

**EXHUMING GUATEMALA'S GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE:
JUSTICE, TRUTH-TELLING, AND REBUILDING IN A
POST-CONFLICT SOCIETY**

by

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Abstract

This interdisciplinary thesis is grounded in forensic anthropology, feminist geography, and the violent history of the past century in Guatemala. I seek to determine a link between past and present gender-based violence in Guatemala. Historically, Guatemala has been gripped in periods of political, economic and social transitions. I argue that gender-based violence becomes most pervasive during these periods of transition, and suggest that the 36-year armed conflict that began in 1960 exacerbated the pre-existing forms of gender-based violence that began before the Spanish Conquest. I describe the characteristics of gender-based violence as they differ between men and women; despite the fact that more men were and are murdered in Guatemala than women, the method by which women have been and are killed is personal, with greater physical contact than in the cases of men. This form of violence is labeled femicide, that is, the killing of women because they are women, a crime associated with the impunity that perpetrators are granted by the state.

The research for my thesis was in collaboration with the Guatemala Forensic Anthropology Foundation (FAFG), the *Fundación Sobrevivientes* (Survivor Foundation) (FS), and the *Grupo Guatemalteco de Mujeres* (Guatemalan Group of Women) (GGM). Based on this fieldwork conducted in Guatemala in May 2008, I share the interviews of family members of victims as they voice their *testimonios* of violence. I examine the history of violence that occurred in the preceding 100 years, since the dictatorship of Manuel Estrada Cabrera (1898-1920) who introduced the ideology of the *Caudillo* to the emerging nation state. Post-peace gender-based violence, the period of violence since the signing of the Peace Accord in 1996, is explored, and I provide evidence that there is an increase in gender-based violence, despite the declaration of peace. The challenges to reconciliation are described using a framework of

forensic investigation to analyze the state of women's bodies as they are found in contemporary cases, compared to female remains from historical cases of recently exhumed clandestine sites related to the early twentieth century as well as the armed conflict. I investigate methods that can be used in the prevention of gender-based violence and recommendations to consider when approaching the justice system to effect change and put an end to impunity.