



Norma Cruz, Guatemala

“We’re not going to allow one more woman to die.”

In Guatemala, an average of two women each day die a violent and often grisly death. The number is increasing, and has more than doubled since 2000. While murders of men are also increasing, the killings of women are particularly gruesome, often involving rape, torture, mutilation, and dismemberment.

Norma Cruz, co-founder and director of the NGO “Survivors Foundation,” has provided emotional, social, and legal support to hundreds of victims of domestic violence and sexual abuse and to the families of murdered women. In 2007 alone, her foundation helped investigate, prosecute, and convict 30 individuals accused of murdering women. The NGO also runs a victims’ shelter – one of only a handful in the country -- and also fights to protect mothers whose babies are allegedly stolen for an illegal and lucrative supply chain for international adoptions.

The increasing number of killings of women in Guatemala, Ms. Cruz says, is tied both to the poverty that is the aftermath of Guatemala’s civil war and to narco-trafficking. Gangsters reportedly kill the female family members of rival gangs, often as an initiation rite, and without fear of legal retribution. These crimes are under-reported and under-investigated, and less than three percent are prosecuted. The more common police response, according to a former member of the Guatemala Human Rights Commission’s delegation, is to assert that the victim must have been a prostitute or a gang member, have engaged in other criminal activities, or have provoked the killer with her infidelity.

Because of the pressure of groups like the Survivors Foundation, the UN-led International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) was approved by the Guatemalan Congress in August, 2008. Although it is too early to gauge the effect of the Commission, it has the potential to be an important tool in combating the gender-based targeted killing of women.

These advances come at enormous personal risk to both the activists and their families. But, Ms. Cruz told the Human Rights Commission delegate, “We’re not going to allow one more woman to die.”

Ms. Cruz was recently the subject of an urgent Amnesty International appeal, after one of her relatives was abducted and assaulted in what appeared to be an attack aimed at intimidating her and the foundation. She herself has received numerous death threats, and her home and office have been surveilled.

Ms. Cruz’ courageous commitment to the Survivors Foundation despite these risks has given voice to hundreds of victims, generated positive change, and inspired other groups and individuals, within the country and outside, to work to turn the tide of violence and impunity in Guatemala.