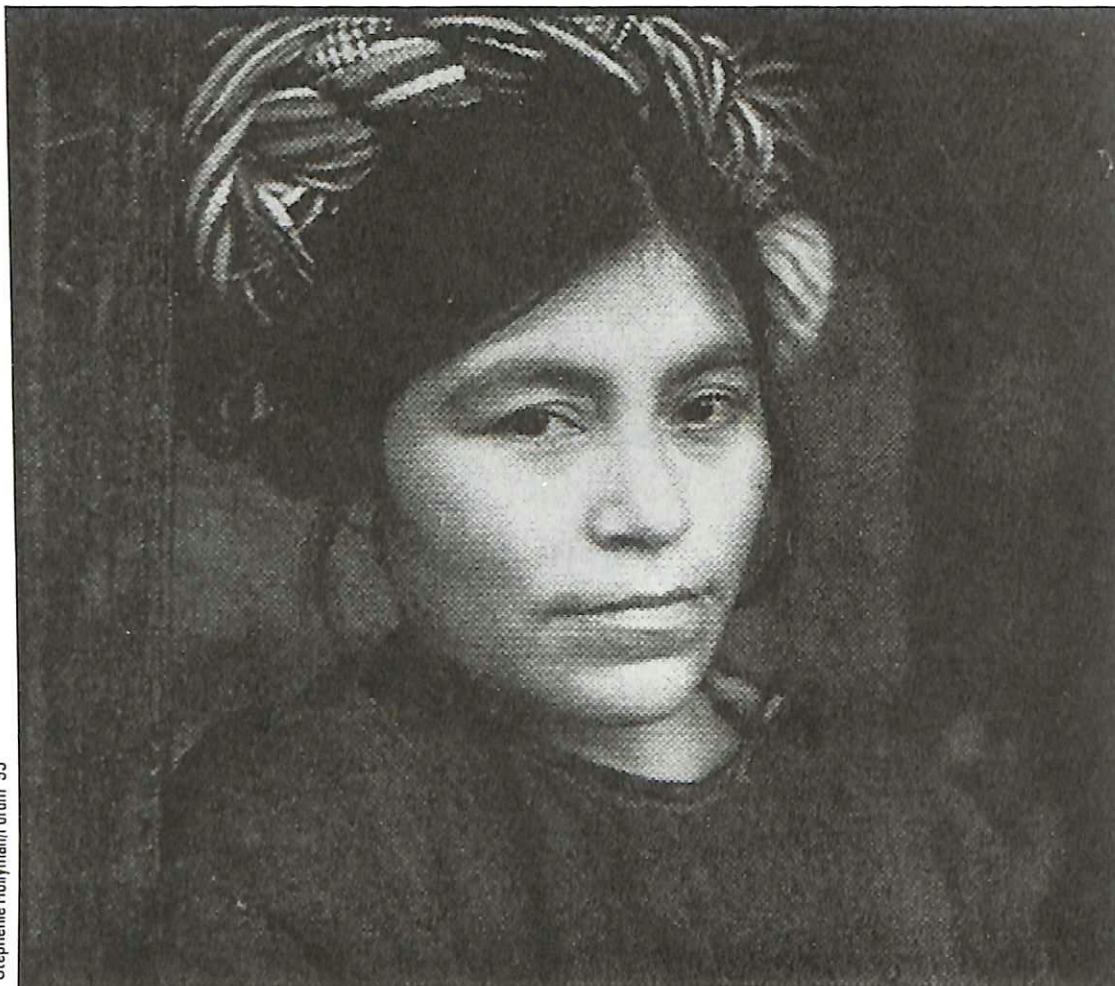


Stephenie Hollyman/Forum '95



Ixial widow of war in Nebaj, Guatemala

World attention was recently drawn to the use of gender specific violence in war by the mass rape of women in Bosnia. The case of Guatemala, which is the subject of the following article, serves to illustrate another aspect of this crime—the use of gender specific violence as a component of counter-insurgency.

While State terrorism and acts of repression are usually gender specific, this aspect of war and conflict has, until recently, been ignored by the international community, including most press agencies and social justice and human rights organisation. Guatemala is no exception.

The Geneva Conventions (codifying the laws of war and conflict) provide for the protection

gender violence in guatemala

by Victoria Rich

of women and girls from gender specific violations in all situations of international and non-international wars and conflicts. Despite this codified and 'accepted' law of war, systematic violations of the rights of women and girls have been the norm—Guatemala is no exception.

Moreover, in Guatemala, as elsewhere, it is most probable that gender specific violence was used as calculated strategic part of the counter-insurgency military campaigns carried across the country in the 1980s and, to a lesser degree, in the 1990s. Testimonies of survivors and forensic evidence from mass grave exhumations provide direct proof of this additional part of the history of Guatemala's repression.

Gender violence in Guatemala has not been and is not confined to the armed conflict. It is often said that the women of Guatemala represent the centre of the family and the community. This cultural 'norm', however, provides no actual respect or physical and emotional protection for the women or girls. Impunity, with respect to violence towards women and girls, is part of many facets of Guatemalan society. Gender specific exploitation, discrimination, violence and

oppression exist in laws, cultural and moral norms and daily behaviour of the society.

Given the widespread and historical phenomena of gender violence and given the nature of war and conflict itself, crimes against women and girls were intensified in the armed conflict. However, it needs to be stated that sexual abuse, when committed in the context of political violence, differs from the crime as it is usually played out in civil society.

While all instances of rape may be considered politically motivated, in Guatemala the overt political sanction transforms the act from an individual, deviant transgression into a normative act of social control executed on behalf of a collective goal. That goal in....Guatemala is the annihilation of the political opposition, through a counter-insurgency programme of psychological warfare.....

MILITARY OPERATIONS

Carried out by the police, soldiers and the civil defence patrols invasions of women's bodies are military operations aimed at weakening, incapacitating, and finally destroying the enemy's power to resist. The

more confident the abuser is of impunity, the more dedicated he can be to his mandate.... The women of Guatemala... have lived under a constant threat of state-sanctioned sexual assault, and their experience of sexual abuse cannot be understood in isolation, or without reference to that condition. (Aron, Adrienne, et al. 'Post-traumatic Stress Disorder in Central American Refugee Women.' Committee for Health Rights in Central America (CHRICA), presented at Convention of the American Psychological Association, New Orleans: August 1989)

'it would be difficult to find a girl of 11 to 15 who has not been raped. Even seven-year-old girls have been raped.'

Sexual violence was and is so prevalent and condoned that one study found that the overwhelming fear expressed by almost all Guatemalan women refugees in 1982 was the fear of being raped. One town official commented that with all the soldiers raping Mayan girls in combat zones in the highlands, 'it would be difficult to find a girl of 11 to 15 who has not been raped. Even seven-year-old girls have been raped.'

The area of Rabinal in the mountainous department of Baja Verapaz is a case study of counter-insurgency tactics that included different forms of gender violence against women and girls. In July of 1982, during the massacre of the villagers of Plan de Sanchez, young girls between aged 12-14 were separated off and raped before being executed. The Guatemala Forensic Anthropology Team-EAFG found and exhumed their bodies about 40 meters away from the main mass graves where the majority of the 130 Maya-Achi members of the Plan de Sanchez community were buried.

Survivor Juan Manuel recounts:

The soldiers went from house to house and took all the people out and brought them to the house of my fine sister. Once they had finished bringing the people here and putting them in my

sister's house, somewhere between 3:00 and 5:00 in the afternoon, one of the soldiers asked permission from the Commander to choose the prettiest girls between the ages of 12 and 14 years old. They separated them from the group and took them just over there where they raped them. They repeatedly raped the girls.

Of the poor young girls that were separated off and raped, three survived, or rather, they were let go. What happened is that the soldiers that came here with the patrollers were from the Community of Concul. The Patrollers knew the girls. The poor girls pleaded for the soldiers to do whatever they wanted, but not to kill them. That is why they left these poor girls alive. This is how we know about what happened.

...One of my sisters-in-law was raped, and as soon as they grabbed my actual sister from her house, they raped her there in front of her house. Both of their bodies were dug out from the mass graves.

In the village of Rio Negro, the soldiers and civil patrollers made the women march to the top of the mountain. They were forced to dance with the men who asked them, 'Is this how you danced with the guerrillas?' On the march up, pregnant women were given no rest. When they could not go on, the patrollers and soldiers hit them on the legs with heavy sticks, yelling, 'Come on, cows!'

Once they arrived at the top of the mountain, to a place known locally as Pacoxom Portezuelo, most of the young girls and women were raped before the patrollers and soldiers killed the 177 women and children. Survivor Ana describes:

The soldiers and the patrollers started grabbing girls and raping us. Only two soldiers raped me because my grandmother was there and she defended me. All the girls were raped. I am the only one who was raped that survived. They forced me to lie down and when it was over they took me to Xococ with them. When we were walking they told each other how many they had killed that day.

CASE STUDY

The Rabinal area is but one example of this type of violence in Guatemala's conflict. In a testimony given to Amnesty International, a 17-

year old Maya-Kekchi girl from the village of Chirrenquiche, department of Alta Vearapaz, stated:

The soldiers came (on 7 April, 1982); we went to the mountains.... where we hid. A group of soldiers came in behind us.... They slashed me with the machete; they raped me, they threw me on the ground and slashed my head with the machete, my breasts, my hand.

Gang rape (the Guatemalan Army's routine reward for soldiers about to massacre women), torture, execution, and ritual cannibalism were supervised by officers who alighted from a helicopter.

In July 1982, at the Finca San Francisco in the department of Huehuetenango, the Army, using scorched earth counter-insurgency military tactics, wiped out the village of Chuj, massacring men, women and children. At that massacre,

*...gang rape (the Guatemalan Army's routine reward for soldiers about to massacre women), torture, execution, and ritual cannibalism were supervised by officers who alighted from a helicopter. (Carmack, Robert M., ed. *Harvest of Violence: The Maya Indians and the Guatemalan Crisis* University of Oklahoma Press: Norman and London, 1988).*

In an environment of State-sponsored terror, the avenues open for protection, assistance, refuge and resistance are few. For women, who in 'normal' times have few open to them anyway, the choices are practically non-existent..

*Unlike men who, in times of war, are often publicly esteemed for the violence they endure or commit for their country, the violence levied against women is either made invisible or is seen as a source of shame for the women and as a reminder of the conquest.... (Bunch, Charlotte and Niamh Reilly. *Demanding Accountability:**

The Global Campaigns and Vienna Tribunal for Women's Human Right, New Jersey and New York: Rutgers University Center for Women's Global Leadership and United Nations Development Fund for Women [UNIFEM], 1994.)

Acts of gender specific violence are, formally speaking crimes against humanity because of the severity of violence and persecution based on gender, it is selected, targeted persecution. The victims are selected because they are female.

It is the responsibility of human rights institutions and organisations throughout the world to recognise that there are number of violations of rights that are exclusively inflicted upon women. The human rights of women and girls must be recognised and unconditionally protected. Human rights instrument must be assessed to specifically protect the rights of women and girls. Those instruments must then be applied to the war crimes of Guatemala.

The forthcoming United Nations 'Truth' Commission in Guatemala must be pressured to address these types of systematic crimes. The recent United Nations Truth Commission in El Salvador pointedly avoided investigating, receiving testimonies about, and denouncing this situation.

Women must be allowed to give testimony to the specific violations suffered by women and girls, and this in a safe environment where they will be heard, where justice will be served and a truthful and gender-inclusive history of the Guatemalan conflict is recorded. ♪

Victoria Rich is a researcher and writer who lived in Guatemala for two years. Currently at the Guatemala Human Rights Commission/USA, she will soon publish a full report on the "Use of gender specific violence against women and girls in Guatemala's conflict." She expresses her gratitude to the European Human Rights Foundation for its support for her research and for the forthcoming publication.

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