

Legacy of Repression: Violence against Women in Post-Conflict Guatemala

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ABSTRACT

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Guatemala's 36 year civil war resulted in 662 massacres, 200, 000 dead or "disappeared", and over one million displaced. The Historical Clarification Commission (CEH, *Comisión de Esclarecimiento Histórico*) found the Guatemalan Army responsible for 93 % of these atrocities and the victims of these massacres to be overwhelmingly Mayan in origin. The "scorched-earth" policies pursued from 1978-83 was so brutal and seemingly indiscriminately murderous towards the indigenous that it has led many to call the scores of massacres "genocide."

During the war, violence against women was systematic and prevalent. Thousands of women and girls, primarily non-combatants of indigenous descent, were raped, tortured, and murdered. Though female homicide as a social phenomenon can be observed in numerous parts of the world, such as Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, the case of Guatemala is of particular interest due to the very recent civil war (1960-1996) and the continuing impact the trauma of the war has had on all spheres of Guatemalan society.

Though there has been some attention paid to the culture of impunity continuing after the war, the majority of existing research only makes a brief mention of the link between former paramilitary groups and the high incidence of female homicide. To understand the phenomenon of contemporary female homicide in Guatemala, I use a historical lens with which to assess the role of the Guatemalan military complex in promoting generalized violence as a means to both retain and expand its power. My thesis seeks to investigate the possibility that patterns of gender-based violence in Guatemala today can be traced back to the brutal counterinsurgency methods and structural violence employed against women during the civil war.

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Introduction

In 2009, 796 women were murdered in Guatemala, a statistic reflective of the rising rate of female homicides. Though more men than women are being killed, what distinguishes the murders of women is evidence of torture, such as rape, stabbing, or mutilation before being killed. Though Guatemalan state officials often decry the violent murders as isolated incidents or the crimes of gang youths, these explanations are simply strategies to deflect state responsibility for human rights atrocities. As is discussed in subsequent sections, the continuity in violence from the civil war is still being wielded by the military as a political weapon with which to remain in power.

I. The Politics of "Femicide"

The lack of acknowledgement of gender-based crimes in Guatemala is evinced by the fact that many "femicide" cases are often shelved into the category of "other causes" or "gang related". Amnesty International (AI) states that these categories "conceal the gender-based brutality and sexual nature of many of the killings in which the victim present evidence of rape, mutilation, and dismemberment" (Amnesty 5). Many feminists note that police refuse to look at crimes as gendered, though the brutality of the methods employed and the gender specific methods of violence, such as rape, against the murdered women point to the fact that the victim's gender as indeed a motive. This falls into a long-standing pattern demonstrated in many patriarchal societies, in which the motivations for gender-specific violence are obscured or dismissed entirely.

There is a general consensus in applying the label of "femicide" to characterize the killings in Guatemala. However, much like the label of "genocide", the term "femicide" is often poorly defined and saddled with varying interpretations. Femicide is defined by the Centre for Human Rights Legal Action (CALDH) as "a combination of repeated and systematic violations of women's rights and a state of misogynist violence resulting in assaults, attacks, abuse, and in the most extreme cases, the brutal murder of women" (qtd. in Doiron).

Author Jane Caputi further characterizes femicide as a "social expression of sexual politics, an institutionalized and ritual enactment of male domination, and a form of terror that functions to maintain the power of the patriarchal order" (Caputi 205).

Human rights activists assert that these killings deserve special attention due to the torture and sexual violence perpetrated before the murder, evidence which suggests that the primary motive for the killings was the victim's gender. Prominent Guatemala scholar, Victoria Sanford, and the Guatemala Human Rights Commission (GHRC) both differentiate "femicide" from the term "feminicide" which has a distinctly more political significance and implicates the involvement and complicity of local and state power structures that downplay or dismiss violence against women. As I will argue below, the label does not provide any additional conceptual advantage in understanding the phenomenon of high female homicide rate in Guatemala. Therefore, I will use "femicide" in this paper to mean the killing of women by men, applying the narrowest definition of this term without implying motive, except where otherwise noted.

Victoria Sanford describes "feminicide" in the Guatemala context as the "institutionalized killing of women" - an extension of the genocidal army policy during the civil war (Sanford 104). Sanford's paper asserts that women and girls were primary targets of the genocide because of their reproductive capacity and that the types of violence towards women manifested intent to destroy the cultural group (Sanford 107). This somewhat coincides with Ricardo Falla's interpretation of the UN Convention on Genocide, stating that if the UN Convention on Genocide definition were to be applied, he "does not believe that the army tried to exterminate the entire indigenous population ... because it makes up most of the country's agricultural workforce. But it did want to exterminate entire groups of both Indians and *ladinos*" (Falla 158)¹. He concludes

¹ The 1948 UN Convention defines genocide as the commission of any of the following acts with "intent to destroy, in whole or in part; a national, ethnical, racial or religious group as such: a) killing members of the group; b) causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; c) deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in

by saying that “the intention of genocide is present when the army kills to exterminate the biological seed of the group” (158). This suggests that the dictatorships of Rios Montt and General Lucas Garcia reflected genocidal intent at various periods during 1978-1983, and the "genocide" could only be applied on micro scale to individual massacres where there existed an intent to “exterminate the biological seed” (Falla 158).

However, applying the label of either "genocide" or "femicide" based on analysis of only select massacres weakens this claim. As Guatemala scholar Greg Grandin emphasizes in his argument against the CEH's designation of "genocide", communities perceived as supporting the rebels were terrorized disproportionately, and thus the massacres fell into the characterization of counterinsurgency rather than genocide (347). Thus, Sanford's assertion is problematic because it oversimplifies a counterinsurgency campaign that used both modes of “selective” and “indiscriminate” massacres to create a generalized climate of fear in which to make survivors more amenable to the military’s preferred outlook.

The shift from “selective” to “indiscriminate” massacres during the reign of Rios Montt, meant the homicide rate for women during the civil war increased dramatically from 14% of victims, to 42% (Sanford 107). Yet it is unclear from this statistic whether women were targeted specifically for their reproductive capacity as Sanford suggests or simply because total extermination of all inhabitants was part of the “scorched earth” policy imposed by Rios Montt. If there was a specific intent to kill women, it would presumably mean that women would account for at least half if not more of the victims of

part; d) imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; e) forcibly transferring children of the group to another group."

the massacres. However, CEH statistics show that women were victims of 20-25% of human rights violations during the war (CEH qtd. in Franco²).

Nonetheless, evidence provided by the CEH and REHMI of violence against women committed in the civil war suggests that the killing of women was institutionalized as a secondary goal in the context of the counterinsurgency during the civil war and then as a mechanism of social control and political oppression afterwards. This remains one problematic feature in proving occurrences of "femicide", the killing of women by men, and "feminicide", the killing of women by men with the complicity of the state, since both definitions state that the gender of the victim was the driving motive for the murder. In this respect, neither Sanford nor other sources, demonstrate convincingly that the high female homicide in Guatemala is driven by a state promoted ideology of hatred towards women.

Though Sanford cites that contemporary feminicide in Guatemala is borne out of the civil war era's genocidal intent towards women, her evidence for this claim rests on shaky ground. Violence against women was indeed systematic during certain periods of the civil war, especially during the "indiscriminate" phases of the scorched earth campaign. However, rape and other gender-specific modes of violence were used not as an end goal but in the larger context of the Guatemalan counterinsurgency logic. Though female victims are singled out for gendered violence, there is evidence to suggest that this is merely a continuation of repression from the civil war, and not "femicide", that is, a traditional definition of femicide with gender as the primary motive. The Guatemalan

² The CEH details the exact percentages of victims by gender for various human rights violation. I have included the percentages here : extrajudicial execution (23% of victims were female, 77% male), deprivation of freedom (21% female, 79% male, torture (23% female, 77% male), forced disappearance (12% female, 78% male), Death due to displacement (51% female, 49% male), rape (99% female, 1% male).

state does not merely normalize misogyny but promotes violence, which can take on gendered dimensions when dealing with women, such as the use of rape and other types of sexual violence. The retention of military structures and former perpetrators maintain a climate of fear in order to serve the broader political function of silencing dissent and any threats to its authority.

The way contemporary violence of women is being characterized does not fully explain or highlight the distinct historical and social processes in Guatemala that have contributed to these enduring patterns of violence. The label “femicide” also often orients the focus on individual motivations for murders or attributes them to a broad culture of patriarchy, while sidelining the specific social, political, and historical processes contributing to female homicide in Guatemala. Caputi and Russell write that “Fixation on the pathology of perpetrators of violence against women only obscures the social control function of these acts” (Caputi 14). The state's "social control" objective is perhaps most apparent in the high homicide rate, which has been linked by numerous sources to former actors from the civil war promoting public insecurity, in order to politically muzzle the population (Peacock 2). According to Susan Peacock, "the number and patterns of the cases point to a systematic targeting of civil society actors and others involved in anti-impunity initiatives - both those who seek justice for past abuses...and those who denounce present day corruption by state agents" (Peacock 2). Within this framework, politically motivated killings in Guatemala have historically included women and the public display of their tortured bodies to intimidate and paralyze the society.

Thus, it is important to delve further to explain the killings in Guatemala as more than a perfect storm of misogyny run amok in the face of government apathy. Rather, the

Guatemalan state is using violence and terror against vulnerable groups such as women to preserve the inegalitarian status quo, using tactics perfected during the civil war.

II. Contemporary Violence against Women in Guatemala

The GHRC reports that between the years 2000 and 2008, roughly 4,000 women have been murdered in Guatemala. Homicide rates in Guatemala are the highest in Latin America, with 42 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants and female homicides accounting for roughly 10% of all murders in 2005 (Sanford 105). However, it is important to note that while Guatemala generally has a high rate of homicide, the increase in deaths for men and women are not comparable. According to Rosalyn Constantino, “in 2004 the number of violent deaths rose in general in Guatemala, murders of men increased by 36 percent while those of women went up by 56.8 percent; in that year, 527 women were reported kidnapped, missing, tortured, and murdered.” Most of the victims are between the ages of thirteen and twenty-two years old, although there have certainly been many cases of younger and older victims (Constantino).

One case recorded by Amnesty of 15-year-old Maria Isabel showed that the young girl had suffered extreme torture, strangulation, multiple stabbings, and had her hands and feet bound with barbed wire (Amnesty 3). Maria Isabel was one of the few lucky enough to have a witness to identify two of her attackers as well as the house where she was kept before being murdered. Another victim, Andrea Fabiola Contreras Bacaro, was found with the word “vengeance” carved into her skin with a knife (Amnesty 11). Bacaro’s body also demonstrated many similar signs of torture, rape, and injuries from being stabbed and shot.

The fact that the murder victims come from varying age groups and socioeconomic levels has been used as evidence to identify gender as the only common link and possible motive (Shepard). According to Jane Caputi and Diana E.H. Russell, obfuscation of gendered motives for attacks on women by the media and law enforcement has a long history (Caputi). In a series of murder of sex workers in 2001, one victim was found with the words “death to bitches, I’ve come back”, and another victim was found with “I hate bitches” (Amnesty 13). Despite the obvious hostility and sexism present in these messages, the murder was classified by the Guatemalan National Police (PNC) in a way that denied a gender based motive.

Some deaths of women have been attributed to gang territoriality from groups such as *Mara Salvatrucha*, either because the victim wanted to leave the gang or had refused the attentions of a gang member. Though there has certainly been an escalation of gang violence, the Guatemalan police hold these groups uniquely accountable for female homicides. Amnesty reports that when members of the gang *Mara Salvatrucha* raped and dismembered two sisters, 11 and 16, with a handsaw the courts handed down a fifty year sentence to the guilty party (Amnesty 13). However, in a country with a conviction rate of less than 5%, it is clear that there is political basis for which cases police decide to pursue, investigate, and prosecute.

Many scholars have cited that gangs in Guatemala provide police with a convenient scapegoat for the killing of women despite the fact that the methods of killing normally featured in gang violence are inconsistent with the extensive torture and injuries suffered by victims in femicide cases. Gang motivated violence usually revolve around demonstrating power and influence, and are measured in the extent of brutality meted out

to victims. This dynamic mirrors the ethos of the Guatemalan army during the civil war, where soldiers were encouraged to commit acts of barbarism including cannibalism, humiliation of victims, and were rewarded in doing so. In fact, upon seeing one femicide victim, Guatemala's morgue chief Mario Guerra professed "I know she died of torture, machete wounds, strangulation, mutilation, dismemberment, blows, rape...I had previously seen this type of violence, but only during the war" (Guerra qtd. in Shepard).

Nearly all the female homicide victims show evidence of torture and sexual abuse, thus requiring a window of time and a remote place in which the victims could be tortured without public notice. However, gangs often use guns to kill their victims and leave the crime scene quickly to avoid police sweeps. Sanford states that "gang violence generally involves fire arms and knives. The victim is left with a tattoo or some other distinct mark carved on the body of the victim to mark the authority of the gang" (Sanford 111). Sanford emphasizes that the murder usually shows no expertise and employ a limited amount of resources due to the financial constraints of gangs. Most of the murdered women were found in a different location than where they were tortured, pointing to one or more killers with a means of transport, time, and a means of bypassing authorities. Given such distinct killing styles, gang violence is markedly different from contemporary female homicide in Guatemala, which exhibits a separate set of defining characteristics and requires the complicity of authorities (Sanford 112).

The methods of killing show a high degree of organization, thus bolstering the belief that the Guatemalan police (PNC) are colluding with drug trafficking gangs in either perpetuating the violence or covering it up. Police reports often include fabricated details linking the victim to gangs or prostitution despite the fact that very few of the

victims actually were prostitutes. This suggests that the PNC believe that women who were linked to either of these stigmatized groups deserved no protection or further investigation, or are socially undesirable and therefore should be targets of violence. Similarly, during the civil war, military officials would often link women they assaulted or murdered as being guerrillas or having links to subversive groups. The mentality shared by the PNC and military is one that demands that marginalized groups such as the poor, women, and street children prove their respectability.

Victims are often dismissed because of their supposed involvement with gangs, with 21% of female homicide classified by the PNC as gang related (Sanford 117). Victim blaming is a convenient way for the police to place the onus on the victims for their deaths and is a consistent feature of the Guatemalan police approach to the murders. The families are often interrogated by the police as to whether the victim was dressed provocatively at the time she disappeared, if she had a boyfriend, or had been working as a prostitute or dancer unbeknownst to them. These types of questions merely bolster the idea that if a woman was murdered, perhaps she had done something to deserve it with her behavior. The police frequently attempt to portray the young murder victims as prostitutes, implying that such women were not worthy of protection or further investigation. Even when families come to the police, their inquiries are dismissed and the victim's character is denigrated.

However, there is evidence to suggest that the police department's apathy may not be so benign, as they have often attempted to downplay the nature of the crimes and have actively discouraged investigation by the families of the murdered women. The response of local officials and state authorities to the climbing murder rate of women in Guatemala

City reflects a deep apathy and even antagonism. According to Sanford, murdered women provide a convenient and socially popular justification for targeting poor urban youth that join gangs. In blaming gangs, the state effectively hands off any responsibility for the pervasive climate of impunity and violence. Author Linda Green writes that though the Guatemalan government pays lip service to its' citizens about a commitment to human rights, "no one in the high command of the military has ever been convicted or served a prison term for human rights violations, despite the fact that frequently there has been substantial evidence indicating the complicity of the state security forces" (Green 67).

The killings in Guatemala have often been compared to femicide in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, which has gained international notoriety as a city where killers thrive on the climate of impunity. In 1993, Ciudad Juarez saw a disturbing trend of extremely violent murders of young women that has continued unchecked for more than fifteen years. Author Katherine Staudt notes that the rise in gender violence and particularly the high rate of female homicide may also be partially attributed to a male backlash in rising levels of female economic independence (Staudt 55). This generally accords with what many have cited as one of the contributing causes of the increased homicide rate for women in Guatemala. Sanford writes that femicide "reveals the very social character of the killing of women as a product of relations of power between men and women" (Sanford 112). This may help explain the killings associated with domestic abuse scenarios and boyfriends or husbands retaliating against what they perceive as a disruption of traditional gender roles.

However, violence against women concentrated in urban centers such as Guatemala City may also be explained partially by the historical movement of migrant labor. This trend has been noted in other cities, such as the large population of female migrants in Ciudad Juarez who come to work in the maquiladoras. Author Risa Grais-Targow makes this link as well citing that the Guatemala City is a site where vulnerable groups migrate for work, noting that “many women are uprooted from the rural areas, their communities, and families and migrate to urban areas for work. Once they migrate, they have no support network, and they become even more open and vulnerable to violence” (Grais Targow 30). Constantino describes Guatemala's femicide victims as “women who, because of migration, geographic location, or employment, lack close family or community ties, have limited access to the legal system, or work in public spaces that cultural values still mark as masculine.”

Indeed, many of the sources of gender violence in Juarez are also used to describe the high rates of female homicide in Guatemala. The rise of female-headed households and higher female employment in the maquiladoras has increased “tensions having to do with the distribution of power and resource allocation result between men and women living together” (Fernandez-Kelley 55). Fragoso underscores this point, writing that “men react confronting the liberation of women: while more women gain access to jobs, financial growth and professional success, the violence of men against women increases, although not necessarily against those who are successful” (Fragoso 6). Both Fragoso and Staudt hint that this growing economic resentment in Juarez may have created a generalized antagonism towards women in Juarez society on the part of men. Studies have shown that even earning modest sums of money give women a measure of power in

the family structure. Similarly, the rise in female employment in Guatemala may have disturbed existing power hierarchies. It is important, however, to point out that the much discussed culture of “machismo” in Guatemala is only part of the analysis of the roots of gender violence in Guatemala City.

One cannot analyze these various contributing factors without looking at the historical context of the civil war. Constantino and others point to numerous factors that have resulted in a push back to an increased climate of repression for women, including the remilitarization of Guatemalan society and integration of security forces from the war into civil society. Constantino attributes several methods of repression such as torture and murder to the armed forces still operating in Guatemala, writing that “carryover of the rage and cruelty that characterized these groups’ actions during the internal conflict directed specifically at indigenous populations and women” (Constantino).

Addressing the causes of "femicide" in Guatemala is a daunting task due to the difficulty in getting local authorities to cooperate and the myriad clandestine groups that still function with impunity. Though Guatemala's patriarchal attitudes and institutional apathy are clearly problematic, these features do not provide a comprehensive explanation for the proliferation of homicide and the role of the Guatemalan state. Only by placing the violent deaths of these women in a proper historical context can we begin to explain the structural violence of a state responsible for such high rates of homicide.

III. Guatemalan Civil War

It would be difficult to understand the exceptionally brutal nature of the counterinsurgency campaign against the Mayan population without placing it within the historical context of racism and marginalization of the indigenous population of Guatemala. *Ladinos* were concentrated in the upper most levels of society and were of mixed Spanish and Mayan ancestry. However, historically, these two groups have largely lived in segregation. The gross disparities in land distribution, the lack of regard for basic infrastructure such as schools or hospitals in rural areas resulted in the vast majority of Mayans being illiterate. Simon notes that the disdain for Indians was also seen in everyday Guatemalan parlance and was so pervasive that Guatemalan Nobel laureate Miguel Angel Asturias penned an essay in 1923 entitled “The Indian Social Problem,” in which he asserted that they were “dirty, slow, barbaric, and cruel.” (59) Exploitation was present in nearly every aspect of the lives of Mayan peasants and their poverty and marginalization was so entrenched in Guatemala that it became nearly a defining character. This only contributed to their disenfranchisement by the Guatemalan state (Manz 44).

Beatrice Manz discusses the various implications of the 1934 Vagrancy law, established under President Ubico, which forced “any person who was not working on plantation...or not planting a specified number of acres of land” to enter into a system of debt bondage (47). This law effectively bound Mayan peasant to *fincas* (farms) in a

system which ultimately amounted to slavery since plantation owners were afforded unlimited power in enforcing this law, and resulted in 25% of the male population of entire villages was drafted to work on *fincas* without pay. According to Jean-Marie Simon, the civil patrol system has its roots in a similar system of forced labor that spans back to the 16th century, as well as a steady process of expropriation which evicted thousands of peasants from their land (Simon 20).

However, under President Juan Jose Arevalo (1945-51), the Vagrancy law was abolished, and various reforms were instituted. Most notably, unions were legalized and some funding was, for perhaps the first time, directed towards rural development and therefore benefited the majority indigenous population. President Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán continued these changes by reimbursing the expropriated land (21). As Simon is quick to point out, Arbenz's land reforms were not radical by any stretch of the imagination. However, in a country that had persecuted their Mayan population for centuries, any move that broke with a tradition of siding with land-owning *ladino* elites was welcome.

During this time Mayan peasants began to get involved politically, running for leadership positions in departments with a majority Indian population such as Chimaltenango (Davis 16). The increased political consciousness of many landless peasants, primarily Mayan, manifested itself in factory strikes, town rebellions, and marches. Small rural labor groups such as the Committee of Peasant Unity (CUC) began forming, attempting to unite both *ladino* and Indian farm workers (20). The organizing efforts of these various groups led to small successes and spawned a number of worker's rights groups.

Naturally, these subtle moves towards aiding the swathes of poverty struck peasants troubled the CIA's "Committee Against Communism" prompting them to compile a black list of 70,000 names (Davis 23). Most of these names were drawn from friends and supporters of President Arbenz, and were automatically handed off to Guatemalan death squads. The CIA then engineered a coup against Arbenz 1954, replacing the democratically elected leader with a puppet dictator Carlos Castillo that would presumably take a hard line stance against the perceived rising threat of communism in Guatemala.

The power transfer to Castillo symbolized a halt to the "ten years of spring" ushered in by Arevalo and Arbenz. After this brief period of democratic reforms for the indigenous such as suffrage and land reform, multinational interests spearheaded by the United Fruit Company in the United States obliterated the progress made. Moreover, under Castillo, any sign of dissent was brutally suppressed. Generally, the military apparatus began including various sectors of civil society in the war against the guerillas, perceiving any dissent as an internal threat to the state (Manz 18). This meant an unspoken death warrant for students, particularly of the University of San Carlos, lawyers, activists, and anyone even tangentially associated with opposition to the powerful military complex. The thousands of murdered Mayans were considered collateral damage within the cold war ideology prevalent at the time.

The army responded to any sign of activism by amplifying the repression, using fear as a potent means to rule the populace (Manz 20). In keeping with this open policy of terror, the tortured and mutilated bodies of union members, progressives, and activists would routinely show up in the streets. However, the Mayan Indian population bore the

brunt of army violence, with massacres racking up death tolls in the thousands.

According to Simon, “the retrieval of bodies was so enormous...that they were referred to as *leña*, firewood” (77).

Though massacres against Mayan communities had been carried out by government forces since the 1970’s, the early 1980’s saw a sharp peak in the violence, within the context of a larger counterinsurgency campaign. In order to get a representation of the modes of violence used against women in the civil war and the current instability in Guatemalan society, it is important to trace the origins of the counterinsurgency campaigns of General Lucas Garcia and Rios Montt, which account for the majority of the human rights violations committed during the course of the civil war.

Ricardo Falla spent a number of years in Ixcán as an anthropologist and saw nearly all phases of military aggression against the local population. He notes that the period of 1979-81 showed a spate of abductions and widespread use of torture. The military initially targeted leaders within communities, including anyone suspected of either being a rebel or collaborating with them (Falla 33). Falla notes that “these abductions were premeditated; the lieutenant knew of them and protected their perpetrators” (33). Also the attacks were carried out in the cover of night fall, making it easier for the army to place the blame on the rebels.

Some massacres were selective, such as the one in Cuarto Pueblo on April 30th, 1981, where the military primarily targeted adult men (Falla 42) who were members of the local cooperative which extended to the whole village. In Falla’s research, the army made no such distinction in the massacres to the east of Ixcán. Falla cites beheading,

rape, strangulation, burning, and evisceration among the tactics that were employed by the military in the Santa Maria Tzeja massacre as well as countless others in February 1982 (54). Falla's opinion from his research was that the military "preferred other forms of death to shooting, not out of pure sadism but to avoid bullet shots, which would alert the people in the town of the army's proximity" (Falla 71). The army would deliberately chose the day and time when all of the villagers would be gathered together in the market or church, in order to inflict the greatest amount of damage. Moreover, right after instructing the villagers not to run, they sprayed bullets into the crowd and then chased survivors. No one was spared including women and children. This was Rios Montt's solution to eradicating the rebels: "to kill the fish, you must drain the sea."

Though Rios Montt has in rare instances admitted that his army committed "excesses", namely widespread human abuses, author Jennifer Schirmer asserts that this was a brutal approach was totally in line with the scorched-earth campaign. The complete destruction of non-combatants in enemy zones was intended to take away a base from which the guerillas could recruit new members. However, the military was very strategic in choosing their targets. Their maps showed enemy zones marked as "red", denoting that the civilian population would be wiped out. Those villages in the "pink" zones faced attack and partial destruction and the "white" zones would remain untouched (Schirmer 48). Schirmer describes this move as a reclassification of all indigenous in the marked zones as subversives and thus employed a "scorched earth" calling for complete destruction.

According to Green, the shift from selective targeting to an all encompassing scorched earth counterinsurgency framework essentially stripped women and children of

their protected status in society (9). Other “protected spaces” such as churches and homes that had been desecrated and used as the sites of massacres similarly created an atmosphere that offered no refuge from the violence. Moreover, the fact that the counterinsurgency model actively promoted the belief that there were no “protected spaces” or “protected groups”, provoked unthinkable barbarism from soldiers. Green writes that this reconfiguring of civilian and enemy meant that “the community now embodies the very mechanisms of state terror under the aegis of military control” (Green 9).

The massacres in the Ixil triangle provide a representative sample with which to assess the various kinds of violence perpetrated against women in the context of "scorched earth" policy. The destruction of Piedras Blancas and other villages in the region were so complete that Falla called it “a clear example of genocide” (Falla 135). More specifically, he cites the army’s brutal attacks on pregnant women such as evisceration and mutilation of the fetus inside as an attempt to “wipe out the seed” of the guerillas (147). However, several sources make it clear that the murder of women was not one of the primary objectives of the massacre as Sanford suggests. Though there were certainly massacres where women and children were the only victims, REHMI states that usually this occurred when “men either were absent from the village at the time....or they had already been killed” (REHMI 75).

According to one priest interviewed by Amnesty International as an eyewitness to a massacre in Huehuetenango, “the women were treated the same as the men, differing only in that some had live babies on their backs when they were stacked for burning” (Amnesty 63). Though women constituted only 23 % of victims in the war, those that

survived the massacres had endured countless hardships including repeated rape, torture, and the disappearance of loved ones. When women were separated from men, it was often for gang rape or additional torture. It was also common for soldiers to indulge in “games” designed to humiliate and denigrate their female victims, such as making them cook before raping and killing them. According to Green, rape was generally used as a “mechanism of inscribing the societal violence on individual women’s bodies and memories” (32).

Gang rape and long term sexual slavery was also very common according to the numerous testimonies recorded by REHMI and described as “part of the war machinery” (REHMI 77). REHMI also explicitly states that “a premeditated strategy of violence specifically targeting women cannot be inferred from the information compiled...the testimonies do indicate, however, that the army’s counterinsurgency tactics against women were consistent at different places and times and formed part of its strategy of mass destruction” (REHMI 79).

Death as a result of repeated rape of the victim and rape was a consistent feature of one out of every six massacres investigated by REHMI (77). One perpetrator interviewed by REHMI attests to the inhuman way women were treated: “One day I was able to escape and, while hidden, I saw a woman. They shot her and she fell. All the soldiers left their packs and dragged her like a dog to the riverbank. They raped and killed her. Also, a helicopter that was flying overhead landed, and they all did the same thing to her” (REHMI 77).

However, although rape was exceedingly common during the war, there is evidence to suggest that it was not an explicit design of the counterinsurgency campaign.

However, though interviews of military officials and G-2 torturers by Schirmer state that rape was “systematic”, there is little evidence to support the claim that it was an explicit aim of the army. Rather, as many sources including author Jean Franco suggest, rape was merely among the many tools used by the army to subjugate, psychologically and physically destroy those they viewed as “subversives”.

This view of subversives certainly included women, especially “enemy women” who were subordinated through rape. “Many perpetrators viewed rape as something natural, and of little significance, in the course of violence against women and communities. This normalization of violence was used as a form of psychosexual control over soldiers, in which women were considered part of the “spoils of war” (REHMI 171). This mentality of “total destruction” of the enemy can be seen in the training materials given to soldiers often depicted graphic pictures of enemy combatants and the exaltation of the unpleasant but necessary duties of soldiers in service of their country. Even such training materials that included human rights principles did not translate to how military operations were carried out on the ground. Amnesty found that some training materials such as the official magazine *Soldado* “encouraged a concept of ‘total warfare’, whereby both the enemy as well as anyone suspected of sympathy for it must be “implacably’ destroyed”” (Amnesty 49). The army also showed a lack of compliance with international standards of military conduct and essentially ignored basic rights covered by the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights such as “the right to life and to be protected from torture, even during times of public emergency” (qtd. in Amnesty 49). A human rights framework also seemed to be completely absent in the training of groups such as the elite Kaibiles who are noted for their brutality in counterinsurgency

operations (49). The chasm between the official stance on treatment of prisoners and enemy combatants and their actual treatment is indeed striking.

The effects of military brainwashing can be seen perhaps most clearly in the civil patrol system. The army, in its attempts to extend its reach into the rural hamlets of Guatemala, forcibly conscripted thousands of indigenous men to form civil patrols (patrullas de autodefensa, PACs). The Americas Watch report published in 1986 called it “the most extensive counterinsurgency model of its kind in the world” (2). The civil patrol system was integral to the army’s counterinsurgency campaign, providing a means of controlling and terrorizing the population, while simultaneously creating distrust and division within whole communities. The level of civil patrol (PAC) involvement in the massacres, their motives for joining or participating in genocidal acts all point to the normalization of violence both during the war and in the post-conflict era. The civil patrol system was integral to the army’s counterinsurgency campaign, providing a means of controlling and terrorizing the population, while simultaneously creating distrust and division within whole communities. Many sources note that the modes of violence seen in contemporary femicide cases are reminiscent of those employed by soldiers in the civil war. Thus, an in depth study analyzing the methods of killing used by massacres involving the PAC as well as their training may shed light on the military apparatus that is largely culpable for these horrific crimes against humanity.

Rise of the Civil Patrols

Though the civil patrol system was initially proposed by General Lucas Garcia, the system was fully realized and burgeoned under the Rios Montt regime. At the start of Rios Montt's presidency there were a mere 25,000 PACs though by 1985 over 900,000 indigenous men had been drafted and nearly all rural villages in Guatemala had implemented the patrol system (Carmack).

Though initially framed as a "voluntary" service by the Guatemalan government, the vast majority of civil patrollers were recruited forcibly by the army. Desertion or refusal to join had serious consequences and most had no choice under the onslaught of torture and death threats to eventually give in. Part of the strategy was clearly to have an additional source of soldiers to patrol and monitor rural areas, but by forcing patrollers to participate in the violence, they made them as complicit as the military. This, once again, undermined any efforts of community's to heal and accept former patrollers back into the community. Many human rights organizations have documented that several leaders of the patrols remain living in the same communities they terrorized years ago, fortifying the power structure created by the military.

The army used the rural population to subvert any support systems available to rebels. Ironically, though the government often described the patrols as designed to defend the communities, the departments with the largest number of patrollers (86,000 patrollers in Quiché and another 80,000 in Huehuetenango) also registered the greatest rates of repression and death during the course of the war. Officially, the minimum age

for patrol system was eighteen although the Americas Watch report found patrollers from eight years old to seventy (27). The modus operandi usually involved the military rounding up all men from 15 and upwards, often corralling groups at markets, parades, church, and work sites (115). The villages were already so militarized that it was virtually impossible to resist being captured and forced into civil patrol duty.

Though it is difficult to pin down what percentage of atrocities one can attribute to the PACs, it was the army's express design as it "gave the military a defenseless scapegoat on whom to pass of its on atrocities; either by forcing patrollers to carry out their own dirty work, or by merely claiming that alleged killings were the work of PAC units" (118). One article on the patrol system stated that "under Rios Montt, the incorporation of civil patrols into state-led massacres doubled, accounting for 41 percent of all the army's massacres, while the amount of victims to violence directed by the military in which the civil patrols participated more than tripled to 47 percent of those killed" (Lawless).

There were 8 distinct levels of command between the rank-and-file civil patrol member and the military zone commander (41). The head of the civil patrol was chosen as someone who could command the community and moreover demonstrate the appropriate level of affinity for Army ideology. The strict chain of command enforced the fact the military largely did not trust the civil patrollers. The fact that the majority were from many of the indigenous communities the army was steadily purging led to most patrollers being given very little information about the nature of their operations (57). The system lent itself to exploitation and abuse of the local populations as patrol commanders would frequently rape women or extract bribes for fleeting protection.

Schirmer asserts that “some civil patrol leaders do take a harder line against resisters than even the army does, revealing that some do revel in the control and abuse of fellow villagers” (Schirmer 93).

Indeed, the civil patrol system provides a microcosm with which to assess the ways in which corruption, violence, and military ideologies of dominance and civilian repression intensified before and after the war. The system lent itself to exploitation and abuse of the local populations as patrol commanders would frequently rape women or extract bribes for fleeting protection. The military enjoyed such impunity that those patrollers that embraced their duties, stood to benefit from their positions. Manz stated that “it became common practice for a patrol chief to spread rumors about an individual he did not like, hoping for some personal gain for himself while causing fear, military punishment, or even death for the victim” (166).

However, by and large, Davis cited a high level of “guilt and shame that people had internalized as a result of their participation in the civil patrol system” (28). This may be particular to the Kanjobal community Davis worked in, however REHMI noted similar sentiments. One priest recounted what one patroller had told him about his experiences as a PAC: “He told me that he had been forced to kill, and that afterwards, the army had made him drink the blood of the man he had killed. I think that his is some kind of psychology so that people become more brutal, more fierce” (Americas Watch, 62).

Indeed, Alex Hinton’s theory of psychosocial dissonance (PSD) may be one way to explain how civil patrollers managed to override ties to their communities and

participate in numerous human rights violations. According to Hinton, the ability to commit violence against others is normally overcome by the following process:

“a person must usually make a series of psychological moves, such as changing their understanding of what they are doing, altering their behavioral norms, or learning new cognitive models for action. The state may facilitate this conversion process through political training and indoctrination by promoting an ideology of hate, diminishing the legal and moral inhibitions against violence, normalizing violence, and creating new contexts in which violence against “the enemy” is legitimated.” (Hinton 236)

As Hinton claims, the state’s role in normalizing violence is a salient comparison for those members of the PAC that perpetrated horrific acts against a defenseless populace. Under the auspices of Rios Montt and Garcia, the military acted as the only existing authority and thus had the power to confer power unilaterally. Some civil patrollers were unable to disconnect entirely from their identity as Mayan Indians, an identity that was continually under assault by the military, by choosing desertion or noncompliance. However, as stated above, noncompliance came with its own hazards, namely torture or death. Others still took advantage of their blighted situation, noting that the closer their association with army ideals and power structure, the greater their chances for survival.

As Hinton concludes, “desensitization makes dehumanization of victims seem more normal” (217). Though Hinton used his theory to explain that participation of civilians in the Cambodian genocide, there are similar parallels to be drawn with the PACs. Civil patrollers engaged in numerous atrocities during their raids on villages including rape. Anthropological studies indicate that prior to the civil war; incidences of rape within the rural Indian hamlets were rare. However, rape became exceedingly common during the course of the scorched-earth campaign. One soldier claimed that “we

all had the idea that once we were in the army we'd have more girls than we'd know what to do with." The army encouraged the use of prostitutes almost as a rite of passage for new recruits. The volunteer soldier said "The Politecnica [Military Academy] are the worst: they're very aggressive and they tell you, 'Okay, bring me women's underwear and if you don't I'm going to punish you when you come back'" (88).

The military actively encouraged the subjugation of women, with army values of dominance and power taking on gendered dimensions. The REHMI report supports this conclusion, positing that the "public display of sexual violence against women, often by several men at once, reinforced a spirit of *machista* complicity and extolled power and authority as "masculine" traits" (77). One witness cited in the REHMI report said "The PAC and the army raped some children and women. They killed them with bullets and hung them by the neck." (78) The military "training" patrollers went through, served to lower or suspend the moral boundaries of ordinary behavior in a military offensive that not only condoned but exalted rape.

Moreover, the army as an institution isolated the soldiers from anything familiar, continually driving the point that their friends, family and kinship ties no longer had any significance. One former soldier succinctly comments on the transformation:

"Most soldiers aren't aggressive to begin with; you become that way. It's because of the mistreatment you receive in the army...you become so changed that, after awhile, I didn't talk to those people who hadn't been in the army, only those who had, because someone who has served has the same kind of mentality, and you're more macho, more of a man" (REHMI 101).

The omnipresent feeling of imminent death that civil patrollers faced having been trapped in a conflict may have had the effect of eroding natural sensibilities and identity. Hinton claims that "meaninglessness, uncertainty, and danger-conditions that may

generate considerable fear and anxiety-not only threaten one's continued being but also undermine the self-concepts that give us a sense of identity and structure the ways in which we interpret experience and act in the world." (243). The army gave the PACs a new identity, one that claimed to have the moral high ground (however erroneously), thus effectively framing the rhetoric of the counterinsurgency into a binary: "them" or "us." Hinton claims that one means of coping was to identify oneself as an extension of a more powerful institution. (243). Since desertion and noncompliance carried such severe consequences, the climate of the war may have made it psychologically more imperative for patrollers to associate themselves with a strong, powerful institution such as the military.

The majority of massacres with civil patrol participation involved members perpetrating violence against communities they did not belong to. Initially, patrol members were coerced to commit acts of violence against subversives in their own community. It is possible that after the initial shock of having to kill members of their own community, PACs found it easier to perpetrate violence against neighboring villages that perhaps did not share their ethno linguistic background. Moreover, the conflict may have heightened existing tensions between communities and armed civil patrollers, under the auspices of the state, was allowed to commit murder as retaliation. Any "excesses" committed by the PACs were rarely punished as they were in accordance with the normal counterinsurgency tactics practiced.

In fact the patrol system supplanted old community dynamics and replaced them with a traditional army hierarchy. Those who aligned themselves with the military through the civil patrol legitimized their authority over their village and had opportunities

to take advantage of their power. According to Davis, it “was used to settle personal or inter-family rivalries and a source of great abuse of authority and power.” Moreover, it had become virtually the only judicial avenue for Indians. Thus, as of 1985, Davis observed that “most disputes were settled through arbitrary acts of violence by local civil patrol commanders, members of rival civil patrol units, or, in the final instance, local or regional army commanders.” (29). According to Beatrice Manz, the army’s purpose was to “use the patrols to rip apart and then restructure social relations throughout the countryside, implanting its values and strict control at the most basic village level” (Manz 160).

Mirroring the military hierarchy precisely, the leaders of the civil patrols were chosen based on their loyalty to the institution and the counterinsurgency campaign (Schirmer 93). REHMI supports this characterization of army promotion, stating that “one of the most important variables for promotion and enhancing one’s status was not how well one followed orders, but rather the brutality with which they were carried out. The ability to kill, to take initiative during massacres, and to demonstrate cruelty in the course of operations were implicitly valued by the army and other security forces...A perverse system was created in which disregard for human life was a prerequisite for promotion” (REHMI 129).

Army training varied among civil patrols but most included a two pronged approach that is resonant with Hinton’s idea that “killing tends to become easier when perpetrators are desensitized to violence, internalize violent ideologies, dehumanize their victims, undergo moral restructuring so that violence becomes morally justified, use euphemistic language that masks their deeds, and displace responsibility onto figures of

authority” (236). The grotesque methods of violence such as raping or decapitating victims before killing them indeed show intent to dehumanize. This process of desensitization is almost always accompanied by lectures on army ideology emphasizing a narrow sense of patriotism that utilized violence at every turn.

According to the testimony of one former member of the Guatemalan Army, Pedro Luis Ruiz, the process of militarizing Guatemala meant putting soldiers through a dehumanizing and brutal socialization which increased their capacity to kill and encouraged them to embrace a new identity (Permanent People's Tribunal 69). Ruiz asserts that:

“in practice, you become an assassin of your own *companeros* – Lieutenant Germán Morales would insult the indigenous people and our customs. He wanted us to trade our parents for machine-guns and our girlfriends for prostitutes. The lieutenant himself would teach us how to rape women. He would tell us to get women – we would grab those who didn’t want to go and take them to him. He would then turn them over to the soldiers; and since we were brainwashed, we thought that was good” (Ruiz qtd. in Permanent People's Tribunal 75).

Ruiz goes on to add “They made me a corporal because I had the courage to strike my own *companeros*, and did not feel sorry for them, and I had the stomach to watch anything that was done” (79). This mentality was enforced through a system of rewards and punishments and the army mentality often became so deeply ingrained that former soldiers such as Ruiz found it difficult to forget their training. Ruiz admits that once he returned to his home town, “I felt like a nothing. I was only used to hitting and yelling” (71). The diverse range of reintegration shows soldiers who are unable to resume their lives, often exhibiting violent and destructive behaviors learned from the army. Though some were able to return to their villages and presumably lead “normal” lives,

reintegration into civil society offered few choices for many former perpetrators in the military (Permanent Peoples' Tribunal).

After the war, though the PAC has been officially disbanded since the Peace Accords in 1996, several perpetrators continue to “monitor” and intimidate the survivors of massacres within their own communities. Since the end of the war, numerous survivors have come forward with harrowing tales of civil-patrol abuses. The CEH states that there are “hundreds of cases in which civilians were forced by the Army, at gun point, to rape women, torture, mutilate corpses and kill. This extreme cruelty was used by the State to cause social disintegration.” Despite recommendations from various truth commissions and international groups, cases against army officials for their roles in the war continue to languish, as the Guatemalan state is still obstinate in taking responsibility. The long term consequences of the civil patrol system are still being felt in Guatemala. The thousands of patrollers who refuse to disarm are in effect, recreating the atmosphere of fear and rampant militarization that characterized the conflict period in Guatemala. The impact of the civil patrol system cannot be overstated as it was a central tool of the Guatemalan military’s gross efficiency in wiping out countless villages and thousands of people. Moreover, it systematically used coercion to break down community ties and utilize locals as tools to kill and infiltrate the population. In a country with roughly 8 million during the civil war, the mobilization of over a million patrollers demonstrates the cold and ruthless power contained in Guatemala’s campaign of psychological warfare and murder in the 1980’s (Sanford).

The roots of the counterinsurgency show a steady escalation of repression in response to what the government saw as a rapidly growing rebel movement. In order to

counteract this, the army sought to militarize Guatemala, using primarily the civil patrols. Rape and violence against women became a secondary strategy with which to cripple the guerillas and their perceived indigenous support base. The use of gender-specific violence and sadism accompanying contemporary female homicide in Guatemala suggest that the militarization process normalizes violence and desensitizes not only individual actors but the society as a whole.

IV. Militarization in Post-Conflict Guatemala

The Guatemalan army has historically resisted efforts to curb their power and reach. The civil war provided the military with the justification to broaden the scope of its operations and increase their presence in nearly every part of the country, including the rural highlands. In the aftermath of the civil war, social structures were reformed and reflected the logic of warfare and suppression of democratic elements by the military.

Jennifer Schirmer details how the military has historically cemented its place as an institution in Guatemala. Schirmer describes the Guatemalan military's views of law and security as guaranteeing rights to the citizenry only when they do not oppose the "security" interests of the state. Schirmer details this conditional right to protection as one that allows the military to decide who can take umbrage under the law. This provision was actually part of the Guatemalan constitution and enshrined the military's right to act as "Guarantor of State". Schirmer writes that "One consequence of immersing security within the Constitution was that rights were made subject to obligations to the State; another is that the Army's obligatory role as Guarantor of the State was constitutionally mandated with counterinsurgency operations within the law and those considered to be subversives by definition, outside the law" (Schirmer 134). This view of civilians as potential subversives has remained fundamentally unchanged since the Peace Accords. Schirmer adds that "Each threat came to represent an opportunity for the military to consolidate as an institution and to expand its power" (Schirmer 9).

Despite the peace accord's lofty goals of bringing perpetrators to justice, any investigations into abuses committed during the war were a sham. Two commissions created to investigate the numerous "disappeared" eventually dissolved stating that it was too difficult to carry out inquiries and that the "commission was effectively inoperative in the face of official violence" (Amnesty 10). Indeed, this is how violence is used in Guatemala: as a means of crippling normal, legal channels of justice in order to retain power. The social devastation caused by the civil war allowed the military to maintain its presence under the guise of enforcing security. In such an environment, it is easy for the government to assert the necessity of police forces and the use of both retired and active military officials to eliminate gangs, street children, and other groups perceived to be socially undesirable. Moreover, blaming gangs for female homicides, allows the police a justification to be brought in as the restorers of societal order and use harsh measures to eliminate the "criminal" elements of society.

According to Constantino, Guatemala currently has a police force of 300,000 and 120,000 "private security guards" (Constantino). Some former soldiers from the elite Kaibiles have been recruited by drug lords to act essentially as hit men and earn significantly more than they did when in the army (Hernandez). Their training, which often included being forced to eat raw dog entrails, seemed to emphasize dehumanizing not only their victims but themselves (Hernandez). Former soldiers have also been funneled into both the national police as well as illicit drug-trafficking gangs. Both groups operate on a strict hierarchy and employ many of the bloody tactics taught by the army during the civil war. Hernandez writes that "beheadings of policemen and drug rivals in Mexico have been blamed on ex-Guatemalan soldiers working with the Zetas, a

renegade unit that broke from the Mexican army to serve as the Gulf cartel's enforcement arm” (Hernandez). Since the civil war Amnesty has received reports of several killings that display many of the characteristics of murders committed by death squads during the civil war, such as signs of torture and bound feet and hands (15).

Guatemala’s high homicide rate has had a transformative effect on how the society deals with violence and how “subversion” is dealt with by the government. In fact, the generally high level of violence in Guatemala and the breakdown of official avenues of justice have been specifically linked to the rise in so-called “vigilante” justice and the use of private security forces by civilians. Extrajudicial killings, especially in the form of lynch mobs, have often been reported in areas populated by ex members of the civil patrol and military (CAR). One report on the findings of the UN Mission for Guatemala (MINUGUA) goes on to state that “in some cases, former PAC members have been identified as instigators” (CAR). This increased climate of violence is a way to validate the state’s efforts to further militarize Guatemala. By blaming gangs for female homicides, the police are brought in as the restorers of societal order, thus providing a justification to use harsh measures to eliminate the “criminal” elements of society.

Several authors including Sanford have linked “femicide” to the general policy of social cleansing adopted by the military and PNC. Sanford defines social cleansing as a “mechanism of selective or arbitrary repression that is systematically produced by either armed actors with ties to the state or by private actors who carry out repression with the acquiescence, complicity, support, or toleration (whether deliberate or involuntary) of the state” (Sanford 111). Reports by human rights groups in Guatemala such as Casa Alianza have observed open aggression and harassment of street children who are often robbed,

beaten, illegally detained, and found murdered on the streets of Guatemala City (cite article). Bodies are frequently found showing signs of torture, marks of strangulation, bullet wounds, and bound hands and feet (Sanford 111). These descriptions match those of massacred victims during the civil war, further demonstrating that sowing terror in the society was an explicit aim of the counterinsurgency model. Testimony taken by REHMI stated the very public nature of killings: “burned corpses, women impaled and buried as if they were animals ready for the spit, all doubled up, and children massacred and carved up with machetes. The women too, murdered like Christ” (REHMI 9, 10).

The public nature of contemporary violence against women seems to have its roots in army practices during the civil war. During the 1970s, roughly 800 dead bodies a month were routinely showing up on the streets of Guatemala (Schirmer). Moreover, when the army invaded indigenous villages, the women were often forced to watch their husbands, children, and family members butchered before them. Falla, in his anthropological account of massacres in the Ixcan region of Guatemala, describes babies strung up on tree branches along with the dismembered parts of women. This type of exemplary terror can be seen today in Guatemala where, according to the PDH, “only 15% of the bodies are hidden, and the rest are left in a public place or in the victim’s home, which indicates that the victimizers are not attempting to hide the crime” (PDH qtd. by GHRC).

The counterinsurgency mentality of weeding out subversive or “undesirable” social elements can be seen currently in the social cleansing operations many human rights groups have accused the police and army of carrying out against street children. The Guatemala Solidarity Network states that “day after day, children and teenagers are

murdered, and their bodies appear with obvious evidence of the torture they have suffered. Equally, street children are constantly threatened and intimidated by Police forces. Many of them live in permanent fear of being murdered by Police or by contracted killers” (“Guatemala Soldiers...”).

The MINUGUA report cited the killing of a group of civilians in Petén suspected to have been carried out by former military officers and civil patrollers. The social cleansing aspect stands out in this particular case due to the fact that notes were left on the victims' bodies with the message “Sorry, but we need to clean up the community” (CAR). Constantino notes that using the security forces only increases public panic about insecurity and the near constant threat of violence. She writes that “frustration and fear, unfortunately, block historical memory and, by complicity and default, the army becomes the only body capable of putting an end to this violence” (Constantino).

The political function of keeping the populace frozen by fear and unwilling to challenge the dominant power structure has been explored by many Guatemala scholars. The specter of violence is always on the horizon for Guatemalans, many of whom are old enough to remember the terror of loved ones “disappeared” by soldiers and the fear of being labeled a subversive troublemaker by the military. Green explores the societal consequences of widespread fear, citing that the Guatemalan military often uses the interminable “state of emergency” to justify acts that would normally fall far outside the bounds of normal security operations (Green 56). Green’s examination of the effects of fear on widows living in the altiplano village of Xe’caj demonstrate that the “routinization of terror is what fuels its power” (60).

Thus, residual fear and terror from the civil war has made a permanent imprint on Guatemalan society and caused a radical shift in social relations so people could learn to deal with the daily instances of violence in their lives. The immersion of a large sector of Guatemalan men in the violence in some role gave rise to the ethos Linda Green terms “blood on people’s hands” (10). This not only made state violence a norm but impacted how the society restructured itself.

Another consistent feature carried over from the civil war is the abuse of marginalized groups such as poor women by police during detention. During the civil war, women were routinely raped in military barracks. One G-2 torturer interviewed by Jennifer Schirmer confirmed this in an interview, said bluntly “The first, first thing would be to rape [the women]...” (Schirmer 289). Nearly two decades after the civil war this is still more or less a feature of the prison experience for women in Guatemala, where three out of four female prisoners suffer sexual abuse at the hands of police in detention (Doiron). In 2005 Juana Mendez, an indigenous woman from the department of Quiche, was gang raped by police officers while in detention at the Nebaj regional police station (Doiron). After a lengthy 3 year trial, rape charges were eventually brought against one officer in 2008. Juana’s triumph is indeed unheard of in a country where 75% of female prisoners are sexually assaulted while in detention (Ibid). One of the legacies of the civil war has been the complete impunity enjoyed by the military and national police, especially for crimes against women.

The military’s perception of “subversive” elements may be more fine-tuned in post-conflict Guatemala than during the civil war, but it still largely includes indigenous, activists, and anyone agitating for change. Green writes that during the civil war the

military, in addition to their stated war against the guerillas, also attempted to crush the threat “posed by unarmed civilians-peasants, the poor, and workers- who dared to challenge long-standing structures of domination and exploitation at the local and regional levels” (29). This response of the state in using violence to assert the status quo could easily be applied to the shifting role of women in Guatemalan society. As author Rubio Marin notes, women were “more likely to be murdered for belonging to social organizations, for their political activism, or for their activism and search for justice after the execution of a family member. Politically active women were doubly punished: first, because they were considered enemies of the state; and second, because they broke gender norms by having “dared” to intervene in the political realm, a traditionally “male” domain” (Rubio-Marín 97). Indeed, this fits the model of repression against women’s rights activists in Guatemala today, who report being followed, receiving death threats, and having their homes and offices broken into.

The women’s organization CONAVIGUA established in 1988 have faced constant intimidation and threats from the state for discussing violence committed against women during the war (Green 106). Another women’s group Sector de Mujeres had their offices broken into and several mobile phones and fax machine presumably stolen, and their archives searched (Observatory). This is reflective of a general climate of intense repression of human rights activists and a means of silencing dissent. Green writes that “Militarization has influenced value systems and behavioral patterns and enabled perpetrators to acquire expertise and perpetuate power networks” (Green 176). The Guatemalan Army’s traditional stance of denial and selective historical memory can be seen in veteran organizations such as AVEMILGUA, who have condemned

investigations into the allegations of genocidal acts during the civil war recast the perpetrators of these atrocities as national heroes (Observatory).

The savage response of these military structures to feminist movements and human rights organizations show a vested interest in both suppressing dissent and promoting public insecurity. Violence as a means of remaining in power has been a long standing, and over arching goal of the Guatemalan state. Thus, by maintaining a climate of violence, for both men and women, the military apparatus will always have its place in Guatemala, as long as the current power structure remains. The manner in which the state deals with female homicide cases is not merely a reflection of the pervasive culture of patriarchy, but a reflection of how the state chooses to deal with all crimes that are “political” in nature.

Violence against women in Guatemala is certainly built on existing dynamics of ethnic identity, class, and gender and poor Mayan women are among the most vulnerable in Guatemala. Apart from singular characterization of "femicide" as a product of male hatred for women, other factors such as historical racism, class tensions, and the militarization of Guatemalan society have played equally important roles in the proliferation of violence against women. Removing “femicide” as a label is not intended to downplay the brutality of violence against women in Guatemala or suggest that it is not compelling. Rather, that this phenomenon is better understood through an analysis of the military as an enduring institution with a vested interest in promoting an overall climate of instability and terror, in which murdered women are useful as a political tool to maintain power.

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