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Guatemala's Murdered Women

For the last five years, Guatemala has suffered 'an epidemic of gruesome killings of women that are as mysterious as they are brutal. Typically a young Woman in Guatemala City vanishes, and her body turns up a few days later in a garbage bag or in an open field. Many of the women's faces and bodies have been mutilated, and many have been tortured .sexually or otherwise. Some of the bodies have mes-~ages, like "death to bitches," scrawled on them.

In Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, a pattern of hundreds of killings of this type has drawn international condemnation. But aside from reports by Amnesty International and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, the Guatemalan women's deaths have gotten very little attention. At least a thousand women have been victims in the past five years, and only three killers are in prison. The police do not even investigate a vast majority of cases.

Guatemala does not keep reliable statistics. But it is clear that a pattern of these killings was first seen in 2000, and the reported numbers have risen 'since then. Last year, there were 590 such killings of women, and the murders have grown more grisly. Many of the women were victims of gang warfare. Others were killed by husbands or boyfriends. But there are also cases of college students or shop ;Workers who had no links to crime and simply disap-

peared - until their bodies were found.

What the women have in common is that their cases go nowhere. Overwhelmingly," victims' families report that the response of the authorities is a lack of interest. The police assure them that a missing daughter, for example, has run off with a boyfriend. When the body turns up, the crime is often dismissed with comments that the dead woman must have been a gang member or a prostitute, or killed by her partner - as if these were justifications for failing to investigate.

Guatemala has recently signed several international conventions protecting women, and it has established such new organizations as the office of the special prosecutor for crimes against women. But this progress is largely on paper. Laws are not enforced, and there is no money to finance the new offices. Guatemala is still a country where a rapist can escape charges by marrying the victim, and domestic violence cases can be prosecuted only if the victim can still show bruises 10 days later. Sexual harassment is not illegal.

When such outdated attitudes toward women prevail, it is easy for the local authorities to justify taking no action when young women are murdered. Their inaction gives an official green light to the killers of women.