



A country at war against its women

After the Internal Armed Conflict, those responsible for the disappearances can be diverse and it depends a lot on the context of the victims. Something that hasn't changed, just like during the war years, many of the victims are women and girls.

By Cristina Chiquín

This report was made thanks to the 'Express Yourself! (*¡Exprésate!*)' initiative of the **International Women's Media Foundation**.

Mayra Angelina Gutiérrez Hernández, 42 years old and originally from the capital city, was a professor at the University of San Carlos, in the Faculty of Psychology.

"I have mixed feelings about knowing what happened, sometimes I don't want to know because I know it's going to be painful, but on the other hand I do want her remains to be handed over to me and so to be able to mourn as it should be," says her daughter, Ángela Arguello.

April 7th, 2000. Mayra disappeared the day she left for Huehuetenango, for work. Ángela states that when they reported her disappearance, the authorities tried to convince them that she fled of her own free will, that she had run away, but Angela knew that it was not so.

That day, when Ángela returned from school, she saw that her mother's belongings were at her house, her cell phone was charging, and that everything was prepared for the trip she made every weekend to teach classes in Huehuetenango. That weekend they started looking for her, they had to spend 48 hours just to report this.

Ángela remembers her as a studious and hardworking woman. At the time Mayra disappeared, she was working on an investigation for UNICEF on illegal adoptions of victims of the armed conflict.

"For a long time, one tries not to think, or talk about it, but when I do talk about it again 20 years later, it makes me ill, same for my family," says Ángela.

The disappearance of someone is an episode that Mayra's family had already suffered. It happened at the time of the Internal Armed Conflict, in Guatemala, a

brother and a sister of Mayra disappeared during that period and, like Mayra, they did not return.

In 2014, Ángela contacted the Mutual Support Group (*Grupo de Apoyo Mutuo - GAM*) in order to present the case before the Inter-American Court. In 2016, she obtained a verdict that obliges the State of Guatemala to resolve the case, deliver the remains to the family, and prosecute those responsible. The file went to a special prosecutor's office (during Thelma Aldana's time as Attorney General) and the investigation began to make progress. Until that point, they confirmed that the pattern of Mayra's disappearance was that of a forced disappearance.

The difference with the disappearances of the past is that, in those times, there were indications of who could be responsible. The usual thing was that they were committed by the State. These days, those responsible for the disappearances can be diverse and it depends a lot on the context of the victims. Something has not changed, just like during the war years, many of the victims are women and girls.

Karla Campos, from GAM, explains how, during the war, the disappearances were of a political nature, criminalising people for being students, being organised or for other reasons. These days, no, but the reasons given by the authorities to explain the disappearance continue to criminalise, to blame, the victims, especially in the case of single mothers, or because of their personal relationships.

Campos offers a clarification and so does not blame the State as the sole actor of the disappearances, because now they are not caused by a single actor. "However, the State must respond and act, carry out the search, hand down sentences in relevant cases and investigate the disappearances. The responsibility of the State continues to be important," she declares.

The psychological consequences that a disappearance leaves do not vary much from those suffered by the families of those who disappeared during the war. Moreover, as happened during the war, the victims are criminalised, claiming that the women have fled or who disappear because they wanted to. They are judged through gender bias and, many times, the searches do not they start immediately.

“I have a little princess named Sarita”

Although statistics from the Attorney General's Office (*Ministerio Público – MP*) show a reduction in disappearances linked to violence, the day-to-day reality in Guatemala shows otherwise.

In January 2021 alone, the murder of more than 69 women were registered, some of them were within the alerts¹, others were not, but in the end they were all victims of femicide. Among these cases there are those such as that of Hillary Saraí Arredondo, where the family activated the Alba-Keneth Alert on January 17th, 2021, but they found her murdered, and with signs of physical and sexual violence on January 18th in Tiquisate, Escuintla.

She was three years old, and about to turn four in April 2020. Her mother, Nancy de León, tells how her daughter was a girl loved by her entire family.

"Let the justice system deal with them," repeats her mother.

Hillary was taken from her maternal grandmother's house in Tiquisate. That night, the child's aunt, Norma Bran, activated the Alba-Keneth Alert to start the search that same night, neighbours and relatives all collaborated. On the morning of January 18th, 2020, Hillary's body was found in a forest.

Nancy remembers the song she wrote for her daughter:

*I have a princess named Sarita
she shakes her head calling her mom
and her mom tells her to behave
Sarita*

Hillary Sarai used to sing the song, laughing with her little brother, Santiago. She doesn't understand what happened, or why, but she hopes that justice will be served. "I want justice, for the law to give them what they deserve. I cannot ask for them to be killed, but I want justice to be done."

Stories, like that of Hillary, repeat themselves. Just a few days after her murder, but in Guatemala City, 25 year old Luz María, a criminal investigator for the MP, was also a victim of femicide. They found her in a drain near her work with signs of violence, her husband being the main suspect.

Although alerts such as Alba-Keneth and Isabel-Claudina are used for the immediate search of women and children, many are not activated in time or the families are unaware of the relevant mechanisms.

1 [For example, the **Alba-Keneth Alert** (*Alerta Alba-Keneth*) is a system for searching for, locating and giving immediate protection to missing and kidnapped girls, boys and adolescents. It was called Alba-Keneth Alert, in honor of two children, Alba España and Keneth López, who were kidnapped to be sold and exploited. Shortly after being kidnapped, both children were brutally murdered. <https://unicefguatemala.medium.com/when-every-minute-counts-746ebaf273ea>. Another being the **Isabel-Claudina Alert** (*Alerta Isabel-Claudina*), an inter-institutional cooperation mechanism that has helped rescue hundreds of missing women, again named after two victims, 15 year old María Isabel Veliz Franco and 19 year old Claudina Velásquez Paiz]

Even if they show up, the State abandons them

Whether a young woman manages to escape or turn up is, in many cases, just part of what they have to deal with next.

Edda Roblero, prosecutor of the MP, says that the follow-up and support for the victims is almost nil. One example is the case of Ana Andrea Pop Hidalgo, a 15-year-old victim of human trafficking. Her family remembers her as a child with great enthusiasm.

She lived in Chioya, in San Juan Chamelco, Alta Verapaz. Using deception, someone close to her community took her to Guatemala City where she was sexually exploited. During the abduction, Andrea was threatened to not say that she was living in a hotel called Casa Blanca, in zone 4. This happened in February 2015.

Her sister, Rosalía, was suspicious when she talked to Andrea, when she said that she was fine. She was returned to the community only when her captors were threatened with the lodging of a complaint but, when Andrea returned, she was no longer the same.

She spent a week at home and, in those days, she received threats. The captors took her away in April 2015 with another young girl from the community. Rosalía lodged the complaint for the kidnapping of her sister, but the authorities sent them from the MP to the State Solicitor's Office (*Procuraduría General de la Nación - PGN*), where they did not take the complaint either.

Finally, the MP received the complaint and activated the Alba-Keneth Alert. They found Andrea a day later, in the central square in Cobán, and her statements served to find those responsible for the trafficking network. They were Herlinda Tiux Tul, her aunt by marriage, Estela Emiliana Ramírez Martínez, and Catalino Verónica González Felipe.

Rosalía tells how her mother was locked up in custody, and states that they pressured her to say that Andrea had left of her own free will, but her family stood firm in the complaint.

Andrea said that she was first taken to a tortilla bakery, but when she arrived she realised that it was a hotel. They held her under threat, sexually exploited her and, as they did with other young women, put her virginity up for auction. The bid was won by a 42-year-old man who paid 600 quetzales².

The accused were sentenced in February 2017, and Andrea was sheltered in The Children's Shelter (*El Refugio de la Niñez*) for a while, then she returned home.

2 [Around GBP £60, or USD \$75, at that time.]

During the complaint process the family were constantly threatened, saying they would kill their father. Andrea was afraid, although they stuck with the complaint. "But it was as if Andrea had been killed to life," recalls her sister.

Her life changed a lot and, a few years later, Andrea was linked to an older man and had a daughter.

She had long-term emotional and psychological consequences from what she experienced at the Hotel Casa Blanca, and there was no support from the authorities to give her protection and help of any kind. With the help of social organizations, Andrea studied medicine, to be a nurse.

The authorities never gave the family protection as witnesses. On October 18th, 2020, Andrea went shopping in San Juan Chamelco. Then there was no news of her.

The next day the family learned through social networks that, at 8:30 a.m., they found her body showing signs of violence, found her on a road that leads to Coxojur, a nearby community. Perla, Andrea's daughter, had a premonition that afternoon, "I don't want my mom to be killed", she told them.

Years later there was another victim in the same hotel, in zone 4 of the capital. Noemí Ambrosio Cambriz, 25, died in unclear circumstances. She was also originally from Alta Verapaz.

The state is still to blame

It is true, the disappearances in Guatemala no longer come from the State, but sometimes continues to be indirectly responsible. An example of state violence was the case of the 56 girls burned in the *Hogar Virgen de la Asunción*, after they reported violence and sexual abuse.

Another example of justice delayed is the case of Isabel Veliz Franco, one of the cases that led to the creation of the *Isabel-Claudina Alert*. The Inter-American Court of Human Rights condemned the State of Guatemala for not investigating the disappearance and femicide of Isabel. After 20 years, her mother, Rosa Franco, together with social organizations, such as the Guatemalan Women's Group (*Grupo Guatemalteco de Mujeres - GGM*), managed to get a Guatemalan court to try, and convict, in March 2021, Isabel's attacker, murdered on December 16, 2001. The sentence was 30 years old, although it took 20 years to arrive. It was an iconic case, but there are thousands of similar cases, many unsolved.

Families continue to seek justice, some more fearful than others. Both the families of the disappeared persons during the Internal Armed Conflict, as well as the

families of the disappeared and victims today, cry because they miss their daughter, sister or mother.

It seems that in Guatemala the war continues, although now it is a war against women. It is their bodies and lives that are at the forefront of the battle.

Translated by Kevin O'Dell

