

A KILLERS' PARADISE

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According to a recent study published by the Inter American Human Rights Institute (IIDH) and the Central American Human Rights Ombudsman's Council (CCPDH), femicide is reaching epidemic proportions in some isthmus countries.

The statistics are chilling: between 2002 and 2006, 1,398 women were murdered in Guatemala, 1,320 in El Salvador, 613 in Honduras, 315 in Nicaragua, 188 in Panama, 146 in Costa Rica and eight in Belize.

Despite campaigns led by women's groups and human rights organisations, the spiral of violence has worsened in recent years. In Guatemala, 383 cases were recorded in 2003, 497 in 2004, 518 in 2005 and 542 so far in 2006. In El Salvador, the country with the second highest number of murdered women in the region, there were 150 such killings in 2002, a figure which more than doubled in 2003 to reach 328, before falling to 262 in 2004 and rising again to 314 in 2005. By June this year, 143 cases had been reported.

The authorities often try to play down the scale of the problem, arguing that these murders are part of the wider problem of increasing gang violence throughout the region, which affects society as a whole, not just women.

However, according to women's groups, it is important to bear in mind not just the number of murders that have occurred, which in itself is shocking, but the viciousness with which these women have been killed.

Around 80% of men are killed by firearms, which does not imply physical contact between murderer and victim.

By contrast 69% of women are killed by firearms with the rest being killed through direct forms of violence such as stabbing, kicking and punching.

According to the report, this represents evidence of 'the killer's intention to assert his physical superiority over his victim,' also expressed through different forms of torture such as rape and genital mutilation.

In Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, the countries with the highest femicide rate, the violent killing of women has coincided with the increase of gang violence.

A USAID study published in April 2006 estimates that there are around 36,000 gang members (known as mareros) in Honduras, 14,000 in Guatemala, and 10,500 in El Salvador (CAR XXXIII, 40).

The study concludes that marginal urban areas (where most femicides occur) are a fertile ground for gang violence.

Nicaragua, in contrast, is regarded as the Central American miracle child –unlike Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala, state repression has been minimal and the authorities have opted for social regeneration and outreach youth programmes as opposed to the hardline tactics adopted elsewhere in the region.

The study estimates that there are some 2,200 gang members in Nicaragua, which also has a far lower femicide rate than the other isthmus countries.

This does not mean, however, that violence against women is not a problem in Nicaragua.

A study carried out by the *Nicaraguan Network Against Violence Towards Women*, yet to be published, reveals that 52.63% of femicides in the country occur in the victim's home, and concludes that 'femicide in Nicaragua takes place mainly in the context of domestic violence.'

It is also important to bear in mind that Guatemala and El Salvador, the countries in the region with the highest femicide rates, suffered extremely bloody civil wars which only ended relatively recently (1996 and 1993 respectively). Studies have shown similarities between the recent murders and wartime counter-insurgency tactics.

Turf wars between rival gangs often result in the killing of women associated with gang members, as the gangster's partner is perceived as the property of her boyfriend and therefore a legitimate target for attack.

Thus, raping and killing a gangster's partner is seen as comparable to trashing his car or property.

When the violent murder of women occurs within the home, the murder is usually the result of many years of physical and psychological abuse.

In both cases, women's groups and human rights organisations stress the fact that the root cause of violence against women can be found in patriarchal social structure that still regards women as second-class citizens who are inferior to men.

The prevalence of sexist attitudes has resulted in discriminatory Penal Codes that fail to impose adequate sentences for the various crimes associated with violence against women.

In some countries, such as Mexico, where the murder of women in the Northern city of Ciudad Juarez attracted considerable media coverage and became the subject of many campaigns from international human rights organisations, a new law has recognised femicide as a distinct crime from murder, as it carries the aggravating factor of sexual violence motivated by misogyny.

The law was approved by the Mexican Congress owing to a forceful campaign led by Congresswoman Marcela Lagarde, of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD).

It is also important to point out that according to Mexican law, 30% of members of Congress must be female.

However, Guatemalan Congress woman Nineth Montenegro, of the Encuentro por Guatemala party, argues that it is unlikely this will occur in Guatemala in the near future. "Women in Congress don't have a gender perspective. Even if we had 100% women in Congress, nothing would change," she said.

As well as discriminatory laws, sexism has also resulted in a skewed budget that assigns derisory sums to women's institutions created to tackle domestic violence and discrimination.

In Guatemala, for instance, women's issues are assigned only 0.25% of the budget, which can be seen as evidence that the authorities have set up these organisations as a PR exercise in order to pay lip service to gender equality.

Human rights organisations have strongly criticised the sensationalist and superficial way in which the media has reported the growing number of femicides in the region, which creates stereotypes and stigmatises the victims.

According to the Guatemalan Human Rights Ombudsman, the media tends to give gang related killings greater coverage, presenting turf wars between rival gangs as the only rather than one of the causes behind the killings.

Coverage of these killings often includes remarks such as 'the victim was wearing a low-cut top and a short skirt,' implying that the victims of these crimes are 'loose women' and that women should stay at home and dress modestly to avoid being the target of violence. ~~del del~~

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