

12-17-2009

Guatemala: A Killer's Paradise

Louisa Reynolds

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen>

Recommended Citation

Reynolds, Louisa. "Guatemala: A Killer's Paradise." (2009). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9754>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

Guatemala: A Killer's Paradise

by Louisa Reynolds

Category/Department: Guatemala

Published: 2009-12-17

On Nov. 26, while hundreds of women took to the streets of Guatemala City to commemorate the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, police in the northern department of San Marcos made a gruesome discovery. Next to the local military barracks, the body of a 19-year-old woman was found in a black plastic refuse bag.

Local witnesses told the police that they saw the body being thrown from an unidentified vehicle that drove past the area. Roberto Vega, head of operations of the Policia Nacional Civil (PNC), said the woman had been strangled and a note attached to the body that read, "I hope you suffer as I suffered when I lost my son." Nobody claimed the young woman's body, which was taken to the morgue of the Instituto Nacional de Ciencias Forenses (INACIF).

According to police statistics, around 70 women are murdered in the country every month, which led Philip Alston, UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary, or arbitrary executions, to call Guatemala "a killer's paradise" during his latest visit in 2006.

Between January and August this year, 490 women were murdered in Guatemala, which has led to fears that by the end of the year more women will have been killed than in 2008, when a total of 672 murders of women were reported.

In April 2008, the femicide law (Ley contra el Femicidio y otras Formas de Violencia contra la Mujer) was approved, imposing 25- to 50-year prison sentences for gender-motivated crimes, 3 to 10 years for physical or psychological abuse, and 2 to 8 years for "economic violence," which includes depriving women from their right to work and own property.

Although approval of this law has been seen as an important step toward eradicating violence against women, it is clear that there is still a lot of work to be done before perpetrators of these crimes are brought to justice.

So far this year, the courts have delivered five sentences for femicide and 47 for domestic abuse. "Considering the number of cases that we have, the figure is low," says Remberto Ruiz, director of the Defensa Publica Penal.

Sonia Escobedo, director of the Secretaria Presidencial de la Mujer (SEPREM), said, "The judiciary needs to respond more assertively," which implies reforming the domestic-violence law (Ley para Prevenir, Sancionar y Erradicar la Violencia Intrafamiliar). Many judges tend to apply this law instead of the femicide law, since it provides protection measures for women who risk abuse but does not include sanctions.

The amendment would modify the Penal Code so that repeat offenders are denied the right to bail, and the aggressor is forced to leave the family home immediately regardless of whether he is the sole owner of the property.

The offender would also be forced to pay alimony right from this point.

"We put forward this bill six months ago, and it has been sent to the Comision de Asuntos Constitucionales. Once it has been approved by the committee, it will be discussed in Congress," said Delia Back, president of the Comision para Asuntos de la Mujer in Congress.

Hilda Morales, director of the Coordinadora Nacional para la Prevencion de la Violencia Intrafamiliar y contra las Mujeres (CONAPREVI), said, "The problem is that the law to prevent, sanction, and eradicate domestic violence does not contain sanctions. After decreeing security measures for 13 years, judges are reluctant to consider violence against women a crime".

However, Morales does not deem an amendment to the domestic-violence law necessary and says it is simply a question of applying the existing law correctly.

Although the Escuela de Estudios Judiciales has already included gender violence in its curriculum, Morales says that "more needs to be done to raise awareness among male, and even female, judges, since the idea is that, if a woman is being abused, it's her fault."

The Mindy Rodas case

Twenty-one-year-old Mindy Rodas was found lying naked and unconscious in a river in the village of Tapalapa, Casillas, in the eastern department of Santa Rosa on July 3 this year. She had been walking along the riverbank with her husband, Esteban Lopez, 24. The couple was on the way to Esteban's mother's house, where they were to explain that they had decided to separate.

The couple got married when Mindy was only 17 and she was systematically subjected to beatings and verbal abuse from her husband. After five years, Mindy decided to separate from her husband, and the courts ruled that Esteban had to support her and their 3-year-old son and give Mindy the family home (a one-bedroom house in Casillas).

While she was walking with her husband, Mindy was bludgeoned with a heavy object and later woke up in the hospital with her face horrendously disfigured. Esteban had peeled away her skin, leaving her with no nose, lips, or chin. Mindy, who now lives with her mother, cannot leave the house without a mask and has a speech impediment as a result of her injuries.

Esteban was sent to prison and the attorney general's office opened an investigation for attempted femicide. However, Judge Amilcar Colindres ruled on July 17 that Esteban was guilty of grievous bodily harm, a less serious crime for which bail and parole measures can be granted.

A statement purportedly signed by Mindy Rodas claiming that she would give up prosecution which she adamantly denies having signed was all that was needed for Esteban to walk free in August this year.

"Mindy Rodas had been accused by her husband of having a number of lovers. I believe that one of these jealous lovers was responsible," says Judge Colindres. "I have my doubts about the INACIF reports that say she was abused because those reports can easily be manipulated."

-- End --