

No more killings! Women respond to femicides in Central America

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This article looks at a specific form of social violence against women in Mexico and Central America, the violent murder of women – femicidio or feminicidio in Spanish, ‘femicide’ in English. We explore the nature of femicide by analysing the situation from a gender perspective, as an extreme form of gender-based violence (GBV), and linking femicides with discrimination, poverty and a ‘backlash’ against women. In a climate of total state impunity, it is extremely important to support the responses of feminists and women’s organisations in the region who are carrying out research to document femicides and GBV in general, supporting survivors and their families, and carrying out advocacy activities.

Introduction

The first cases of what has become known in Mexico and Central America as femicide (*femicidio* or *feminicidio* in Spanish) emerged in 1993 in Ciudad Juárez on the Mexico–US border, when reports began to appear in the media of the discovery of the mutilated bodies of raped and murdered women on waste ground outside the city (Garwood 2002; Ertürk 2005). Femicide is now reaching alarming proportions across Central America (Clulow 2005; Thomson 2006). In Guatemala, for example, over 2,200 women have been reported murdered since 2001 (Amnesty International USA 2006). In fact, feminist researchers carrying out a regional study to compare trends in the different countries have found that in Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica, taken together, at least one thousand women die each year as a result of femicide or other forms of gender-based violence (Puntos de Encuentro 2006).

Mexican and Central American women’s organisations use *femicidio* as a legal and political term to refer to the murder of women killed *because they are women*. This is not a new phenomenon, but it is one which has seen a dramatic increase in recent years. The killings are carried out deliberately with extreme cruelty. Frequently, particularly in Nicaragua, they are carried out by partners or relatives of the victim, but in a high proportion of cases the murderers seem to be men connected with criminal activities. As such, they represent a new group of perpetrators not previously known for killing women, or at least not known for killing women in these proportions, or with these

motives. Women's mutilated corpses, left in public places, are being used as a weapon to spread terror amongst women; in this sense, and because the murders are committed with such brutality, femicide can be seen as a hate crime against women (Kennedy 2006).

The extent to which these crimes represent acts of hatred towards women can be seen in the descriptions provided by organisations working around femicide. A relatives' and survivors' association in Guatemala (Sobrevivientes n.d.) reports the violent murder of Maria Isabel Veliz Franco, who was found dead in December 2001. Maria Isabel, a 15-year-old student who worked in a shop, was raped and tortured; her body was found in a bag, tied with barbed wire, her face disfigured and her nails torn out. Similar crimes are also reported elsewhere in the region. For example, in Honduras, women's naked, tortured bodies were found with their legs open as a demonstration of male power; and two young women were found dead with a message to the former presidential candidate written on their bodies, warning him off his campaign against criminal gangs (known as *maras* or *pandillas*) (Kennedy 2005a).

In this article we suggest that femicide is an extreme form of the gender-based violence (GBV) that many women suffer at home, in the workplace, in the community and in their relations with the state, violence that is intrinsically linked to deeply entrenched gender inequality and discrimination, economic disempowerment, and aggressive or *machismo* masculinity. Femicide represents a backlash against women who are empowered, for instance by wage employment, and have moved away from traditional female roles. These are deaths that cause no political stir and no stutter in the rhythm of the region's neo-liberal economy because, overwhelmingly, state authorities fail to investigate them, and the perpetrators go unpunished.

This article is based mainly on secondary sources from the region, but also reflects what the authors have learned from Central American feminists and women's organisations over several years of work with the London-based Central America Women's Network (CAWN), and with the Centre for Women's Studies in Honduras (CEM-H)². Central American women's organisations are active around femicide and GBV in general, and we acknowledge a debt in this article to their energetic research and advocacy. We write in the hope of helping to transmit their voices to a wider English-speaking audience.³

Although we focus here on the killing of women, we recognise that men are also killed violently in Central America. However, these murders do not usually have a gender-specific motive. Men who do not conform to the *machista* stereotype (the overtly masculine identity defined by Latin American culture), for instance homosexual men or transsexuals, are at risk of gender-based violence (Amnesty International USA 2003), but on the whole men are not killed because they are men and gender inequality does not underpin their murders (Aguilar 2005; Monárrez-Fragoso 2002).

Femicide – anatomy of a gender crime

Who are the victims?

Guatemala has the highest number of femicides in Central America and Mexico, but increasing numbers of women are also being killed in Honduras, San Salvador, and Costa Rica. Victims come from a range of social and economic backgrounds, which vary from country to country, as do the circumstances in which they are killed. In Costa Rica, for instance, migrant women are especially targeted, while the number of femicides is lower in Nicaragua, where they are linked specifically to domestic violence⁴. Many of the murdered women are from the most marginalised sectors of society, and it has become common for the media to present them as prostitutes, *maquila* (factory) workers⁵ and members of *maras*. Indeed, young, poor women working on the margins of legality are in a very vulnerable situation and are more likely to be attacked. According to the most up-to-date figures held by CEM-H, among the women murdered in Honduras many of the victims of femicide live in densely populated areas and are poor (Martinez 2006a).

One group of victims which has received much academic attention, particularly in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico (for example, Garwood 2002), and to a lesser extent in Central America, is that of women *maquila* workers. Large multinational companies recruit young women to work in manufacturing and assembly-line production of commodities such as garments and electronic goods, ostensibly because of their ‘nimble fingers’ and aptitude for the work, but also because they are cheap and supposedly docile workers (Elson and Pearson 1981). Several factors put women *maquila* workers at high risk of violent assault: they are often migrants, and the nature of their work often obliges them to do overtime, which often means walking long distances at night, even if they are scared to do so (Mónarrez-Fragoso 2002). They are more vulnerable if they are heads of households, as they are often forced to work longer hours to support their families. Raquel, a Nicaraguan *maquila* worker, explained how ‘some women workers have to walk through dangerous areas. There have been rapes and assaults. It is dangerous’. Another worker, Elsa, said she preferred not to do any overtime and lose valuable income rather than risk her life, because she would have to walk home late at night on her own (both quoted in Prieto-Carrón 2006, 4–5).

However, many victims across the region do not conform to this stereotype of the *maquila* worker. Eighty-five per cent of the women killed in Mexico are not *maquila* workers (Lagarde 2006), while 45 per cent of the victims in Guatemala are housewives (Aguilar 2005). In Honduras, CEM-H reports that many victims are housewives and students.

Who are the killers?

Violence in the region has been exacerbated by decades of savage conflict and organised crime, and more recently by trafficking in drugs and people, and a general

lawlessness that has followed the formal cessation of the civil wars⁶. There is a culture of violence connected to drug traffickers and other criminal gangs (Bähr Caballeros 2004) and public institutions prefer to attribute femicides to this, rather than seeing them as an expression of male hostility to women. In this way the state's actions (or inaction) favour the escalation of femicide.

Women's organisations and feminist advocates disagree with the official interpretation of the causes of these crimes. Giovanna Lemus, director of the End Violence against Women Network (Red de la no Violencia Contra la Mujer) in Guatemala, argues that 'whoever is killing, it needs to be investigated, because it is clear that not only the maras are responsible for these killings' (cited in URNG 2005, 76). In 2003, of the 383 women killed in Guatemala, only six murders could be attributed to street gangs (Amnesty International 2005a). Attempts by the authorities and the media to blame the gangs for the murders obscure the structural and root causes of femicide, which are inherent in GBV in the region.

Women are not necessarily killed by strangers in public places. Aguilar (2005) argues that women suffering domestic violence or trying to leave their violent partners are at significant risk. Similarly, Almachiara D'Angelo points out that 'domestic violence cannot be separated from femicides, especially in Nicaragua, where women are killed by their husbands and partners. In this sense, femicide can be considered as an extreme form of domestic violence that kills women' (quoted in Prieto-Carrón 2006, 4–5). Other studies in the region show that a high percentage – more than 60 per cent – of femicides are committed by an intimate partner or male family member, and occur in the victim's own home (Carcedo and Sagot 2001; Martinez 2006b). Furthermore, there are cases where the perpetrator was not known to the victim but the crime was 'masterminded' by the partner or ex-partner, who contracted members of the police or paramilitary forces to carry it out (Puntos de Encuentro 2006). Sometimes women are killed 'as an act of revenge against a close male relative of the women, related to drugs, gang warfare or networks involved in traffic and sexual exploitation' (Martinez 2006b). The killings have a motive, they are planned, and the perpetrators are known to their victims (Sobrevivientes n.d.).

Femicide and gender discrimination

Many feminist organisations and defenders of women's rights in Mexico and Central America argue that women are killed because they are women and that GBV is at the root of the problem (see for example, Las Dignas 2004). They contend that femicides are the 'tip of the iceberg' (Lagarde 2006, 3) of cycles of gender-based aggression that patriarchal societies impose on women in the private and public spheres, and in different and often combined forms (physical, psychological, sexual and economic). This analysis includes the less widely recognised categories of 'institutional' and 'symbolic' violence within the nexus of discrimination and violence, giving a more

comprehensive framework for the gender analysis of the social, political, economic, and cultural aspects of femicide.

Inequality, poverty, and violence

There is an increasing body of literature showing the links between poverty, gender inequality and violence against women (Pickup *et al* 2001; for example, Kennedy 2005b). In Latin America, studies show an increase in domestic violence in low-income neighbourhoods (Chant 1997) that has worsened during the region's economic crisis. Women from poor and marginalised communities are often constrained by traditional attitudes that subordinate them within the family and limit their mobility. Lack of qualifications and skills restricts the type of work they are able to do and therefore the income they are able to contribute to the household. In addition, these studies show that in poor households where the male partner cannot find work, unemployed men feel that their status in the household and the community is undermined; this may lead to the use of violence against their spouses to impose their authority (Pickup *et al.* 2001).

The neo-liberal economic model itself propitiates gender violence by impoverishing and disempowering women (Oliviera 2006). Most jobs available to women – for instance factory jobs in the *maquila* industries – are low-paid and exploitative. The privatisation of public services, which both takes away women's jobs in the public sector and increases the cost of services to the consumer, has driven many women into informal and unprotected forms of labour, as street vendors, domestic servants, prostitutes, and even 'mules' transporting drugs inside their bodies, in which violence practically comes with the job. Young women in poor urban areas may join criminal gangs in the search for some kind of meaning in their disenfranchised lives (Bähr Caballeros 2004)⁷. Migration also exposes women to violence: young women who leave rural homes (where they may already have experienced violence) for a job in the city are often exposed to fresh dangers, while women left behind in both rural and urban areas when male workers migrate often find themselves as overburdened and vulnerable heads of households.

Backlash against women

The increase in the number of femicides can also be linked to women's empowerment. Some feminist and women's organisations consider that femicides are a backlash against women who have stepped outside the 'safe' domestic sphere to earn an independent living (Aguilar 2005; Gargallo 2005; Monárrez-Fragoso 2002). Although the *maquila* sector is notorious for violating labour rights, some feminists have pointed to the liberating and positive aspects of this kind of employment for many women around the world (Férrandez-Kelly 1983; Lim 1997; Rosa 1994; Ver Beek 2001). Despite their very limited options in an unequal globalised economy, *maquila* workers are empowering themselves by securing employment outside the home. But for this, they

are then labelled by society as 'sexual subjects lacking value, worth and respectability as a result of their structural position in the global economy', and therefore 'worthless, temporary and disposable' (Garwood 2002, 20). As a result, their violent deaths are regarded by the authorities as not worth investigation.

These crimes against women have created an environment of fear in which many women are afraid to leave their homes. Consequently, those in power, both in the household and in state institutions, can exert greater control over women's behaviour and mobility. In this respect, violence and the fear of violence are a form of social control used to terrify women and prevent them from participating in the public sphere, considered the male domain. As perpetrators generally go unpunished, the subordination of women in this way and the gender inequality that it underpins are legitimised. As Suyapa Martínez from CEM-H notes, femicides are: 'a reaction against women's empowerment: [men are saying,] "I'm denying you a public space, I'm denying you freedom, the right to go out and have fun, to have a personal life"' (Martínez, 2006a).

A continuum of violence

As mentioned above, femicides are the culmination of a continuum of violence in cultures where less extreme acts of violence against women are considered socially acceptable by both men and women. Research shows that femicide victims are in some cases already 'survivors of domestic violence': for example, 60 per cent of women in Mexico who were murdered by their partners or their accomplices had previously reported domestic violence to public authorities who did not respond (Lagarde 2006). The testimonies below illustrate how women survive 'lesser' acts of violence in their everyday lives, as some men use violence to impose their will in situations that could potentially escalate into more extreme forms of attack:

He wanted me to give him a son and it took me too long . . . to become pregnant . . . He would tell me, 'Son of a bitch, you're no good for shit, not even to have children.' (woman from Costa Rica, Sagot 2005, 1301).

He struck me again on my temple and almost strangled me. It took me two months to recover, to be able to swallow again. (Woman from Honduras, Sagot 2005, 1300).

The socio-cultural environment in which 'everyday acts of violence' are possible is one in which femicide is also possible. *Machista* cultural attitudes are reinforced in newspapers, commercials, songs, and soap operas, which reproduce myths justifying violence against women, such as 'women like to be beaten', 'she provoked him', and that 'he was drunk or under the influence of drugs' (URNG 2005, 49–54).

The state's response

Governments in the region are allowing men to get away with murder. This was highlighted by Yakin Ertürk, the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, in the report of her mission to Guatemala in 2004. The murders continue because national justice and public order systems ignore them. Impunity facilitates further murders and, in a cultural climate where violence is commonplace, men kill women because they can.

In Mexico and across Central America, public institutions from social services to the courts ignore, discount, belittle, cover up, and collude with the perpetrators of femicide, creating an enabling environment for its growth. In Guatemala, for instance, 70 per cent of murders of women were not investigated and no arrests were made in 97 per cent of cases (Amnesty International USA 2006). In the case of Maria Isabel Veliz Franco, mentioned above, it is claimed that forensic evidence (the perpetrator's hair and semen) found in her body was not examined for DNA analysis (Sobrevivientes n.d.). In Guatemala, according to the Human Rights Commission Report of 2003 (Procuradería de Derechos Humanos), in 82 per cent of cases of femicide, no suspect has been identified, and more than 70 per cent of the cases have not been investigated at all (URNG 2005). The police and the judicial system lack interest and political will, and there is no funding available to investigate these crimes.

State justice systems ignore legislation

All the countries in the region have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and are signatories to other international and regional agreements that protect women against violence. These include the Inter-American Convention to Prevent, Sanction and Eradicate Violence against Women (Convention of Belém do Pará), approved and widely ratified in 1995. However, none of these countries has reformed its national legislation to make it coherent with these international commitments, or drawn up regulations and provided funding to implement either the international agreements or existing national policies against GBV. In addition to the lack of policy and mechanisms to address gender-based violence in general, no Central American government has responded adequately to these horrific murders. Officials persist in their claims that they are spontaneous or accidental acts and do not take appropriate actions to investigate them (Kennedy, quoted in Gargallo 2005). They also dismiss claims that these murders have anything to do with unequal gender relations, but it can be argued that the failure of state authorities to investigate violent crimes against women is itself evidence of gender discrimination, and of discrimination on the basis of class and ethnicity, as victims are often poor, indigenous or migrant women. As Marcela Lagarde has noted, 'it's necessary to change the living conditions of women, to change the relations of

supremacy of men and the patriarchal content of laws . . . it's a substantive problem for democratic governance' (cited in Portugal 2005).

Crimes go unreported

Underreporting of femicides contributes to impunity. Researchers from several Latin American organisations preparing a report on femicide for the Inter-American Human Rights Commission found that:

the states do not have an official system for compiling information which would permit us to know the precise magnitude of the problem so as to make an adequate response . . . Moreover, where official figures do exist, they are always found [to be lower than] the figures coming from NGOs, showing a tendency by the governments to downplay the problem. In general, the information systems do not disaggregate data by sex, age or ethnicity. Neither do they make it possible to establish any kind of relation between victim and perpetrator. Every country has different indicators for organizing the data relating to the murders of women . . . even within the countries information systems are [not consistent]. (Feminicidio en América Latina 2006, 5–6)

Femicides are made invisible when records of deaths are not sex-disaggregated (Martínez 2006a; see also CLADEM 2001). The above-cited report also reveals that information about femicides is mostly recorded and disseminated by relatives of the victims and civil society organisations (Feminicidio en América Latina 2006). The research for this article confirms significant gaps in the data available and their reliability.

Service providers facilitate impunity

Insensitive, prejudiced, and inadequate responses by service providers also play a big part in the patriarchal social nexus that facilitates femicide by 'normalising' violence against women, particularly domestic violence, as not being serious or a real danger to women. A Nicaraguan woman reported that 'the doctor did not ask me anything, he just said, "You seem very sad, what you need is a lot of vitamins"'; while a woman from Costa Rica said, 'I used to tell the doctor, "Don't prescribe me any more pills, I am not crazy! I am hurt, but not crazy!"' (Sagot 2005, 1305). In Honduras, a physician argued that 'the demand is very high; we don't have time to talk with the patients. We only look at the medical problem' (*ibid*).

A legal service provider from Nicaragua said:

All in all, it's a very painful experience. Many times women go to the police in tears, and the police tell them not to be irresponsible and waste their time with that kind of complaint . . . They tell them, 'tonight your man is going to be between your legs again'. (Sagot 2005, 1307)

Research documenting the testimonies of mothers of femicide victims illustrates the contempt and lack of sensitivity towards the victim and her family. As the mother of Maria Isabel Veliz Franco reported: 'When they gave me her body, I was on the floor,

crying, and still they were telling me not to exaggerate' (Amnesty International 2005b). According to the Guatemalan Women's Group (Grupo Guatemalteco de Mujeres), which keeps records and supports victims' relatives, poverty and racial discrimination are key barriers for individual women and families, preventing many from seeking access to justice (Lemus 2006). Families often abandon legal procedures because they receive death threats or become disillusioned when they receive no response from the authorities. People do not trust the system or the bureaucracy, they fear reprisals, and they often cannot afford to pursue their cases.

The failure of service providers to treat victims and their relatives with respect, and to take their experiences seriously, represents a form of institutional violence, compounding the violence exercised by the state in allowing femicide to be committed with impunity.

Challenging state impunity at the international level

Women's organisations are beginning to see some successes in their campaigns to challenge impunity in cases of femicide. In recent years, human rights organisations such as Amnesty International, the International Federation of Human Rights, the Centre for Justice and International Law, and the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women have undertaken official missions, produced research reports, and supported women's organisations' struggle for justice. Women politicians in Central America, in collaboration with women's organisations, have spoken out at international hearings. For example, a Guatemalan congresswoman, Alba Maldonado, has spoken at several international meetings, including at the European Parliament:

I have taken up this issue of feminicidios as a priority . . . because the State has abandoned its social responsibility and insecurity, violence and femicide have been unleashed. I have no doubt where the responsibility lies: I affirm it both outside and inside Guatemala. (Maldonado 2006)

At a hearing at the European Parliament in April 2006, there was a call for the EU to take action, for example by making the provision of aid to countries in this region conditional on national governments strengthening their efforts to stop violence against women (Thomson 2006).

The response of women's organisations

Under incredibly difficult circumstances, with minimal resources, and often against considerable odds, women and women's organisations in Central America and Mexico are responding to gender violence with a variety of strategies (Aguilar 2005). In this section we outline some of these activities.

Organising across the region

Since the early 1990s, when the scale of the murders in Ciudad Juarez became apparent, women's organisations have come together to protest against systematic gender violence and demand justice. In 2001 a three-year, continent-wide campaign began, coordinated by the Latin American and Caribbean Feminist Network against Domestic and Sexual Violence (part of ISIS International)⁸ with the slogan 'For women's lives: not one more death' (*Por la Vida de las Mujeres, Ni una Muerte Más*). Large numbers of women participated in demonstrations and marches on the International Day to End Violence Against Women (25 November) and on International Women's Day (8 March), and the campaign succeeded in mobilising women's organisations, collectives, and NGOs throughout Latin America. When Central American women's organisations met in Guatemala in December 2004 for the second Central American Feminist Meeting⁹, they recognised that femicide had become a region-wide tragedy and that none of their governments was addressing it seriously. They decided to form the Central American Feminist Network against Violence against Women (*Red Feminista Centroamericana contra la violencia hacia la mujer*, hereafter referred to as the *Red Feminista*)¹⁰ and issued a public statement which argued that 'there is a context favourable to violence against women and resistance by the state to protecting [women's] rights to live a life free from violence', condemned femicide as 'a brutal form of violence against women,' and criticised 'the high level of impunity and corruption in the justice systems' (Puntos de Encuentro 2006, 74).

At the grass roots

In Mexico and in Guatemala, relatives of femicide victims were instrumental in getting the issue on to the public agenda. Without funding or experience in fighting for justice, the mothers of the young victims have confronted the police and the judicial system, at great personal cost. Self-help organisations have now been formed to denounce impunity, generate income, support the orphaned children of the murdered women, and cover legal and other costs, which remain a great challenge for family members (Lemus 2006).

Women's organisations in the region are also working more generally on gender-based violence. This includes projects offering support to women survivors with help lines, counselling and psychological therapy. Some organisations work in the poorest communities training community leaders to contribute to the prevention of violence, and to promote equitable gender relations in their communities. Others are also working to prevent violence against women and girls through workshops with the wider community, particularly working with young men to explore alternative, non-violent masculinities¹¹.

CEM-H is one of these organisations, implementing a project in some of the most marginalised communities in Honduras, offering emotional and legal support to

women affected by violence, as well as providing resources and tools, and training legal monitors (*promotoras*) to help women learn about their rights as women.

Research and advocacy

There is little data on femicides in Central America (Aguilar 2005), as pioneering research by CEFEMINA in Costa Rica found (Carcedo and Sagot 2001), so research and information gathering has become a priority for women's organisations. In 2005 the *Red Feminista* set up a research group to monitor the situation in Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala and Costa Rica (3)(10). Their aim is to generate research findings to be used to create public awareness and advocate for official action to prevent and punish violent crimes against women.

This research will inform regional advocacy initiatives at the highest possible levels, and campaigning to raise public awareness. Women's organisations see the legal framework as one of their greatest challenges. They want to change penal codes so that femicide is recognised as a distinct crime separate from homicide, because very often data are not disaggregated and it is difficult to analyse the gendered nature of the murder of women. The *Red Feminista* is working closely with a network of women lawyers linked to the International Centre for Justice and International Law based in Washington, and with other international organisations, to take their advocacy to the highest levels possible. They also want the police to keep accurate, sex-disaggregated, up-to-date records; failures in this respect are a key factor in impunity. As Suyapa Martínez from CEM-H argued in a recent interview with CAWN:

in Honduras we have several key challenges. We want the State to take preventative measures. We don't just want them to put more police on the streets, we also want integrated public policies. We want to go into these cases in greater depth and to transcend the national level and denounce them internationally. It's important to carry out campaigns regionally and internationally – these crimes are happening throughout the world. It's important that women raise their voices to denounce them and demand an end to femicide. (Martinez 2006b)

Conclusion

Women's organisations, and feminist researchers and politicians, believe that femicide, like all gender-based violence, requires attention at all levels of society and government, including the judiciary, the police force, and relevant public service providers. As we have argued in this article, femicide in Central America and Mexico is an expression of gender discrimination and unequal power relations between men and women, operating in both the private and public spheres. While the murder, torture, and mutilation of individual women by individual male aggressors makes gender discrimination starkly visible, institutionalised discrimination is evident in the failure of governments both to investigate these murders in particular and to protect the rights of women in general. This is not only a social problem but also one of

security. The state and its institutions, by lacking the political will to confront femicide, have in effect stimulated its reproduction.

The efforts of women's organisations must be supported at all levels. International support is needed, through different networks and collaborations, such as the project between CAWN in London and CEM-H in Honduras. Women's organisations are closer to the women victims of violence and to their realities. As we have outlined in this article, together with feminist advocates, they have developed a framework of analysis that locates femicides as part of a continuum of gender-based violence in all aspects of women's lives, the most extreme manifestation of many other kinds of violence that women suffer.

International donors need to take a position on gender-based violence, because it exists in all the social processes that their programmes are trying to address. A greater distribution of funds towards programmes promoting gender equality would be a starting point. With regard to Central America, pressure is needed to stop the impunity of governments. For example, cooperation treaties between the European Union and the countries in this region should include the condition that governments take action to solve crimes against women. As long as the international community ignores violence against women in Central America, there is little hope of stopping the killing of women. Women in Central America deserve our international support.

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Notes

- 1 The English term 'femicide' was first popularised by the academics Jill Radford and Diane Russell (1992) in their book *Femicide: The Politics of Woman Killing*. They argue that society is organised to make violence part of all relations, reinforced by cultures that legitimise violence against women.
- 2 CAWN is a UK-based organisation that works to increase awareness in the UK and Europe of violations of women's human rights in Central America and which supports the work of women's organisations to end discrimination against women in the region. CAWN produces a regular newsletter and bulletins, organises conferences and speaker tours, and carries out research on women's rights in Central America (www.cawn.org). In 2006, CAWN embarked on a five-year project with CEM-H, focusing on GBV (www.cemh.org.hn), with the financial support of the Big Lottery Fund.

- 3 The Central American Feminist Network against Violence against Women (Red Feminista Centroamericana contra la Violencia hacia las Mujeres), supported by UNIFEM and founded in February 2005, is undertaking a regional study on femicide. Although this was not available at the time of writing, very valuable research from women's organisations and women's advocates is already accessible and we have referred to it as widely as possible.
- 4 The fact that in Nicaragua there is less violence related to organised crime, drugs and prostitution than in other Central American countries needs to be researched. A factor could be the greater social consciousness in the population and the impressive community organising, as a legacy of the Sandinista Revolution (1979–1990).
- 5 *Maquilas*, or *maquiladoras*, are factories in Mexico and Central America manufacturing textiles and garments and producing assembly line electronics and other goods for export. They may be located in free trade zones or outside them, but all benefit from the same special export regimes and tax advantages.
- 6 For example, Guatemala suffered 36 years of civil war, during which rape and murder of women were widespread, particularly of Mayan women in rural areas. But the signing of the Peace Accord in 1996 has not ended the violence against women (or men and children). Similarly in El Salvador, a civil war in the 1980s between the Farabundo Martí Liberation Front (FMLN) and the incumbent government lasted for over 13 years, while the Nicaraguan *contras* fought a war against the left-wing Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua, supported by the United States.
- 7 A significant proportion of female workers in Central America also migrate (see for example, Morales Gamboa 2002).
- 8 One outcome was the setting up of a data bank by ISIS International with research findings and documentation on the anti-violence movement. This is an important resource available on line for all women's organisations. See: www.isis.cl/Feminicidio/index.htm (last checked by the authors 2 August 2006).
- 9 II Encuentro de la Red Feminista Centroamericana contra la Violencia hacia las Mujeres. This was a specifically Central American conference, not the Latin-America-wide Encuentro Feminista that has been held since 1981. For information on the Central American conference see *La Boletina* (2006 64: 75) which can be accessed at www.puntos.org.ni/boletina (last checked by authors 20 November 2006).
- 10 The network members working on this research are: the Women's Studies Centre – Honduras (CEM-H); the Feminist Collective for Local Development (Colectivo Feminista de Desarrollo Local) El Salvador, the Guatemalan Women's Group , CEFEMINA in Costa Rica, and Almachiara D'Angelo, an independent researcher in Nicaragua.
- 11 Men can also be allies in the struggle against gender-based violence, by not personally engaging in violence, by intervening against the violence of other men, and by addressing the root causes of violence (see for example, Berkowitz, 2004). Pioneering work with men to combat gender violence has been carried out, for instance, in Nicaragua, by CANTERA, an NGO that runs popular education training courses on masculinity, and the Nicaraguan Association of Men against Violence (Welsh 2001).

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