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Femicide Numbers Down But Problems Persist For Salvadoran Women

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El Salvador’s female homicide figures have fallen sharply during the past year and a half, thanks in large part to a tenuous government-backed gang truce that has cut overall murders by more than half. An encouraging sign for the country as a whole, the decrease is a particularly welcome development for the administration of President Mauricio Funes, which has made women’s rights a policy priority with initiatives such the Ley Especial Integral para una Vida Libre de Violencia para las Mujeres (LEIV), a femicide law that went into effect early last year, and Ciudad Mujer, a network of female-focused resource centers.

In 2009, the year Funes took office, violent crime took the lives of an estimated 570 Salvadoran women and girls, nearly three times the number killed a decade earlier. During that span, the national rate of female homicides, as measured in relation to population, rose from 6 per 100,000 residents to 16, more than enough to earn tiny El Salvador the dubious distinction of being the world’s most dangerous country for women, ahead of Jamaica, Guatemala, and South Africa, according to a report published early last year by Small Arms Survey, a Swiss-based research project. A 2010 study by the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) reached a similar conclusion.

Funes, a former journalist who ran for president with backing from the leftist Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN), made it clear early on he intended to address the problem. Less than six months after his inauguration, he oversaw passage of the LEIV, an anti-violence bill that, for the first time, established a legal distinction between regular homicide and femicide. The law defines the latter as a killing "provoked by motives of hate or disdain for [the victim's] condition of being a woman." The LEIV made "aggravated femicide" punishable by up to 50 years in prison. It also established punishment guidelines for certain abusive behaviors against women, such as cruel insults and written or spoken threats.

In early 2011, again at the president’s behest, the Asamblea Legislativa (AL) approved another key women’s rights law: the Ley de Igualdad, Equidad y Erradicación de la Discriminación Contra la Mujer Salvadoreña (NotiCen, May 12, 2011). Passage of the anti-discrimination law coincided with the inauguration, two weeks later, of the government’s first Ciudad Mujer facility. El Salvador now has four such "cities" in operation. Two more are under construction.

The Ciudad Mujer project was spearheaded by Funes’ wife, Dr. Vanda Pignato, a Brazilian-born attorney and human rights activist who also heads the government’s Secretaría de Inclusión Social. Pignato’s goal was to make each facility a sort of clearinghouse for public services. Women can visit the various centers to receive, among other things, skills training, health care, psychological counseling, financial advice, and even assistance in acquiring small loans.

"With these opportunities, the women will be able to generate income for their families, strengthen their productive abilities, and, thanks to their economic independence, end cycles of violence," Pignato explained during a graduation ceremony held last month at a Ciudad Mujer facility in Colón, a small city just west of San Salvador.
A turning point?

For all the presidential couple’s efforts, female-homicide numbers rose further still during Funes’ first years in office. In 2010, 580 women and girls were murdered. The next year, the death toll hit 647, according to the Policía Nacional Civil (PNC). Nearly 90 of those victims were girls under the age of 18. Analysts pointed to another alarming statistic: female homicides were not only spiking in absolute numbers, but also as a percentage of overall murders. In 2004, women and girls represented 8.86% of the country’s total homicide victims. They accounted for 11.13% of the total in 2006 and 14.48% in 2010.

In the first two months of 2012, female-homicide numbers were again on the rise. In January, the same month El Salvador implemented the LEIV, 70 women and girls were killed, four more than in January 2011. The breach was even greater the next month, when 59 women and children were killed, compared with 45 the previous February.

March, however, marked a turning point. After more than a decade of almost steady increases, the numbers started to fall—first gradually, then by a significant margin. By year’s end, the PNC was able to report a 47% drop overall in female homicides, from 647 to 329. So far this year, the rate is even lower, down nearly 60% compared to the first six months of 2012, according the state-run Instituto Salvadoreño para el Desarrollo de la Mujer (ISDEMU).

The timing of the turnaround suggests it has everything to do with a tregua (truce) the government helped broker between El Salvador’s principal street gangs, or maras, as they are known locally (NotiCen, April 26, 2012). The truce, which went into effect in March 2012, has been tenuous since the outset. Bad blood runs deep between groups like the Mara Salvatrucha, also known as MS-13, and Barrio 18, which have been warring for years. But it has also been effective, cutting El Salvador’s overall homicide numbers by more than 40% in 2012. Mara members, it would seem, have not only held back on killing each other; they have also shown more restraint when it comes to killing women and girls.

"The rise in violent deaths among women in recent years corresponded to the growth of these gangs," then justice and public security minister David Munguía told BBC Mundo in March. "Most of the murders of women are related to these groups, among which the cost of infidelity is death."

Munguía, a retired general who played an instrumental role in helping broker and maintain the now 17-month truce, currently heads El Salvador’s Ministerio de Defensa. President Funes gave him the job in July, two months after a Consejo Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) ruling forced Munguía to resign from the Ministerio de Justicia y Seguridad Pública. The high court determined that Munguía, because of his military background, was constitutionally ineligible to serve as a top public-security official (NotiCen, June 27, 2013). The CSJ ousted then PNC head Francisco Salinas, also a former military man, for the same reason.

Enduring impunity

Women’s rights groups welcome the recent drop in female homicide numbers but warn that it by no means signals an end to El Salvador’s deeply rooted problems with machismo and gender-based violence. For one thing, the gang truce may not last. Even with the "cease-fire" in place, the numbers of woman and girls being abused and, in the worst cases, killed, remains extremely high by global standards. Last year’s final body count (329) may have been a vast improvement over the
horrific 2011 numbers, but it still averaged nearly 10 murders per 100,000 female residents. By way of comparison, the female-homicide rate in the US is less than 2 per 100,000.

Furthermore, gang members are not the only Salvadoran men committing violent acts against women. The first person to be prosecuted under the country’s new femicide law was a wealthy business executive who murdered his wife in 2012. The killer, Dagoberto Gutiérrez, was absolved in March on a technicality but arrested again the very next day on a weapon’s violation. A separate court later annulled the original ruling, meaning the businessman will again be tried for murder.

Another domestic-violence case attracting a lot of attention in recent months involves a former AL deputy, Rodrigo Samayoa, of the center-right Gran Alianza por la Unidad Nacional (GANA). Samayoa was dumped from the legislature after being accused of beating his then wife. Prosecutors have since dropped the charges. Samayoa is pushing for reinstatement in the AN.

Both cases highlight what organizations like CEMUJER, a Salvadoran rights group, insist is a long tradition of impunity that allows abusive men to get away, quite literally in some cases, with murder. "Because of this judicial impunity, there is always a high probability that the aggressor will evade justice while the victim faces greater chances of being fired, discredited, accused, prosecuted and sentenced, threatened, blackmailed, humiliated, cornered, and even killed," CEMUJER spokesperson Ima Guirola explained in a late July interview with La Página.

Research carried out earlier this year by another Salvadoran newspaper, Diario el Mundo, revealed that, even with the new femicide law in place, convictions are still few and far between. The daily found that, as of May 17, only 16 of the more than 60 aggravated femicide cases being processed under the LEIV resulted in guilty verdicts.

Speaking last month to a group of some 5,000 women, President Funes acknowledged "as a man" that Salvadoran society is "chauvinistic and organized in such a way as to give men more benefits, more privileges, and more power." The president’s speech marked the launch of a new government campaign in support of women’s rights. "Full independence for women, full equality, and the full guarantee of women’s rights is the key to building a just, inclusive society and a better future of the Salvadoran people as a whole," said Funes.

The president’s various gestures and initiatives have not gone unnoticed. Observers like Vilma Vaquerano of the Organización de Mujeres por la Paz (ORMUSA), a San Salvador-based women’s group, hail the government’s efforts as an important step forward for Salvadoran women. "But it doesn’t mean that all the institutions in all the different sectors [of the state], especially when it comes to the legal system, are working at the same rhythm," she told the online news site ContraPunto earlier this year. "Violence isn’t going to be solved by the approval of a new law," she added. "Society as a whole needs to become more aware of just what violence against women really means and then focus more on the causes of that violence."

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