“The Most Dangerous Place in the World to be a Woman”: The Roots of Feminicide in Guatemala

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Abstract

“The Most Dangerous Place in the World to be a Woman”: The Roots of Feminicide in Guatemala

By Ailsa Bryce

Feminicide, the killing of women because they are women within a culture of impunity, is prevalent in Central America and one of the most shocking human rights violations of our time. Though most of the existing literature focuses on Mexico, Guatemala has an exceptionally high rate of feminicide: an estimated 6500 women were murdered between 2000 and 2012 and that number continues to rise. Combining the theoretical frameworks of Path Dependency Theory and Intersectionality, the project seeks to chart the development of attitudes towards both indigenous and ladina women in Guatemala from the colonial period to the modern era. The paper examines how media representations of women and of crimes against women reinforce these narratives, which have now become institutionalised, allowing feminicide to continue unchecked. A focus on sensationalism and victim blaming, combined with a lack of investigative journalism in the reporting of femicide, has reinforced the culture of impunity that exists in Guatemala. Highly racialised and unrealistic beauty standards in the media also render indigenous women less visible in society. Their lack of participation in the political arena further hinders their fight for justice. The paper concludes with an evaluation of some of the emerging activist movements that aim to counter the violence.
“The Most Dangerous Place in the World to be a Woman”: The Roots of Feminicide in Guatemala

i. Introduction

On the 16th of December 2001, María Isabel Franco was on her way back from work. Her mother, Rosa, waited for her at home. She never arrived. For two days Rosa frantically searched and waited for her daughter. Finally, on the 18th of December, she turned on the news to see María lying face down on the ground with her fingernails bent backwards, a rope around her neck and dressed in the same clothes she had worn to work two days earlier. Just 15, María Isabel had been tied up with barbed wire, beaten, tortured, and raped before being strangled. Her body was found stuffed in a bag on wasteland outside Guatemala City (WOLA 2006). Over a decade later María’s case, like those of so many other women, remains unsolved and unpunished. María Isabel became one of 6500 women killed between 2000 and 2012 in Guatemala, a country with a total population of less than 14.5 million (Musalo and Bookey 2014). In 2012 alone, over 600 women were murdered. Despite escalating numbers, an estimated 98% of these cases have never gone to trial (Mujer Guatemala). By 2009, an average of two women a day were being murdered in Guatemala and since then this figure has continued to rise unabated (Portenier 2006). The increasing numbers of murdered women and the pattern evident in the killings have led scholars to describe these crimes as instances of femicide.

Although there is no clear single cause for the increasing rates of femicide today, oppression of women in Guatemala traces back to the colonial era. Narratives placing women in positions of inferiority were ingrained within strict religious and social
structures. Independence from Spain changed very little for women and they continued to suffer oppression. However, in 1960 a brutal civil war engulfed the country. As the conflict turned genocidal, soldiers targeted women, especially indigenous women, using sexual violence and torture to shame them and destroy their communities. An incomplete transition to democracy following the war resulted in rampant and continuing corruption. The blanket amnesty granted to perpetrators of violence during the war has translated into impunity for those responsible for the femicides today. However, just as cultural narratives surrounding women shaped colonial era attitudes, these also influence political behaviour in the present. While colonial narratives were enshrined in religious and social structures, today these are disseminated through the media. Reporting of the violence relies on sensationalised news stories and victim blaming, which both reinforce and reflect political responses to feminicide.

The word *femicide* was first adopted to describe the killing of women and girls in a speech given to The International Tribunal on Crimes Against Women by Diana E.H Russell in 1976. She defined the term as, “the killing of females by males because they are female” (Russell 1976). Since then, the term *feminicide* has come into use (Fregoso and Bejarano 2012). While *femicide* refers to the killings themselves, *feminicide* refers to killings in the context of a culture of impunity that excuses violence against women. Therefore, in this research, I will use the term *femicide* when referring to specific cases or specifically to the crimes and *feminicide* when referring to the problem more broadly.

The two questions that form the basis of my research aim to narrow the scope of the investigation while still drawing from multiple disciplines. These are as follows:
“What are the cultural and political factors that fuel violence against women in Latin America? How has gender violence affected advocacy and activism?” Existing work on this subject has identified the political factors that contribute to violence against women but has done little to explore relationships between these factors and cultural narratives surrounding the violence. It is my intention to investigate these causal relationships. Consequently, the political factors that are the focus of existing research also inform this project, in particular the culture of impunity, post-war or post-dictatorship reconstruction, corruption, and weak democracy (Fregoso and Bejarano 2012, Schirmer 2012, Velasco 2008). In addition to the analysis of these political factors, I will also focus on narratives surrounding gender roles and ideals of beauty and purity, and the influence of these on political behaviour.

A key value of an interdisciplinary project lies in its ability to examine the interplay of theoretical perspectives in different disciplines and apply them to a real world context. This project will contribute to broader scholarly debates in various ways. For example, within the discipline of International Studies, specifically Latin American and comparative politics, there are on-going discussions regarding the advances of “Third Wave” democracies in Latin America and the relative strength of these democracies (Uprimmy 2011, Nohlen 2009, Arias and Goldstein 2010). Additionally, this project will investigate issues of corruption and impunity in Latin America and how these political factors affect interactions on the interpersonal level. The majority of Latin American countries where femicide is a growing problem, such as Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, have also experienced war or dictatorship in recent years. In these countries in particular violent crime and weak democracy exist as legacies of conflict or dictatorship.
(Isaacs 2012, Leiby 2009). Various scholarly debates examine the best forms of transition to democracy and the role advocacy plays in reconstruction (Ross 2014). This project will indirectly evaluate the efficacy of recent democratic transitions in the region and how issues such as corruption and crime are contributing to violence against women and hindering advocacy efforts (Velasco 2008). Focusing on Guatemala, the investigation will explore the links between pervasive violent crime, media narratives, and democracy. In doing so it will situate the issue of femicide in a broader socio-political context.

1. Theoretical Perspectives

1.1 Review of Scholarly Debates and Literature

Discussions of femicide as a social phenomenon are still young. So much so that the use of the term femicide to describe contexts in which violence against women has reached epidemic proportions has yet to be fully accepted. Scholars have problematised the term, suggesting that the homicide rate in regions where femicide is widely considered a serious issue are invariably still higher for men than women. This argument posits that gender is not a key factor in the deaths at all. Molloy, for example, argues that the concept of femicide is a myth, generated by sensationalism and a desire to detract attention from the real problems experienced by those living on the US/Mexico border (Molloy 2012). However these arguments do not take into account the fact that this violence is unique, in that it is both very public (most of the women are attacked by unknown assailants and found in public places) and that it is combined with cultural narratives that are extremely damaging to women in general, and that reproduce and
excuse the violence (Olivera and Furio 2006). As a result, although drug and gang violence undoubtedly play a role in normalising violence in society, the violence against women that has become so common in these areas stems from a different set of factors (Godoy-Paiz 2012).

Research that deals with human rights in general is crucial in understanding issues of violence and citizen insecurity. A fundamental basis of research into feminicide is that the murders of women are more than simply a series of “private wrongs” (Brysk 2005). While prosecution is a key step in countering the violence and in ensuring that those responsible are brought to justice, the problem itself demands more than simply dealing with individual perpetrators. Rather, it is vital to recognise that feminicide has its underpinnings in a society that views women as second-class citizens and a state that condones the violence, which together perpetuate a culture of impunity for those responsible. Consequently, the sociological roots of the violence mean that feminicide is not just thousands of crimes committed by individuals but an instance of massive human rights abuses committed at the institutional level (Brysk 2005).

Furthermore, even with the recognition that large-scale abuses against women are a human rights issue, feminist scholars engaging in debates around the issue of human rights have also noted the paradox inherent in the phrase “women’s rights” (Peters and Wolper 1995). While “human rights” are generally understood to refer to a set of universally applicable freedoms that should be available to all human beings, women continue to experience discrimination at the hands of the law and society at large that men do not (Peters and Wolper 1995). Therefore, Peters and Wolper argue, a
fundamental shift is necessary, in which human rights organisations recognise that women’s bodies constitute the physical centre of a struggle for a genuinely universal definition of human rights (Peters and Wolper 1995, Bunch 2004). The fight for reproductive freedoms, freedom from violence and the right to “bodily integrity” represent a human rights struggle that affects vast numbers of people around the world, but that nonetheless remains largely invisible (Bunch 2004).

The literature dealing specifically with the phenomenon of femicide has focused primarily on Mexico. However, the explanations privileged in this context are not necessarily applicable to the Guatemalan context. Scholars discussing violence against women in Mexico have generally proposed an economic explanation (Guzmán and Gaspar de Alba 2010, Olivera and Furio 2006, Pantaleo 2010), while those studying gender violence in Guatemala have tended to privilege a historical explanation (Carey 2010, 2013, Forster 1999). Initial arguments have also been inclined to concentrate exclusively on either the cultural narratives, or the political climate. Scholarship exploring the causal relationships between the two sets of factors is comparatively limited. Although scholars have frequently sought to combine comparative politics with economics and history, or have used feminist theory alongside these approaches, few have chosen to analyse cultural narratives and their role in institutions and policy making decisions.

Scholars examining feminicide in the Mexican border cities, especially Juarez, have generally taken a structuralist approach, proposing a combination of economic and cultural factors as an explanation for the phenomenon of femicide (Livingston 2004,
Fregoso and Bejarano 2012). However, these explanations are based on independent variables such as rapid industrialisation, feminisation of the workforce and a sudden reversal of traditional gender norms, that are unique to Mexico, in particular the border region (Staudt 2008). In 1993, the US and Mexico signed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Although the US/Mexico border had long been a site for transnational corporations seeking cheap labour and a geographically advantageous location for their factories (maquilas), following NAFTA such corporations proliferated. By 1996, less than three years after the agreement, the maquilas employed over 500,000 people as cheap labour to produce goods for export to the US, of whom, over 50% were women (Human Rights Watch; 1996). Numerous scholars have linked the surge in murders of women in these border towns with the construction of factories (Livingston 2004, Fregoso and Bejarano 2012). These arguments hinge on the idea that conflict arose because the factories attracted families from the rural and traditional south looking for work but they preferred to hire a predominantly female workforce. As a result migrating men and women experienced a sudden gender role reversal.

Gender Role Theory is a helpful lens in analysing cultural factors that also play an important role in the Mexican case (Livingston 2004, Staudt 2008). People migrating from rural southern Mexico in search of work in the maquilas found themselves in situations where the roles that each gender had traditionally occupied were rapidly altered as women were hired and men suddenly found themselves staying at home (Littlejohn and Foss 2009). Consequently, there was a rapid and sudden reversal of traditional gender roles that, in conjunction with an environment already rife with corruption, crime and gang violence, made young women extremely vulnerable. The factories also heavily
sexualised the women they employed, often finding excuses to fire or mistreat those who became pregnant (Livingston 2004, Human Rights Watch 1996). This sudden reversal and the increasing sexualisation of women eventually led to a male backlash that manifested itself in the most extreme form of gender violence (Livingston 2004, Fregoso and Bejarano 2012, Pantaleo 2010).

On the other hand, in the case of Guatemala, the economic argument is of little use in explaining the rising rates of femicide. Guatemala has not experienced the same rate of industrialisation as Mexico and therefore the resulting internal migrations and feminisation of the labour force has not taken place. Consequently, although there are some social factors in common, for example citizen insecurity, corruption and gang violence, the key economic and cultural explanations applied to the Mexican case are not necessarily relevant to the Guatemalan case. Instead, scholars have opted to chart a historical trajectory, most often beginning with the Guatemalan Civil War that occurred between 1960 and 1996, in order to explain how violence became ingrained in society.

The second alternative explanation for femicide focuses specifically on the Guatemalan case and is based on a view of femicide, and violence against women more generally, as a legacy of civil war violence. Scholars argue that the Guatemalan civil war constitutes this key turning point, and that the war has altered the structure of society and influenced inter-personal relationships ever since (Isaacs 2010, England 2013, Stein 2012). The civil war that engulfed the country from 1960 to 1996 was one of the most brutal in the region. Sexual violence was commonly used as a tool to destroy communities and the perpetrators were never subject to any retribution (Manz 2010,
Menchú 1983, Carey 2010, 2013). Indigenous women came to be seen as a danger to society as a result of their power to reproduce and therefore transmit culture (Manz 2010). Scholars have argued that gradually the line between civilian and combatant began to vanish and the violence took on the characteristics of genocide as indigenous women came to be seen as bearers of subversives rather than as non-combatants (Human Rights Office Archdiocese of Guatemala 1999). As a major factor in the on-going epidemic of violence against women in the country, this explanation holds a great deal of weight.

Literature positing civil war violence as the root of violence against women in modern Guatemala also tends to argue that citizen insecurity in general can also be traced back to the civil war (Velasco 2008, Isaacs 2010). These scholars argue that the political factors that have contributed to violence against women have also perpetuated violent crime and citizen insecurity in general (Isccas 2010) As a result, literature dealing with impunity, security and policing is also relevant to a discussion of femicide and violence against women. In seeking to explain the rising crime rates and the increase in gang activity in Central America, scholars have focused primarily on inefficient policing and the idea of “violent pluralism” (Argueta 2012, Pion-Berlin and Trinkunas 2011, Arias and Goldstein 2010). “Violent pluralism” refers to the role of violence in maintaining the system of governance, in the sense that gang violence and high crime rates provide justifications for strict government control of citizens. Under such a system citizens live in a constant state of threat and are therefore more likely to accept a latent military presence and government restrictions on their freedoms (Arias and Goldstein 2010). As part of this structure, the military and private security companies play a key role in
internal security (Argueta 2012). On the other side of the issue, and in part as a response to police inefficiency and corruption, scholars claim that the proliferation in street gangs has become a means of teaching and reproducing violence in communities to such an extent that gang involvement often becomes the basis for construction of identity among disenfranchised youth (Pérez 2013).

Nevertheless, while the political factors, including citizen insecurity, impunity and civil war era violence against women, and modern institutionalised sexism all play a crucial role in perpetuating femicide in modern Guatemala, the argument that the phenomenon is rooted solely in the violence of the civil war is inadequate. In truth, discrimination against women by those in power, and the widely accepted narratives reinforcing women’s inferiority did not emerge during the civil war, but 400 years earlier during Spanish colonial rule. Scholars have extensively examined court cases and judicial testimony showing that a strong emphasis on a woman’s purity existed at that time (Komisaruk 2008). This centuries old focus on a woman’s chastity remains a key contributor to the culture of impunity that persists in modern Guatemala.

The cultural narratives surrounding women and violence during colonial times are equally important today and play a crucial role in normalising the violence and condoning or excusing it, creating attitudes that are inevitably reflected in elites’ political behaviour. Nonetheless, the existing literature has focused on the representation of indigenous women’s bodies (Nelson 1999, Menchú 1983). While race is a key factor in many contexts, particularly that of Guatemala, the gender violence affects both indigenous and ladina women (women of European descent). Therefore, concentration
purely on the indigenous women narrows the focus in such a way that implies that representations of ladina women or indeed women in general are less salient. However, visual and written representations of women, particularly in the media, play a major role in creating the cultural narratives that fuel impunity and condone violence.

Although the literature dealing with the issue of the representation of women and women’s bodies is very limited, Godoy-Paiz has performed extensive research dealing with the representation of women in the media and the role that this plays in reinforcing the culture of victim blaming and impunity. She argues that the media reinforces a culture of victim blaming while simultaneously sensationalising crimes against women and normalising violence in general (Godoy-Paiz 2012). On the other hand, little work has been done to analyse the visual representations of women that accompany these articles. Such images play a key role in defining standards of beauty and in perpetuating cultural narratives that place a premium on Guatemalan women’s purity. These representations also do more than affect cultural narratives. In climates where corruption and impunity are thoroughly institutionalised, images of women that sexualise the female body while also normalising violence, contribute to political cultures of impunity and victim blaming that allow the violence to continue unchecked (Velasco 2008).

1.2 Arguments and Theory

I will therefore argue that a historical trajectory is evident in the evolution of contemporary attitudes towards women, from the colonial era through to the Guatemalan civil war and the modern era, and that this has shaped modern behaviour, both on an
interpersonal level and on an institutional level. Furthermore, I will argue that perceptions of women as second-class citizens manifest themselves clearly today in media representations of women, which further contribute to the political factors that allow femicide to go unpunished and contribute to a culture of impunity. Fig 1 shows a causal diagram illustrating the relationships between the independent variables of historical narratives and events and media representations, and the dependent variable of feminicide.

**Figure 1: Causal Diagram**

Although colonial era narratives did not necessarily lead directly to the violence that women experienced during the civil war, they do mark the start of a historical
trajectory that shaped the attitudes towards women. Colonial Latin America was characterised by strict hierarchical structures based on race, religion and gender. Women occupied a position of inferiority to men but they nonetheless had a vital responsibility as carriers of the family’s honour. As a result narratives emerged concerning gender roles and chastity and purity that dictated a woman’s behaviour and society’s treatment of them. These narratives can be traced through the colonial and independence era to the civil war. The violence of the civil war, especially the violence directed at women, is reflected in the culture of impunity that plagues Guatemala today, allowing those guilty of crimes against women to go unpunished, much as they did during and after the war. By granting a blanket amnesty to perpetrators of the atrocities, the truth commissions set a clear path for impunity for those committing violence since the end of the war. This in turn has led to a weak democracy with a weak rule of law, as evidenced by policing standards and practices as well as high levels of corruption. However, political behaviour and the socially accepted narratives regarding women are not only dictated by history but are also heavily influenced by media representations of women and their bodies.

The most obvious forum in which images of women are publicly disseminated is print media. Whether through actual reporting of crimes against women or in advertising, the media plays a significant role in shaping cultural narratives surrounding gender violence. Specifically, the lack of investigative journalism and the prevalence of victim blaming and sensationalism fuel a culture of impunity that condones and excuses violence against women. In place of any informed analysis of the problem at a local or national level, news sources instead focus on the physical details of a particular crime. The articles often include very graphic images of the victims, thereby sensationalising the
murders. They are also often excused. By regularly labelling victims as prostitutes or of leading double lives, reporters imply that their murders do not merit investigation. Reporting of this nature contributes to the narrative that a woman’s worth is dependent on her sexual purity, while simultaneously obfuscating the underlying socio-political factors that perpetuate the violence. Not only does the media bolster the culture of impunity through this style of reporting but also reinforces political and institutional indifference towards the crimes. The media can be an important tool in strengthening democracy and government accountability, but in these cases it calls little attention to the political context and therefore allows scapegoating and victim blaming to continue.

I will combine two major theoretical frameworks as lenses through which to view this problem: Path Dependency Theory and Intersectionality. Together these approaches help to formulate a multi-faceted view of feminicide in Guatemala. This research charts a historical trajectory in the evolution of cultural narratives that begins with the arrival of the Spanish in Central America. Another major change came with the Guatemalan civil war, a period of violence that ended in 1996 (Isaacs 2010, England 2013, Stein 2012). Path Dependency Theory posits that the future of certain a country can be fundamentally and permanently altered by a single major event (Collier and Collier 1991). Therefore, each of these events fit into a Path Dependent approach to studying Guatemalan history. Meanwhile, Intersectionality allows for a study of how race and gender intersect, shaping a person’s life experiences (Hill Collins 2000, Glenn 2004). In the Guatemalan context, this is pertinent in discussing pre-war narratives surrounding indigenous and ladina women and in analysing the discrimination that indigenous women faced during and after the war. In this way Intersectionality and Path Dependency work together to create a
picture of how ladina and indigenous women have experienced violence and discrimination from the colonial era until today.

Although scholarship dealing with modern Guatemala frequently takes a Path Dependent approach, this approach is inadequate when dealing with issues of race and gender (Collier and Collier 1991). However, this framework is very rarely gendered and as result, is not sufficient in an investigation of how different genders or ethnic groups experience a major event in a country’s history and of how that event’s consequences manifest themselves among these different groups. In order to address this critique, I will combine this approach with the framework of intersectionality, which takes into account how the intersections between race and gender affect a person’s individual experience.

Scholars employing the approach of Intersectionality argue that examining race and gender separately renders certain subjects, especially women of colour, invisible (Hill Collins 2000, Glenn 2004). In the Guatemalan context, this applies in particular to indigenous women. Ladina women of European ancestry have historically taken the position as the “universal gendered subject” (Glen 2004, p 6). During the post-independence dictatorships and the civil war, women experienced extreme violence. Viewed as those responsible for continuing Maya culture and bearing subversives, indigenous women were subject to murder and sexual violence. However, they remained invisible victims as males took the place of the quintessential indigenous subject. Today, images of indigenous women as anything other than victims or as perpetrators of vigilante justice are rare. As a result, stereotypes portraying the indigenous population as backwards and violent remain unchallenged and no holistic representations of their daily
lived experiences exist. The dearth of indigenous voices being heard further heightens the
discrimination they experience at the social and institutional levels.

Both the economic and historical approaches that scholars have privileged in exploring the issue of femicide have a relatively narrow focus. The approach of examining political and historical factors alongside cultural narratives and issues of representation is designed to connect two major sets of factors in order to either analyse interaction or to establish causal relationships between them. The end result therefore will suggest a new way to understand the phenomenon and, ideally, a clearer idea of how to combat it. To be truly effective therefore, an investigation into the nature of the problem needs to be interdisciplinary.

1.3 Research Design

While the existing literature has done little to address the political manifestations of cultural narratives surrounding women and violence against women, a cursory glance over local and national news sources is enough to understand that the media plays a significant role in shaping cultural narratives surrounding gender violence. Although the research questions I pose are relevant to numerous cultures in Latin America, Guatemala will serve as the country context for this project. The huge number of factors at play in the country, including low development indices, very high crime and poverty rates, recent civil war and reconstruction, and racial divides make Guatemala a highly complex case. On the one hand, this facilitates an examination into how each of these factors contributes to, or affects violence against women and advocacy; on the other hand, the large number
of variables also means that causal relationships will be more complex and less applicable to other cases.

Although other Central American countries also experienced violent civil wars, the Guatemalan Civil War was unique in both its length and its brutality. The end of the war ushered in a rocky and arguably incomplete transition phase, during which the country attempted to restore democracy. Scholars who study Guatemala often view violence against women as a human rights issue and a legacy of the war (Isaacs 2010, Patterson-Markowitz et al. 2012). This combination of factors renders Guatemala particularly apposite for discussions of post war transition and reconciliation, and yet the existing body of work on the country’s democratisation is relatively small (Fregoso and Bejarano 2012, Menuivar 2008, and Isaacs 2010). Once again, this is both a strength and potential pitfall: while there are fewer sources from which to draw, there is more opportunity to contribute to the field of Latin American Studies in general.

A further reason for the choice of Guatemala as a case study is the staggeringly high rates of femicide and the fact that these numbers continue to grow. Although femicide exists across Central America, Guatemala has some of the highest rates in the region. Guatemala is also understudied, with research dealing with the issue of feminicide frequently privileging Mexico as a case study. The key factors that contribute to feminicide in Guatemala are very different from those that contribute to the problem in Mexico. As a result, explanations and theories suggested in the Mexico case are not often applicable to Guatemala. The high female homicide rates combined with the relatively
limited body of work dealing specifically with feminicide in Guatemala makes this an apt case for this research.

Given that scholarship dealing specifically with feminicide in Guatemala is limited, this research draws from both scholarly and primary sources, including testimonies and accounts from the civil war and newspapers. Scholarly sources and testimonies will form the basis of the discussion of political factors. However, focusing on variables such as impunity, weak democracy and civil war reconstruction poses a distinct challenge in that each of these is inherently abstract. Therefore, in order to measure these variables, it is necessary to identify tangible manifestations. The relationships between these variables can be expressed as a historical trajectory in that civil war violence and an incomplete transition to democracy have given rise to a culture of impunity, which in turn has contributed to rising rates of violence against women. This is borne out by figures showing the number of women who died during the war, compared to the numbers of those murdered today. There are numerous testimonies and accounts of civil war violence and the truth commissions that followed, which provide evidence of brutality during this time. Statistics from the World Bank, Transparency International, Pew Research and the Overseas Security Advisory Council provide violent crime rates and corruption rankings for Guatemala in relation to the rest of the world over the last decade.

News content analysis provides the focus of the investigation into cultural narratives and ideals of beauty. *Nuestro Diario* is Guatemala’s most widely read and distributed newspaper, providing local and national news throughout the country. A close
examination of the reporting of violence against women during the year 2013, as the most recent full year at the time of writing, allows for the identification of key narratives in the reporting of the violence and for a close analysis of representations of women in advertising. The need to compete to catch the public’s eye encourages the sensationalised reporting of violence as a key marketing tool. Although print media is competing increasingly with online news content, newspapers remain the most universally accessible news source. Internet access is not available to a large proportion of the population and, for the 75% of the population living below the poverty line, computer ownership is an impossibility (World Bank). In fact, despite increasing internet usage in metropolitan areas, overall usage in Guatemala remains low. As of 2014, only an estimated 1.4% of rural households and 12.8% of the country’s entire population has internet access (Central America Data 2014).

The major advantage of this research design lies in the opportunity to compare statistics measuring political trends with narratives generated through media coverage of the violence. For example, a comparison of the National Democracy Institute statistics detailing political representation of minorities with media representations of minorities serves to highlight how institutionalised discrimination echoes narratives in the media. Interdisciplinary comparisons of this kind enrich the research and allow me to draw conclusions that take into account the interaction between the cultural and the political.

The choice of Nuestro Diario for news content analysis enables me to see news in its original print format, despite being published online. This makes it possible to discuss the aesthetics of the paper alongside the content, looking for example, at the space taken up on the page by specific images or stories. Equally, the focus on one paper is limiting, but
also necessary, since no other widely-distributed Guatemalan news source is available online in print format, and online-only content is far less accessible to the general population and consequently far less influential.

In order to draw together these different approaches and disciplines, the paper begins by charting the evolution of cultural narratives surrounding women from the colonial era to modern day Guatemala. This includes a brief examination of how the recent civil war shaped modern Guatemalan politics in general. This then leads to a discussion of the Guatemalan political landscape and how the culture of impunity has become institutionalised, allowing feminicide to continue. Tying the modern political factors back to cultural norms, the paper then discusses media narratives surrounding violence against women and female beauty standards. Finally, the paper concludes with an examination and evaluation of some of the groups and organisations who are working in Guatemala and abroad to counter the violence through activism and education.

2. Empirical Evidence

2.1 Dependent Variable: Feminicide in Guatemala

Between 2001 and 2012, 6,500 women were murdered in Guatemala (Musalo and Bookey 2014). Although the numbers of femicides are rising steadily in the country, the conviction rate has remained at a steady 2%, with the remaining 98% of crimes against women going unpunished. The murders have occurred throughout Guatemala and there is no consistent profile for the murdered women. While the majority of victims are between
15 and 35, the youngest girl murdered was five and the oldest woman was 75. Victims are of no single skin colour, nor do they live exclusively in urban or rural areas (Portenier 2006). Authorities have failed to produce any response to combat the violence as impunity, corruption and inadequate resources and training have prevented any progress, with lawmakers instead seeking alternative explanations (Velasco 2008).

In the two decades since the end of the civil war, Guatemala has seen little reduction in overall rates of violence and violent crime. Citizen insecurity is barely lower than during the civil war, with a homicide rate of 40 people per 100,000 in 2012 and an average of 101 murders a week in 2013 (OASC 2013, World Bank). In fact, women in particular are being killed at a higher rate than during the civil war. In 2006, the number of femicides matched the number of women dying during 1981-2 and that number has continued to rise, with 720 dead in 2012 (see fig.2) (Sanford 2008, LAB 2014).

**Figure 2: Female Homicide Rate by Year**

![Female Homicide Rate by Year](source: Sanford 2008)
2.2 Historical Trajectory

The cultural narratives that reinforce misogyny in Guatemala however, can be traced back to long before the civil war. Examining the historical trajectory of women’s rights in Guatemala reveals that race and religious doctrine have played a fundamental role in shaping gender ideologies in Guatemala since the colonial era. Although the civil war represents a critical juncture in attitudes towards women in Guatemala, historical forces dating back to the Spanish conquest have shaped the role of women in society today. Spanish colonial rule functioned according to a strict hierarchical system, and the Spanish attempted to import both the tenets of Catholic devotion and their patriarchal social order from Europe to the Americas, with varying degrees of success. The Catholic Church, a deeply patriarchal institution, quickly became the basis of Spanish rule in Latin America, with most towns organised around a church. However, the transition to the Spanish hierarchical structure was fraught with challenges. Based on a binary understanding of racial categories, the Spanish system quickly became a logistical impossibility as new racial groups began to emerge. In the face of these powerful religious institutions and oppressive social structures, women developed everyday forms of resistance, finding ways to manipulate the laws to gain more independence.

Initially, the Spanish designed a clear system that positioned Europeans and those of European descent as the elite social class and those of indigenous origin as the peasant class. However, the race-based class system quickly became increasingly difficult to maintain. In the early days of settlement the Spaniards arriving in the Americas were all men; firstly because the journey across the Atlantic was considered too arduous for
Spanish ladies and secondly because the continent of the Americas was as yet an unknown entity, considered dangerous, barbaric and generally unfit for habitation by Spanish ladies. (Socolow 2000). As a result, indigenous women found themselves at great risk of abuse by the Spanish conquistadors. This is not of course to say that had Spanish women been present such abuse would not have taken place, but that the absence of these women meant that sexual violence against Native American women became an openly accepted practice (Van Deusen 2012). Their plight was exacerbated by the legality of slavery, which did not exclude Native Americans until 1555. Until then, indigenous women were frequently taken as slaves by the Spanish and for many, though not all, these relationships were marked by sexual abuse (Van Deusen 2012). Women of colour therefore existed in a double bind, placed in a position of inferiority as a result of both their gender and their race. However, relationships between Spaniards and indigenous women led to the emergence of the mestizo, a new racial group.

The first mestizos were the children of the conquistador Hernan Cortés and his Mexican interpreter Malintzin, a deeply controversial figure. An orphan, she was originally handed over to Cortés and served as his translator. She is portrayed variously as a traitor, a victim or a seductress. Although, her sexual relations with Cortés were almost certainly non-consensual by today’s standards, the invaluable assistance she gave the Spanish in the conquest of Mexico implies that she was loyal by her own choice to the Spanish cause (Kellogg 2005). Through this apparent complicity she has come to symbolise the ambivalence of Latin America towards its indigenous population. As the mother of the first mestizos and as Cortes’ translator, she simultaneously created the first embodiment of the collision of Spanish and Native American cultures, and helped to
conquer her own people. Malintzin also illustrates the challenge the Spanish faced in implementing their anachronistic hierarchy system in the Americas. With both European and Native American parentage, the existence of the mestizos confounded the original simplistic Spanish hierarchical organisation and paved the way for an increasingly complex system of classifications that the Spanish imposed upon those living in the Americas.

While racial hierarchies aimed to ensure control over the Native American population the ever-changing demographics and fluid racial categories made this system increasingly uncertain. So, in an attempt to exercise further control over the Native American population, the Spaniards focused on their aim to spread Christianity through Latin America. As in Spain, religious leaders held immense power in the colonial administration and the Catholic Church therefore played a major role in defining how women were treated. The religious authorities declared that “not only mentally inferior, women were also morally fragile and prone to error….Unable to govern their passions and behaviour, women were dangerous to themselves, their families and society at large if uncontrolled or uncloistered” (Socolow 2000, p.6). When Spanish women finally arrived in the Americas, they found little difference in gender ideology in the New World. Given the prevalent view of women as in need of constant protection from others and from themselves, the Church sought to control women’s sexuality by limiting their freedom; restricting their access to money and emphasising that a woman’s worth lay first and foremost in her chastity. For women who chose not to marry or for some other reason could not be married, the convents provided a viable and sometimes the only alternative. Time in a convent was also prescribed as a punishment for women who fell
afoul of the Spanish Inquisition, which was also imported to the Americas in order to root out and eradicate heresy (Brianna Leavitt-Alcántara 2014). The power exerted by the Church over the people is evident in this excerpt from a Guatemalan prayer book (c. 1803): The only thing that I have to do in this world is save my soul […] because in the end I do not know when I will die […] there is no moment in which it could not happen: maybe it will be in a month, maybe in a week, maybe this very day (Guatemalan Prayer Booklet 1803, Brianna Leavitt-Alcántara 2014). The suggestion of imminent death simultaneously reminds the reader that the only figures with the power to offer eternal salvation are priests, and as such the Church is the single most important institution in the colonial world, the priests the most powerful figures and the people entirely devoted on pain of eternal damnation.

As an example, both of the challenges of spreading the Catholic faith and of the role of convents the case of Augustina Ruiz is worth citing. A “young, poor, single, uneducated mother,” she was sentenced to three years in a convent after confessing to the Inquisition that she had experienced erotic visions of Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary and various saints (Andrien 2013, p.118). Notwithstanding the graphic nature of her visions, before finally accepting the Inquisitors’ interpretation, “Ruiz painted a picture of sincere and even singular devotion” (Andrien 2013, p.125). Ruiz’ case illustrates how the virtues of Catholic devotion could be misinterpreted by those learning the faith without any other background in the Christian tradition. The sentence she received demonstrates the relative leniency of the Inquisition in such matters, but it also shows how the Spanish authority sought to keep from society those who posed any threat to the colonial order and structure (Tortorici 2012). Similar to Ruiz, who inverted the purpose of the religious
iconography, women who did not choose to get married inherently presented a threat to the rigid structures of Spanish rule, as they represented a blatant rejection of the role society had prescribed them. The convents therefore served as an environment in which elite Spanish women could be “protected” from society without posing any threat to it.

Despite the control Spanish rule exerted over them, women of different classes and backgrounds were able to resist and challenge the power structures in which they found themselves. For some women, specifically those without heirs or relatives, it was possible to manipulate property laws in order to become independently wealthy (Brianna Leavitt-Alcántara 2014). Women in this position were able to invest in the “spiritual economy” allowing them to become benefactors to priests and to retain capital from the Church for themselves and for their own salvation (Brianna Leavitt-Alcántara 2014). However, for women with surviving immediate male family members or heirs, this was not an option and so other everyday forms of resistance emerged.

Crimes against women in colonial Latin America were common and rarely denounced. A man had the right to beat his wife if she was “suspected of unseemly conduct,” and in such cases, the wife had little or no recourse to protect herself (Socolow 2000, p.150). Violence against women also occurred outside the privacy of the home, although a spouse or partner committed the vast majority of such crimes. That said, instances of violence against women outside the private sphere were no more likely to be investigated than those taking place in private (Komisaruk 2008).

In response to the violence, women began turning to witchcraft and the use of “love magic” spread throughout the Americas. Although the Inquisition generally regarded witchcraft as frivolous superstition and dealt with it very lightly, the notion that
women’s love magic could make a man impotent or sterile was a powerful one. As these forms of magic became increasingly related to male sexual potency and the idea spread that through this medium a woman could control her husband’s sexuality, the Inquisition began to take more notice and denunciations of witches increased (Few 2002). The Inquisition frequently blamed witchcraft cases on women who were unmarried and single yet could not afford a dowry or entry to a convent, and had therefore become beatas or holy women not affiliated with a specific religious institution. The Inquisition’s response again reinforces the belief that unmarried independent women represented a threat to the colonial administration.

While everyday forms of resistance were commonplace during the colonial period, the position of women changed little over the course of this era. A key reason for this lay in the systematic devaluing of women’s work. Women worked in the domestic sphere but were also able to sell goods they produced, especially textiles, in the market (Kellogg 2005). Since these vendors were primarily indigenous or mulatas, the market places came to be seen socially as low-class spaces, rendering those women who occupied them inferior to those who had the luxury of not working with their hands (Socolow 2000). Those women who worked as domestic servants were almost inevitably subject to abuse at the hands of their masters. In Guatemala Spaniards frequently kidnapped girls in order to force them to work as domestic servants, or forced indigenous families to sign contracts tying their young daughters to set periods of servitude (Kellogg 2005).

By the late 1700s, the indigenous population was experiencing more and more abuses of this kind as the Spanish developed new ways to avoid laws protecting the
native peoples (Handy 1984). With the imposition of the Bourbon reforms, access to ancestral lands was also curtailed. The reforms aimed to re-establish Spain as the governing authority, primarily by increasing taxes on citizens of the colonies and by replacing Creole tax collectors with Spanish tax collectors. Indigenous people were unable to pay the increased demands and this in turn led to revolts (Handy 1984). A young woman led one of the most dramatic of these. She claimed that the Virgin had chosen her to eradicate the Spanish population and managed to gain over 2000 followers, until the Spanish finally put down the insurrection with great difficulty (Handy 1984). Such revolts became increasingly common throughout the country and ultimately set the stage for independence.

This independence was gained in 1821 and although Guatemala achieved freedom from the laws imposed by the Spanish crown, this freedom did little to alter the oppressive power structures that placed male Creoles in positions of privilege and left women, particularly indigenous women and descendants of African slaves, forced to rely on their relationships with men to gain wealth or social status. The independence movements led primarily by priests and Creoles resulted in a structure where once again church elites and males of European descent governed the country. Consequently, even after independence, little changed either for women or for the indigenous population. For 80 years following independence Guatemala suffered under a string of dictatorships. During these years the coffee economy became the backbone of development in the country. Despite efforts to encourage the immigration of a white labour force to facilitate the industry, the government and Creole landowners quickly turned to the indigenous population (Handy 1984). Native workers worked for tiny wages under a debt peonage
system and laws emerged requiring a quarter of all males in all indigenous villages to be allocated to different landowners (Handy 1984). This left the families of these men to fend for themselves and their children, forcing them to develop their own means of survival.

The 1900s marked the beginning of US involvement in Guatemala and a new economy emerged. Suddenly, bananas, not coffee, became the new national crop. The shift also set the stage for the dramatic events of the second half of the twentieth century. In 1945 Guatemala finally made the transition to democracy but despite this change in government, US involvement continued unaffected (Handy 1984). US-owned companies, in particular United Fruit, bought massive tracts of Guatemalan land for banana production, placing major strain on indigenous populations who lost vast swathes of their land (Kinzer 1982). In response to this the democratically elected governments between 1945 and 1954, led by Juan José Arévalo and then by Jacobo Arbenz, sought to restore some of these lands, enacting policies of land reform and redistribution, targeting in particular US-owned land (Kinzer 1982). The US responded swiftly and decisively and this decade, known as the “Ten Years Spring,” came to an abrupt end with a US-funded coup against Jacobo Arbenz in 1954 (Kinzer 1982). The civil war sparked by the coup fundamentally altered the course of Guatemalan history and the set the stage for a series of events that have defined the spaces occupied by women in modern day Guatemala.

The Guatemalan Civil War, beginning in 1960 and spanning 36 years, was characterised by extreme violence against the country’s indigenous population and resulted in the loss of between 200,000 and 300,000 lives (Lovell 2010). While the majority of those killed were men, the manner in which women were specifically targeted
sheds light on the historical context of treatment of women in modern day Guatemala. During the course of the civil war, rape and humiliation of women became a common tactic in military operations. *Guatemala: Never Again!*, the Recovery of Historical Memory Project (REMHI) compiled after the civil war states, “the rape of women was a systematic practice during military operations…Many perpetrators viewed rape as something natural and of little significance” (Guatemala Human Rights Office 1999 p170-171).

As well as raping the women, the soldiers often used the women’s status as mothers as a form of psychological torture, killing their babies in front of them or raping their daughters (Guatemala Human Rights Office 1999, Manz 2005). These testimonies show how sexual violence had become normalised and the terrorising of women came to be a valid weapon of war. It might be tempting to view rape as an inevitable side effect of war, however, the behaviour of the army in Guatemala and the systematic and intentioned rape of women is evidence that the practice was not a side effect of war but a “political form of aggression” designed to spread terror and shame (Kirby 2012). The instance of using rape as a weapon is not unique to Guatemala: similar behaviour is found in war torn African countries and was also a common practice during the Yugoslavian wars (Isgandarova 2013). One reason why the practice has proved so effective, both in Guatemala and across the globe, is the shame that rape often brings (Isgandarova 2013). Sexual assault victims in Guatemala, especially those who bore children as a result, often faced being ostracised by their families and communities. This had a deep psychological effect on the individual victims and on the collective memory of villages (Archdiocese of Guatemala 1999). The stigma attached to rape and sexual assault has also made it
impossible to provide reliable estimates for this form of violence as so many cases went unreported.

To ensure obedience from the soldiers ordered to carry out these atrocities, generals adopted a campaign of dehumanisation, referring to indigenous peoples as “monsters”, “aliens” or the “bad influence” (Menchú 1984, p. 202). They also took care to specifically dehumanise the women as the breeders of the subversives. The systematic killing of women as a counter insurgency tactic led to the classification of the attacks against Guatemala’s indigenous population as genocide. The murder of women “attacked the community fabric at its foundations by attempting to exterminate women and children as vessels for the continuity of life and the transmission of cultures” (Guatemala Human Rights Office 1999). One soldier also testified: “they minimised the things that we did so we wouldn’t feel them all at once, we took comfort in the fact that we were following orders” (Guatemala Human Rights Office 1999). These methods of dehumanisation were specifically designed to allow soldiers to reject their victims’ personhood and to normalise murder.

Once again, in the midst of this appalling brutality, voices of resistance started to emerge; the most famous and most controversial of these being Rigoberta Menchú. A Maya K’iche woman and Nobel Peace Prize winner, Menchú published an account of her life before, during and after the war, including graphic depictions of the atrocities she witnessed during the violence. Much like the indigenous women engaging in resistance against the colonial administration, Menchú also experienced life in a double bind due to her gender and her ethnicity. Given this, her decision to position herself as the voice of Mayan people is even more remarkable but is not without controversy. Not long after the
publication of her account, it emerged that not all of her testimony was true or related experiences she had first-hand. David Stoll also points out discrepancies between Menchú’s testimony and that of her neighbours. He argues that the guerrilla movements emerged as a response to army attacks as opposed to the other way around, and that even then, most rural peasants rejected joining these movements, instead fleeing to the coast, or even joining the army themselves (Stoll 1999). In some respects this has dented Menchú’s credibility but in her defence she specifically stresses at the outset of the account, “it’s not only my life, it’s also the testimony of my people” (Menchú 1983, p1). In the light of this statement, whether or not events described happened exactly how she portrays them, or to whom, matters considerably less than the fact that they happened. Indeed, Menchú’s account serves only to reinforce the findings of the Guatemala Human Rights Office.

However, following the civil war, efforts to prosecute the perpetrators were fundamentally flawed. The country opted to establish truth commissions but these were conducted under the condition that those named as responsible remain anonymous (Isaacs 2010). Consequently, the Human Rights report became “The Historical Archive that Never Was” (Lovell 2013). With no names included and under the conditions of amnesty and anonymity, there were no prosecutions for crimes committed during the genocide (Isaacs 2010). This arrangement allowed guilty parties to escape with impunity, with some even obtaining positions of power not long after the war and, in essence, the brutal violence was excused.

Throughout Latin America countries had to contend with transition to democracy and reconstruction following decades of civil war and dictatorship. Decisions regarding
management of transitional justice were key to the move towards democracy. In Guatemala the military enjoyed impunity for human rights violations and abuses of power. Consequently, even after the war, the military maintained a strength that extended beyond the reaches of state government, leaving the democratic transition weak and incomplete (McSherry 1992). The continued power of the military in the country meant that it was still not fully under government control and therefore remained a threat to stability and to democracy.

2.3 Impunity in Modern Guatemala

In Guatemala, the 1996 peace agreements included provisions stating that those who had perpetrated the violence should be brought to justice. However, once made these agreements were promptly ignored and many of the highest-ranking military officials worked to ensure their immunity from prosecution by involving themselves in politics (Mejia 1999). The most high profile of these cases is that of General Efrán Rios Montt, who took power after a coup and controlled the country from 1982 until 1983. Despite the brevity of his time in power, his rule gave rise to some of the worst violence of the civil war. Most estimates put the total number of civil war dead at 200,000 and it is estimated that around 86,000 of these died during Rios Montt’s incumbency (McDonald 2012). In 2000 Rios Montt ran for election as head of congress. Although he did not win, this clearly demonstrates how elections could be used as a way to galvanise impunity. For a congressman, officially granted impunity is an absolute necessity and, despite losing the
election, it was Spain and not Guatemala that finally brought a case against Rios Montt for genocide (McSherry 1999).

The civil war engendered a weak democracy and this in turn has led to an institutionalised culture of impunity that allows those who commit violence against women today to go unpunished (Velasco 2008). Linz and Stepan’s definition of a consolidated democracy sheds some light on the obstacles to strengthening democracy in the Guatemalan case. They argue that the three most basic necessities for consolidation are that democracy must be accepted behaviourally, attitudinally and constitutionally (Linz and Stepan 1996). In other words: there can be no group outside the government attempting to seize power or control parts of the country, democracy based on fully free and fair elections must be seen as the only option for government by the general populace, even in times of hardship, and finally, all those in power must seek to solve conflicts by way of a democratic process, in which laws apply equally to citizens and state officials (Linz and Stepan 1996). Given that Guatemala ranks 155th of 175 countries in the corruption perceptions index and that 42% of all respondents said that they had no faith in the veracity of the 2011 election results, it comes as little surprise that there is an on-going culture of impunity and therefore scant will to prosecute crimes against women today (Transparency International 2014, NDI 2013). Indeed, domestic violence and sexual harassment are still not punishable by law (GHRC 2007). The attitude of law enforcement is often rife with victim blaming, and officers regularly accuse women of being prostitutes or leading double lives and use these claims as justification not to investigate deaths (GHRC 2007).
A particularly high profile case that illustrates both police attitudes and inefficiency is that of Claudina Velasquez, who was murdered in 2005. Claudina, who lived in Guatemala City, called her parents at 11:45pm on August 12th to tell them that she was on her way home. At around 2 am her panicked boyfriend came to her parents’ house to tell them that he had just had a phone-call with her that was cut off after he heard her screams for help. Desperate, they visited the police station to report her missing but were laughed at and told that she had probably run off with another boyfriend. The police finally made an official report at 8:30 the next morning, four hours after Claudina’s body had been found in Zona 11, just a couple of miles from the party that she had left the previous evening. Her body showed signs of extreme violence, including rape. Despite the parents’ earlier contact with the police she was not identified until nearly eight hours later (Sanford 2008). Police did little to secure the crime scene or to collect evidence in a timely manner. In fact, the authorities interrupted Claudina’s wake in order to take her fingerprints (GHRC 2007). At the time of writing, her killer(s) have yet to be identified (OASC 2013). Alone, Claudina’s story would be a shocking indictment against the Guatemalan police force, illustrating numerous examples of judicial and police inefficiency. However, as one in a growing list of crimes of this kind, it serves as an example of institutionalised impunity on a massive scale.

Gang activity in the country has intensified dramatically over the last decade and, as general citizen insecurity spreads, the gangs have become an easy scapegoat for investigators. Police frequently allege links between the individual victims and organised crime (Velasco 2008). Following the visit of a UN official in 2004, the government developed a special squad dedicated to dealing with murders of women. The unit
comprises 15 officers with one car, one mobile phone and one working computer and is tasked with investigations across Guatemala (Velasco 2008). The police force in Guatemala as a whole struggles with low wages, limited resources and training, and rampant corruption. The police do not have a lab in which to test DNA samples, nor do they have the personnel to cope with the volume of cases that they receive (Velasco 2008).

In an attempt to remedy these problems, the Guatemalan government has increasingly been contracting security work out to private security companies. Although officially this process takes up to three years, bribes often reduce the length of the process to a few months (Argueta 2012). In 2011 there were 298 private security companies operating in Guatemala, of which 140 were operating illegally (Argueta 2012). Since these are private companies, by definition they are available for hire by the highest bidder. Consequently, rule of law is weak and corruption is rampant. Transparency International currently ranks Guatemala 115 out of 175 countries for levels of corruption (Transparency International 2014).

However, much like the civil war era, the violence that plagues the country disproportionately affects men. This has led some scholars to argue that the concept of femicide as a social phenomenon is a myth perpetuated by sensationalised reporting of the violence and by literature (Molloy 2012). Nevertheless, as was also the case during the civil war, the most important factor is not the ratio of men to women but the ways in which women are specifically targeted for violence and their victimhood ignored or excused (Fregoso and Bejarano 2010). In particular, the manner in which these crimes are reported in the media contributes to narratives surrounding violence against women and
the focus on victim blaming and binary gender ideologies that trace back to the colonial era. The lack of investigative journalism and media reliance on sensationalism in reporting crimes against women results in cultural narratives that condone the lack of institutional responses to the violence, and therefore excuse the violence itself.

2.4 Reporting of Violence Against Women

Over the course of 2013, Nuestro Diario, Guatemala’s most widely distributed newspaper, included an average of 25 stories a month reporting the deaths of women in Guatemala. Once again, the numbers are shocking but also relative, as violence targeting men remains more common throughout the country. However, it is the sensationalised and highly gendered nature of the reporting that sets stories about murdered women apart from those about men. Perhaps even more problematic than the reporting itself, is the juxtaposition between the news stories depicting graphic images of dead women and the extremely sexualised images of female models that immediately follow the news pages in every single edition.

Three key themes emerge in the reporting of crimes against women. The first of these is the highly gendered and overtly sexual nature of the stories detailing the violence. Stories describing male homicide victims generally have headlines such as “Tirotean a Joven” (Young Person Shot) or “Doble Crimen en Finca” (Double Crime on Farm)\(^1\). Reports of female victims on the other hand, almost always have gendered headlines, for example, “Agrede a Mujer” (Woman Attacked) or Hallan Cuerpos de Dos

\(^1\) Nuestro Diario, Aug. 13\(^{th}\) 2013 p. 5, Jul. 16\(^{th}\) 2013 p.7
Mujeres” (Bodies of Two Women Found). Highlighting the gender of the victim in the headline also makes it the focus of the story. Taglines often reinforce this, sensationalising the story or sexualising the victims. The tagline attached to the headline “Hallan Cuerpos de Dos Mujeres” is “Victimas fueron torturadas” (Victims were tortured) and in one case the tagline read “Dejan a víctima solo en ropa interior” (They Left the Victim in Only her Underwear). By stressing the victim’s clothing, in this case her underwear, reporters remove from her any identity outside of her gender and sexuality. Indeed, almost every story dealing with a female victim describes her clothing, provocative or otherwise.

The articles are also accompanied by graphic images of the victims that catch the attention of the reader. Since the articles attached to these do not include any real investigation or discussion of crimes against women in a broader sociological context, the images serve only to sensationalise the violence and to draw attention to the gruesome details of the individual crimes.

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2 Nuestro Diario, Oct. 22\textsuperscript{nd} 2013 p.10, Jan. 22\textsuperscript{nd} 2013 p. 10
3 Nuestro Diario, Jan. 22\textsuperscript{nd} 2013 p. 10, Apr. 10\textsuperscript{th} 2013 p.4
4 Further research would be necessary in order to adequately compare statistics regarding gendered headlines and images in stories about women with the true frequency of gendered headlines and images in stories describing male homicides. However, the volume of stories focusing on male victims would necessitate a research team performing extensive coding and more time than is available for the completion of this project. At this stage, information regarding headlines and images in stories about male homicides is based on observed patterns as opposed to quantitative statistics.
This image above (Fig. 3), for example, shows the body of a woman named Blanca Crispín, found in a village just south of Guatemala City. The article, which is barely two paragraphs long, explains that the woman, who sold *pupusas* on the streets in the evenings, leaves behind four children and includes a graphic description of her wounds. However, there is no mention of a police investigation or of any possible suspects. The family member interviewed says only that she repeatedly told the victim to be very careful. The contents of the article and the quote from the family member indicate no sense of outrage or clamour for investigation. In fact, the quote suggests that this kind of violence is almost expected to befall women on the streets alone at night and that therefore the victim is partly responsible for her own fate as the onus is on her to avoid danger. The perception that victims are to blame for their own deaths is a second common theme in the media. The most frequent manifestation of this is the reporting of the deaths as “crímenes de pasión” or crimes of passion, which have occurred as a result
of the victim’s infidelity. Occasionally reporters even draw attention to the women’s attitude to married life, implying that she has not adequately fulfilled the expectations of her regarding traditional gender roles, and often includes discussing what the victim was doing prior to the attack, for example if she was visiting a discotheque with another man (Nuestro Diario).

Figure 4: Crimen Por Celos

The image in Fig. 4 is of a woman allegedly killed by her husband with a machete, under the headline Crime of Passion, and the tagline “He killed his wife with a machete.” Despite the image of the dead woman, which takes up significantly more space on the page than the story itself, the headline and story still focus on the husband, who the reporter describes as “cegado por celos” or “blinded by jealousy.” The use of the word blinded here suggests diminished responsibility and comes close to implying a justification for the murder.
Yet another incident of a man killing his wife occurred on April 9th 2013 in Baja Verapaz, a rural area in central Guatemala. In this case, the man, once again the focus of the story, was rescued by the police just before being killed by the community for murdering his wife. Only then did the police find the woman’s body, 22 days after her disappearance was reported. However, before the young man was arrested the reporter succeeded in getting an interview with him, in which the reporter asks questions regarding the motives for the killing. Immediately apparent is the man’s lack of remorse as he claims that he does not regret the killing saying, “usé mis cinco sentidos,” an idiomatic phrase meaning, “I was completely aware of my actions.”

Perhaps most alarming however, are his responses to the reporter when asked about his motives for killing his wife and his actions following the murder. Rather than claiming any kind of diminished responsibility due to jealousy, the man says that he was angry because “she did not do as I asked and she wanted to leave the house to work.” Clearly a stereotypical example of machismo, his response implies the complete denial of a woman’s worth outside of her role as a wife who serves her husband. He goes on to explain that following the murder he felt no remorse but went immediately to declare her missing so that he would not fall under suspicion. Notwithstanding these chilling responses there is no commentary at all condemning the man’s actions. Both the interview and accompanying story indicate the role that machismo continues to play in shaping attitudes towards women, especially in rural areas, and also further reinforce the prevalence of police indifference.

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5 Nuestro Diario, April 9th 2013, p.2
The third common theme is the tendency of reporters to scapegoat gang members in their discussion of potential suspects and to use gang violence as a way to explain the violence against women. The words “presuntos pandilleros” or “presumed gang members” occur frequently as suggested suspects, though no concrete evidence for this claim is ever given but merely the allegation of a link between the victim and criminal activity. In a story reporting the discovery of the bodies of two young women in a cave, the reporter claims that there is fear in the area as the Mara Salvatrucha, a notoriously brutal Central American gang, has been active there. The journalist uses this as grounds for the assumption that gang members were responsible for the murders, despite giving no indication that there has been an investigation or that any evidence to that effect has been produced.  

6 In cases where the victim works in a business, the most common explanation is extortion. It is certainly true that in Guatemala gangs frequently use extortion as a way to control and profit from local businesses, and that those who refuse to comply with the demands of the gangs risk death. However, the police often resort to this explanation as default. On October 28th 2013, Nuestro Diario reported the case of a woman murdered outside her shop. The article states that the police found no evidence and goes on to explain that the first hypothesis the police are investigating is, “that the woman could have been a victim of extortion.”

7 Scapegoating gangs in this way is very convenient for the authorities. The police resources are already extremely stretched and the majority of these are dedicated to combatting gang violence (Argueta 2012). By linking the murders to gang activity police

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6 Nuestro Diario, Mar. 13th 2013 p.6
7 Nuestro Diario, Oct. 28th 2013 p.4
can avoid investigating any specific individual, allowing them instead to blame an entire
group and portray the murders of women as an inevitable side effect of widespread
organised crime. However, this has led increasingly to citizens engaging in vigilante
violence, especially in smaller indigenous communities where a consensus can be
reached regarding who might be responsible for a crime (Sieder 2011). From this a
narrative emerges suggesting that since the police will not investigate or punish those
suspected of rape or murder, community justice is the only way to deal with the crimes
and criminals (see Fig. 5).

**Figure 5: Linchan a Violador**

![Figure 5](image)

Fig. 5 Source: *Nuestro Diario*, June 25th 2013

The incident shown in Fig 5 exemplifies this form of “justice,” under the headline
“Rapist Lynched.” Such images are common and though generally the police manage to
rescue those threatened with vigilante justice, in this particular case they were unable to
protect the man in question. The police response to lynchings of this kind further
reinforces the lack of respect for the lives of women. When these incidents are reported, police appear for the most part to intervene rapidly, unlike in the case of female victims. In fact, rapists are often only questioned or investigated by the police once they have been rescued from violence aimed at them by their own communities (Nuestro Diario 2013, Sieder 2011).

Nuestro Diario does not only show images of women as victims. In every edition there is a sizeable section of the paper, immediately following the news, dedicated to images of models. Many of these women are highly sexualised and the majority have features that set them apart from most Guatemalan women. This juxtaposition of the brazenly sexual images and the stories about violence against women suggests a fourth more subtle narrative. Models depicted are always female, normally very pale skinned, fair-haired and provocatively dressed (Nuestro Diario 2013).

Figure 6: ¡Que Viva el Amor!

![Figure 5](source: Nuestro Diario, Feb. 10th 2013, p.16.)
The Colombian model in Fig. 6 appeared in the paper in the lead-up to Valentine’s Day. The words around the image read “Isabel can’t wait to celebrate Valentine’s Day in Guatemala” and “She says she had her first boyfriend when she was 15.” The combination of the model’s scantily clad appearance and the words, which emphasise her strong female sexuality and her physical sexual experience, are clearly designed for the pleasure of male readers. Models like Isabel appear in almost every edition of the paper, particularly, as in this case during special occasions or holidays. Each of these women appear wearing little clothing, either in child-like poses or in more overtly sexually alluring attitudes.

However, even in the face of such overt objectification, for Guatemalan women purity remains a vital part of the moral code. They are expected to be virgins when they marry and many engage in unsafe sexual practices to avoid penetration (Roberts 2006). The value of purity is so high that up to two percent of women in the country may have undergone dangerous surgical procedures to ‘reconstruct their virginity’ by rebuilding the hymen (Roberts 2006). Practitioners who perform this unnecessary surgery advertise primarily in phone booths or by painting on walls. That increasing numbers of women are willing to go through with the operation despite the obvious risks involved demonstrates how powerful the link is between virginity, purity and a woman’s worth as a human being (Roberts 2006). The standards for Guatemalan women therefore, appear unrealistically high. However, this does not seem to apply universally.

Clearly the image of a light-complexioned and fair-haired model, like Isabel, is a quixotic representation for Guatemalan women. More importantly though, the
juxtaposition of these models with the reports of femicides, implies that those with pale skin and blonde hair are not beholden to the same standards as Guatemalan women. The standards of beauty established by these images are unobtainable for the vast majority of Guatemalans. While arguably this is true of most female models, the discrepancy between the models depicted in the news and the majority of Guatemalan women is marked by racial difference. The strikingly different appearance of the models seems to make it acceptable for them to wear revealing clothing without the fear of stigmatisation.

A focus on female sexuality combined with the lack of representations of women of colour or of indigenous origin, reinforces ladino racial dominance while simultaneously emphasising female inferiority. Each edition of the paper introduces a new model who also features on the back page to catch the eyes of other potential readers.

**Figure 7: Noticias Como Son**

Fig. 7. Source: *Nuestro Diario* 8th November 2013
Fig 7 shows the model on the last page of the 8th of November 2013 edition. Dressed provocatively and with flowing blonde hair and pale skin, she is typical of models appearing in the paper. The headline reads, “Noticias como son, con toque sexy” or “Real news with a sexy touch”. Images such as these are the norm and, even though Guatemala’s indigenous population comprises 51% of the population as a whole, there are no representations of indigenous or black women in this context. The invisibility of women of colour plainly situates ladina women, the closest to this unrealistic standard of beauty, as the dominant group. That said, the overt sexualisation of the images also reiterates the narrative that a woman’s worth lies primarily in her sexuality. Once again, women of colour find themselves in a double bind, suffering oppression both as a result of their gender and as a result of their race.

Political structures in Guatemala also reflect media narratives regarding the country’s population. Following the 2011 elections, there were 158 elected officials in the Guatemalan Congress. Of these, 12% were indigenous and 21% female, with just four indigenous female members. The 333 district mayoral races around the country resulted in only seven females being elected as mayors; by no means a balanced representation of the actual population (Dialogo Americas 2012, NDI n.d.). Since there are rarely enough representatives to challenge the ladino male majority, very little real change benefitting women or indigenous communities has taken place. The dearth of representations of indigenous women as anything other than victims of perpetrators of violence suggests that crime occurring against women is the natural result of life in “violent” rural societies, and therefore even less worthy of investigation. This attitude leaves indigenous women especially susceptible to abuse (Sieder 2011). It also acts as a further obstacle to the
empowerment and political participation of women, both helping to explain, and perpetuating the current low levels of participation of indigenous women.

3. Responses to Feminicide

The increasing rates of femicide in Guatemala have led to the emergence of numerous organisations seeking to counter the violence by raising awareness and bringing about institutional change. These goals reflect the two major types of organisations campaigning for women’s rights in Guatemala. The first type employs the language of human rights in order to draw attention to women’s rights issues, engaging in international discourses and forming linkages with transnational advocacy networks and institutional bodies. The major objective of these groups is to alert the international community and educate the Guatemalan public about the violence and its root causes. The second broad group of organisations includes those that focus on specific aspects of the femicide problem and on producing long-term change through short-term achievements. Given the more tangible results, it is perhaps easy to label this form of advocacy as more effective. However, a wider focus on human rights and participation in international networks has resulted in pressure on the Guatemalan government that facilitates the work of outcome-orientated organisations and continues to play a major role in countering femicide. Education-orientated organisations have also succeeded in involving men in their advocacy efforts. Classes for men have even led to some of them creating grassroots organisations of their own to combat the violence and educate other men. Although few partnerships exist
between organisations with different focuses, the complementarity between them contributed to the creation of the 2008 Femicide Law, which introduced “femicide” as a legal term in Guatemala and demanded harsher sentences for those accused of killing women.

Different sectors of the population also employ different forms of activism. Where ladina women tend to focus on institutional change and education, indigenous women tend to seek empowerment through economic ventures and cooperatives. This division also serves to highlight the distinction between Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and grassroots organisations. Where grassroots movements involve members attempting to enact change within their own communities, NGOs tend to be larger, highly structured organisations with paid staff and over-arching projects (Earle 2004). Among indigenous communities in Guatemala, grassroots organisations, mainly consisting almost entirely of volunteers working in cooperatives, are by far the most common. While these groups can and do form links to facilitate international trade and economic ventures, they do so of their own accord: for example, El Red de Mujeres Ixhiles (The Network of Ixil Women) and La Asociación de Mujeres Petén Ixqik (The Association of Petén Ixqik Women). On the other hand, NGOs involved with Guatemala are often based in the United States and have broad, wide reaching goals such as combatting militarisation or improving access to land (GHRC). In Guatemala, NGOs typically focus on human rights issues in general, while grassroots organisations have specific focuses.

Organisations that aim primarily to raise awareness of the issue of femicide typically use the framework of human rights alongside that of women’s rights. In doing
so, they are able to emphasise the severity of the problem nationally while simultaneously attracting the attention of the international community. One of the most basic governing principles behind the concept of human rights is that they are universal. Therefore the existence of “women’s rights” as a necessary addition to the more general “human rights” creates a paradox that both highlights gender inequality and calls into question the most fundamental bases of the human rights discourse (Lloyd 2007). Organisations seeking to counter the violence through education often do so by stressing the need for equality. Nonetheless, these same organisations frequently privilege the language of women’s rights alongside that of human rights and in doing so highlight the institutionalised inequality that necessitates campaigns specifically designed to benefit women.

Though atypical in that its main offices are based in Guatemala, El Centro de Investigación, Capacitación y Apoyo a la Mujer or The Centre for Investigation, Training and Support for Women (CICAM), uses language in their values and mission statements that illustrates this paradox and is common to many NGOs operating in the country. The organisation seeks to inform women of their rights while also offering workshops aimed at improving understanding of gender bias and training women to educate others about these issues. Two key values of the group include equality and sisterhood and the juxtaposition of these two values highlights the women’s rights/human rights paradox. The definition of equality reads: “supone que todas las personas a pesar de sus diferencias individuales, que las hacen únicas, son idénticas a su valor esencial y dignidad como seres humanos, y sus particularidades contribuyen sólo a distinguirlas y a permitir aportar socialmente.” “It is assumed that all persons, in spite of their individual differences that make them unique, are identical in their essential value and dignity as human beings and
that their individual characteristics serve only to make them distinctive and allow them to contribute positively to society” (CICAM n.d.) Since this definition is not gendered, it clearly privileges human rights over women’s rights. However, it also appears in tandem with the value of sisterhood, which is described as the creation of shared spaces in which women can learn from each other and learn to promote women’s rights in their communities (CICAM n.d).

The combination of non-gendered language with highly gendered language demonstrates the tension between stressing the importance of gender equality and the reality that necessitates highlighting differences between genders. Often these groups that privilege narratives and frames over short-term outcomes also address or publicise a wide variety of issues. For example, The Guatemalan Human Rights Commission (GHRC), based in United States and probably one of the most widely recognised NGOs operating in Guatemala, lists as its main areas of focus: militarisation; truth, justice and historic memory; access to land and natural resources; women’s rights; and criminalisation and impunity. Despite the specific use of the term women’s rights within the larger mandate of human rights, the organisation defines the women’s rights problem as: “entrenched gender bias, a history of sexual violence during the internal conflict, institutional weaknesses, and rampant impunity leave women unprotected and with little access to justice” (GHRC, n.d.). This definition in fact draws upon almost all of the other named focuses but specifically addresses the roles that these issues play in making Guatemala “one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a woman” (GHRC, n.d.). In using the framework of women’s rights as separate from that of human rights, the GHRC addresses the root causes of violence against women, while also acknowledging that
women are not the only victims of social problems such as weak rule of law and impunity. However, they also acknowledge that women’s lives are rendered partially invisible by the rhetoric of human rights, as their experience of these social issues is heavily coloured by their gender and compounded by institutional discrimination.

Like the GHRC, many other organisations focusing on long-term social gains operate out of foreign countries and have fully bilingual websites, or websites entirely in English. The need for external bases and multi-lingual publicity illustrates both the role of the international community and the logistical difficulties faced by activists within Guatemala. The Unit for Protection of Human Rights Defenders in Guatemala (UDEFEGUA) found that between January and December 2010, 305 activists were shot in the country and many more faced death threats (Freedom House, 2011). Some activists’ families have even been “targeted for rape and murder” (Freedom House, 2011). That all these murders were also committed by “unknown assailants,” once again reinforces the rampant culture of impunity (Freedom House, 2011). Considering the obstacles that activists face in the country, it is unsurprising that many choose to operate externally.

However, there are strategic advantages, other than an improved security situation, to be gained from having an international base. Since organisations based abroad also tend to be focused more closely on narratives and drawing attention to human rights violations, a location outside Guatemala facilitates participation in international discourses and forming linkages with transnational advocacy networks. For example, MuJER Guatemala, an organisation that aims to promote “women’s rights through
education, awareness, and community organizing,” states that it relies heavily on “grants from foundations and private companies and we have a track record of winning major grants in the United States, Central America, and Europe” (MuJER Guatemala, n.d.). The group not only relies on grants from western companies but also works closely with the International Human Rights Commission on the issues of femicide and gender-based violence (MuJER Guatemala, n.d.). These linkages bring the term “femicide” into the global human rights lexicon and emphasise the problem as a global issue. In turn, such efforts lead to grants and donations to campaigns operating within Guatemala, resulting in funding that would be unlikely to come from within the country itself due to a combination of fear of retribution, corruption and economic hardship.

In contrast, organisations that are located in Guatemala utilise very different strategies to those that work from outside the country. Those based within the country often focus on affecting long-term change through short-term achievements and are therefore more focused on outcomes than narratives designed to raise awareness. Rather than taking a comprehensive view of the issue and covering numerous aspects of the problem through education, the second broad group of organisations dedicate themselves to addressing specific areas, most often legal or medical, in order to undermine the structures that allow the violence to continue. However, these organisations have still succeeded in engaging in international collective action. In 2013, over 150 civil society organisations, local, regional, nation and international signed a statement to the leaders of the United States, Mexico and all the Central American countries demanding that the heads of state recognise that institutional behaviours and government policies are perpetuating human rights abuses in the region. This statement alone is unlikely to spark
any direct change but it stands as testament to the networks that NGOs and grassroots organisations across the Americas are forming in order to combat citizen insecurity in the region.

Although these organisations undoubtedly raise awareness nationally and internationally, they do so primarily by publicising outcomes as opposed to through education regarding the issue itself. The most widely recognised group is Fundación Sobrevivientes or The Survivors Foundation. Comprised of activists, investigators, and lawyers, the organisation focuses on combatting the culture of impunity by taking up individual cases. Their first key objective is “Realizar incidencia a través de la propuesta y planteamientos en los temas de seguridad, legislación, acceso a la justicia, que contribuya a creación de políticas públicas tendientes a prevenir, sancionar y erradicar la violencia en contra de las mujeres y la niñez,” or “To influence approaches to public security, legislation and access to justice, in order to create public policies designed to prevent, prosecute and eradicate violence against women and children” (Fundación Sobrevivientes, n.d.). In practice, the organisation works to gain prosecutions in cases of femicide by placing constant legal pressure on prosecutors and law enforcement officials to ensure that files do not disappear and that cases are not closed prematurely.

Unlike the broad, narrative-based approach of the first group of organisations, this approach focuses very specifically on one aspect of the femicide issue in order to produce specific outcomes. While the first group generally tends to address the problem from a more holistic standpoint, this method aims instead to spark long-term change by assisting individuals. The results achieved by organisations like Fundación Sobrevivientes are
more immediate and more evident but these groups are necessarily less inclusive. Rather than seeking to improve political participation and educate the general population, outcome orientated organisations rely on skilled professionals to investigate and prosecute cases, or to offer medical and psychological care to victims. Similar to Fundación Sobrevivientes, La Asociación Nuevos Horizontes, or The New Horizons Association, also provides a legal clinic that gives assistance to survivors of violence or to the families of victims. In addition, they are able to provide psychological care for survivors of violence, and have a medical clinic with gynaecologists and family planning services available at low cost. In Guatemala 80% of women are attended by iyoms or traditional midwives with little or no formal education (Roost et al. 2007). Consequently, access to a medical clinic is both a desperate need and a source of trepidation for the vast majority of women in the country. Nonetheless, family planning and awareness play crucial roles in empowering women and reducing the dependence that can contribute to cycles of domestic violence (Schooley et al. 2007).

Lack of access to legal clinics or to mental and physical healthcare facilities is a particular obstacle for the indigenous population who, as a result, have developed their own activism strategies. Already severely disenfranchised by the Guatemalan government, indigenous activists, rather than pursuing legal routes or seeking to participate in international dialogues, have tended to focus more closely on economic empowerment. These women are typically geographically isolated and face extreme institutional discrimination as a direct consequence of their ethnic identity (Santiso-Galvez and Bertrand, 2004). In view of this, activists from this population sector have generally shunned judicial routes, partly because past experience suggests that that
method is usually unsuccessful but also because the majority of Mayan women do not have the tools or finances to perform investigations or exert legal pressure on city prosecutors. As an alternative, activism aims to economically empower women and improve their political participation. Besides issues of violence, the daily challenges faced by indigenous women are often on the level of basic survival needs such as nutrition, clean drinking water, health care and education. Consequently, the legal routes and human rights discourses are of limited immediate help. While indigenous women do occasionally benefit from rural initiatives, for example mobile health clinics, alternatives that address the more urgent needs of these communities of women have also emerged to supplement these initiatives.

The Mayan woman weaving has long been a quintessential image of Guatemala. Although Mayan women selling their crafts, particularly woven textiles, to help make a living is by no means a novel invention or the result of any co-ordinated collective action, it has come to serve as an essential route to empowerment and an indirect way to combat violence. For women in these communities, violence is very much a normalised aspect of life. In their study on the effect of violence against women on miscarriage rates, Schooley et al. found that women reporting, “me pega lo normal” or “he beats me the normal amount” was a common statement among respondents (Schooley et al. 2007). In the face of this culture of normalised domestic violence and the everyday hardships of life in rural Guatemala, Mayan women have turned to traditional crafts and agriculture as a means to gain economic independence (MacNeill, 2014). By achieving this women are granted more agency within the domestic sphere, helping to break cycles of dependence and violence. Through the formation of cooperatives, women have also succeeded in
establishing international ties, facilitating international trade and therefore increasing revenues (MacNeill, 2014).

The purpose of these cooperatives is twofold. Firstly, participants are able to enjoy economic gains, and secondly these cooperatives serve as a way to preserve traditional cultural practices without entirely forgoing the potential benefits of modernity (MacNeill, 2014). The economic advantages in turn improve access to education, healthcare and basic necessities that boost overall quality of life and break the cycles of poverty and violence. However, these organisations also often rely primarily on Western NGOs to establish international trade networks. Without this involvement it can be very difficult to break into the competitive international markets. Many of these organisations, for example, El Red de Mujeres Ixhiles (The Network of Ixil Women) and La Asociación de Mujeres Petén Ixqik (The Association of Petén Ixqik Women), combine economic ventures with human rights aims. El Red de Mujeres Ixhiles identifies several activities including, raising chickens, weaving and educating women about the importance of political participation (Red de Mujeres Ixhiles, n.d.). Combining these apparently unconnected ventures allows organisations to address women’s agency in the domestic and public sphere and to simultaneously help them better serve communities.

Both indigenous and ladina women in Guatemala constantly find themselves defined in opposition to their male counterparts. Although male remains the dominant gender, the resulting dichotomy between expectations of masculinity and femininity is harmful to both genders. Rigid social codes make it hard for men to become involved in movements supporting women’s rights and those who do face considerable stigma.
Nonetheless, men and boys have become both targets of activism and agents in their own right. One of the most encouraging of the campaigns simultaneously involving and targeting men is the White Ribbon Campaign, started by Mujeres Iniciando en las Américas or Pioneering Women in the Americas (MIA). While this group falls into the category of narrative-based organisations, they are addressing many of the root causes of the violence by directly educating not only women, but also men. They have developed a ten-week course entitled, Hombres Contra el Femicidio, or Men against Femicide, aimed at grade and middle school boys, and adult men in Guatemala. The workshops included in the course deal with such topics as: Aggressive, passive, and assertive; Gender stereotyping in the media; Abusive behaviour — a wide range of degrees; and The Choices We Make (MIA n.d.). Each of these is led by a man and addresses either the socially-accepted cultural narratives that contribute to feminicide or the role of masculinity and the culture of masculinity in condoning violence against women.

Despite limited apparent progress in numbers of prosecutions or improved safety of women in the country, the organisations have had some success in enacting change. In 2008, the Guatemalan government passed “el Ley Contra el Femicidio” or “Law against Femicide.” The Guatemala Human Rights Commission amongst other organisations were instrumental in pushing for the passage of this law (Bellino, 2010). The work of Fundación Sobrevivientes to increase publicity of individual cases of femicide was also crucial in raising awareness of the issue in general. The law itself recognised that misogyny and institutionalised gender bias underpins femicide and promised harsher sentences for those convicted of the crime (Bellino, 2010). However, in 2011 20,398 cases of violence against women were filed under the 2008 law and less than 3% of these
ever made it to the court system. Estimates generally considered to be conservative put the numbers of women murdered in 2011 at somewhere between 631 and 700, representing a continuing rise in the number of cases of femicide in the country (Musalo and Bookey 2014).

These statistics look extremely bleak. However, much of the activism work being done around the issue of feminicide relies principally on educating the next generation and on long-term goals to empower women economically and politically. Therefore, the current status of these efforts is not necessarily a fair measure of their performance. Since educational efforts and outcome-focused approaches must work together whether intentionally or indirectly, those organisations aiming to enact immediate institutional change may need to wait for the efforts of those attempting to change narratives long embedded in the national psyche to catch up. Accordingly, the process of change in both ladina and indigenous communities will inevitably be a long one, and all the more so for those sectors of the population combatting discrimination based not only on their gender but also on their ethnicity and who are struggling to gain basic living standards in addition to institutional justice. Given the scope of and historical precedent behind contemporary gender narratives, the work of evaluating performance lies perhaps with generations to come.

Although scholarship focusing on Guatemala as a key context for the study of femicide is limited, the complexity of the case and the scale of the problem highlight the interplay between political and cultural behaviour. Colonial era narratives dictating society’s treatment of women have evolved as colonial structures gradually became
obsolete, but have never disappeared. They are evident in the treatment of women during the civil war and in the responses to femicide today. Once grounded in religious doctrine and racial hierarchies, cultural narratives now focus on victim blaming and ideals of beauty and purity. Political handling of femicide reflects media narratives that re-victimise the murdered women while also sexualising ladina women and rendering black and indigenous women invisible. Impunity, police indifference and the lack of government accountability all echo stories painting women as imperfect victims, and therefore as culpable in their own deaths, and in stories scapegoating gangs in favour of conducting any meaningful investigation.

Trends to date (see Fig 1.) suggest that the rates of femicide in Guatemala will continue to rise. Given the dialogue occurring between media and political leaders, it appears that the only possibility for addressing the issue lies in a fundamental change in both media reporting and institutional response. Though this goal may appear unreachable, a new decentralised voting system, designed to promote political participation among rural voters, and proposed legislation mandating gender quotas and proportional representation for ethnic groups, provide hope for positive change in the future.

4. Conclusions

Although the 2008 Femicide Law has had little immediate or tangible effect on the levels of violence against women, the recognition of the wider sociological underpinnings of femicide represents a huge step forward for Guatemala. The law was
never going to spark an overnight change. The misogyny and impunity that lead to femicide are deeply rooted in Guatemalan society and will therefore require time and long-term measures to counter them. As long as law enforcement and the judicial system cling to narratives presenting women as second-class citizens, impunity will continue to be the main obstacle in the fight against femicide.

However, the law does now give weight to organisations framing femicide as a human rights issue by providing them with a legal precedent and therefore institutional credibility. Once the law acknowledged the societal causes of the violence, it also set the stage for organisations to present cases of violence and abuse to the attention of the courts as instances of femicide, making such cases harder to dismiss. This in turn has placed organisations such as Fundación Sobrevivientes that seek to combat femicide on a case-by-case basis through legal pressure in a far stronger position. Although the judicial system currently has an appalling track record in hearing and prosecuting these cases, these organisations now have more chance of success in the future.

Legal advocacy organisations are not the only players working against the blight of femicide. Organisations that aim to educate people about the root causes of violence against women are working to increase awareness among the general public. Fostering public support in this way also allows movements against the violence to gain traction, which in turn increases the pressure on the government to affect real change and to address corruption and impunity. For Guatemala to avoid pressure from the international community and further investigations by international organisations, such as the UN or Amnesty International, the government will eventually have to respond to such mounting
pressure from its citizens. Together, therefore, these groups are helping to bring about both short-term and long-term change.

Policy is a potentially invaluable tool in addressing social barriers and racism in Guatemala. For example, enhanced police standards and training would greatly improve prosecution rates for crimes committed against women and particularly, indigenous women. This could be achieved firstly through policies governing the physical activities and requirements for the police force, including a higher education level requirement for entry into the police force, better training on how to handle a crime scene and higher wages to prevent bribery, corruption and the proliferation of private security forces.

Secondly, policing and the judicial system would be greatly improved by instituting mandatory sensitivity training for officers regarding women’s rights and gender discrimination, and how to recognise and intercede in abusive relationships.

Currently, various NGOs and grassroots organisations, for example Mujeres Iniciando en las Américas (MIA), are leading efforts to educate young people in Guatemala. Perhaps the most valuable possible policy development would be to make this education a compulsory part of the national curriculum in schools. In particular, this education would include classes on how to objectively assess messages gained from the media. Since the cultural narratives and value that underpin femicide are so deeply rooted in Guatemalan society, no single policy change could provide a rapid solution to the problem. It is for this reason then that the burden of change really lies with the next generation. However, without continuing education and constant legal pressure to prosecute cases of femicide, change will be very gradual indeed.
The interaction between organisations taking different approaches reflects too the fundamental principles behind this research. These groups are employing both practical approaches, such as legal advocacy, and approaches based on narratives and long-term education. Together they are addressing many of the various factors that have contributed to feminicide and have succeeded in affecting change on a political and social level. This research too seeks to identify the intersections between both social issues and disciplines in order to approach the study of feminicide from a new angle. In gendering existing theoretical perspectives, the paper recognises the value of these approaches while simultaneously challenging some of the homogenising tendencies that ignore the experience of different genders or ethnicities. It is my hope therefore, that going forward interdisciplinary scholarship will continue to focus on increasing inclusivity and that this in turn will translate into more effective activism, resulting eventually in more effective policies that recognise and address the root causes of the violence.
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