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## **El Salvador's Prostitutes Fear Serial Murders, Demand Police Protection**

*by LADB Staff*

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During two weekends in mid-April, several prostitutes in San Salvador were murdered. Two had their heads cut off. Another was shot to death. Police have offered hypotheses, but the women who work the streets and brothels do not believe them. Prostitutes in the neighborhood of Avenida Independencia, in the brothels of Calle 18 Sur and Calle Celis are sick with fear.

Flor de Piedra, the organization of sex workers, has demanded police protection for those who ply their trade in the area. Police have responded, according to Deputy Chief Wilfredo Avelenda, with increased patrols in the zone. They have begun questioning the dozens of men trolling the streets where the prostitutes work.

The police on patrol have told reporters they think the murders are drug related. "From what I hear, the [murdered] woman sold drugs," said one officer involved in questioning the men on the street. Police have also said the murders are related to gangs. They said the case of the woman who was shot was "clearly" the result of a gang feud. They said she belonged to Mara 18, that they have arrested the killer, that he belonged to Mara Salvatrucha, and that he was the son of the woman who employed the victim.

### *Police unconvincing*

The arrest of and accusation against a gang member was unconvincing to the workingwomen. So was Avelenda's explanation: "Because they do business with anyone, the gangs have access to them, and that is where a war broke out. If one rival gang solicits the services of a sex worker, the opposing gang tries to do damage, developing this type of activity." The workingwomen, however, are more concerned and frightened by the knife-wielding assassin. They point out that the two women were killed in the same way.

First, their throats were slit, then several deep stab wounds were made to their chests. Both were found dead in the beds where they worked. In both cases the assassin left the door ajar, so that his handiwork would quickly be discovered.

In speaking to the media, some of the women have expressed more than just fear for themselves. They said they know their work is hazardous and that they will not live forever. "But these murderers don't stop to think that one has a family to take care of," said Carla, a close friend of Rosa Ramirez, one of the victims. Ramirez had four children between the ages of five and ten, none with a responsible father.

The other victim, identified only as Ernestina N., left several children under seven orphaned. Carla added that she had to return to prostitution 22 days after giving birth. After their mother's funeral, Rosa Ramirez's children were taken to Sansonate by their grandmother, Rosa's mother, where relatives can care for them. It was reported that they didn't cry at the funeral.

The relatives told them their mother was "in a better place." The eldest son, Henry Edgardo, stood with his arms around the younger ones, as they watched mourners throw dirt on the grave and place mementos upon it. The mourners at the Cuscatancingo cemetery were Rosa's fellow prostitutes and some fruit vendors from Avenida Independencia.

The organization Flor de Piedra is not buying police suppositions of the crimes. Silvia Vidal, director of the organization, said, "We stand in defense of the human rights of the companeras. In this case we ask the attorney general's office and the PNC [Policia Nacional Civil] to take charge of the matter, since the companeras also have rights." Vidal said there had been no complete investigation of the cases. "We want an exhaustive investigation until they get to the bottom of the matter, just as if a politician had been killed." She brought up the cases of two other women, Veronica and Jenny, who had been murdered under conditions similar to the others, saying that a serial killer had not been ruled out.

Vidal had been a sex worker from age 21 until she was 37. Responsible for four brothers and sisters and her unemployed parents, she turned to prostitution when family friends introduced her to the profession, assuring her that the family would never find out.

### *Stopping extermination before the numbers get newsworthy*

These killings have not yet risen to the magnitude of those in Juarez, Mexico (see SourceMex, 2005-02-09), or Guatemala (see NotiCen, 2004-03-11), where the numbers of murdered women easily surpass 1,000. Nor were the women killed in those countries prostitutes. Flor de Piedra is not waiting for the volume to reach levels worthy of the international attention, however scant, that those countries have begun to receive. El Salvador has its own history of "inspired" murder to worry about.

In 1998, sex workers, not only women but gay men and transvestites as well, were victims of what was then seen as a throwback to the social cleansing and extermination policies aimed at eliminating undesirable members of society by death squads during the civil war. Then, as now, authorities only reluctantly took the murders seriously. At that time it was the Asociacion Salvadorena de Desarrollo Integral para Minorias Sexuales Entre Amigos that took up the battle for justice now sought by Flor de Piedra.

For Vidal, this, too, is a "form of extermination," of which the most worrisome aspect is "the little interest, the disdain of the authorities." Karla Quintanilla, another member of Flor de Piedra to speak up, added, "We are not begging them, we are not crying, we are demanding that they protect us, that they give us security because we are citizens who work to feed our children. Just as the police take care of football stadiums, just as they take care of evangelical vigils, they can also come to take care of the areas where we work."

The evolution of Flor de Piedra grew out of a 1990 Catholic parish project to help sex workers that was eventually taken over by the Lutheran University of El Salvador, where these workers took courses. Some of the graduates decided to work with other sex workers, first doing outreach, later giving workshops on human rights, health issues, and assisting workers who had been raped. The organization eventually got its own funding from the Dutch development agency HIVOS, increasing its activities to include workshops on AIDS, distributing condoms, and providing services for AIDS-infected workers.

Next, they began militating for changes in the way Salvadoran society and the government perceived sex workers. As Rosi Laines, a member of the organization's executive committee, put it in 1998 when this phase began, "We face constant discrimination. People treat us like garbage. We want to be accepted as human beings, with the same rights as everyone else." Flor de Piedra figures show that, in metropolitan San Salvador alone, there are 1,267 women sex workers registered, and "there are hundreds or thousands more who work anonymously."

-- End --