



Photo credit: Tens of thousands of women protest against femicide and gender-based violence on International Women's Day in Mexico City, Mexico: Soy Sendra, Shutterstock, March 2020

Ni Una Menos, Not One Less: Femicides and Gender-Based Violence in Mexico and Northern Central America

Gema Kloppe-Santamaría

In January 2021, Luz María del Rocío López was murdered. Her body was found wrapped in plastic inside a sewer in Guatemala City, showing signs of mutilation, torture, and burning. Luz María was 25 years old, had a 1-year-old daughter, and worked as an investigator in the Public Prosecutor's Office. She was trained as a criminologist and wanted to go to school for a master's in forensic science. The neighbors had continuously heard her screaming asking for help while her husband abused her, but they did not report it to the authorities. Her family and friends knew or

suspected the violence she endured at the hands of her husband but were unable to help her.¹ Neither the country's justice institutions—where she happened to work—nor her neighbors or family members could prevent Luz María's killing. She was defenseless in the face of her abuser. As her case continues to be investigated, the number of women murdered in Guatemala keeps growing. Between January and July 2021, 300 women were killed.² Like Luz María, many of these women were murdered by their partners and were exposed to cruel forms of violence and abuse—

About the Series

Gender-based violence (GBV) affects one in three women worldwide, making it an urgent and important policy challenge. Many countries around the world have passed laws intended to protect women from violence, yet violence persists. Over the past year, the COVID-19 pandemic has raised awareness of the perils women face from gender-based violence—what has come to be known as the “shadow pandemic”—but it has also aggravated risk factors while increasing barriers to protection, support, and justice.

This publication aims to focus on the intersection of gender-based violence and the rule of law by examining how legal frameworks, judicial system responses, and public policy contribute to the ways in which gender-based violence is—and is not—addressed around the world. Each piece addresses the complicated challenge of gender-based violence and the successes and failures of various public policy responses globally, and offers recommendations for a path forward.

verbal, emotional, and physical—that culminated in their killing. In all likelihood, they were victims of femicide, the intentional killing of a woman because of her gender.

Luz María’s femicide is one of the thousands of cases that have been reported over the last decade in the Northern Triangle of Central America, a subregion deeply impacted by the prevalence of femicides and gender-based violence more broadly. In 2019, Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala were among the four countries with the highest numbers of femicides per 100,000 women in Latin America, a list that also includes Bolivia.³ In a context where gender-based violence intersects with gang-related activities, state-sanctioned violence, and high levels of impunity, an increasing number of women—either alone or with their children—have been forced to flee these Central American countries and migrate northward in search of survival and protection.⁴

“In Mexico, every day, 10 women are murdered.”

Women fleeing from Mexico share similar experiences of violence and abuse at the hands of their partners, men linked to criminal organizations, or law enforcement institutions. Although Mexico has lower femicide rates than the northern Central American nations (1.5 per 100,000 women, compared with 1.8 in Guatemala, 3.3 in El Salvador, and 6.2 in Honduras),⁵ statistics on violence against women in Mexico are equally staggering. According to official sources, from January to June of 2020, 1,844 women were killed, most of them by firearm or strangulation.⁶ This number corresponds to the grim figure that has caught national and international attention over the last two years: In Mexico, every day, 10 women are murdered.⁷

Behind these statistics, there are the stories of thousands of women whose lives, and those of their families, have been shattered by violence. One of the most recent—and perhaps most alarming cases—reported in Mexico was the murder of 34-year-old Reyna González in the municipality of Atizapán de Zaragoza, in Estado de México, in May 2021. Reyna’s body was found, together with the remains of other unidentified women, in the house of Andrés N., a 72-year-old man who has since admitted to murdering and mutilating 30 women over the course of two decades.⁸ The case is reminiscent of the series of murders committed by former policeman Hugo Osorio in the municipality of Chalchuapa, in El Salvador. Osorio’s murders were uncovered this past May when neighbors called the police after hearing screams coming from his house and seeing the perpetrator hit one of his victims in the head with a metal pipe.⁹ The victim was Jacqueline Palomo Lima, 26 years old, who had been lured into Osorio’s house after he promised her information about her missing brother. The remains of at least 24 more people, including Jacqueline’s mother and brother, were found in his home.

Although authorities and press reports have characterized these men as “monsters” and “lone serial killers” whose behavior is assumed to be anomalous or isolated, the reality suggests a more complex and unsettling picture. Andrés N. participated actively in local and neighborhood-based politics, and he was part of a campaign team supporting one of the candidates for mayor in the municipality of Atizapán de Zaragoza.¹⁰ Hugo Osorio planned and carried out his killings in collaboration with at least 12 other people. One of his accomplices was a member of the armed forces who asked for Osorio’s help with murdering his girlfriend and his own son.¹¹ More important perhaps, the femicides perpetrated by these men share important characteristics with the thousands of cases that remain unresolved in Mexico and the Northern Triangle of Central America. These characteristics include these killers’ excessive use of violence (including torture, mutila-

tion, and burning), the use of sexual forms of abuse, a close or sentimental tie to some of the victims, and their occurrence within contexts undergirded by high levels of impunity.

The prevalence of these acts of violence, together with the impunity that surrounds them, has produced a wave of protests organized by feminist organizations and activists across this subregion. In Honduras, the murder of a 26-year-old nursing student while in police custody pushed dozens to rally and publicly denounce police brutality and gender-based violence last February.¹² In Guatemala, hundreds of women took to the streets on International Women’s Day, carrying banners that read “Girls are not to be touched, raped, burnt, killed” and “We did not ‘appear’ dead; we were murdered.”¹³ Political leaders have met women’s mobilizations with contempt, if not outward hostility. Notably, Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador has repeatedly downplayed or called into question the significance of violence against women in the country.¹⁴

“Gender-based violence is thus at the heart of the cycles of violence impacting these and other nations.”

For too long, security responses promoted by the governments of Mexico and the Northern Triangle of Central America have focused on the violence produced by drug-trafficking organizations or the transnational gangs commonly known as *maras*.¹⁵ Conversely, international cooperation efforts and assistance programs—including those sponsored by the United States government—have centered on dismantling these criminal organizations through punitive and military responses, as well as, to a lesser extent, policies that seek to address the institutional and social roots driving organized crime.¹⁶ Violence against women has been, at the

very best, addressed as an afterthought, as part of those “other” forms of violence impacting citizens in the “private realm.” Evidence suggests, however, that gender-based violence intersects in significant ways with the violence produced by gangs and organized criminal groups. Women experience forced recruitment, sexual exploitation, and lethal violence on behalf of gangs in the Northern Triangle,¹⁷ and networks of human and sexual trafficking operating in both Mexico and the United States—such as the one originated in Tenancingo, Tlaxcala—involve women who are exploited by members of their own families or by their sentimental partners.¹⁸ Moreover, militarized responses to security challenges have increased women’s exposure to sexual violence and femicides perpetrated by organized criminal organizations and state actors.¹⁹ Adding to this scenario, several studies have demonstrated that exposure to violence during childhood—e.g., witnessing sexual and physical violence against a mother at home—increases an individual’s risk of suffering violence later in life.²⁰ Gender-based violence is thus at the heart of the cycles of violence impacting these and other nations.

The governments of Mexico and the countries of the Northern Triangle of Central America need to prioritize the implementation of integral and multisector responses to femicides and gender-based violence. US security cooperation initiatives as well as assistance programs need to acknowledge how gender-based violence intersects with different expressions of criminal violence in both the public and private spheres. The US government’s recently announced strategy to address the root causes of migration, which includes a fifth pillar centered on “combating sexual, gender-based, and domestic violence”²¹ is a step in the right direction, insofar as it acknowledges the centrality of these issues to the security challenges faced by these nations. To be fully effective, however, such a strategy should address the intergenerational dimensions of gender-based violence, its manifold connections to organized crime and gang-related violence, and the

detrimental consequences that militarized responses to crime have had on women and girls' security and well-being. Gender-based violence needs to be seen, heard, and acted upon. "Not One Woman Less, Not One More Death."

NOTES

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Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars
One Woodrow Wilson Plaza
1300 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20004-3027

 www.wilsoncenter.org / gbv.wilsoncenter.org

 wwics@wilsoncenter.org

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 202.691.4000