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Killings of women rising in Guatemala

Felecia Bartow, Aug 10, 2007

Early this year, the Center for Gender & Refugee Studies (CGRS), a San Francisco-based women's human rights organization, conducted a week-long fact-finding trip to Guatemala which focused on the issue of violence against women, as well as the growing number of gender-motivated killings or "femicides" taking place in that country.

"We need this support," said Norma Cruz, Director of the Fundación Sobrevivientes, one of the few shelters in the entire country serving women escaping violence.

This sentiment was echoed by activist Jorge Velásquez, the father of Claudina Isabel Velásquez, a 19-year-old law student who was murdered in 2005. International pressure is fundamental," Velásquez told CGRS, "it is the only thing that will bring Guatemala's femicides to an end."

According to police statistics, more than 2,500 women and girls have been murdered in Guatemala since 2001. However, during CGRS's fact-finding trip, Guatemalan human rights groups reported that of these murders only 17 cases had resulted in a trial.

In fact, so few cases have been brought to trial that human rights advocates say there is almost complete impunity for those who murder women in Guatemala.

Investigators mishandle crime scenes and officials blame the victims themselves, often deciding that their murders are not worth investigating.

CGRS has sought to build public awareness about Guatemala's femicides and pressure policymakers to take action to help protect Guatemalan women and girls.

In 2005, CGRS launched the U.S.-Guatemala Partnership to End Violence Against Women. The coalition seeks to examine and address the roots of this violence.

CGRS has also led a sustained advocacy campaign around the case of Rodi Alvarado. Alvarado is a Guatemalan woman who suffered ten years of domestic battering. She eventually sought asylum in the U.S. after the police and the courts refused to protect her.

Alvarado's case has been pending for more than a decade -- the result of a stalemate between government officials who favor granting relief in cases such as Alvarado's, and those who fear that accepting such women as refugees will open the so-called "floodgates" to others.

Why killings are increasing

There are many possible explanations for the growing rate of femicide in Guatemala, but there is no one clear answer to the question: Who is killing Guatemala's women and girls? Guatemala is a deeply patriarchal society in which gender-related violence is widely tolerated, including in the justice system itself.

Without a doubt, the legacy of Guatemala's brutal 36-year civil conflict provides historical context to the current situation.

Rape, torture, and the killing of women were common military strategies used during the conflict, and most of the perpetrators were never brought to justice.

Those interviewed by CGRS repeatedly cited Guatemala's inept, corrupt, and under-resourced institutions — including the National Civil Police and the Public Prosecutor's Office — as serious obstacles that lie in the

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way of addressing the impunity that exists for those who murder women and girls.

Other factors — including gang violence, drug trafficking, organized crime, and the presence of “maquilas” or foreign-owned factories — were also mentioned as contributing to the increased vulnerability of Guatemalan women.

It is within this context that police and other officials often attempt to justify their failure to investigate the murders of women by characterizing the victims as gang members or sex workers.

Role of human rights

While there are any number of overlapping causes contributing to the high rate of femicide in Guatemala, interviewees identified a key role that U.S. activists can play in helping to solve the problem of deadly violence against Guatemalan women and girls.

U.S. activists must voice concern about individual cases of women who have been murdered as well as the growing instances of Guatemalan human rights advocates being threatened and intimidated.

They must also ask the U.S. to demand accountability from the Guatemalan government for its failure to investigate and prosecute those responsible.

They must urge the Guatemalan government to fully fund and staff the office of the National Institute of Forensic Science (INACIF).

INACIF was established in 2006 to improve criminal investigations and prosecutions, including the murders of women.

The Guatemalan Congress has yet to appoint any personnel to INACIF or to provide it with a budget, despite the fact that the U.S. State Department has provided half a million dollars to this institution.

In May, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a resolution (H.R. 100), which condemns Guatemala’s femicides and expresses sympathy to the families of the victims. A similar resolution (S.R. 178) is now pending in the Senate. California Senator Dianne Feinstein recently signed on to S.R. 178 as a co-sponsor.

CGRS continues to encourage broad support for Congressional action on this issue and for other measures that will help bring an end to violence against women in Guatemala. ♦

For more information about CGRS see: <http://cgrs.uchastings.edu>. To receive updates about CGRS’s work, send an email to cgrs@uchastings.edu. Felecia Bartow is the Associate Director of the Center for Gender & Refugee Studies at U.C. Hastings

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