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The Danger of Being a Woman in Ecuador

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Karina del Pozo, a 20-year-old student who also worked part time as a model at promotional events, disappeared on Feb. 19. Her body, showing signs of rape, was found eight days later. Her killers were close friends of hers who had been with her at a party.

On March 26, 22-year-old Leslie Rosero disappeared; her body was found in a park four days later. The police determined that she had been strangled. Earlier, on Jan. 26, 2012, Estefanía Madera, also 20, disappeared, and her body was found two days later.

María Eugenia Carrera disappeared on Aug. 20, and her body was not found for almost seven months. The last time anyone saw María Eugenia was when she left work with some friends to "have a few beers and talk."

On April 28, 2012, Carolina Garzón, 22, went missing. No trace of her has been found, as is the case with Juliana Rodríguez who vanished July 7, 2012.

These are but a few examples of disappearances reported in the Ecuadoran capital, but they are also occurring throughout the country. The disappearances and murders are considered femicide, the murder of a woman for being a woman and where sexual, domestic, or workplace violence can be determined.

There is little evidence to go on in these cases, since the national police and prosecutors do not have specialized teams to investigate disappearances. They have 45 days to question friends and relatives, after which any further investigation is left in the hands of the person's relatives.

**Silence—the accomplice to femicide**

An investigation by the Observatorio Metropolitano de Seguridad Ciudadana in Quito found that 21 cases of femicide were reported in the capital in 2012 and 28 cases were reported in 2011.

The Transitional Commission for the National Council of Women and Gender Equality (Comisión de Transición Hacia el Consejo Nacional de las Mujeres y la Igualdad de Género) says that 77% of the murders of women in four cities in the country constitute femicide. Their data indicates that four of every 10 women experience intrafamilial abuse, regardless of their social or economic situation. Of the 170 deaths of women reported in Guayaquil, Esmeraldas, Cuenca, and Portoviejo, 80 were murders, and 62 had signs consistent with femicide.

Legislative Deputy María Paula Romo says that a murder is considered femicide when the killer is a man—the spouse, boyfriend, ex-boyfriend, brother, or father of the victim or someone with whom she had, or previously had, a close or emotional relationship.

The motives for the killings can be jealousy, supposed defense of honor, or forms of punishment for the woman's misconduct in not fulfilling her "traditional" role of service and submission to a man. They can also result from sexual violence—from rape or the woman's refusal to have sexual relations...
with the killer. If a woman suffers extreme domestic violence and shows a desire to get away from her partner or if she does leave, she risks being killed.

"If there is domestic abuse, silence is one of the cruelest accomplices to a possible femicide," said former attorney general Mariana Yépez, referring not only to the abused woman's silence, whether from fear or shame, but also the silence of those around her, since the woman's family and neighbors are usually aware of the domestic violence. "In many testimonies regarding femicide, it is evident that the neighbors heard screams but no one went to help the abused woman," said Yépez.

The Asamblea Nacional (AN) is debating a new penal code that would classify femicide as a crime distinct from other murders and introduce more severe punishment for this type of crime.

María Paula Romo says, however, that femicide is not only a problem of citizen security that will be solved with greater police control and more severe punishments but also the product of a social construct in which gender-role stereotypes are prevalent. "Each phrase, each joke, each ad, each action that denigrates a woman supports the mistaken construct of gender relations and can lead to extreme violence, such as the murder of women for being women," said Romo.

**Some disappear without a trace**

"If a violent death is painful for the victim's relatives, a disappearance is even more so, since the pain of a death can be overcome, but the uncertainty that a disappearance brings does not go away," said Dr. Yolanda Hererra, a lawyer with the Fundación Regional de Asesoría in Derechos Humanos, who follows the investigations of disappeared women.

The Policía Nacional (PN) reports that they have received 1,091 missing-person complaints since January 2012. Of the 863 complaints received in 2012, 341 of the persons reported missing were found, 89 were determined to have left home voluntarily, 206 have not been found, and 19 were found dead. During the first quarter of 2013, 228 missing-person complaints were filed; 89 of those persons were found, 69 returned home, 20 are still missing, and 4 were found dead, among them Karina del Pozo and Leslie Rosero.

Carolina Garzón's disappearance on April 28, 2012, mobilized several Ecuadoran and Colombian social organizations to try to find her, since she was linked to leftist youth organizations and it was feared that her disappearance was for political reasons or that she was a victim of human trafficking, as was suspected in the case of Juliana Rodríguez.

The follow-up after Carolina's disappearance brought to light shortcomings in the prosecutor's office and in the national police in investigating these cases, in that they lack specialized prosecutors or police and the cases are considered administrative procedures that are soon forgotten and filed, with the simplest explanation being put forth: she ran away, she left with her boyfriend, or the convenient "she'll be back."

In Carolina's case, the prosecutor went with the version that "the river took her," based on witnesses who said they saw her on the banks of the river near her house, ignoring evidence suggesting a forced disappearance that could well have been politically motivated.

However, evidence indicates that Juliana's disappearance was a human-trafficking case, since several messages were found on her Facebook page in which a stranger posing as a psychologist was
attempting to lure her to meet with him. This evidence was not considered by the prosecutor in the case and no expert examination of the electronic messages was carried out.

Karina del Poza's death led other relatives of disappeared persons to make their cases known, and they formed an association thinking that, although they can do nothing alone, perhaps together they can find the missing persons.

"The Asociación de Familiares y Amigos de Personas Desaparecidas is being organized to demand that the state take these cases more seriously and that we can at least have a specialized team to take over the investigation of the disappearances," said Yolanda Herrera. Meanwhile, uncertainty is growing.

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