rosa María Salazar from the Human Rights division of the Public Prosecutor’s office said that they are trying to improve, but that change takes time. She claimed that the prosecutors investigate all

Public Prosecutor’s Office
Investigates Crime Scene of
Murdered Woman



crimes, saying “even prostitutes are people.” She said that although evidence used to be buried with victims or returned to the family, personal belongings are now kept as evidence. Guatemala has recently installed a DNA testing facility. With US funding, the National Institute of Forensic Sciences (INACIF) had just elected its first president while we were in Guatemala. The Prosecutor’s Division of Crimes Against Life has also recently added photographers, doctors, and attorneys to the staff to assist the investigators.

The investigators can use all the help they can get. The causes of femicide that Rosa María Salazar, the representative from the Public Prosecutor’s Office, gave us were very different from the explanations we heard from other sources throughout the delegation. “Satanic cults,” she said, “are to blame for a lot of the murders. Also, infidelity on the part of women. When wives cheat on their husbands, they are often murdered in a crime of passion.” What Ms. Salazar was saying, in effect, was that women are to blame for their own murders. How can a woman possibly expect to find justice if those who are supposed to be fighting for her are blaming her for the crimes committed against her?

• Government Initiatives •

Whether due to inability, a lack of resources, or apathy, the fact remains that the murders of women are not investigated and that the killers remain free. Guatemalan law doesn’t even provide for some of the basic protections that US citizens may take for granted. Domestic violence and sexual harassment are currently not punishable by law, said María Gabriela Nuñez. This gives husbands a free pass to physically abuse their wives. Other laws have too many loopholes. For example, Norma Cruz’s young daughter was sexually assaulted with multiple foreign objects. Guatemalan law, however, only punishes sexual penetration with a penis, and

therefore does not define the act against her daughter as a crime. Young boys are also left unprotected, as the law only prohibits “vaginal penetration.”

The government has the responsibility to rectify these laws. Three recent government initiatives are aiming to address violence against women. The National Coordinator for the Prevention of Domestic Violence and Violence against Women (CONAPREVI) is a government-run commission including the participation of SEPREM, members of the Executive Branch, the Public Prosecutor’s Office (MP), the Justice Department (OJ), and representatives from civil society. CONAPREVI, which was initiated by the women’s movement, has the goal of accompanying and advising policies on violence against women in Guatemala.

Another recently launched program is the Plan for No-Violence (PLANOVI), which aims to end violence against women in Guatemala by 2014. PLAVOVI, supported by the Dutch Embassy, focuses on domestic violence.

In 2005, the Guatemalan government unveiled the Commission to Fight Femicide, which is coordinated by SEPREM. The Commission is in the process of compiling different studies done on femicide in Guatemala and is trying to analyze the profiles of the aggressors in order to standardize the criteria for the murders of women. The ultimate goal is to identify which murders are gender-based and which are general murders. SEPREM also expects the government to propose a law soon that will specifically condemn femicide.

While these measures seem to be on the right path to ending violence, Giovana Lemus is not so optimistic. She said that her women’s organization does support CONAPREVI and PLANOVI, but feels that the Commission to Fight Femicide is just smoke and mirrors. “If they really

cared,” she said, “they would change the penal code like we’ve asked them to.” Rosa Franco feels that the government has abandoned her. “President Bush responded to a letter I wrote him, but [Guatemalan] President Berger did not,” she said.

Furthermore, the Guatemalan government unfortunately supports US policies of hemispheric security. According to Edda Gaviola, “They have focused their fight against gangs, youth, organized crime, and narco-trafficking, but have linked it all to terrorism, which links back to grassroots movements and campesino movements. People who are fighting for justice are labeled as terrorists.”

• Outlook for the Future? •

The elections that occurred in the first week of September will usher in a new government that may or may not see violence against women as a priority. Juan Pablo Arce captured the mood of the country when he told us, “We are in an election year so no one cares about violence against women.” Not one of the organizations we spoke with felt optimistic about any of the presidential candidates adequately addressing gender-based violence. On a positive note, Sandra Morán said that 44% of the people registered to vote are women.

Perhaps another positive sign is that the number of documented femicides appears to have declined. As of June 30 of this year, 277 cases of femicide had been reported. If that trend continues, the total number of homicides of women in 2007 would be 554, an 8% decrease from 2006 and a 17% decline from 2005. Speculation abounds as to the reasons why there has been a slight decrease. Perhaps initiatives to raise awareness about women’s rights are working. Perchance perpetrators have lost their nerve. Possibly international pressure has


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Sandra Morán, Sector de mujeres (Women’s Sector)

* The Guatemala Human Rights Commission/USA (GHRC) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, humanitarian organization that monitors, documents, and reports on the human rights situation in Guatemala. For the last twenty-five years, GHRC has advocated for and supported survivors of abuses, and worked toward positive, systemic change.

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Guatemalan woman beaten by her partner.



forced authorities to do a better job in preventing femicide. Or maybe families are more afraid of the consequences they may face if they report the murder.

However, it is also possible that government authorities were purposely underreporting the number of women killed. Giovana Lemus said that the moment organizations began to publicize the increasing murders of women, the official numbers began to decrease. Her organization is trying to determine whether those in charge have fictionalized the numbers. Yet, despite a decrease in reports of femicide, the fact remains that the cases are not investigated and the assailants aren't prosecuted. To have even just one woman's murderer walk free is an injustice to all women.

• Our Role •

Through all of the meetings, interviews, and presentations, we wanted to know what we could do, as US citizens, to help change the situation. The answers were varied. Many expressed the need for continued international solidarity, accompaniment, and pressure on Guatemalan authorities. Some said, "Talk to your Representative and Senators," highlighting the importance of US-sponsored Resolutions and governmental visits to Guatemala. Edda Gaviola told us to focus on US security policies to help curb our country's influence over the Guatemalan military.

A midwife at CODECOT told us that our products are bad for their health, saying, "Stop sending us your packaged, preserved food! Too many pregnant women are drinking Pepsi!" Finally, Congresswoman Nineth Montenegro said that we might not be able to do anything, that Guatemalans need to take responsibility and solve this problem by themselves. After a long civil

war in which US government influence and resources led to the deaths and disappearances of thousands of Guatemalans, who could blame her?

But at the end of the day, violence against women is a global issue; it is everyone's struggle. Jorge Velásquez told us, "There is so much pain in the word 'femicide.'" For victims like Jorge's daughter, Claudina, and so many others, we will keep fighting.

Delegates:

Joanie Dawson
Dan Gentile
Jacquie Marroquin
Kathleen Melville
Andy Petonak
Laurie Sheridan
Maryjane Westra

Coordinators:

Marty Jordan
Julie Suarez

**We offer a special thanks to the institutions and individuals that took time out of their day and schedules to meet with us. We would also like to recognize Laurie Sheridan, Dan Gentile, and Kathleen Melville for allowing us to use their photographs for this report.*



Guatemala Human Rights Commission/USA (GHRC)
3321 12th St., NE
Washington, DC 20017
Tel: 202-529-6599
Fax: 202-526-4611
ghrc-usa@ghrc-usa.org
www.ghrc-usa.org