

ABSTRACT

Mothers and Widows: Gendered Violence and the Birth of Female CSOs in Argentina and Guatemala

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From the 1970s into the 1980s, Argentina and Guatemala were both ruled by ruthless military dictatorships that systematically killed and tortured men, women and children as a part of their respective wars on subversion. This violence created a generation of childless mothers and widows. This thesis analyzes the role of these women in the emergence of civil service organizations (CSOs) dedicated to protecting women's rights: Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo in Argentina and Coordinadora Nacional de Viudas de Guatemala, the domestic and international success of each, and seeks to identify the factors that aided or inhibited the growth of these organizations.

MOTHERS AND WIDOWS: GENDERED VIOLENCE AND THE BIRTH OF FEMALE CSOs
IN ARGENTINA AND GUATEMALA

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To my parents, who have always encouraged speaking on behalf of what was right, and for those who could not defend themselves. We've come a long way from McDonald's playgrounds. Thank you for everything. I love you both.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

*"Children bury their parents in sorrow, but the sorrow is greater when parents have to bury their children."*¹

Motherhood plays an intrinsic and unique role in Latin America. Familial structures in Latin America provide a person with a sense of self and definition. Latin America is not a culture of nuclear families but of extended families, where grandparents, parents and children are closely tied. Naturally, children expect to outlive their parents; when the order is reversed, the family structure struggles.

The Argentine and Guatemalan military governments during the 1970s and early 1980s created a generation of mothers without children, and wives without husbands. These women either buried their loved ones or worse, never learned their whereabouts and continue to live with uncertainty. The attack on womanhood that occurred under these military dictatorships violated human rights on a broad scale. Among the most prominent and relevant Civil Service Organizations (CSOs) that emerged to protect human rights in response to these attacks were the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo in Argentina and the CONAVIGUA (Coordinadora Nacional de Viudas de Guatemala) in Guatemala. Specifically, these groups rose to preserve the rights of the women as mothers and as wives. The attacks on the child in Argentina

¹ Mabel Bellucci, "Childless Motherhood: Interview with Nora Cortinas, a Mother of the Plaza de Mayo," *Reproductive Health Matters* 7, no. 13 (May 1999): 83.

and the direct assault on womanhood and wifehood in Guatemala necessitated specialized organization that could accurately represent the interests of its members.

Human rights concerns have a long history in Latin America. Through the “Christian humanism of Las Casas and early missionaries, secular influences of the Enlightenment modified by Latin Americans, and the political influences of the United States constitution,” human rights have become a tradition deeply embedded in Latin American culture and therefore continue to shape political and social policies today.² Human rights are classified into two distinct categories: first and second-generation human rights. The first generations rights have been accepted globally and are enumerated in the United Nations (UN) Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. These rights include the most basic human rights such as the right to life, right to freedom of movement, and the right to equality before the law.³ Second-generation rights are enumerated in the UN International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural rights. These rights do not have the same level of acceptance as their first-generation counterparts largely in part to the heavy duty they place on the state.⁴

² Edward Cleary, *Mobilizing Human Rights in Latin America* (Bloomfield: Kumarian Press, 2007), 1.

³ United Nations, *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, 1966. <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/ccpr.htm> (accessed April 25, 2012).

⁴ Maurice Cranston. *What Are Human Rights?* (New York: Taplinger Pub., 1973), 66.

These rights include the right to work under “just and favorable conditions,” the right to social security and the right to the “highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.”⁵ Though Argentina and Guatemala have ratified both Covenants, providing these rights places a heavy burden on the state, which some governments are unable to carry.

This deep tradition of human rights, along with the brutality of Cold War military regimes prompted the rise of activist Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and CSOs.⁶ The Madres de la Plaza de Mayo and CONAVIGUA emerged as a part of that trend. However, both groups went on to achieve radically different levels of success. While the Madres were able to accomplish many of their goals due to their domestic influence, CONAVIGUA continues to be marginalized from mainstream society and has yet to fulfill its purpose.

The different levels of success can be explained through examination of different domestic and international factors. The centralized geographic location of the Madres allowed them broad access to both Argentine society and politics whereas CONAVIGUA struggled to unify in the isolated countryside. Internally, the Madres were composed of educated, middle-class women who possessed at minimum a basic knowledge of their political rights. Conversely, the women of

⁵ United Nations, *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, 1966. <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/cescr.htm> (accessed April 25, 2012).

⁶ Henry Steiner, Philip Alston and Ryan Goodman, *International Human Rights in Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 403.

CONAVIGUA were often indigenous, impoverished, and uneducated women who had never before played an active role in Guatemalan society. Internationally, the Madres were able to capitalize on the World Cup in Buenos Aires, and present their cause before the international community, thus garnering support from crucial International Organizations (IOs) such as the U.N.. CONAVIGUA members had no such opportunity, and were unaware of IOs that could contribute to their cause. As a result, the Madres were positioned for success at the time of their founding while CONAVIGUA faced extensive struggles before their goals could be realized.

Survey of Existing Research

The dictatorships in Argentina and Guatemala waged war on their citizens in two distinctly different manners. While Argentina conducted its 'war on subversion' in a clandestine manner; the Guatemalan government did little to hide its genocidal attacks on the K'iche' people. As a result, the research that emerges from Argentina consists largely of testimonies and findings garnered by international bodies. Exact statistics regarding victims remain unreliable as bodies and records continue to be uncovered. The Guatemalan government kept careful accounts of its attack against the K'iche', which allowed investigating bodies such as Guatemala's Historical Clarification Committee (CEH) to report accurate statistics regarding victims.

There is also a difference in the time span of the research. While organizations like the Madres began offering testimonies in 1977, during the junta rule, similar accounts do not emerge from Guatemala until well into the 1980s,

coinciding with the decline of military rule. This is due in part to the repressive regime that threatened victims from coming forward, and to the lack of literacy and knowledge of the public sphere.

Resources on Civil Society Organizations

Civil society is a broad term used to encompass any person or entity that exists separate from the state. Scholars define civil society as “the sphere of voluntary associations, social movements, trade unions and forms of public communication.”⁷ This can include persons acting independently of the state or larger organizations, such as churches and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Some scholars posit that in order to be considered a CSO, there is a “mobilization of resources” required.⁸ They assert that a CSO is an exercise of social capital, or the ability of a society to promote “an associational life, a good society and a public sphere in which ideas and ideologies can be discussed and debated.”⁹ Under this definition, it would be challenging to classify CONAVIGUA as a CSO due to its limited scope and accomplishments within the public sphere although the

⁷ Roman Krznaric, “Civil and Uncivil Actors in the Guatemalan Peace Process,” *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 18, no. 1 (Jan 1999): 2.

⁸ Christine Bell and Catherine O'Rourke, “The People's Peace? Peace Agreements, Civil Society, and Participatory Democracy,” *International Political Science Review* 28, no. 3 (June 2007): 295.

⁹ Rollin Tusalem, “A Boon or a Bane? The Role of Civil Society in Third- and Fourth- Wave Democracies,” *International Political Science Review* 28, no. 3 (June 2007): 363.

Madres clearly fit. A slightly broader definition considers CSOs as “any grouping that assumes representation of collective interests” so long as it entails the civic engagements of citizens apart from their government.¹⁰ In this case, both organizations fit but the definition loses precision.

The most conclusive and widely-accepted definition of both civil society and CSOs is credited to political scientist, Larry Diamond, who cites civil society as “the realm of organized social life that is open, voluntary, self-generating, at least partially self-supporting, autonomous from the state and bound by a legal order or a set of shared collective rules.”¹¹ Therefore, CSOs would be voluntary social actors from said society who “recognize the primacy of state authority” and hope to achieve their goals under the established rule of law.¹² For the purpose of this study, this third definition will be utilized to analyze the success of the Madres and CONAVIGUA.

Both CONAVIGUA and the Madres are examples of CSOs in third wave democracies (states that transitioned to democratic governments between 1974 and 1988). In these democracies, civil society operates differently than that in first and second wave democracies. Specifically, CSOs that have emerged later in the democratic tradition have the capacity to influence their government in both

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 364.

¹² Ibid.

positive and negative ways. Groups can create a democratic government or restore authoritarian leaders to power.¹³ CSOs in third-wave democracies can be extremely powerful in domestic politics, and as such, a strong division appears between those who successfully earned domestic recognition and those who failed to do so.

Based on this study's definition of CSO, the Madres of the Plaza de Mayo constitute a true and successful CSO. The Madres marched every Thursday to draw attention to their disappeared children, or *desaparecidos*. Their demands included the re-appearance of their children alive, and the group has worked within the democratically elected system to achieve their goals. The Madres were and continue to be partially self-supporting and entirely autonomous from the state. They are also powerful, both domestically and internationally, as typical of a successful CSO in a third-wave democracy.

Unlike the Madres, CONAVIGUA is more difficult to classify. CONAVIGUA is open and certainly voluntary. It is largely self-supporting and operates separately from the state. However, it fails to hold much influence within its domestic governments, and continues to be excluded from proceedings regarding women's and indigenous rights. Thus, the group has been unable to fulfill its goals- a key characteristic in successful CSOs.. Therefore, while CONAVIGUA can be considered a CSO, it is one that has not yet achieved its fundamental goals.

Resources on Argentina

¹³ Ibid., 366.

Secondary sources are critical in establishing the political and social circumstances in Argentina that prompted the creation of the Madres. Susan Eckstein's *Power and Popular Protest: Latin American Social Movements* places a number of CSOs, such as the Madres, in their political and social context to better understand the purpose and struggles of the organization. It also provides a stark analysis of the junta's perspective and motivations behind their "Dirty War." Rita Arditti's article "Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the Struggle against Impunity in Argentina" discusses the history and purpose of the Abuelas as well as elaborates on the "kidnappings" of children of the disappeared and the adoptions that resulted. "Argentina's Mothers of Plaza de Mayo" by Nora Femenía and Carlos Gil discusses domestic campaigns of the Madres, their public reception and their eventual results. This article focuses extensively on the act of "remembering" and highlights the dangers of "forgetting" the events of the past. The work also explores the Madres' work with various international organizations such as Amnesty International (AI) and the Organization of American States (OAS) to which the Madres appealed to in the hopes of discovering the truth regarding their *desaparecidos*.

Primary sources give insight into the motivations of the Madres and their continuing struggle. Nancy Steinbach's article "Interview with Hebe de Bonafini" serves as a valuable primary source. Hebe de Bonafini, former president of the Madres, recounts stories from the founding of the Madres and offers the perspective of a mother regarding the need for human rights defense and the pain of losing a

loved one. Information from the website of the Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense, or EAAF brings the struggles of the Madres to the present day. EAAF releases annual reports that include the discovery of clandestine graves and identification of remains, hoping to bring peace to aggrieved families. Declassified documents released by the United States State Department, “Derian Visit with Admiral Massera” and “Notes from U.S. State Department Human Rights Coordinator Patricia Derian,” provide a stark perspective on the crimes carried out by the junta.

Resources on Guatemala

CONAVIGUA’s growth trajectory and eventual success differed greatly from other Civil Service Organizations (CSOs), due largely in part to internal and external factors pressing on the group. This study will seek to connect the crimes committed against the indigenous Maya population, specifically the K’iche’ people, of whom many CONAVIGUA members belong, the geography of the communities, and the membership composition to their eventual domestic and international success.

The first section will describe the political and social situation in Guatemala at the time of *La Violencia* and K’iche’ roles in the conflict. Primary sources are critical in discussing the emotional toll the violence took on its victims. The Human Rights Office of the Archbishop of Guatemala compiled the comprehensive *Nunca Más* under the Recovery of Historical Memory Project. *Nunca Más*, released in 1999, traces the development of the military dictatorship, explains key tenets of K’iche’

culture and provides first-hand accounts of human rights abuses. This is especially useful in evaluating what pushed the widows to create a group such as CONAVIGUA and what their psychological and emotional states would have been at the time of its inception.

The violence in Guatemala has also attracted the attention of North American scholars. Judith Zur's *Violent Memories* focuses more explicitly on women during the period of violence, or *La Violencia*, and describes the unique struggles they faced. Zur also explains important aspects of K'iche' society which made it more susceptible to rampant violence than other cultural groups. Finally, Zur presents the struggles of the widows in post-war Guatemala, ranging from the psychological and emotional to the tangible such as being forced to disown the bodies of loved ones and bearing the physical pain of escapes across the mountainside. Much like *Nunca Más*, Zur introduces CONAVIGUA and discusses its early successes within the K'iche' community. Zur's research is also pivotal in demonstrating the impact of geography on CONAVIGUA. The description of mountainsides and isolated towns illustrate the extent to which CONAVIGUA members were geographically isolated. It also explains how K'iche' culture, which places a stigma on widows, prevented CONAVIGUA from forming earlier in the period of the violence. Her book, *Violent Memories* also describes the typical K'iche' woman, who is the type of person to whom CONAVIGUA appealed. Unable to speak Spanish and entirely unaware of their political and human rights, these women struggled to find their place in both Guatemalan and international society more so than many other CSOs.

Testimonies will be garnered from reports “Guatemala: A Memory of Silence,” and “Guatemala: Nunca Más,” and books *Violent Memories*, and *Buried Secrets* by Victoria Sanford. All four resources provide first-hand accounts regarding different aspects of the violence. “Guatemala: A Memory of Silence” provides statistics, maps and dates of the massacres as well as accounts from the victims who experienced them. As previously mentioned, “Guatemala: Nunca Más” and *Violent Memories* cover the span of the armed conflict with testimonies dating back to 1962. *Buried Secrets* focuses largely on the aftermath of the violence, and holds accounts regarding shifts in gender and societal roles, and the process of grieving.

Following 2000, there is a significant decline in the research available on CONAVIGUA. Reports from Amnesty International provide glimpses of current projects and successes, though are all limited to Guatemala. The reports also detail the internal structure of the organizations and provide recent information regarding elections and member positions in government.

Primary sources differ greatly between Argentina and Guatemala. Detailed accounts of suffering during the “Dirty War” are widely available, largely due to the NGOs that entered the country during this period to conduct investigations. Such sources do not exist for Guatemala until the end of the armed conflict in the late 1980s due to extensive military repression and lack of international awareness. Secondary sources follow in the same vein. As a result, it is possible to trace the growth of the Madres through articles and interviews dating back to their founding

while retrospective testimonies and research are more prevalent in resources on Guatemala.

CHAPTER TWO

Argentina: The Mothers

*"All for all, and all the children are ours."*¹

On March 24, 1976, a military junta overthrew the Argentine government, ousting the democratically elected Peronist government. The junta quickly launched a 'war against subversion,' or its *Proceso de Reorganización Nacional*. The enemies in the war were the guerillas whom the junta claimed posed a danger to the Argentina nation, especially through their attacks on the armed forces.² The junta held guerillas completely responsible for the collapse in social order. In a 1976 statement released to Amnesty International, the military government denied extrajudicial activities and asserted that "'if anybody violates human rights in Argentina, murdering, torturing and bombing, it is undoubtedly the terrorists," in reference to the guerillas. "[Those] people use violence for [their] own sake or to create chaos and destruction."³ The junta's image in this period "suggests, at least, the perhaps disconcerting qualities of earnest intensity, 'moral' conviction, and

¹ Mabel Bellucci, "Childless Motherhood: Interview with Nora Cortinas, a Mother of the Plaza de Mayo," *Reproductive Health Matters* 7, no. 13 (May 1999): 85.

² Susan Eckstein, ed., *Power and Popular Protest: Latin American Social Movements* (University of California Press, 1989), 243.

³ *Ibid.*, 243.

religion's vision," which provided the junta with justification for their violent 'retaliation'.⁴ The military argued that it was protecting Argentina, Argentine society and the Argentine family with "whatever force necessary."⁵ It attempted to portray itself as the champion of traditional values, and the family. However, the enemies in the war against subversion quickly expanded to include anyone who propagated ideas that differed from the way the junta defined Western and Christian norms in its '*Proceso*.' Suddenly, political dissidents and any students who disagreed with the '*Proceso*' were vulnerable to the junta's violence.

The military government executed its '*Proceso*' on two fronts. First, it confronted the guerillas directly in the cities and rural areas. Guerillas and military officials alike shot down aerial equipment, placed explosives in vehicles and orchestrated anonymous, drive-by shootings that left many wounded and dead.⁶ A special military task force known as the *patotas* waged a second, clandestine campaign of extermination that included the forced disappearances, torture, and death of many 'enemies of the state.' It was the second front in the '*Proceso*' that came to be known as the "Dirty War" throughout Argentine society, named for the inhumane, and concealed tactics of the *patotas*.

⁴ Mark Osiel, "Constructing Subversion in Argentina's Dirty War," *Representations* 75, no. 1 (Summer 2001): 120.

⁵ Eckstein, *Power and Popular Protest*, 243.

⁶ Paul Lewis, *Guerillas and Generals: Argentina's Dirty War* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2002), 123.

The clandestine war left behind devastated mothers, many of whom had watched their children vanish from their own homes. Initially, these women had sought refuge within their families, but as the “Dirty War” continued, they realized that in order to protect their families, they would have to extend their reach beyond the confines of their homes.⁷ Banned from discussing their tragedies publicly by the regime, these women repeatedly saw each other at different functions and offices trying to get information regarding the whereabouts of their children.⁸ In April 1977, fourteen mothers who had lost children gathered in the Plaza de Mayo in remembrance of their loved ones.⁹ They found solidarity in each other, and drew strength from their friendships.

Their chosen form of non-violent, non-confrontational action was a silent march in the Plaza de Mayo, the “one place that can lay claim to most of Buenos Aires’ historical moments and monuments.”¹⁰ The Plaza de Mayo, often considered “the historic and political heart of the nation,” also served as the “historical site of protest by the people and of multitudinous mass demonstrations in Argentina,” due to its proximity to the Casa Rosada, the symbol of Argentine government, and its

⁷ Belluci, 85.

⁸ Nancy Sternbach, “Interview with Hebe de Bonafini: President of Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo,” *Feminist Teacher* 3, no. 1 (Fall 1987): 18.

⁹ Egan and Cordella, “Las Madres de La Plaza de Mayo,” 257.

¹⁰ Danny Aeberhard, Branson, Andrew, O’Brien, Rosalba, Phillips, Lucy, Drew, Keith, *The Rough Guide to Argentina* (London: The Penguin Group, 2008).

placement in the heart of the financial district.¹¹ The Plaza came to hold emotional significance for the Madres, becoming a place to express their pain, and anguish.¹² The marches in the Plaza allowed the widows to present their cause before the whole of Argentina, and to remain in the forefront of the Argentine struggle for human rights. The junta struggled to discourage the marches, but as 'protectors' of Argentine society, it could not attack the mothers during their peaceful demonstrations. Therefore, despite the state of siege that banned gatherings in public places, the Madres continued to meet every Thursday in the plaza to silently march for their disappeared loved ones.

Bound together by mutual hardships and struggles, the mothers journeyed from all regions of Argentina to participate in these protests. They were, for the most part, middle-class housewives with no prior political experience. Most had only basic education, and had been raised to believe that the woman's role was in the home. However, even basic education empowered these women, allowing them to function as a literate, well-spoken group. Many Madres went on to pursue higher levels of education. One member describes her transition: "From being a housewife, I studied and earned a degree in social psychology. I am now head of the Open Department of Economic Power and Human Rights at the School of Economics of the University of Buenos Aires."¹³ The Madres understood that as women and mothers,

¹² Bellucci, "Childless Motherhood," 86.

¹³ Ibid., 87.

they had a unique perspective to contribute to Argentine political landscape, and that education would allow them to make their voices heard.

The marches allowed the Madres to challenge not only the military junta, but also the “patriarchal system that reinforced the power of the man over the woman and that relegated the woman to private spaces.”¹⁴ However, the Madres did not seek to revolutionize the role of the woman in public society. Instead, many mothers felt that their involvement in the group was an extension of their motherhood. Their “identity as a movement was based on that traditional role” and fulfilling it to the best of their abilities.¹⁵ Thus, they began “socializing motherhood,” and thereby transformed grief into a demand for justice. They adopted the slogan: “All for all and all the children are ours.”¹⁶ This was designed to express the collective loss that had occurred and to join themselves to all Argentines.

The Madres’ marches drew domestic attention and support, much to the dismay of the junta. Argentine police began to threaten the mothers with weapons and dogs.¹⁷ Mothers who chose to march in the Plaza encountered police with water cannons, and guns cocked at their backs during the first few months of their

¹⁴ Egan and Cordella, “Las Madres de La Plaza de Mayo,” 257.

¹⁵ Bellucci, “Childless Motherhood,” 86.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., and Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood*, 71.

marches.¹⁸ Despite the constant police harassment, the mothers came to “[cherish] an illusion that as middle-aged mothers they would never be arrested,” but they soon became as much targets as their children.¹⁹ Azucena de De Vincente, founder of the Madres, was abducted by the police and held captive in the ESMA, or the Naval Mechanics School, which was known for its use as a detention and torture center.²⁰ She never returned. The remaining mothers were “constantly arrested . . . beaten, taken to jail” only to return to the Plaza the following Thursday.²¹ Due to the junta’s intimidation tactics, membership in the organization dropped drastically, but the Madres proved hard to deter and after a few months, the membership numbers increased again.²²

When the Madres continued their marches in the face of De Vicente’s disappearance, the junta increased its threats against the group. It targeted the Madres’ remaining children and relatives by kidnapping them. The military government publicly declared that the Madres had brought their pain onto

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 78.

²⁰ Ibid. / In the 2006 report released by the Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense, or the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (EAAF), the remains of De Vicente were identified. The report disclosed that the mother had been tortured and then thrown from a plane, another victim of the “death flights.”- EAAF, “Annual Report 2006,” (2006): http://eaaf.typepad.com/annual_report_2006/.

²¹ Sternbach, “Interview with Hebe de Bonafini,” 19.

²² Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood*, 78.

themselves, but the Madres refused to be repressed. In response, they called a press conference in the Plaza de Mayo to declare that the kidnappings were the fault of the government.²³ The only reporters who dared to attend came from international presses, and their presence prevented the junta from disrupting the conference. The junta retaliated by initiating their own propaganda campaign that portrayed the mothers as *Las Locas*. The campaign succeeded in dissuading some women from joining, but was unsuccessful in stopping the mothers who had already joined. Madres' resiliency and continued public presence ultimately overcame ambiguous societal perceptions, and turned the group into a symbol for the whole of Argentine society that was combating fear and repression.

The Madres' presence in the public sphere garnered them more international attention. In August 1977, Jimmy Carter's administration sent his Coordinator for Human Rights, Patricia Derian, to investigate alleged violations in Argentina. Derian's reports to the Assistant Secretary of State describe accounts of "disappearances, prolonged periods of incommunication, intimidation of lawyers . . . and torture."²⁴ Derian discovered that some kidnapped persons were given live ammunition and sent to pre-determined locations to serve as forced suicide

²³ Ibid., 77.

²⁴ U.S. Department of State, *Notes from U.S. State Department Human Rights Coordinator Patricia Derian*. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1977. Declassified, 2003.

bombers.²⁵ As a result, the junta transformed the innocent into enemies of the state and used these suicide bombers to justify their war on 'subversion.'²⁶ In a visit with Navy Admiral Emilia Eduardo Massera to ESMA, Derian reports that she was fully aware that "people [were] being tortured in the next floors."²⁷ Despite the widespread knowledge of these human rights violations, the military persisted in its campaign to eradicate dissidents.

A second organization based on motherhood concerns also emerged to challenge the military's programs. The Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo, founded after the Madres' in 1977, joined them in marching in the Plaza de Mayo. Throughout the "Dirty War," the junta had been indiscriminate in whom it had taken to its detention centers. As a result, an estimated three percent of the kidnapped women were pregnant, and gave birth while in captivity.²⁸ The junta, unable to justify killing an innocent child, would take the child from its mother and allow military officials and other prominent families to adopt it. The birth mothers were then killed. This practice resulted in further fragmenting the family, and provided the foundation for

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ U.S. Department of State, *Derian Visit with Admiral Massera*. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1977. Declassified, 2003.

²⁸ Francisco Goldman, "Children of the Dirty War," *The New Yorker*, March 19, 2012, 54-65.

the Abuelas' cause: the return of their kidnapped grandchildren.²⁹ While the Madres continued to search for their 'disappeared' children, and fight for justice on their behalf, the Abuelas "demanded the right as 'traditional' women to secure the survival of their families."³⁰ They visited "every court, office, orphanage, day care center, and so on" in attempts to locate their grandchildren.³¹ They also fought impunity, a word that describes the "lack of punishment, of investigation, [and] of justice" surrounding the deaths of their loved ones.³² The Abuelas "challenged silence and denial by courageously bearing witness to the crimes of the dictatorship: they defied the active forgetting that the culture of impunity fosters."³³ Despite attempts by the junta to censor information regarding the disappearances, the Abuelas also worked to keep the clandestine war at the forefront of both Argentine and international society.

In 1978, Buenos Aires hosted the World Cup, an event that brought press, and media from around the globe. When international reporters came across the Madres, they disseminated stories that portrayed the Madres as heroines-

²⁹ Rita Arditti, "The Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the Struggle Against Impunity in Argentina," *Meridians* 3, no. 1 (2002): 22.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 23.

³¹ "History of Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo." Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo. <http://www.abuelas.org.ar/english/history.htm> (accessed March 25, 2012).

³² Arditti, "The Grandmothers of the Plaza De Mayo," 25.

³³ *Ibid.*, 29.

“aggrieved and outraged mothers who were risking their own safety for the sake of their disappeared children,” and not the insane madwomen as the junta had tried to characterize them.³⁴ The marches in the Plaza “were photographed and appeared in newspapers, magazines, and on television screens of five continents.”³⁵ This international publicity allowed the Madres to present their cause to a global audience and establish connections with various IOs.

The first IO to come to the aid of the Argentine people was the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) operating under the Organization of American States (OAS). The Commission launched an extensive investigation into the junta’s extrajudicial activities, and with the help of the Madres and other CSOs and NGOs, compiled detailed reports of human rights violations. These reports included not only background information on individual *desaparecidos*, but also government responses to the claims and government action, if any was taken. After providing aid to the IACHR, “the group joined other human rights organizations in their efforts to publicize the plight of the disappeared in Europe and the United

³⁴ Amy Kaminsky. *Argentina: Stories For a Nation*. Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2008, 160.

³⁵ Marjorie Agosin and Cola Franzen, “A Visit to the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (August 1987): 426-35.

States.”³⁶ The Madres understood that publicity would help assure them permanence and bring them closer to accomplishing their goals.

Increased international exposure followed. The same year, a group of former members who had moved to France formed the Support for the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo (SOLIMA) to provide economic, political and moral aid. Among their most prominent supporters was Mme. Danielle Mitterrand, wife of the French president.³⁷ The Madres were well received globally and even managed to secure an audience with Pope John Paul II. All this international success heightened their profile and increased their domestic support. Ordinary citizens were mobilized and emboldened by their successful protests. It became common at their Thursday marches that people would surround the Plaza to applaud them and cheer, “Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, the people embrace you!”³⁸ This increased public support gave the Madres increased protection to continue their work.

While the burgeoning attention they received aided their cause, a number of the Madres were unprepared to accept the radical transition from housewife to public figure. Many had been raised with the roles that relegated women to the domestic sphere, and men to the position of breadwinner and mediator between the

³⁶ Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, “*Argentina 2209*”, 1977. <http://www.cidh.org/annualrep/79.80eng/Argentina2209.htm> and Eckstein, *Power and Popular Protest*, 253.

³⁷ Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood*, 256.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 123.

private and public domains. However, the “Dirty War” transformed their roles by making the fight for motherhood a public cause. Many Madres expressed the sentiment that in order to act in accordance with their maternal duties, they had to search relentlessly for their children and campaign for their safe return home. Additionally, those Madres with husbands found that the men were supportive and understood the mothers’ need to reunite the family.

The collapse of the junta in 1983 and the return of democracy shifted the ground on which the mothers operated. Unable to reconcile the differences between themselves, the organization split. The latter, afraid that open criticism against the newly established government could weaken it so much so that military rule might return, formed the Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo- Línea Fundadora (The Founding Line).³⁹ They hoped to continue their work but in tandem with the government, rather than against it.⁴⁰ Those who remained with the Madres vocally criticized the steps towards impunity taken by the government. Despite the annulment of the junta’s Self-Amnesty Law, President Raúl Alfonsín’s administration, under pressure from the military, approved legislation that filled the same capacity- the 1986 *Ley de Punto Final* (Full Stop Law), and the 1987 *Ley de*

³⁹ “Who We Are.” Madres de Plaza de Mayo- Línea Fundadora. <http://www.madresfundadoras.org.ar/pagina/whoweare/85> (accessed March 25, 2012).

⁴⁰ Ibid.

Obedencia Debida (Due Obedience Law).⁴¹ The *Ley de Punto Final* created a statute of limitations on cases of forced disappearances and the *Ley de Obedencia Debida* offered amnesty to lower-ranked officers carrying out orders. These amnesty laws outraged the public as well as the Madres, and to mitigate this, Alfonsín called for the creation of CONADEP (*Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas*, or National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons) to “establish the facts about the primary method of state terrorism in Argentina and the toll it had taken.”⁴² It documented the “disappearance” of 8960 people, a number that many believed did not accurately represent the number of victims.⁴³

While the commission’s work answered some questions, it left most mothers without answers concerning the fate of their missing children. The group began to place increased pressure on the Alfonsín administration to find answers. In response, the administration allocated resources and searched through concentration camp sites, prisons and hospitals for *desaparecidos*.⁴⁴ It devoted state resources to identifying the remains of the *desaparecidos*, and was able to provide

⁴¹ “Interview with Pablo Parenti On the Esma Trials in Argentina,” International Center for Transitional Justice, <http://ictj.org/news/interview-pablo-parenti-esma-trials-argentina>(accessed April 1, 2012).

⁴² Thomas C. Wright, *State Terrorism in Latin America: Chile, Argentina, and International Human Rights* (Lanham, MD): Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 143.

⁴³ Susan Eckstein, *Power and Popular Protest*, 245.

⁴⁴ Femenía, “Argentina's Mothers of Plaza de Mayo,” 16.

the Madres with the answers for which they had been searching.⁴⁵ Eunice Paiva, a member of the group, discovered the truth in 1986 about her husband during one of her marches:

Today, I became a widow and my children became orphans. For the first time, after fifteen years, someone has said that he had seen Rubens in prison, tortured, dying. . . Until today, although we knew the truth, my children and I still had fantasies. We never saw him in a coffin. Maybe that is the reason we never imagined him dead, and as incredible as this may seem, we often spoke as if he were alive.⁴⁶

As time passed, the chance of a *desaparecido* appearing alive decreased, but the Madres continued to press for information from the democratic government.

The Madres focused their attention not only on reaching a federal audience, but also on reaching the public as well. In the mid 1980s, they constructed life-sized silhouettes, each labeled with the name of a *desaparecido*, and posted them throughout Buenos Aires. They began a similar campaign with cut out paper hands designed to represent the hands of their missing loved ones.⁴⁷ These campaigns proved successful in bringing increased domestic attention to their struggle and soon, the number of supporters in the Plaza numbered in the thousands.

The surge of media attention led CONADEP to take additional action. It reached out to Dr. Clyde Snow, a forensic expert, and formed the EAAF, or the

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Susan Eckstein, *Power and Popular Protest*, 255.

⁴⁷ Femenía, "Argentina's Mothers of Plaza de Mayo," 16.

Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team, in 1986. EAAF worked to exhume and identify the remains of “Dirty War” victims.⁴⁸ The identification of remains provided closure to grieving families, as well as provided a more accurate death toll.

The Madres shifted their focus as it became clear the *desaparecidos* would not return alive. Then-president of the Madres, Hebe Bonafini replied: “We need to know who the murderers were, not the murdered.”⁴⁹ More significant than the bodies of their loved ones was knowing what had happened to them, and active remembrance, and a call for justice to ensure that these events would never again occur.

The notoriety of the Madres increased when the Abuelas of the Plaza de Mayo took their cause against impunity abroad. In 1996, the Abuelas, along with six other Argentine human rights groups, drafted and presented a report to the European Parliament that described “the systematic human rights violations that took place in Argentina.”⁵⁰ They released a similar report the following year to the United Nations Committee on Human Rights (UNHCR), a report now “widely considered as the most comprehensive international document dealing with impunity” as it helped establish “the right to know, the right to justice, and the right

⁴⁸ Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense, “Founding of EAAF” Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense, http://eaaf.typepad.com/founding_of_eaaf/ (accessed March 2, 2012).

⁴⁹ Femenía, “Argentina's Mothers of Plaza de Mayo,” 17.

⁵⁰ Arditti, “The Grandmothers of the Plaza De Mayo,” 23.

to reparations” as fundamental rights of victims.⁵¹ By continuing to tap into the international audience, the Abuelas and the Madres remained a potent political force within Argentina.

In 1999, the Madres’ and Abuelas’ demand for answers was partially realized. The IACHR recognized the “right to truth” as a human right and began holding “trust trials” which were “non-punitive judicial processes hearing and recording testimony on the Dirty War.”⁵² Through these trials, the Abuelas discovered eighty children who had been kidnapped from their biological parents and raised “by military families under forged identities.”⁵³ Since their founding, the Abuelas have also investigated local and federal courts that granted adoptions, all births registered with governmental offices during the period of the “Dirty War” and more recently, have begun campaigns directed at people encouraging them to come forward if they have “doubts regarding their true identity.”⁵⁴ Though well intentioned, the Abuelas face the resistance of those who do not wish to be tested. In many cases, such as the high profile Noble Herrera case, adopted children have no desire to explore their possible heritages. Like the Noble Herrera children, some view the law requiring

⁵¹ Ibid., 28.

⁵² Sam Ferguson, “The Unending War; Argentina's Quest For Justice,” *Boston Review* (Spring 2008): <http://www.law.yale.edu/news/7384.htm>.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ “History of Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo.” Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo. <http://www.abuelas.org.ar/english/history.htm> (accessed March 25, 2012).

adoptees to have their DNA tested as an invasion of privacy, and have challenged the legality of the law. Still, the Abuelas have thus far succeeded in reuniting over a hundred children with their biological families and remain optimistic that people will continue to come forward and seek the truth.⁵⁵

The Madres still march on the Plaza every Thursday, but their reasons for doing so have changed with the passage of time. Most know that their children will not return alive. However, information about their fates allows the Madres to begin a mourning process, a right that has long been withheld from them. The group also continues to fight against forced military conscription, and to demand criminal code reforms that “would explicitly outlaw actions like those taken by the junta against the disappeared.”⁵⁶ Finally, the marches keep the memories of the “Dirty War” and its victims alive in Argentine society. Former injustices, such as the *Ley de Punto Final* and the *Ley de Obediencia Debida* have been repealed as of 2005. The Madres, like other Argentine human rights group, are resolved to truly defend the warning “never again.”

Both the Madres and the Abuelas have demanded the establishment of a database “to preserve genetic data about the families of the disappeared” so that their grandchildren, who might be in captivity or being raised by families with ties to the military might “learn the truth about their origins, even after the deaths of

⁵⁵ Goldman, “Children of the Dirty War,” 64.

⁵⁶ Femenía, “Argentina's Mothers of Plaza de Mayo,” 17.

their grandmothers” and mothers. The groups were successful and in 2009, the Argentine Congress passed the proposal from the Abuelas that authorized the non-voluntary extraction of DNA from people “who may be the children of political prisoners.”⁵⁷ The creation of this database set a precedent “and enabled the expansion of genetic tracing as an important tool in accounting for the disappeared and providing a remedy for victims.”⁵⁸ Since the creation of this genetic database, the practice has spread to Peru and Guatemala, where grieving mothers will be given the opportunity to locate their children. Both the Madres and the Abuelas are hopeful that these genetic databases will bring peace of mind to grieving mothers and broken families.

As an organization, the Madres have been successful in accomplishing the majority of their goals. The Madres owe much of their success to their constant determination and fortitude, as well as their educated and vocal membership. Due to its significance and centralized location, choosing the Plaza de Mayo for their marches made their presence highly visible both domestically and internationally. Finally, their use of the media allowed them to counter the accusations and slander

⁵⁷ "Argentina media heirs provide DNA samples." *The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation* [CBC] 30 Dec. 2009. *Gale Opposing Viewpoints In Context*. Web. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/story/2009/12/30/argentina-dna-disappeared.html> (accessed March 9, 2012).

⁵⁸ Sharanjeet Parmar, Mindy Jane Roseman, and Saudamini Siegrist, *Children and Transitional Justice: Truth-Telling, Accountability and Reconciliation* (USA: United Nations Children's Fund, 2010), 310.

of the junta, and to bring their cause to Argentina and the rest of the world. Along with the creation of the genetic database, the continued investigations into cases of *desaparecidos*, and the annulment of the impunity laws, the Madres have also succeeded in creating the opportunity for women to move from the private to the public sphere and become involved in the political process.

CHAPTER THREE

Guatemala: The Widows

*"We will never forget. What happened here is written in our hearts."*¹

In 1962, the Guatemalan government launched attacks against a number of guerilla groups labeled as communist that had emerged in opposition to the military government. Four years later, under pressure from the military and the United States to deal with guerillas more "harshly," then-president Julio César Méndez Montenegro signed a pact with the army stipulating that "all communist actions and those against the existing democracy are punishable," and gave the army complete autonomy to combat guerillas in whatever way it deemed appropriate.² Under Montenegro's presidency, the use of "death squads," which would publish a 'death list' of alleged Communists, came into practice. New anti-communist groups, such as the Anti-Communist Organization, adopted slogans such as "See a Communist, kill a Communist."³ Montenegro also approved legislation that "authorized landowners to serve as surrogate security personnel," which resulted in an increase in civilian

¹ Victoria Sanford, *Buried Secrets: Truth and Human Rights in Guatemala* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 211.

² Ernesto Guevara, Brian Loveman, and Thomas Davies, *Guerrilla Warfare* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), page 194 and *Guatemala: Never Again!* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 197.

³ Guevara, Loveman, and Davies, *Guerilla Warfare*, 193.

casualties.⁴ Despite pressures from the military, Montenegro attempted to instill a strong civilian presence in the government, and limited its militarization.

The election of General Carlos Arana Osorio in 1970 fully transformed the government into an extension of the military. Upon taking office, Arana Osorio vowed to put an end to guerilla insurgency.⁵ In November, he declared a state of emergency and under *la ley del orden público*, or law of public order, was able to expand his powers beyond what was constitutional.⁶ Arana authorized “house-by-house” searches for subversive activities and detained much of the previous administration.⁷ Among his people, he created a “climate of terror” in Guatemala, and launched a series of terroristic attacks in the countryside, where guerilla activity was strongest.

In response to government action, guerilla groups focused their efforts on the dismantlement of the oppressive regime. Most guerilla activity occurred in the countryside where groups best knew the territory, and where many indigenous groups, most notably the K’iche’, tended to live. Despite the “professed Marxism-Leninism” of the guerillas, many indigenous groups viewed the guerillas as their

⁴ Ibid., 194.

⁵ *Guatemala: Never Again!* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 197.

⁶ Kenneth Johnson, “The 1966 and 1970 Elections in Guatemala: A Comparative Analysis,” *World Affairs* 134, no. 1 (Summer 1971): 36.

⁷ Ibid., 37.

only defense against the violence of the military.⁸ In turn, the government viewed the guerillas and the indigenous groups as intrinsically linked, and marched on rural villages, attacking those it suspected of subversive activities. In most cases, the accused hardly spoke a word of Spanish nor understood the crimes of which they were accused. Their previous political isolation had left many uninformed of different ideologies.

The K'iche' were limited by their Spanish illiteracy, lack of information, and an overwhelming confusion that prevented their organization in the face of these brutal attacks. To exacerbate their problems, the K'iche' also struggled with poor living conditions. Between 1980 and 1987, the portion of the population living below the poverty line in Guatemala was eighty-seven percent. Seventy-two percent of people suffered from food insecurity. Forty-six percent of the population was illiterate in any language, sixty-six percent lacked access to health care and the life expectancy of a K'iche' living in the countryside was sixteen years less than their ladino (non-indigenous) counterparts which was seventy.⁹ Most K'iche' had no understanding of the political process, much less of human rights. Without this knowledge, the K'iche' were especially vulnerable to the war being waged against them.

⁸ Judith Zur, *Violent Memories: Mayan War Widows In Guatemala* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001), 81.

⁹ Anita Rapone and Charles Simpson, "Women's Response to Violence in Guatemala: Resistance and Rebuilding," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 10, no. 1 (Fall 1996): 116.

The government justified the widespread killings of the K'iche' with claims that preemptive killing would lessen the number of people from which guerilla groups could recruit, thus decreasing their numbers over time.¹⁰ Keeping with the strategy of preemptive killing, the military adapted its fighting tactics to target and terrorize the K'iche' citizens. Militants marched into villages, collected all the men and boys from their homes, took them to the center of town, and killed them.¹¹ These massacres were among the most "effective way of mortifying an Indian, an extreme means of degrading an already devalued population through dehumanizing them."¹² Not only did the massacres help perpetuate the "climate of fear," but also the mass killings decimated the K'iche' population, leaving over 200,000 dead at the end of the armed conflict (See Appendix A).

Additionally, the military focused its assaults on the home. Killing husbands in their houses destroyed the K'iche' sense of refuge within their homes.¹³ Home attacks also allowed the military to target women. The home "was women's main, everyday sanctuary" so that with the "refuge of the home shattered . . . the control and coherence she maintained in the intimate sphere of the home [was] destroyed

¹⁰ *Guatemala: Never Again!*, 219.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 115.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 116.

as well.”¹⁴ Women were forced to cook and entertain their assailants following the murders of their husbands. Though embarrassed and degraded, many women had no other option if they wished to protect themselves and their children.¹⁵ Entire villages were susceptible to decimation and the K’iche’ who resided in these regions were aware of the military’s hatred. Women were consistently raped, sometimes in large numbers, sometimes in front of their husbands and children, which furthered the “foundation of women’s fear, anger and resentment.”¹⁶ The military’s campaign effectively unraveled the social fabric of K’iche’ culture and left women behind as the principle survivors, and as the victims.

K’iche’ women’s testimonies bear poignant witness to their suffering. “Horror, death, torture, and abuses affected men and women, boys and girls, and the elderly. Although most of the victims found in the testimonies were men, specific forms of violence were used against women” that specifically targeted their womanhood and their dignity.¹⁷ From one testimony:

The women who were pregnant. One of them was in her eighth month and they cut her belly, and they took out the little one, and they tossed it around like a ball. Then they cut off one breast, and they left it hanging in a tree.¹⁸

¹⁴ Ibid., 116-117.

¹⁵ Ibid., 76.

¹⁶ Zur, *Violent Memories*, 117.

¹⁷ *Guatemala: Never Again!*, 73.

¹⁸ Ibid., 74.

The other girl, maybe about twenty-three years old, was between the kitchen and the bedroom. She also had three gashes here in the neck, and [K'iche' women] had taken away her baby girl, who was still nursing. There she was, already dead, and still nursing her.¹⁹

While the unimaginable violence weighed heavily on K'iche' women, the slow destruction of the family, and the complete unraveling of their social structure proved to have the longest lasting effects.

The “climate of terror” evolved into full-scale genocidal attacks by the beginning of the 1980s. Seventy percent of the 626 massacres occurred in the region predominantly populated by the K'iche' and claimed over a thousand lives (See Appendix B). Among the most notable massacres was the 1982 Massacre of Dos Erres. Guerillas staged action against Guatemalan security forces, and in response, armed forces officials, disguised as guerillas entered the town and over the course of three days, killed 250 men, women and children, and ultimately subjected residents to both torture and rape.²⁰ Mass killing proved highly effective in preventing the growth of any resistance, and consequently, the lack of resistance allowed the government to continue its genocidal attacks throughout the K'iche' regions.

¹⁹ Ibid., 73.

²⁰ Historical Clarification Commission, *Guatemala: A Memory of Silence*, 2001. <http://shr.aaas.org/guatemala/ceh/report/english/toc.html> (accessed February 1, 2012).

The military's 'war against communism' left both physical and psychological scars on its victims.²¹ Visible violence, as previously discussed, involved public executions, massacres, and the razing of entire village. Cases of invisible violence included "unwitnessed abductions or assassination" which left many unable to place blame for the death of a loved one.²² "During the long years of armed conflict, women were the backbone of the family and social structure . . . Coping with the consequences of violence often meant that women were the sole supporters of their families."²³ For many of these women, the death of their husbands marked their first moments as independent women- as widows.

The women of Guatemala were childless mothers, like those in Argentina, but they were also wives without husbands. K'iche' culture had long likened gender roles "to the sun and moon," neither existing without the other and each with its "own sphere of activity."²⁴ Most women had never known life without a male head of family, but extensive massacres and forced recruitment left behind an estimated 45,000 widows.²⁵ Women who had lived their whole lives subordinate to men had to learn to survive without a husband. It was a turning point in K'iche' society when

²¹ *Guatemala: Never Again!*, 78.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Zur, *Violent Memories*, 51.

²⁵ *Guatemala: Never Again!*, 119.

women suddenly became the providers for their families; when they took up arms against the military, and when they made the bold and brazen decisions typically allocated to men.²⁶ Because there were no more men.

Initially, widows were reluctant to share their struggles, partially due to the fear of the military they still carried, and partially due to the societal isolation in which they were encased. The majority of K'iche' lived in rural areas or on *fincas* (sugar, cotton, or coffee plantations with deplorable working conditions) which were often miles apart. Furthermore, widows competed among themselves for limited resources such as jobs and food, leaving women both geographically and socially isolated. Women were further isolated through the labels placed upon them by K'iche' society, which often identified women by their husbands' political affiliation. This shaped the way the army, guerilla, and the general community responded to them, and in the way in which they were perceived by their neighbors. Many people offered support to widows of army sympathizers while refusing to acknowledge the widows of supposed guerillas in attempts to avoid conflict or army retribution. Women who had been married to an accused 'guerilla' were forced to 'disown' the corpse of their loved ones for fear of being attached to a subversive, and were never allowed to properly mourn their loss.²⁷ Women further divided themselves into widows and those whose husbands had disappeared, those whose

²⁶ Zur, *Violent Memories*, 156.

²⁷ Ibid., 178.

children had lived and those whose children had been killed, and between those who maintained traditional gender roles and those willing to adapt in order to survive.²⁸ Conflict and misunderstandings between these groups prevented them from unifying in the face of government repression.

Widows who survived the violence “were often evicted or terrorized into leaving” by both military officials, and other K’iche’ women who were lucky enough to survive the violence with their families intact.²⁹ Widows as single women posed a threat to the stability of this structure. Many times, these widows who had never left their hometowns were forced to travel through the mountainside with their children in search of safety and solidarity. Journeys were often long and physically brutal. Food and shelter were never assured, and poor living conditions resulted in disease. Women who were lucky enough to find food often had no way to cook it “because that would have given away the people’s hideouts in the hills and in the forest.”³⁰ Many children died as a result, and mothers were forced to choose between losing some children by continuing to travel with the ill child, and saving others by leaving their sick ones in the mountains. Some women remained hidden in the mountainside for the duration of the military violence while others sought refuge in foreign countries, arriving with nothing but their children, and the tattered

²⁸ Ibid., 147.

²⁹ Ibid., 175.

³⁰ *Guatemala: The Companeras Speak: Testimonies of Six Women* (Berkeley, California: Guatemala News and information Bureau, 1982), 8.

remains of their clothes.³¹ Because flights through the mountains were hardly premeditated, women were left with little time to prepare themselves. One woman recounted:

I turned off the light and we left. I very nearly fell into the ravine with my children, because there is a ravine down below there. We left there and we went to the wilds. I got that far, carrying my seven children with me. I stayed there for fifteen days. . . ³²

These women “had to cope alone and see to the material and emotional survival of their families.”³³ However, most had little idea of how to be both a mother and a father, and felt overwhelmed by the sudden responsibility and grief. As another woman recalled:

They killed my husband. From then on, I suffered like a little girl. I couldn’t manage money, or work, or support my family. You see, the life of a woman among men is hard; and the life of a woman alone with her children is worse yet. They left me like a bird on a dead branch.³⁴

The social network of K’iche’ women traditionally consisted of family members, and the deaths of husbands and children left widows without a place to seek solace. In order to find companionship, widows were forced to move into more public spheres.

³¹ *Guatemala: Never Again!*, 63.

³² *Ibid.*, 59.

³³ *Ibid.*, 72.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 82.

The political situation for the K'iche' worsened under General Romeo Lucas García, who followed General Arana. Under Arana, the recorded number of murders increased from 1,371 in 1979 to 3,422 in 1981.³⁵ Widows had begun to establish 'safe houses' in churches, empty buildings and in school, providing a home for victims who had lost their homes. However, the escalating violence threatened the tenuous support groups that the widows had formed. Finally, in 1984, the local meetings of women were consolidated into a regional organization called CONAVIGUA. These widows worked to foster a "positive reconstruction of identity through connections with history in a more distant past."³⁶ Drawing strength from their K'iche' faith and ever-growing self-reliance, members urged each other to hold on to their memories, and to tell their stories.

By the mid 1980s, government pressure on regional groups made it clear that consolidation into a national organization would be the only way to survive.³⁷ Eventually, the widows who had first met in 1984 sought refuge in a church.³⁸ After their initial meetings, the women began making *denuncias* against the military, and sought aid for food, medicine, clothing and housing. On May 14, 1988, under the new, consolidated CONAVIGUA, they organized their first protest in the city of El

³⁵ Ibid., 211.

³⁶ Ibid., 185.

³⁷ Rapone and Simpson, "Women's Response to Violence", 122.

³⁸ Radcliffe and Westwood, "Viva," 50.

Quiche.³⁹ They articulated eleven objectives, demanding both first and second-generation human rights. They demanded basic rights, such as the rights to life and to political participation, as well as economic, social and cultural rights:

meeting basic needs for food, housing, education, and healthcare for themselves and their children; proposing new legal protections for widows and poor women; bringing the law to bear on those who violate and abuse women; the end to forced recruitment of their sons and family members to the military and the civil patrols; control over international aid meant to assist them; and integrated development for women so that they can contribute to their communities and solve national problems.⁴⁰

They also requested placement in the Unidad de Acción Sindical y Popular (UASP), the national coalition of civil and union groups.⁴¹ Their goals included women's participation in social, cultural and religious actions, an end to forced recruitment of K'iche' men by the military, and aid for women widows struggling under the burden of their new responsibilities.⁴² In short, CONAVIGUA fulfilled the crucial role of mediator between victims and the government during the Vinicio Cerezo Arévalo administration, which held power from 1986 to 1991. Despite high hopes for the first civilian government since 1966, Cerezo failed to bring the guilty to justice. Military officials responsible for egregious acts of violence walked among their victims, further perpetuating the "climate of terror" that had begun years ago.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Rapone and Simpson, "Women's Response to Violence", 123.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Radcliffe and Westwood, "*Viva*", 53.

To combat this, CONAVIGUA moved to organize nationally. In September 1988, CONAVIGUA held the First National Assembly of Widowed Women at which members elected their National Council by a majority vote.⁴³ To further organize itself, the National Council then developed a “National Assembly, National Board of Directors, General Coordinator, Areas of Administration and of Projects, Five Programs, Regional Structures and the Local Board of Directors.”⁴⁴ The Cerezo administration pledged to work with CONAVIGUA by dispersing seeds, tools, and loans through the organization. The widows viewed this as an important step towards national recognition, but were only further humiliated when, upon arrival at government offices, they were berated for leaving their homes.⁴⁵ As women, and especially as widows, CONAVIGUA received little respect from society, much less the government.

CONAVIGUA continued to encounter obstacles to its growth. Membership numbers were inconsistent for the first few years because widows would join the group in hopes of receiving crucial aid such as food and water, and would withdraw when their expectations were not met. Some only joined because “they had heard it

⁴³ Radcliffe and Westwood, “Viva,” 51.

⁴⁴ Medrano Carmen Álvarez, María Rosenda Camey Huz and Daniel Domingo López, *Report of Organizational Performance Review: CONAVIGUA*. Forum for Women and Development: 2009.

⁴⁵ Radcliffe and Westwood, “Viva,” 51.

was giving away free fertilizer.”⁴⁶ Widows were also still heavily burdened by fear, and were reluctant to speak publicly of their tragedies. As a greater number of massacres occurred in the countryside, many survivors submitted to the culture of fear, which had succeeded in “fragmenting communities and isolating people.”⁴⁷ One survivor of a major massacre, for example, lived twelve years without talking about the massacre that included his father” for fear of being labeled a subversive.⁴⁸ Rosalina Tuyuc, founder and General coordinator of CONAVIGUA, also understood the stigma of publicly discussing past events. When people asked where her husband had gone, she would tell them he had run off with another woman, afraid that the truth, that her husband had been abducted in 1985, would incur the wrath of the military. The forced isolation, she remembers, left her carrying a heavy burden.⁴⁹

CONAVIGUA struggled to establish itself without full support of the K’iche’. Widows disagreed regarding women’s roles in the public spheres. Furthermore, military persecution of CONAVIGUA members discouraged would-be supporters from associating with the group. Military officials followed members to and from meetings, adding their names onto a ‘death list.’ Others experienced physical

⁴⁶ Zur, *Violent Memories*, 149.

⁴⁷ Rapone and Simpson, “Women’s Response to Violence”, 122.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 122.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

violence. One member describes an army official holding a knife to her throat, threatening her if she did not cease her subversive activities. Many describe similar threats against their lives for participating in the organization.⁵⁰ Military deterrence was successful and membership in CONAVIGUA dropped drastically. Widows who remained dedicated became increasingly reluctant to speak of the horrors they had witnessed and continued to suffer.

While the army was successful in deterring many women from joining CONAVIGUA, the need to share experiences and actively remember their loved ones ultimately proved more compelling than intimidation. As widows began to attend regular meetings, it became clear that the group would have to contend with internal challenges. Of the 9,000 members, only twenty-five to thirty women were literate and of those, even fewer were literate in Spanish.⁵¹ CONAVIGUA had to first establish literacy classes for its members in order to “learn the language of bureaucracy, law and power as a way both to make their demands known and to protect themselves.”⁵² The Spanish language enabled these widows to learn their basic political and human rights. A founding member of CONAVIGUA explains:

We’ve always lived in ignorance, not knowing if we can really expect respect or have the right to protest such a thing as rape. Now [that] we have the experience of becoming organized, this becomes possible [to consider]. . . If an offense is committed against a woman, we now

⁵⁰ Ibid., 124.

⁵¹ Radcliffe and Westwood, “*Viva*”, 54.

⁵² Ibid.

know how to bring the man before the authorities. That teaches the men to respect us as human beings.⁵³

Basic levels of education allowed these women to express themselves in ways that appealed to larger populations. Members of CONAVIGUA were also concerned with the “physical and psychological health of indigenous,” as half of all children died before the age of five, and worked to increase child access to healthcare.⁵⁴ Women worked to understand the bureaucracy and began to express their demands to the government.

Rosalina Tuyuc and the CONAVIGUA leadership understood that to achieve success, the group had to diversify its member base to include widows from all ethnicities and socioeconomic classes. Though the group was comprised largely of indigenous, rural women, it encouraged other women, both non-indigenous and urban-dwelling, to “join them in their struggle for human rights.”⁵⁵ Women, they emphasized, carried a heavier burden than did anyone else affected by the violence. They were entrusted with the traditional care of the child, given the responsibility of being the sole income-generator of the household, and were expected to instill positive cultural values and skills in the next generation.⁵⁶ The prolonged period violence, lack of external support and internal obstacles prevented CONAVIGUA

⁵³ Ibid., 55.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 54.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 49.

⁵⁶ Rapone and Simpson, “Women’s Response to Violence”, 119.

from becoming self-sustaining, and from having a strong impact on Guatemalan society for many years.⁵⁷

The continuous armed conflict also disrupted investigations of human rights violations for thirty years. Perpetrators responsible for egregious acts of violence were not held responsible until the signing of the Oslo Peace Accords in 1993. The Accords, signed by President Ramiro de León Carpio, signaled the end of the armed conflict and mandated the creation of the CEH (*Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico*, or Historical Clarification Commission) which would be headed by international lawyers and experts, and aided by multiple NGOs and CSOs, to investigate the human rights violations, and compile a report for the people of Guatemala.⁵⁸ Due to the magnitude of the violations, the CEH would take five years before issuing its report, *Guatemala: Memory of Silence* that would become the “authoritative story of some of the darkest years the country had lived through during the last century.”⁵⁹ The CEH openly stated that the ninety-three percent of human rights violations that occurred “are directly attributable to the State . . . [and] for the actions of civilians to whom it delegated authority to act on its behalf” (See

⁵⁷ Radcliffe and Westwood, “*Viva*”, 53.

⁵⁸ Amnesty International, “Justice and Impunity,” Guatemala's Historical Clarification Commission 10 Years On (February 2009): <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/country,AMNESTY,COUNTRYREP,GTM,49a651682,0.html> (accessed January 31, 2012).

⁵⁹ Marcia Esparza, “The Guatemalan Truth Commission: Genocide through the Lens of Transnational Justice,” in *International Crime and Justice*, ed. Mangai Natarajan (New York, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 404.

Appendix C). CONAVIGUA was among the CSOs chosen to aid the CEH, and its members provided testimonies for use in the investigation.

After the signing of the Peace Accords, the Catholic Church worked to preserve a record of the genocide. It established and funded the Recovery of Historical Memory (REMHI) project. Its report, entitled *Guatemala: Never Again!*, included testimonies from widows recalling the violence, some of which dated back thirty years. They recalled memories from life before the conflict, the moments in which they lost their husbands; and in some cases, children; the razing of their villages; the flights through the mountains and the aftermath in which they were left to reconstruct their lives.

In 2003, CONAVIGUA had another opportunity to play a pivotal role on the national stage. The Alfonso Portillo administration created the National Reparations Program (PNR), an autonomous entity presided over by CONAVIGUA leader, Rosalina Tuyuc. The PNR sought to provide victims with “material restitution, financial reparations, psychosocial reparation, or rehabilitation.”⁶⁰ Unfortunately, participating CSOs failed to work cohesively and were excluded from the program in 2009. Nevertheless, CONAVIGUA continued to broaden the horizons of indigenous people in Guatemalan society by expanding its literacy classes to include any student who wished to learn. It also continued to establish safe retreats

⁶⁰ Lieselotte Viaene, “Life Is Priceless: Mayan Q'eqchi' Voices On the Guatemalan National Reparations Program,” *The International Journal of Transitional Justice* 4 (2010): 8.

for widows, a practice that had begun during the armed conflict.⁶¹ Finally, the solidarity CONAVIGUA offers continues to be crucial to grieving widows and families in the process of reconstructing themselves.

Presently, CONAVIGUA seeks to strengthen its relationship with both the local and national government in order to promote the interchange of information and political and social discussion. The organization encourages group participation in the government to ensure that the indigenous voice continues to be heard. CONAVIGUA has also founded the Movimiento de Jóvenes Mayas (MOJOMAYAS), a group aimed at increasing social and political participation among indigenous children, which has expanded to include six regions of the country.⁶² Through such programs, CONAVIGUA continues to expand its political footprint in Guatemala.

Since its birth, CONAVIGUA has worked to protect women victims of armed conflict, impoverished women, women engaged in the fight for justice and dignity for indigenous victims of violence, and women in roles of political power.⁶³ CONAVIGUA's evolution to fight on behalf of all women gained the group national momentum and allowed it to accomplish some of its goals, particularly those regarding first-generation rights. The group "has been able to clarify the whereabouts of missing persons" and continues its call for justice against the

⁶¹ Medrano, Huz and López, *Report of Organizational Performance Review: CONAVIGUA*.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

perpetrators.⁶⁴ It has also increased opportunities for indigenous women in urban and political spheres. However, their demand for second-generation rights remains unanswered. This is due in part to the lack of resources available to the Guatemalan government. Second-generation rights place a financial heavy duty on the state, and it feasible that Guatemala does not have the means to fulfill those duties. Overall, the group has transformed itself into a symbol for all indigenous in Guatemala and continues its struggle to gain international credibility as its members travel abroad, increasing awareness of the rights of indigenous and of women.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusion

“Let the history we lived be taught in the schools so that it is never forgotten, so our children may know it.”¹

The political climates in both Argentina and Guatemala in the 1970s and 1980s created a pressing need for a new kind of human rights organization. The tradition of human rights for men had long been in existence but few groups focused on the application of those same rights to women. “As women became more active in the political sphere, they began making much-needed reforms such as creating ‘autonomous organizations, increasingly pulling away from the male *patrones*.”² Many women chose to act out of love for their families. Mothers without children fought for their stolen motherhood, and wives without husbands fought for their broken families. Both CONAVIGUA and the Madres looked for ways in the system to reconstruct the lives of their members. The attack on the private sphere pushed these women into the public sphere where, even if unwilling and unschooled, they

¹ Historical Clarification Commission, *Guatemala: A Memory of Silence*, 1999. /In 2011, the Guatemalan government issued an apology for its involvement in the massacre. Four officers directly involved were convicted of human rights abuses and sentenced to 6,000 years in prison. No high-ranking official has been indicted for participation in the massacre.

² Edward Cleary, *Mobilizing Human Rights in Latin America* (Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press, 2007), 25.

understood the need to defend themselves and their families against the injustices carried out by their respective governments.

The Madres and CONAVIGUA, though both prompted by this unraveling of familiar societal fabric, focused on two different elements of familial disintegration. The Argentine regime targeted young people who it accused of subversive activities. Its victims faced extrajudicial execution or “disappearances.” The military of the Guatemalan regime directed its violence against the K’iche’ people as a whole, executing a genocide in its own countryside. Men were targeted as possible allies to the guerilla forces. Women and children were subjected to specially tailored methods of violence. As a result of the different targets of violence, two different types of CSOs emerged. The Madres created a group to defend their children and protect their families, relying on a defense of first-generation human rights. They wanted justice. While CONAVIGUA was founded to allow widows to access a new support network and make sense of the world as a single woman and mothers, they called for second-generation human rights: social justice.

The developments of the Madres and CONAVIGUA were highly influenced by the geographic location and membership of each group. Localized in an urban area and composed mainly of middle class mothers, members of the Madres were both politically and socially aware and articulated a demand for justice that was understood globally. Thus, the Madres appealed to and drew the sympathy and support of a global audience. It was this global support that prevented the junta from responding to the Madres with excessive force. The Madres and their cries for

justice for their children captivated the international audience. In direct contrast, CONAVIGUA was largely composed of K'iche' women from the countryside, many of whom were unable to speak Spanish, much less be aware of their basic human rights. The widows were largely uneducated and had rarely formed profound relationships outside of the home. K'iche' widows were highly suspicious of public gatherings and many held poor opinions of those who sought a role outside of the home. In addition to restrictive social norms, the Guatemalan military was highly effective in intimidating the members of CONAVIGUA. Threats of death, severe beatings and killings prevented CONAVIGUA from gaining the membership it needed in order to thrive as a national CSO. Additionally, the goals articulated by the organization went beyond the call for justice because of the genocide. It focused instead on resolving inequalities in society that made the genocide possible calling for equal living conditions, clean water, and education. However, in 1984, the plight of indigenous women reached a global audience with the publication of Nobel Prize winning *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. Indigenous groups, including CONAVIGUA, were able to make the most of the attention placed on them, and escalated their campaigns for justice.

The way in which these two CSOs handled media and international relations directly impacted their success. The Madres of the Plaza de Mayo were able to use the media to achieve domestic and international success not commonly found in most CSOs. They overcame government actions to suppress them by advertising their cause domestically through a number of highly effective and visible domestic

campaigns. Their effective use of the media translated into success in fulfilling their purpose. They have supported anti-impunity laws that the Argentina government has passed, opening the way for new trials of those guilty of the disappearances and kidnappings, helped create a genetic database for missing children, and remain a prominent and highly visible organization in contemporary Argentina. Composed largely of educated, middle-class mothers, the Madres are women that resonate with much of the Western world. They have had members who had dispersed throughout the world, and were able to spread word personally of the Madres' purpose. Their Catholic faith allowed them to reach out to the Vatican, and appear before Pope John Paul II. This gave the Madres an advantage in organizing the support of Argentine society. The only enemy they had was the military regime, and it was crippled by its pledge to protect the Argentine family and womanhood.

In contrast, their ethnicity, class, and geographic location marginalized members of CONAVIGUA. As such, they lacked the tools to resist government oppression effectively. They could not speak the ruling language, Spanish. They did not understand how the political system functioned. They had no international contacts and were unfamiliar with International Organizations (IOs) that could help them such as the UN. These factors resulted in a noticeable absence from the international stage. Though CONAVIGUA has gained more recognition in recent years, its international prominence is markedly weaker than that of the Madres. Their goals calling for social justice require much more than reform and action from the judicial system.

CONAVIGUA was ultimately presented with more challenges regarding the dissemination of their information than were the Madres. The Madres were educated women who understood the importance of the press and international connections, and were consequently able to capitalize on moments of global attention. International prominence afforded them a kind of protection in Argentina that in turn allowed them to pursue their goals more ardently than before. On the opposite end of the spectrum, the women of CONAVIGUA remained largely insulated from the global stage. International attention hardly focused on Guatemala but even if it had, it is doubtful that the members of CONAVIGUA would have been aware of how to publicize their cause. Many women in CONAVIGUA had never ventured outside of their village, or participated in government and thus, were unaware of how to push their cause forward internationally. Members of CONAVIGUA pursued their goals but were hindered by unchecked military repression that lasted well into the 1980s, and by societal tension.

Both the Madres and CONAVIGUA qualify as CSOs under Diamond's definition. Both organizations are open, voluntary, self-generating and bound by a set of shared rules. However, under the requisites for success for third-wave democracy CSOs, the Madres easily classify as successful while CONAVIGUA, while making impressive strides, has yet to gain much domestic and political traction. Part of the success of the Madres can be attributed to the type of demands they made. The Madres sought to restore their well known and respect first-generation human rights, including the right to life and the right to truth. As a result, IOs such

as the United Nations and Amnesty International were able to lend support to the Madres, and the Madres were able to achieve their goals. In the past twenty years, the Madres have pushed anti-impunity legislature through the Argentine Congress and have succeeded in creating a genetic database that will receive state funds until 2050.³

CONAVIGUA's objectives included a much more controversial set of human rights. The rights to housing, education and healthcare are enumerated in the UN International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, and are thus considered second-generation human rights. This type of right is much more difficult to attain than a first-generation human right as it requires a commitment on the part of the state to uphold these rights. In order for CONAVIGUA to accomplish its goals and press the government for second-generation rights, it must establish itself as a domestic force. The decline in external threats has allowed the organization to strengthen itself, develop highly structured internal committees, and expand their boundaries beyond K'iche' districts. Members of CONAVIGUA began as women with no prior knowledge of their political system and have become knowledgeable enough in Spanish to understand their bureaucracy. However, this learning process has delayed CONAVIGUA's successes. Unlike the Madres who were able to publicize their cause from the beginning, CONAVIGUA is just now

³ Sam Ferguson, "The Unending War; Argentina's Quest For Justice," *Boston Review* (Spring 2008): <http://www.law.yale.edu/news/7384.htm>.

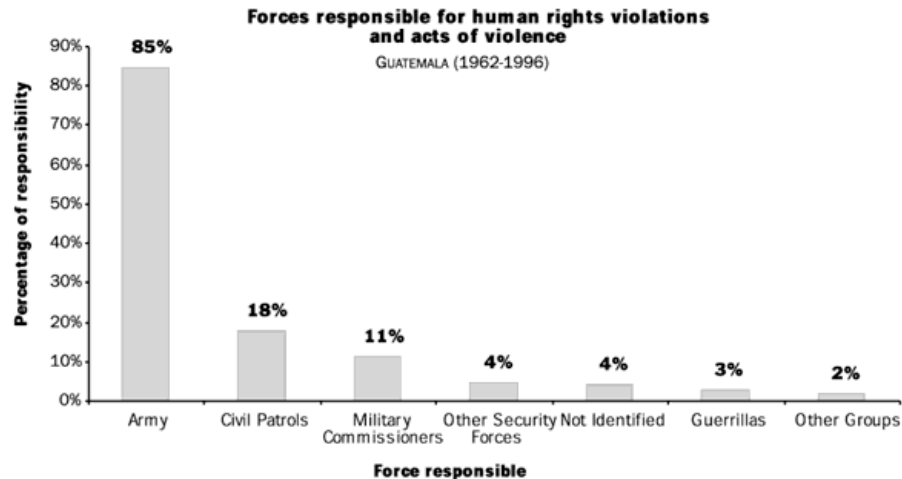
discovering that capability, almost twenty years after the signing of the Oslo Accords.

Present-day CONAVIGUA has improved itself dramatically over the past twenty years. At its current rate of growth, it is entirely plausible that the group will one day help Guatemala achieve greater social justice. Presently, its success cannot be compared to that of the Madres. The Madres owe much of their quick success to their initial cohesion, education, geographic location, and the World Cup games, all of which CONAVIGUA lacked. As the Madres continue to march and CONAVIGUA continues to expand, it is possible that they will someday share an equal level of success. For the time being, however, the Madres remain a potent symbol of Argentine resiliency while CONAVIGUA, like the K'iche' people, still struggles to overcome its marginalized position and are still searching for social justice.

APPENDICES

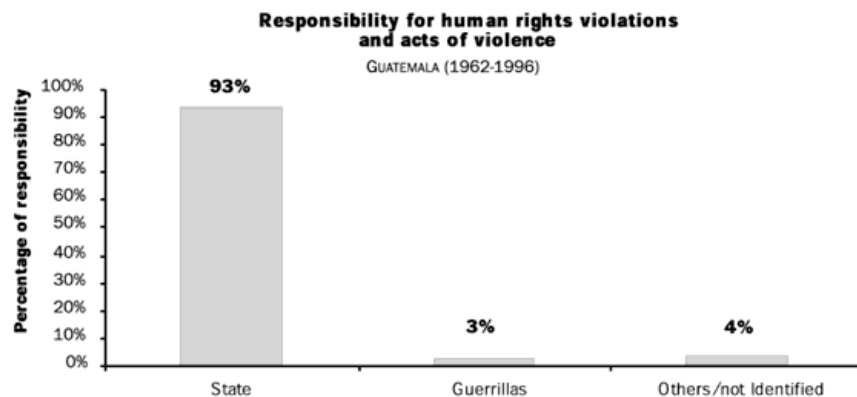
APPENDIX A

The following graph demonstrates the excessive use of violence carried out by military forces, and those to whom it granted power. Guerilla actions accounts for three percent of all violent acts.



SOURCE: CEH Database

The columns indicate the percentage of responsibility by different groups, whether acting alone or in conjunction with other forces, with regard to the total number of human rights violations and acts of violence committed. Consequently, the "Army" category accounts not only for the violations committed by this force when acting alone, but also for those committed in conjunction with Civil Patrols, military commissioners, death squads or other members of State security forces. In the same way, the "Civil Patrol" category records the violations committed by its members, acting alone or together with another force. This logic holds true for all of the categories, therefore the sum total of the percentages is greater than 100.



SOURCE: CEH Database

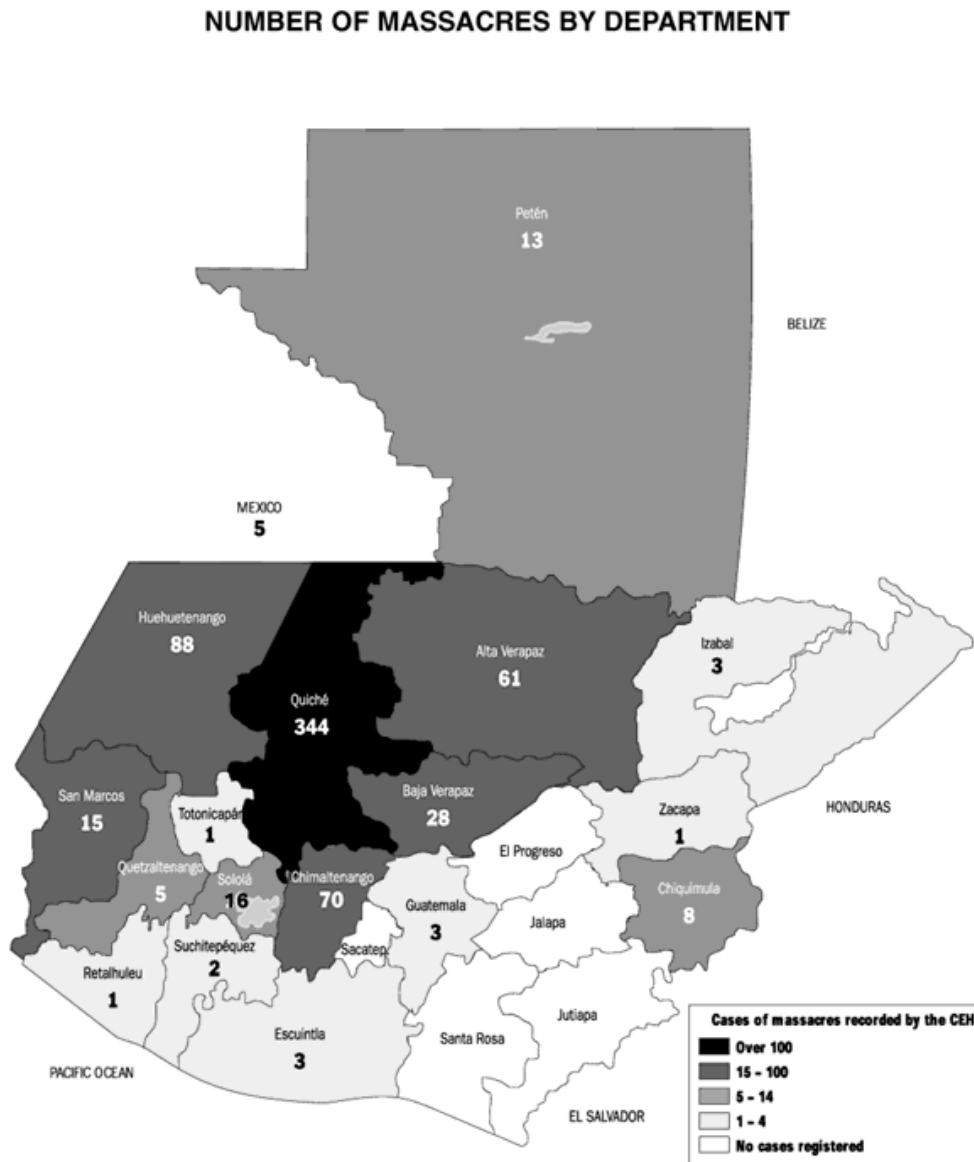
The categorisation of group responsibility yields the following data: 93% rests with agents of the State, including in this category the Army, security forces, Civil Patrols, military commissioners and death squads; 3% rests with the guerrillas; the remaining 4% rests with other unidentified armed groups, civilian elements and other public officials.

1

¹ Historical Clarification Commission, *Guatemala: A Memory of Silence*, 2001.
<http://shr.aaas.org/guatemala/ceh/report/english/toc.html> (accessed February 1, 2012).

APPENDIX B

The following map details the number of massacres per department. An overwhelming concentration can be noted in the Quiché department, which contains a largely indigenous population.



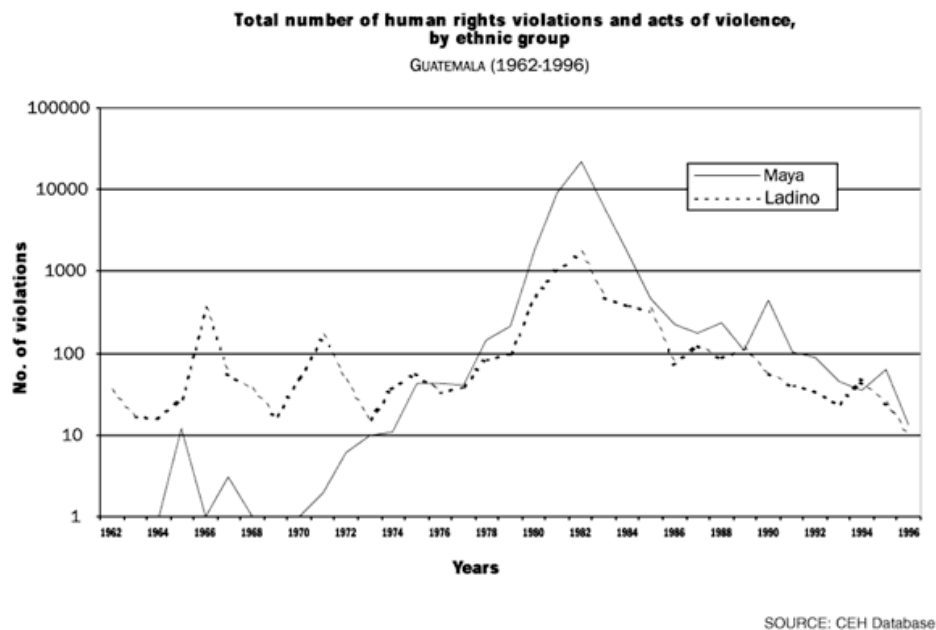
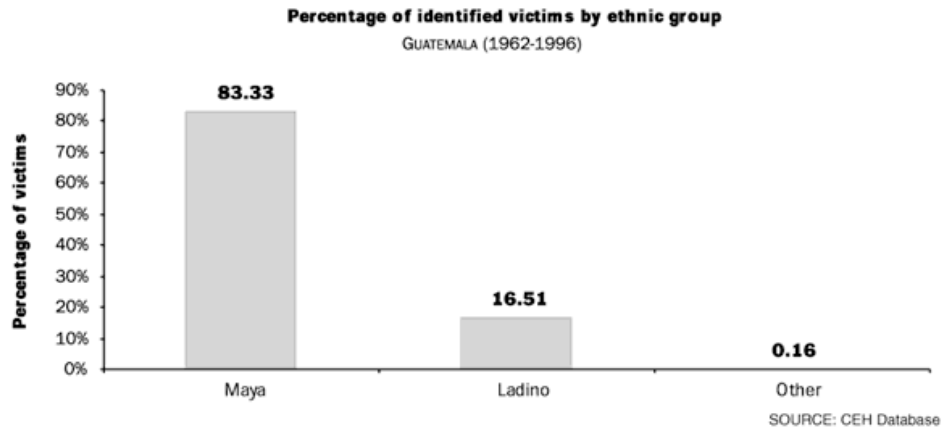
SOURCE: CEH Database; total number of massacres – 669 cases – perpetrated by all responsible forces.

2

² Historical Clarification Commission, *Guatemala: A Memory of Silence*, 2001.

APPENDIX C

This chart highlights the disproportionate violence suffered by the indigenous population as opposed to their ladino counterparts.



NOTE: The lines of the vertical scales – number of violations – follow a progression of multiples of ten.

3

³ *Guatemala: A Memory of Silence*, 2001.

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