

Sepur Zarco: An account of violence against women
during the Guatemalan Civil War

Sepur Zarco is a community in Eastern Guatemala composed primarily of indigenous people. This region was particularly affected by military operations during the internal armed conflict. During the 1980's, six military bases were established, each devoted to a specific function. The military base in Sepur Zarco was used mainly as a "rest and relaxation" area for military personnel. Inside this base, native women were forced to perform housekeeping tasks and were repeatedly subjected to individual and group rapes by military personnel.

The inhabitants of the Polochic Valley¹ suffered massive and systematic violations of their human rights at the hands of soldiers between 1982 and 1988. Thousands of cases of forced disappearances, torture, extrajudicial executions and massacres have been documented by the Historical Clarification Commission, particularly for the period of 1981 through 1983. As regards women specifically, they were victims of the following crimes.

Rape. After a community's leaders, men and children were abducted, tortured or forcibly disappeared, the women became the targets. They were often raped in their own home, after which all their property was set afire and their animals slaughtered or stolen. Those who managed to escape into the mountains were persecuted. The rapes were carried out collectively, in front of family members, sometimes even in view of their young children. Women of all ages, and pregnant women too, were subjected to this abuse. Those who ventured out in search of their husbands were themselves abducted and brought to the military base to be raped and tortured.

Domestic and sexual slavery. At the Sepur Zarco military base, while the troops "rested and relaxed," women were forced to work 12 hours a day, cooking for the soldiers and washing their uniforms. They received no compensation, and had to use their own resources. These work conditions prevented them from tending to or feeding their own children, whose health began to deteriorate as a result. They were systematically and repeatedly raped by groups of soldiers, often under threat of a weapon. The women were closely watched, making it impossible for

¹ Near Lake Izabal, in northeastern Guatemala.

them to leave the Sepur Zarco community. They were forced to take contraceptive medication. Other widespread practices in the community included forced nudity and forced marriages.

In 1988, the army withdrew from Sepur Zarco, leaving its inhabitants to live with the consequences of the violations endured for close to six years. Today, the women suffer the effects of extreme physical and psychological trauma as a result of the violence and crimes that were perpetrated.

Consequences of sexual violence. The physical consequences of sexual violence include abortion, forced pregnancy, hemorrhaging, the inability to conceive, and many types of diseases, including sexually transmitted ones. Psychological consequences abound: chief among them, fear, shame, stigma and silence. For more than 25 years, that silence has served as a survival mechanism for the victims, helping them avoid the rejection and rage of their spouse, the violence of their aggressors (since many of the soldiers lived in the same community), and social exclusion within their community. Women were sometimes accused of provoking their rape, of not being able to prevent it—even of enjoying it or of committing adultery. To this day, they are harshly ostracized by their community and are held up as bad examples. The macho culture and the influence of religion have driven these women to withdraw into silence and guilt for over 25 years.

“I witnessed how they [the soldiers] killed off the men of the community, so that they alone might make the decisions affecting the lives of each one of us.”²

“They forced us to feed them; they divided us into groups to take turns preparing their meals, to make tortillas. When we had finished, they began to rape us. It was tremendously hard. We were not subjected to one rape or one torture; it was constant. This is why it is very painful to think about it...”³

² Testimony from a survivor in the department of Alta Verapaz delivered during the “Ni olvido, ni Sielencio” tribunal of conscience: pp. 31, 32. “Y yo fui testigo de cómo iban matando a los hombres de la comunidad, para que sólo ellos quedaran con decisión sobre la vida de cada una de nosotras.”

³ Testimony from a survivor in the department of Alta Verapaz delivered during the “Ni olvido, ni Sielencio” tribunal of conscience: pp. 31, 32.

“Nos obligaban a ir a alimentarlos, nos conformaron por grupos, para ir a hacer turnos, para hacerles la comida, las tortillas. Luego de cumplir si fue muy duro, no fue solamente un tipo de violación o de tortura al cual fuimos sometidas, sino que lo hicieron constantemente. Por eso insisto que recordarlo realmente duele.”

“We need you to believe us; we need that all this be made public; and, above all, that it be known that here in Guatemala serious violations of our human rights have been perpetrated. Respect for life has been lost, as has respect for our integrity, because that was what we held most sacred.”⁴

Since August 2015, Lawyers Without Borders Canada (LWBC), supported by the Stabilization and Reconstruction Task Force (START) of Global Affairs Canada, has been implementing the program “Fight against impunity for violence against women and other serious human rights violations in Guatemala”. Within the framework of this project, LWBC offers its support to countless civil society organizations in their fight against impunity as well as promoting women’s rights, particularly aboriginal women in exercising their right to access to justice.

⁴ Testimony from a survivor in the department of Alta Verapaz delivered during the “Ni olvido, ni Sielencio” tribunal of conscience: pp. 31, 32.

“Necesitamos que nos crean, que se publique sobre todo, que se sepa que acá en Guatemala se han cometido graves violaciones a nuestros derechos como seres humanos, se perdió el respeto por la vida, el respeto por nuestra integridad, porque es lo más sagrado para nosotras.”