

**FACULTAD LATINOAMERICANA DE CIENCIAS
SOCIALES - SEDE ECUADOR
MAESTRIA EN ANTROPOLOGIA
CONVOCATORIA 1993-1995**

**Guatemala women as refugees. A study of change in
gender relations in the context of social movements**

VERSION PREELIMINAR

Asesor/a: Blanca Muratorio, Ph.D.

Martha Gabriela Torres De la Vega

Quito, noviembre 1995

**FACULTAD LATINOAMERICANA DE CIENCIAS SOCIALES
SEDE-ECUADOR**

**Guatemala women as refugees. A study of change in gender relations
in the context of social movements.**

Autora. Martha Gabriela Torres de la Vega

Asesora: Blanca Muratorio

Quito Noviembre, 1995

CLACSO - Lima 1995

Chapter Three:

The Unforeseen Impact of Extreme Violence

Introduction

The level of violence that counterinsurgency policies inflicted upon the Guatemalan population in the 1980s is comparable only to the destruction that occurred during the colonial period (Falla, 1994:4). The massacres, political assassinations, torture, and general widespread terror were endemic in the rural area for more than a decade.¹ The most outward manifestation of this extreme violence was the exodus of thousands of Guatemalans into Mexican lands.

The social effects of violence, defined for the purposes of this paper as permanent changes in the social relations and the way of life practiced by Guatemala's indigenous peoples, have been severe. Although all groups affected by the violence have experienced, to some extent, physical and social transformations, the refugee experience gives us one of the most pronounced examples of the social aftermath of violence. This is due to the complete and potentially permanent physical removal of refugees from their cultures and lands of origin.

This chapter will approach the experience of the refugees in view of the social effects of extreme violence. Guatemala's refugees resulted directly from state brutality. The refugees' organizations and the increased political participation of women refugees, for instance, are a direct reaction against persecution and extreme violence. When looking at a process of societal transformation which redefines ethnic, gender, and refugee identities, the individual and collective reactions to violence become the first and most important building blocks.

1. The Effects of Violence- A Psychological Perspective:

The effects of violence on the collective psyche have been discussed in cases of extreme violence in Latin America by the Task Force of the American Psychological Association- Division 35 (Lykes, 1993:525). The work of the Task Force concentrates on efforts made by women's groups to oppose extreme violence. It aims to place women's experience with state-sponsored violence beyond the limits of individual pain and into its current sociopolitical context. For the Task Force, the emphasis on women is a natural response to the Latin American experience where, according to their studies, surviving women have endured horrors unparalleled in the surviving male population (Lykes, 1993:527). These horrors include the burden of widowhood, the loss of children and the legacy of rape.

Their findings suggest that there is a general collective response to violence manifested in shared behavioral responses to the violent experience. In particular, the Task Force has found that although individual responses to violence differ, there are several collective responses common to Latin America's state sponsored violence. One of the most common responses is the organization of groups or collectives to oppose violence with direct political action (Lykes, 1993:530). A second common response, identified by Margaret McCallin among Guatemalan refugee women, is the use of **testimonios**² by women themselves to address the emotional and psychological damage to themselves that occurred in conjunction with the near-total losses that exile represents (Lykes, 1993:532). The testimonio, according to McCallin, serves as a means for turning 'hearing into speech' and thus dislodging a victim-complex and replacing it with concrete political actions.

In the testimonios that will be presented throughout the rest of this study it is possible to identify some common actions undertaken to respond to the violent experience. These actions are described directly in the interviewees' stories of flight and exile, and their projections into their future as returnees. In

accordance with the Task Force findings, this paper will argue that in the Guatemalan refugee community there is a reactive collective and individual resistance to extreme violence that is manifested in the formation of women's organizations, and in the use of testimonios for the formulation of individual discourses on social organization (Lykes, 1993:536).

The ultimate aim of the Task Force's study of Latin American experiences with state-sponsored violence is to devise new approaches towards the psychological treatment of victims of violence. In their efforts to characterize Latin American responses to violence the Task Force studies hope to provide an adequate data basis from which to begin population-specific treatment techniques. It is precisely in this prescriptive aim that this anthropological study differs from psychological approaches to the study of violence.

2. An Anthropological Approach:

The experience of violence marks only the starting point of an autonomous socio-cultural reconstruction that has taken place in refugee communities. The detailed reconstruction of refugee memories presented in this paper, aims to ground the more general changes in gender relations and ethnic identities within the individual, cultural and political contexts in which they occurred. The study of particular social and cultural changes cannot hope to be adequate reconstructions of reality if they are discussed outside the contexts in which they arose. Thus, the purpose of this chapter is to provide a general context of the violent experience from which we can begin to understand both the articulation of gender relations and the restructuring of ethnic identities.

While this approach may seem to go beyond the scope of gender analysis, it is precisely the realization that gender relations constitute and are constituted by a broader set of social

relations and historical contexts that makes this an analysis of gender structures and not simply a study of women. Feminist scholarship in Latin America has resulted in a vast body of studies of women (Campos Carr, 1990; Eckstein, 1989; Lykes, 1993; Molyneux, 1985; Patai, 1988; Perez-Arminan, 1992; Schild, 1991; Smith-Ayala, 1991). These studies are on the most part lacking an integral link between the contexts in which women develop and represent themselves and other social, political and economic contexts. This lack of contextualization results in limited works that do not describe in detail the socio-historical processes with which both women and men are faced.

A representative example of this approach to women's history is Smith-Ayala's Granddaughters of Ixmucane.³ In this volume, Smith-Ayala presents a collection of abridged life stories and political discourses. She separates these discourses according to each woman's organizational associations and gives us a brief historical context in each section. There is no indepth research into the specific historical processes from which each woman's testimonio arises. While this type of study does give us a bird's eye view of Guatemalan women's voices, it does not inform the reader of the events that shaped the society and the individual experience of the women speakers. What Smith-Ayala does provide is value to the voices of women. This essay will attempt to go beyond giving women a voice into an understanding of the social conditions and interrelationships in which women's voices arise.

Keeping in mind that there is a complex interrelationship between gender relations and other social relations, this study will also attempt to go beyond the presentation of women's experiences to give an outline of the systemic changes that have affected the whole of the refugee population. In the chapters that follow, the general changes discussed here will be incorporated into an in depth analysis of the effects that the refugee situation has had upon ethnic identities and gender relations as

illustrations of broad socio-cultural changes.

In order to define the social effects of violence, this chapter will develop a characterization and a contextualization of extreme violence. Starting from these explanations, the stories related to extreme violence will be incorporated. These stories will be viewed not only as examples of violence, but also for the consciousness-building power that these experiences have given to the social actors.

3. Extreme State-Sponsored Violence:

The nature of the repression to which the refugee populations were subjected is characterized as extreme state-sponsored violence perpetrated and engineered by state authorities. This type of violence is part of a broader strategy of low-intensity warfare adopted by the Guatemalan state apparatus beginning in the 1970s. Low-intensity warfare aims at destabilizing insurgent forces within state boundaries through any possible political, economic and military means.⁴ Within this strategy, the Guatemalan government adopted and perfected military counterinsurgency and a tactic of instating widespread terror.

Violence of any kind has multiple consequences on the individual psyche of the surviving victims. In the case of many holocaust survivors, it affected their individual integration into society.⁵ The emphasis in this paper will not be the individual repercussions of violence but rather what may be called the effect of violence on the community or the collective psyche.

4. A Background in Violent Terror:

The state-sponsored violence in Guatemala was carried out under the pretence of counterinsurgency measures. Within the Guatemalan military's policy of counterinsurgency⁶ it is possible to distinguish four types of violence used to instate terror and force societal control by the military apparatus.

Selective violence, predominantly used between 1975 and 1980 both in the urban and rural areas, is the assassination, torture, and/or disappearance of popular movement and political opposition party leaders. This type of violence is used to deter further participation in opposition movements by the members of popular organizations. In this strategy the number of victims is limited, but the profile of the victims is carefully chosen to impress either specific groups or the general public. Thus, this type of brutality serves to limit the political actions of set groups and to establish a climate of terror among the general population.

The second type of violence, **systematic violence**, was used in Guatemala's civil war throughout the 1980s. It incorporates a variety of terror tactics, including selective violence, indiscriminate disappearances, mass political assassinations, massacres, and public torture and detention. The use of different terror techniques is designed to obtain the social and behavioral control of a target population.

Cyclical violence is the rotation of systematic and selective violence. It requires a condition of conflict sustained for a prolonged period of time. In the Guatemalan case, more than thirty years of increased militarization have allowed for several cycles of violent repression each of varied and regularly higher intensity. With the use of cyclical violence, terror is furthered by the tangible continuity of the brutal onslaught.

The final type of violence used by the Guatemalan government is **extreme violence**. Extreme violence must be either limited to a specific geographic area or to a distinctly identifiable population. It is differentiated from other types of violence in its inherent restriction to a short time period. A situation of extreme violence requires the near-total destruction of a population. When this destruction is achieved, brutality is no longer indispensable. Terror, in this case, is intended for spectator populations rather than the immediate victims. Thus, the

decimated population is not the intended political target but only the symbol of military brutality in the long-term.

Extreme violence was used by the Guatemalan government between late 1981 and the end of 1982. Its immediate targets were the populations of the Ixcán and surrounding areas in the departments of El Quiché, Huehuetenango and El Petén.

Looking at the components of violence of Guatemala's counterinsurgency policy, there should be no surprise that the result was ethnocide. There is, however, a debate in the anthropological and historical literature surrounding the nature of the effects of Guatemala's repression. Some authors have referred to the destruction of early 1980s as only "genocide", thus, purposefully overlooking the ethnicity of the victims. While it is clear that the Massacres in the Jungle reached genocidal proportions, it is also clear that this genocide together with the forced exile into Mexico, and the development poles and civil patrols acted to destroy a substantial portion of Guatemala's Mayan cultures.

In both the public and private documents of the Guatemalan Army it is clear that the intentions of Guatemala's counterinsurgency programmes were not explicitly ethnocidal. Many author's have based their definition of Guatemala's Massacres in the Jungle as genocide on extensive analyses of the non-existent ethno-specificity of the Guatemalan Military's intentions (Black, 1983; Carmack, 1988; Falla, 1994; Morrison, 1994 and Grupo de Apoyo a Refugiados I and II, 1983). Thus, Falla's analysis of the massacre of Xabal in 1975, emphasizes that the repression of the civilian population was a result of the army's belief that the plot owners were helping guerrilla forces (Falla, 1994:17). Similarly, the Grupo de Apoyo a Refugiados also presents counterinsurgency as the sole purpose of rural destruction. In a confidential report written by a Guatemalan army general in 1982, the Grupo de Apoyo a Refugiados finds proof that the scorched

earth policy was only meant as a means to destroy the communist insurrectionist forces that were operating in highland areas (Grupo de Apoyo a Refugiados II, 1983:31).

Yet, the victims' ethnicity was not simply coincidental. The violation of Human Rights to which indigenous peoples were subjected in the 1980s were consistently a result of the marginalization that Mayan people continue to experience to this day in Guatemala.⁷

If we concentrate on the effects of counterinsurgency policies employed in 1981-3, and not as most authors have on the intentions of the military establishment the Guatemalan government's counterinsurgency must be deemed ethnocide. In focusing on an area that was not directly affected by state-sponsored violence, Smith gives us a glimpse into the more universal societal effects of the brutality of the 1980s. In Harvest of Violence, anthropologist Carol Smith analyzes the cultural effects of counterinsurgency in Totonicapan, an area that was not directly affected by scorched earth policies or massacres. Smith's article argues that counterinsurgency policies have destroyed much of the material basis for the reproduction of Guatemala's indigenous culture. The use of control mechanisms such as development poles and civil patrols has restricted rural indigenous economies to the breaking point by demanding an excessive amount of labour from all rural populations (1988:230).

Additionally, a significant number of indigenous markets were destroyed by scorched earth policies.⁸ This destruction retarded the production of rural crops by almost a decade and diminished the earning and purchasing power of rural populations, leading to widespread unemployment and even deeper poverty. This situation, combined with the generalized economic deterioration discussed in the previous chapter, has resulted in what Smith believes to be insurmountable material limitations to the re-establishment of indigenous rural cultures (1988:232).

While Smith's position may put undue emphasis on the material basis of cultural reproduction, her analysis does raise an important variable. The effects of low-intensity warfare have gone beyond the initial political and military aims and have played a decisive role in the future development of Mayan peoples. The initial demographic effects of violence put at risk the survival of some indigenous groups through the simple annihilation of the population or through the migrations as a response to the violence. Yet, beyond these undeniably significant effects there are other more long-term results to which Smith alludes. These changes include the reduction of rural trading economies and the general depression of indigenous production.

In looking at the social and cultural effects of violence it is important to realize that the direct targets of violence are not the only groups that are affected. Nor is it possible to pin point the final effects of exile or material deprivation on cultural systems. The extreme violent destruction that occurred in Guatemala extends its effects through both space and time. Thus, even now, more than ten years after the events it is not possible fully appreciate the total results of the violence of the 1980s.

4. Refugee Experiences with Extreme Violence:

"De repente escuchamos que a una aldea cerca de nosotros llegó el ejército y mató a quince hombres. Los recogió a los quince hombres y los mató. Y al poco tiempo volvieron y mató a diez hombres mas.

Nosotros dijimos: '¿Pero qué está pasando?'

Un día el ejército llegó en avión y nosotros nos reunimos en el centro y dijimos 'vámonos'- como nos empezó a dar miedo, pues. Empezamos a salir para la parcela. Nos fuimos a la

"All of a sudden we heard that in a village near ours the army entered and killed fifteen men. They took the fifteen men and killed them. A little while later, they came back and killed ten more men.

We said: 'What is going on?'

One day, the army came by plane and we met in the centre of town and said 'Let's go'- because we were afraid. We began to go towards our plots in the mountains. We went to our plot and we couldn't find a place to go. The army was on

parcela y no encontrábamos a donde irnos. En todos los caminos y en todos los espacios siempre estaba el ejército. Y si uno no lleva su cédula dicen que lo agarran- hay un puente en un río Jocón- y lo llevan a ese puente y lo acuchillan. De ahí lo tiran al río cuando ya está muerto. Si no, los meten en unas bolsas grandes. Primero, los amarran y los meten en la bolsa después los tiran al río dentro de la bolsa así vivos.

Nosotros pensábamos: '¿Que es eso? Es algo extraño- ¿Que esta ocurriendo? ¿Cómo puede ocurrir?'

Entonces, empezamos a salir porque pensábamos que tal vez saliendo al monte no nos iban a hacer nada. Mi papá se fue a hacer una casita en la montaña donde llevamos nuestra ropa y todos nuestros tamales.

Al llegar una noche nos contaron que nos habían empezado a buscar abajo de la montaña y empezábamos a huir sin saber hasta donde estamos huyendo. Sin saber a que pueblo íbamos a salir. Nos fuimos y las cosas y los animales se fueron quedando así poco a poco. Era como si nos estuvieran arriando para fuera.

Pasábamos un día o dos días en un lugar y después nos íbamos a otro cuando llegaba el ejército y teníamos que salir. Entre nosotros dijimos 'tenemos que ir a un lugar donde no nos encuentren'.

Salimos tres familias las de dos de mis hermanos y la de mi papá. Tenía dos hermanos y cuando salimos dejamos

every road and in every space. And if you didn't have your identification they said that the army would take you- there is a bridge in a river called Jocón- they would take you to that bridge and stab you. After that they throw you in the river when you are already dead. If not, they put people in big bags. First they tie them up and put them in the bag and then they throw them into the river alive in the bag.

We thought: 'What is that? That is strange. What is going on? How can this happen?'

Then we started to leave because we thought that by going to the mountain we would be safe. My dad went to the mountain to build a little house and we took all our clothes and food there.

When the night came we found out that they had been looking for us in the town and so we began to flee without knowing where we were going. We left and our things and animals were left behind bit by bit. It was almost as if we were being herded out.

We spent one day or two in one place and then we went to another when the army came and we had to go. We said to ourselves: 'we have to go somewhere where we won't be found'.

We left together with two other families: my father's family and the families of two of my brothers. I had two brothers and when we lost my brothers and their families. Only our family managed to reach Mexico..."

"In our community in

perdidos a ellos y sus familias. Ya solo nosotros llegamos a México..."

"En la comunidad de nosotros hubieron otras familias que no quisieron salir. Dijeron "¿Para que voy a ir? Los que quieren huir son guerrilleros, yo no soy guerrillero yo no soy nada. No tengo delito para que me mate el ejército no he hecho nada." La próxima vez que supimos de ellos ya habían sido quemados. Ellos fueron sacados de sus casas y llevados a la iglesia del pueblo. Ahí, le metieron fuego a la iglesia con ellos adentro.

¿Porque? por no defender sus vidas. Si ellos hubieran salido, de plano que ahora estarían vivos."

- Mariana, joven de 22 años.

Guatemala there were other families that didn't want to leave. They said: 'Why should I leave? The ones that want to leave are the guerrillas. I am not a guerrilla member. I am not involved.' The next time we found out about them we were told they had been burnt. They were taken out of their houses and brought to the town church. There, they set fire to the church with all of the people inside. Why? Because they didn't defend their lives. If they had left like we did I am sure they would be alive now."

-Mariana, 22 years old.

Mariana's story is representative of the experience of fleeing for many Guatemalan refugees. Many of the women interviewed describe their exodus from Guatemala emphasizing, as Mariana does, the unfamiliarity with the migration and their inability to understand the motivations of total terror to which they were subjected.

5. Defining and Responding to State-Sponsored Violence:

There are two main characteristics of state-sponsored violence. The first is its execution by the recognized authority. In such cases, the affected population has no effective resources to counteract the violence. In the beginning, the afflicted Guatemalan populations were not able to recognize who were the authors of the violence or that it was aimed not only at individuals, but at entire communities. Many assumed, as Mariana did, that violent acts were aimed at offending or threatening

individuals who belonged to guerrilla organizations. Many families left their communities without knowing the reasons why they left or why they suffered the punishment of exile, assassination, or torture. Guatemalan refugees in Mexico began to perceive the catastrophic and ethnic-specific outcome of the violence only upon their arrival in Mexico or in their temporary stays in the populations in resistance (CPR) within Guatemala.⁹

Up until their violent experience, the affected population continued to believe that the state power could only be used against them with legitimate reasons. When there was an explicit recognition of the collective aim of the repression, the refugee community lost its trust in the legitimacy of state power. In the long run, this loss of trust in state power, discussed in the following chapter, has had consequences that have yet to be seen, particularly in the ensuing redefinition of ethnic identities.

A second characteristic of extreme state-sponsored violence is its selection of a limited target population. In the Nazi example, racism towards Jewish populations was politicized into a race policy where Jews as the target population are at the centre of hostility (Nicholson, 1992:89).¹⁰ Unlike the Jewish experience, Guatemala's brutality, as discussed above, was not originally conceived against indigenous populations. Its aim was the geographically limited rural population that served as a potential support base for the armed insurrectionist movements. Nevertheless, the ethnic specificity of the violence was a consequence of the geographic concentration of military scorched earth policies. The areas where such policies were perpetrated were areas inhabited almost exclusively by indigenous peoples.

This violence has had two general responses in the refugee situation that will be analyzed in what remains of this chapter. A first response to the experience of violence is the denial of the violent experience. This denial takes place in both the private sphere- within the communities themselves, and the public sphere-

in Guatemalan society in general.

Second, the violence has resulted in the creation of ethnic identities and closed communities whose identity is centred on their situation as exiles. As with the Jewish case, the creation of communities of refugees is done with a looking towards the future. These communities of exiles contributed, in the Jewish case, to the formation of the Israeli state. In Guatemala, the exiled population will also play a leading role in the reformulation of the social structures in the regions where they will return but also generally in the structures of the nation as a whole.

6. A Community's Denial:

The refugee situation has resulted in divisions within the exiled communities. These divisions take place between those refugees that plan to return to Guatemala and those refugees that intend to stay in Mexico. More than 40% of Campeche's refugee population has decided not to return to Guatemala in the immediate future. ¹¹

These divisions have been felt throughout the refugee society. For Lucía, for instance, the difference between those returning and those staying resulted in the creation of a new women's organization: Ixmucané.¹²

"Vimos que sí teníamos que regresar. Somos de allá y aquí no hay una tranquilidad favorable para nosotros. Pero como a nuestra organización la integran compañeras que ya no piensan regresar, ellas se sentían molestas al escuchar que la organización de mujeres Guatemaltecas va retornar. Entonces, ellas dijeron 'Porqué nos involucran a nosotros? nosotros no queremos retornar.' Entonces se cambió, pues, el nombre de la organización y se buscó el

"We saw that we did have to return. We are from there and here there is no peace that is in our favour. But, because there were other women in our organization that were not planning to return, they were upset when we said that the women's organization was going to return to Guatemala. They then said to us: 'Why do you get us involved in this? We don't want to return'. So we changed the name of the organization and we found the name Ixmucané. We are the ones

nombre de Ixmucané. Somos las
que vamos a retornar al
Petén." -Lucía.

that are going to return to El
Petén." -Lucía.

Lucía's description reflects the attitude of the returning refugees: the choice to remain in Mexico is perceived at best as passivity in the face of oppression and in the worst case as the denial of the refugee's experience with violence. The division which Lucía talks about concentrates on the opposition between reactive political action and passive acceptance of the refugee's predicament. For Lucía, women who decide to remain in Mexico are not only resigned to their situation in exile, but also are opposed to continued political participation with the returnees, thus, their self-exclusion from Ixmucané.

Despite the discursive politicization of the return, the division between returnees and those who will remain in Mexico is not clear cut. The decision to return is admittedly a personal choice. In the majority of the cases, families or close neighbours are torn apart by the division between those who want to return and those who choose to stay in Mexico. Both the reasons for returning to Guatemala and the reasons for remaining in Mexico are varied and in all cases extremely personal. Many of those who have chosen to stay are scared of continued army repression or feel that they are too old to begin anew. Those who return are encouraged by the relative advances in Guatemala's political climate, feel constrained in their Mexican settlements, or simply want to return to their homeland. There is a general awareness among refugees of the complexity of the return. This is manifested in the mutual respect of the residence choice by both refugees who want to return to Guatemala and refugees who want to settle in Mexico. This respect is further enhanced by the participation of returnees in the struggles of to improve education, agricultural subsidies and road access to the Camps. Those who want to settle in Mexico also have participated in the struggles of the returnees

for Human Rights in Guatemala.

A division that occurs frequently in defining future residency is generational. Young people who have grown up in Mexico and have not experienced the violence on the most part do not have as strong ties to Guatemala. In personal interviews with youths who were planning to remain in Mexico there were two reoccurring concerns that encouraged them to want to remain in Mexico. First, there is the threat of violence upon the return. "How could my family return if what they have told me about Guatemala is true?", asked Lola a fifteen year old refugee.¹³ Second, Mexico has become home for some young people. For them, Guatemala no longer means the homeland. This generational division serves to further fragment the refugee community and to complicate the issues surrounding the return.

For the women interviewed, the choice to return to Guatemala is not a simple habitational option. Rather, in returning as organized and politicized communities, it is an action that aims to counteract the official denial of the extreme violence from which refugees originated.¹⁴ In analysing their return the refugees aim to ensure that by representing their pasts in present struggles these violent pasts will not reoccur.

A similar process of reactive consciousness and political action is discussed by Renate Siebert as negative tradition encapsulated in the jewish term *zahkor*- not to forget (Passerini, 1992:166). For Siebert, keeping memories alive is a means for survivors to elaborate on the process of mourning and attain some form of release. Thus, in maintaining negative tradition-traditions based on not forgetting a past experience- in the struggle to return collectively, refugees go beyond confronting their pasts with their present and begin to resolve their experience with violence.

This apparent politicization of the psychological 'healing' process is not restricted to refugee populations. In Jenifer

Schirmer's "Seeking Truth and the Gendering of Consciousness", both the CoMadres of El Salvador and Guatemala's CONAVIGUA widow's organizations are based on negative traditions. In recounting the transference of memories from mothers to daughters in the CoMadre organization, Schirmer notes that to pass on collective memory is to ensure that the past is not repeated (Radcliffe, 1993:49). Evidently, both groups take negative tradition beyond the personal sphere and into the political sphere. While Schirmer does not concentrate on this point, her analysis does show that the organizational impulse of both the CoMadres and CONAVIGUA which was based on a negative tradition has become a reactive political conscience, and further still a gendered consciousness. For Schirmer, the movement seen in Guatemalan and Salvadorean women's organizations from the personal to the political is a result of the connection made by the women themselves between their practical necessities- to never forget, and their strategic needs (Radcliffe, 1993:61). As with the organizations of the CoMadres and CONAVIGUA, refugee organization has also begun with the same aim- to never forget. Currently, this organization is in the process of establishing and developing concrete strategies. This movement towards possible strategies will be the subject of discussion in the chapters that follow.

7. Official Denial- Remembering the Refugee Experience:

A denial of the violence of the early 1980s has been engrained into the official memory of Guatemalan society. This official and collective denial is fuelled by two factors. First, most of the genocidal violence took place in the rural areas far from important urban centres. Thus, the economically and politically influential upper and middle classes were not directly affected and found it easy not only to disassociate themselves from the events, but also to believe the official constructions made by the government. A second factor that has fuelled the

official denial is the trauma still experienced by the populations currently living in the affected rural areas. In Guatemala there have been variable reactions to extreme violence. For much of the affected populations still living in the areas where the violence occurred, healing has begun by forgetting what they suffered. According to Siebert's "Don't Forget", affected populations are prone to suppressing their memories because this process of suppression removes from daily experience problematic aspects of their mental universe (1992:166).

In Guatemala the state built on the existent trauma of affected populations and created a history that omitted the destruction that was the aftermath of counterinsurgency policies.

Dolores describes the effects of this official denial on the refugee population:

"Ese es el gran problema que tiene Guatemala ahorita. Que no hay las condiciones de vida. No hay seguridad. Y además de eso no quiere reconocer que hay refugiados. Siempre nos trata de decir que somos guerrilleros. Pero la mera verdad es que somos civiles, somos mujeres, somos indígenas, somos campesinos. Salimos por causa de ellos. Salimos por la represión. Salimos por causa de ellos porque todavía en Guatemala hay mucha represión del gobierno." -Dolores.

"That is the big problem that Guatemala is facing at the moment. There are no appropriate living conditions. There is no security. And what's more, they don't want to recognize that there are refugees. They always try and tell us that we are a part of the guerrillas. The truth is that we are civilians. We are women, indigenous peoples, and peasants. We left because of them. We left because of the repression. Because of them because in Guatemala there is still repression by the government." -Dolores

What is surprising about the government policies of historical reconstruction is not so much that they existed, but rather that they were successful in erasing memories of events that had occurred less than a decade ago. In capitalizing on persistent traumas and the remoteness of the most brutal violence, the Guatemalan authority has effectively used memory as a political tool. In the paragraph above, Dolores explicitly links the denial

of history to continued government policies of marginalization and repression of refugees. Evidently, history and the need to rewrite history is not simply a question of accuracy but rather a question of political power. Dolores' recognition of this politicization of memory is proof of the political nature of the past. Dolores' challenge to official memory shows that Guatemalan authorities do not have a monopoly on the use of memory.

The dispute over the official and resistance memory has been discussed by Passerini in Memory and Totalitarianism. According to Passerini, memory is disputed in a number of facets including symbols, names and museums (1992:8). The dispute over memory, however, is not clear cut as the resistance to official histories is often mixed with some forms of acceptance (Passerini, 1992:13). The complexity in both accepting and resisting official memories is seen in the following example.

A denial of collective memories is seen in the audiovisual recording of the first collective return of Guatemalan refugees to the Ixcán area. In this recording there are interviews with some of the thousands of peasants that came to the edge of the highway to witness the refugees' return. When the host of the programme asks a woman why she came to the edge of the highway she responds crying: "Para ver si era cierto"¹⁵ (When the People Lead, 1993). The emotional reaction to the return of the refugees is replicated in other interviews also documented in the same recording. This reaction is explained by the response of a returning refugee to the question of why the observers are crying: "ellos ahora se acuerdan porque nos fuimos."¹⁶ (When the People Lead, 1993).

Paul Connerton in How Societies Remember posits that social memory is encoded through either commemorative ceremonies or bodily practices (1989:7). The return of the refugees is a commemorative ceremony because of the symbolic meaning attached to refugees' migration. The refugees' return is in many ways a resolution to the violence that affected rural Guatemalans. In

participating in the welcoming of returning refugees, the spectators are in effect taking part in a process of historical reconstruction that takes away what Connerton has called the 'mental enslavement' practiced by totalitarian regimes (1989:14). Thus, in remembering a past that has been officially silenced, spectators cry when the refugee return forces them to unearth their trauma.

8. From Memory to Action: Healing From Violence

All life histories that I collected on the refugee experience included the violence that occurred in Guatemala. In almost all the interviews it was the first thing that was mentioned by the interviewees. This is a particularly relevant detail if we take into account the formal structure of the interviews. Before beginning each interview I tried to explain to all the interviewees the purpose of my study: I wanted to study the participation of women in the refugee community. Thus, the first and, in most cases, the only question I asked was: "¿Porqué cree Ud. que las mujeres estan participando en las comunidades refugiadas?".¹⁷ The standard response to this question was a detailed description of the violence in Guatemala that forced them into exile. In one case, Carla said before beginning: "Can I tell you about Guatemala first?" In all the cases, the flight into exile was the starting point for any analysis of their current situation in Mexico.

In the first part of the interview with Francisca, she gives us a clear idea of the articulation between community organization and the experience with repression.

"Las razones por las cuales nosotros hemos organizado las mujeres en el refugio?"

-Si.

Como vimos que era necesario. Teníamos que organizarnos principalmente porque teníamos que regresar a nuestro país.

"The reason why we have organized? Us, women refugees?"

-Yes.

Well, we saw that it was necessary. We had to become organized mainly because we were returning to our country. We want to go in an organized

Queremos ir así organizadamente. Ahora no es así como antes cuando empezó la represión. Antes, no sabíamos nada. No sabíamos como defendernos. En ese tiempo éramos bien ignorantes pues, no sabíamos pues ni como ni donde. Lo que hicimos fue refugiarnos y buscamos la vida pues aquí en México. Fue nuestra experiencia misma que nos enseñó, pues, que es mejor estar organizados.... Queremos ir al retorno organizadamente para poder defender nuestra vida. La organización de mujeres que tenemos es para la defensa de nuestra vida. Ya no volverá a ser como antes. Cada quien disperso como que si fuéramos pollitos." - Francisca.

manner. Now it is not like it was before. Before, we didn't know anything. We didn't know how to defend ourselves. We were very ignorant then because we didn't know where and how to do things. What we did was find refuge and save our lives here in Mexico. It is our own experience which has taught us that it is better to be organized.... We want to return in an organized manner so that we can defend our life. The women's organization that we have now is for the defense of our lives. It will never be like it was before- everyone on their own as if we were little chicks." -Francisca.

In Francisca's own words we can see that there is a very strong link between the violence that the refugees were subjected to and the identities that refugee women have defined for themselves in exile. This link is cemented on the need to ensure the physical survival of the women themselves and of their families. In the same way that women perceive their refuge in Mexico as a salvation, organization is seen by them as the only alternative to ensure their dignified survival in the long term. To further examine this link between violence and identity it is important to concentrate on the descriptions of the repression made by the women themselves.

The first case is a story that Claudia told me in her interview. In this story we can see that the movement from violence to a refugee identity takes two steps: from violence to a search for survival and from physical survival to political action. In the excerpt that follows, Claudia contextualizes her own experience with violence in order to document the physical

survival of her family.

"yo salí de Guatemala cuando era chiquita. Salimos por la represión. El ejército llegó a masacrar a toda la gente de mi pueblo y quemaron todas las casas y todo lo que había en las casas de la gente. Entonces, ya no pudimos resistir mas porque ya todas las casas estaban quemadas. Tuvimos que salir. Fue una masacre muy dura, pues. Algunos perdieron a sus papas, otros a sus esposos o sus hermanos. Los torturaron o los amachetearon. Cortaron a los niños en tres pedazos. Esto es nuestro sufrimiento. Tuvimos que salir porque no podíamos aguantar. -Claudia.

"I left Guatemala when I was very small, because of the repression. The army came and they massacred all the people in my town. They burned all the houses and everything in people's houses. After that, we couldn't resist anymore because all the houses were burnt. We had to leave. It was a very hard massacre- some people lost their parents, others lost their spouses or siblings. They tortured them or they cut them up with machetes. They cut the children into three pieces. This is our suffering. We had to leave because we couldn't stand it any more. -Claudia

Claudia experienced violence at the early age of eight years old. In her story it is possible to see that violence still holds a prominent role in her memory of Guatemala. Claudia, like many other women, had a very difficult time narrating the details of the massacres which are only described in very general terms. The excessive use of the passive grammatical tense in the description of violence is further evidence of her effort at detachment.

While in Claudia's story the psychological trauma is very evident, it is also relevant to point out that there is an overt use of the experience with violence to incite o politicized reaction. Thus, for many women active opposition to oppression means that becoming a refugee is in itself an act of resistance. Currently Claudia, a young woman of K'eqchí origin, is part of the leadership of the women's organization Ixmucané. The purpose of her participation is, in her own admission, to prepare her returning community so that the violence that she remembers at age eight will not be repeated on their return to Guatemala.¹⁸

None of the women interviewed explained why they incorporated

their experience with violence into their description of female participation in exile. The answer to this question is implicitly present in all of the stories of the repression. The violence of the early 1980s was responsible for radical changes in the environment, the perception of the world, and the way of life to which the refugees were accustomed. For those interviewed, violence is an indispensable part of becoming a refugee. The shared experience with violence and the incorporation of this experience into the organizational directives of the refugee community, is comparable to what Connerton has defined as necessary histories of group origin that are needed for the establishment of self-identification in new communities (1989:43).

The creation of refugee communities grounded on a violent past is particularly relevant in the return process. The organization of the return is based upon a negative tradition enshrined in the establishment of refugee organizations. Thus, we can identify the first of a series of common or collective responses to extreme violence: a movement from a victim's trauma to a politically active individual and community. In planning their return as a reaction to violence we can see the seeds of a 'culture of resistance'.

In the chapters that follow, the emphasis will be on the changes in the cultural systems that are evidenced in shared behavioral responses and result from the experiences of violence. These changes in social relations will be analyzed through the interviewee's discourses. These structural or systemic changes of the peasant and indigenous culture are manifested in a restructuring of both gender and ethnic consciousness.

Endnotes for Chapter Three:

Between 1981 and 1985, the Guatemalan Human Rights Commission estimated that massacres had taken place in 19 of the 22 departments that make up the Guatemalan territory (CEIG, 1986:37). The department that was most affected was El Quiché with the most massacres. Ethnically, the most affected groups were K'iche', Kanjobal, Q'eqchi', Mam and Jacalteco.

For the purpose of this paper, "testimonios" can be defined as short life stories in detail, in particular, the hardships of the narrator.

A second example of women's histories for the Guatemalan area is Perez-Armiñan's Historia y Cambio de la Mujer K'iche'. While this author does discuss broad economic changes to rural communities, she fails to give us the counterpart to her argument. Perez-Armiñan describes the necessity of some communities to go outside their region for employment, but she doesn't tell us the effects that these migrations have on family relations or on the attitudes and traditions of the migrating men and women. While she does give us an idea that change in the rural community has occurred, her adherence to the preservation of an ideal tradition does not allow her to go beyond a criticism of change into an in depth analysis of the effects of migration on the depressed economies of rural societies.

For an in depth discussion of low intensity conflict strategies refer to Marshal Donald Morelli's "Low Intensity Conflict: An Operational Perspective" Foreign Affairs, November, 1984.

An example of a study that explores the insertion of affected individuals into mainstream society is Frank Stern's chapter in Luisa Passerini's Memory and Militarism. In this essay, Stern explores the insertion of Jewish people into post-war German society.

The massacres that occurred in Guatemala between 1975-1984 aimed to dissuade popular and actual support for insurgent groups. Yet, human destruction was not the means used to attain this aim. Military counterinsurgency was accompanied by a 'rural development' policy that includes programmes such as the "techo tortillero", "fusiles y frijoles" and "development poles". For a more in depth discussion of the interrelationship between military counterinsurgency and rural development, see Insurgencia y Desarrollo Rural researched and published by the Centre for Studies and Research for Guatemala (CEIG).

This point is repeatedly reiterated in the discourses made by indigenous participants in four seminars on ethnic issues sponsored by Flacso-Guatemala between 1985 and 1990. Gloria Tujab, a Poqomchí indigenous person and director of the National Centre for Women, reflects the marginalization still felt today by indigenous peoples: "Why haven't they exterminated ladino populations? Why haven't they attacked the indigenous populations? For us, if we look at things in depth, we have been forced to live but only in the straightjacket that was created for us" (Solares, 1993:28).

In 1983, for instance, the production of food crops was 60% lower than normal averages as a result of the army's destruction of agricultural fields (Jorjón, 1985:105).

Before migrating to Mexico, many of the refugees spent months or years in hiding in Guatemala's jungles and/or mountains. In these internal camps, refugees organized themselves into groups called the Comunidades de Población en Resistencia. While some of the CPR members fled to Mexico as a result of continued persecution, the majority remained hiding in Guatemala's rural areas (Bastida, 1991). Today, in conjunction with the refugee population, they are active members of the Coordinating Body of Groups that have ensued from Repression and Impunity.

The history of the holocaust, affecting Jewish, Gypsy and other selected groups, should not be repeated in this context. It is important to mention, however, that practicing and non-practicing Jewish population living in Europe was not a recognized ethnic group. In the 'racist' conceptions of Nazi violence, the ethnic limits of Jewish population were established using pseudo-racial phenotypic characteristics (Stern, 1992:89).

This percentage was arrived at from estimates made by refugee representatives. It is estimated that a majority of the population of two refugee camps, Los Laureles and Keste, will be incorporated into Mexican society. Although a small number of inhabitants of Los Laureles and Keste have already enlisted in the return it is expected that many more will join. Los Laureles and Keste have the potential to become permanent settlements. They are equipped with the possibility to provide essential services, such as access to potable water, electricity, and education, and current

side access to sufficient arable land for the subsistence of its inhabitants.

The organization of returning refugee women Ixmucané was formed in November . It joins women who will be returning with the Vertiente Norte to the areas of and Alta Verapaz. Ixmucané aims to train their members with practical farm ledge and organizational skills that will allow for the creation of links between returning refugees and the communities surrounding the cooperatives where Vertiente Norte will return. Many of the interviewees in this study were associated with Ixmucané.

Lola, personal interview. October 1994.

The politicization of the return process has also occurred in the case of Zimbabwean refugees from Mozambique. According to Tandai Makanya, a refugee's option to return to Mozambique signifies not only their fear of returning to a violent situation but it also signifies their ideology of struggle (All 1994:111). The Zimbabwean refugees buy their collective identity upon their exile as a representation of the ongoing struggle for free Zimbabwe. According to Tandai Makanya, return meant a betrayal of the struggle of other refugees. This situation bears similarities to the Guatemalan case where although refugees recognize the complexities of the decision to return or be repatriated to Guatemala there are still resentments against those who betray refugees and 'buy' what the government offers.

"To see if it was true."

"Now they remember why we left."

"Why do you think that women are participating in the refugee communities?"

Claudia, personal interview. October, 1994.