

Femicide On the Rise in Latin America

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On the eve of International Women's Day 2006, a delegation of Latin American women made a historic journey to Washington, DC. Rather than celebrating the gains women have made through their many struggles, the group arrived at the headquarters of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) of the Organization of American States with an alarming message: femicide, the murder of women, is spreading.

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“(Femicide) is not only present in Ciudad Juarez and most of Mexico, it’s a regional problem,” warns Marimar Monroy, a representative of the non-governmental Mexican Commission for the Defense and Promotion of Human Rights and one of the delegates to the IACHR.

Joined by grassroots delegates from Guatemala, Colombia, Peru, and other nations, Monroy presented a report to the IACHR commissioners that sketched widespread violence against women from multiple causes, rampant failures in the procurement of justice for victims and relatives, the prevalence of impunity, and the absence of standard statistical gathering and record-keeping methods to document gender violence. Monroy and her Latin American colleagues delivered their femicide report as one piece of a campaign aimed at making “the problem more visible in the region.”

Incomplete murder rates cited in the NGO report mention 373 murders of women in Bolivia from 2003 to 2004, 143 in Peru during 2003, and more than 2,000 in Guatemala. In Colombia , a woman is reportedly killed every 6 days by her partner or ex-partner. Ciudad Juarez and Chihuahua City , Mexico , two cities where the femicide trend was first widely noticed, have suffered the murder of more than 500 women from multiple causes since 1993, according to press and other sources. Dozens more remain missing.

Latin American women's organizations contend that member nations of the Organization of American States are in widespread violation of international treaties and declarations that protect the rights of women , including the American Convention on Human Rights, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Belem do Para Convention, and others. Appealing to the IACHR to follow-up on previous recommendations the human rights institution has made about eradicating femicide, delegation representatives considered the Washington hearing a positive step.

“Given the kinds of questions (from the commissioners) it opened a door to initiating a process with

the participation of civil society,” said Adriana Beltran of the non-profit Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), which facilitated the delegation’s U.S. visit. The IACHR conducted previous trips to Ciudad Juarez in 2002 and Guatemala in 2004 to investigate the femicides. Additionally, United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women Yakin Ertuk traveled to Guatemala in 2004.

Femicide-a Form of Gender Violence

The Mexican Commission’s Monroy says a broad debate exists about the definition of femicide, which in her analysis is “gender violence,”-violence specifically directed against a person because she is female. Femicide in Latin America first became a major issue in 1993 after women’s activists in Ciudad Juarez raised protests about a growing number of unidentified women discovered raped, tortured, and murdered on the outskirts of this Mexican border city.

A sampling of recent cases reveals how the murder of women has become gruesomely routine in other parts of Mexico as well. In the month of February 2006 alone, Nora Rocio Ruiz, a 16-year-old Internet cafe employee, was found tortured and murdered close to a garbage dump near the drug-infested town of Uruapan , Michoacan. Eighteen-year-old Daniela Martinez, an indigenous Nahua high school student and domestic worker in Chilpancingo, Guerrero, was found shot to death and partially burned on the city’s outskirts. Martinez had been holding down a second job at a stationery store and was described as a hard-working student who had dreams of emigrating to the United States . Meanwhile, hundreds of mile north of Guerrero, 17-year-old Fabiola Cuevas Coral was found raped and strangled near Cuauhtémoc , Chihuahua .

Guatemala: Ciudad Juarez South

Angelica Gonzalez, a member of Guatemala’s Network to Oppose Violence against Women, says more than 2,400 women have been murdered in Guatemala since the year 2000. Killings have occurred throughout the Central American nation, with most concentrated in and around Guatemala City, Escuintla, and San Marcos, a department bordering Mexico. Despite the establishment of a special prosecutor’s office for women’s homicides, statistics compiled by WOLA indicate the slaughter is worsening. According to Adriana Beltran, more than 300 women were murdered in 2003, 527 in 2004, and 624 in 2005. Often portrayed in the press as faceless statistics, the victims had names and lives like Claudia Isabel Velazquez, a 19-year-old law student raped and shot to death, or 15-year-old Maria Isabel, a retail shop employee who was found raped with her hands and feet bound together with barbed wire.

A 2005 report by Amnesty International listed housewives, professionals, students, domestic employees, unskilled workers, sex workers, former and current street gang members, and migrants from other countries as among the victims. The human rights group cited class as another common denominator of the femicides. Most of the victims were very young and poor , and many were horribly tortured before their deaths. Like Ciudad Juarez , Gonzalez says sexual aggression, the mutilation of body parts like breasts, torture, and the dumping of victims in empty lots are trademarks of the killings. The cutting of women’s skin is a common trait in many crimes throughout the hemisphere, according to Gonzalez. In Guatemala, firearms, knives, and strangulation are the most common methods of killing women, she adds.

Other similarities stand out between the situations in Ciudad Juarez and Guatemala. Amnesty International highlights foot-dragging, poorly-protected evidence scenes, ignoring concrete leads, and failing to gather forensic evidence as characterizing the police investigations. Many crimes have

been pinned on the Mara street gangs, but Gonzalez says the real perpetrators aren't always readily identified. The women's advocate criticizes investigators for frequently focusing their probes on family members of victims rather than examining the bigger picture. "There's no clear information about the victimizers of women," Gonzalez says. Similar to Mexico, police are suspected as being the authors of more than one killing in Guatemala. Only 15 sentences have been handed down for the more than 2,000 murders in Guatemala during the last six years, Gonzalez adds.

The Wars Against Women

The roots of the present gender crimes in Guatemala can be traced back to the civil war that ended in 1996 with a peace agreement between the Guatemalan government and opposition guerrilla groups. A report by the Roman Catholic Church's Project for the Recuperation of Historical Memory said one-fourth of the 200,000 people who disappeared during the conflict were women. As in the former Yugoslavia and the Darfur region of Sudan, government soldiers and pro-government paramilitary groups committed widespread human rights violations against women. "Rape and sexual violence were an integral part of the counterinsurgency strategy," the church concluded. The present crimes reflect this pattern of hatred and domination of women.

Similar patterns have been observed in Colombia, Peru, and Chiapas, Mexico. In Colombia, suspected right-wing paramilitaries working with the Colombian military raped 16-year-old Omaira Fernandez and tore her unborn child from her womb before tossing the bodies of the teenager and baby into a river in 2003. In Peru, the country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission identified rape as a form of torture during the 1980-2000 armed conflict.

In Guatemala violence against women continued in the years after the war ended, a period when international drug cartels and Mexican transnational corporations moved into the country. After a 2004 visit, the IACHR's Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women said there were indications that some women were being killed by organized criminal bands intent on carving up national territory into zones of influence. Young women who were in a gang's territory and rejected the passes of gang members were at risk, as well as those who resided in rival territory and were sometimes killed and exhibited in a lurid manner to send a "message."

One former female gang member told Amnesty International: "Such murders can be used to show which gang has the most power. The one that does the most brutal things has the most power-all the more so if nothing happens to them as a result."

Killing women as a means of projecting power is also evident in the neighboring nations of El Salvador and Honduras, where defiant messages and challenges to politicians have been found scrawled next to murdered (sometimes mutilated) women. South American anthropologist Rita Laura Segato, who has studied underworld sub-cultures, has pointed to the possibility of mafia blood pacts and territorial claims as features of some of the Ciudad Juarez killings.

A Transnational, Parallel State

In a globalized world, femicide is not just a local horror. The social, economic, and political forces transforming the globe and expelling populations across borders likewise put their stamp on the killing of women. Femicides flourish in areas experiencing social upheavals marked by previous or current armed conflicts, violent rivalries between internationally organized criminal groups, the displacement of old economies in favor of new-often illicit-ones, and the corruption and weakening of

traditional forms of state power.

At the same time, killers now frequently jump borders. Jose Manuel Torres Yake, a Peruvian national, was arrested in Hiroshima , Japan , last year for raping and murdering a 6-year-old girl. The suspect had a previous criminal record in Peru for raping two other minors.

The assorted, possible transnational paths of femicide are mind-boggling. In recent comments, Alicia Perez Duarte, the newly-appointed federal special prosecutor for women's homicides in Mexico , departed from previous denials by the Chihuahua Office of the State Attorney General and her own agency, the Office of the Federal Attorney General, that organized crime and drug traffickers were not involved in the Ciudad Juarez rape murders. Perez links the murders to the rise of the Carrillo Fuentes drug cartel in 1993, even though evidence exists that the murders began somewhat earlier. The Mexican special prosecutor does not discount a possible link between the Ciudad Juarez murders and international money-laundering, prostitution, pornographic and pedophile rings that use modeling agencies, Internet cafes, and computer education schools as covers.

According to Perez, coincidences exist in the modus operandi of a ring exposed two years ago in Ciudad Juarez that recruited teenagers for sex with prominent businessmen and the international network of pedophiles involving Jean Succar Kuri, the Cancun businessman detained in Arizona. Perez recently said it's within these circles that murder victims "presumably met those who killed them." Perez added, "There you have the leads. The forms are very similar in the state of Mexico , in Ciudad Juarez , in Cancun , in Tapachula."

Spanning the globe from Asia to Europe to the Americas, the economic clout of human and sex trafficking networks is estimated by some observers to be only surpassed by illegal drug and arms trading. Latin America is a hot spot in the international sex economy. Recent pedophile investigations in Germany and Spain, for example, traced back to Guatemala where pornographic videos featuring children as young as three years old engaging in sexual acts were produced. Earlier this year, a scandal erupted in the Guatemalan town of Jutiapa bordering El Salvador when a pedophile ring was exposed. Suspects, including the son of an official of the Guatemalan Justice Ministry, were accused of using a high school to recruit 15 youth aged 11 to 16 to act in porn flicks. As in Ciudad Juarez , family members of the youths were threatened after pressing legal action.

In the view of Adriana Beltran, the power of organized criminal groups and the persistence of femicide serve to undermine the democratic transition Guatemala was supposed to experience after the peace accords. In former military dictatorships like Guatemala where civilian government institutions are still fragile, the security threats posed by organized criminal bands and their impunity are paradoxically reviving the former national security state apparatus as the military is being drawn into law enforcement. Beltran believes that this is a temptation that should be resisted at all costs. "We strongly believe that the lines between police and military should be kept separate, especially in countries that had armed conflicts," she says.

The WOLA is supporting proposals to convene an international commission to investigate clandestine armed groups that grew out of the civil war years, and focus attention on the root causes of rapidly-proliferating organized crime.

Internationalizing the Anti-Femicide Movement

While the bad news is that femicide seems to be spreading throughout the hemisphere, the good news is that growing movements are emerging to counter the violent tide. In Chilpancingo, Guerrero, students of Daniela Martinez's high school demand justice in their slain friend's case.

Another movement is being organized around the brutal December slaying of high school student Sara Benazir in Tijuana , linking activists in the Mexican border city with activists in San Francisco , California .

Meanwhile, the pro-Juarez women's movement has gone global. In Holland, activists outraged by the lack of progress in the 1998 Ciudad Juarez murder of Dutch citizen Hestor Van Nierop and other women are organizing to pressure the transnational electronics company Philips, which has maquiladora plants in the border city, to push for action, and has targeted the human rights clause of the free trade agreement signed between Mexico and the European Union as a pressure point for demanding an end to impunity. A growing roster of international celebrities including Jane Fonda, Salma Hayek, Joan Manuel Serrat, and the Mexican rock group Jaguares, among others, are giving mass exposure to the issue of femicide.

In the United States, the Mexico Solidarity Network and the Washington Office on Latin America are organizing tours and speaking engagements to educate the public about femicide in Mexico and Guatemala. Last year, U.S. Congressional briefings about the Guatemalan femicide attended by Democratic representatives Hilda Solis and Barbara Lee were held on Capitol Hill. "We're trying to raise the level of awareness, of concern," says the WOLA's Beltran. "There is increasing concern from members of Congress about the situation," she says. "Ciudad Juarez sparked interest ... this is a situation that affects not only Ciudad Juarez."

P.S.

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