MEXICO - "The Other Ayotzinapa": Organizing Against Feminicide

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March 13, 2015 - Americas Program - Over the past weeks, the bodies of three women were found in three different municipalities of the State of Mexico. The State of Mexico is the most dangerous state for women — 10 times more women have been murdered there then in Ciudad Juarez over the last 21 years.

The bullet-ridden body of one woman was found washed ashore on the edge of a sewage canal in Tequixquiac on Feb.17. Residents found the body of the victim, dressed in a pair of blue jeans, a black jacket, and boots, with severe trauma to the head. That same week, a mother found the body of her daughter, twenty-year-old Marisol, on the street in San Roque. The third young woman, Rosaura, was found murdered, floating in a river canal in Tenancingo.

Marisol, Rosaura, and the woman found in Tequixquiac are only three of more than 1,500 women assassinated in the State of Mexico since 2005. They are victims of feminicide—the term used to describe the murder of women because they are women. It refers to gender-based violence characterized by discrimination, sexism and misogyny and often includes sexual abuse and other gender-specific signs of mutilation and torture prior to the murder. In Mexico, like much of Latin America, feminicide has been linked to sexism and structural violence rooted in social, political, economic, and cultural inequalities.

Feminicides, a National Epidemic

As the demand for justice for the 43 disappeared Ayotzinapa students continues in streets worldwide, the epidemic of violence against women grows and justice for its victims remains relegated to a labyrinth of impunity, inefficiency and government indifference.

Yet the demand for justice and against feminicide has not only endured over three decades of violence, but continues to mobilize people across borders. At the end of the International Women's Day March in Los Angeles on March 8, Carla Castañeda began a 72-hour hunger strike to demand justice for her missing daughter Cynthia Jocabeth Castañeda and all the daughters of Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. Carla, along with the mothers of the Ayotzinapa students and the thousands of other relatives of disappeared people, is seeking information on the whereabouts of her daughter kidnapped six years ago. She is demanding the government files on the investigation around her daughter's disappearance from the Mexican Consulate in Los Angeles.

Though official and human rights groups' statistics vary, reports document an increase in feminicide that dates back at least twenty-five years. On a national scale, feminicide has increased 55 percent between 1990 and 2011. According to a report produced by UN-Women in 2012, cases of feminicide in the country have increased steadily since the year 2007. And more recently, the National Citizen Femicide Observatory (OCNF), a coalition of 43 groups that document the crime, identified that only 24 percent of the 3,892 femicides the group identified in 2012 and 2013 were investigated by authorities and and only 1.6 percent led to sentencing.

Out of the approximately 4,000 women disappeared throughout the country in 2011-2012, mostly in Chihuahua and in the State of Mexico, a majority are either presumed murdered or working in the cartel-run sex trade.

There currently exists no comprehensive policy that facilitates justice for the victims or federal-level classification of the crime of feminicide. Institutional inefficacy and discrimination pervades all stages of criminal proceedings. Too often, government investigators decide that cases involving violence against women are not worth their time.

The Other Ayotzinapa

The demand for justice for the Ayotzinapa teacher's college students has catalyzed protests throughout hundreds of cities worldwide and catalyzed a movement against forced disappearances and state violence in Mexico and beyond. It has raised serious questions surrounding the Mexican government role, impunity and lack of transparency in investigations of human rights violations. Protests in Mexico City, led by the disappeared students' families, have drawn nearly half a million people to the streets. During these giant demonstrations, women have marched to demand justice for the 43 students and thousands of others, overwhelmingly women, who have been disappeared and whose cases remain unresolved.

The feminist collective Pan y Rosas Mexico organized a series of forums and protests titled "Women: The Other Ayotzinapa" in Mexico City to discuss and publicize feminicide. The collective, founded in Argentina and established in Mexico in 2010, works to stop feminicide.

In an interview with the Americas Program, Francisca, a member of Pan y Rosas and active participant in the "The Other Ayotzinapa" initiative, explains the history of the collective.

"Since our inception as a collective in Mexico, we've tried to organize a strong front against feminicide. Women are murdered every day throughout the country. It was recently found that every 6 hours and 20 minutes, 7 women are murdered and these numbers reflect a reality that all of us women experience as a result of a phenomenon that dates back more than 20 years in Ciudad Juarez–the feminicide of the women of Juarez—and that today has extended to all the states in the country."

Francisca cites the widespread and systemic violence against women that was first documented in Ciudad Juarez, but now is present in the State of Mexico, Chiapas, Chihuahua, Mexico City, Guerrero, Jalisco, Nuevo Leon, Oaxaca, Puebla and Sinaloa. She notes that feminicide is a major human rights issue in Mexico, yet it has been marginalized by many experts and academics who do not consider it a category of analysis. Pan y Rosas believes that feminicide is a crime that stems from poverty, the precarious work conditions of women, and misogyny resulting in sexual torture and violence against the victims' bodies.

"Femicides have extended throughout the country in a very terrible way and have increased as a result of drug-cartel related violence, which includes the sex trade of women," Francisca told the Americas Program.

At a time when people are disappeared everyday and mass unmarked graves have been uncovered throughout Guerrero and the country, as a feminist organizer Francisca connects the history of activism around feminicide with the pain many families have faced upon the disappearances of their loved ones.

"It is years of impunity that weigh on our shoulders. In the last few years feminicide has moved hundreds of parents of disappeared women to action, like Norma Andrade, from Bring Our Daughters Home, who have used the same protest chants popular during the Dirty War of the 70s when mothers also searched for their children. The mothers of Juarez have adopted the chant of that era "They took them alive, we want them back alive" for their missing daughters. This chant characterizes the protests for Ayotzinapa, the latest movement in a country where forced disappearances, feminicide, the violation of human rights, and political corruption is everyday news."

She explains that this is why Pan y Rosas joins in the collective protest against impunity and state violence in Mexico sparked by Ayotzinapa and adds that the case has detonated a grassroots phenomenon in the streets that has served to denounce many injustices, from feminicide to the criminalization of social protest under the PRI ruling party. Ayotzinapa uncovered the link that exists between the government and

the drug traffickers and exposed the state as responsible for the disappearances, she notes.

“This is why it’s important to say that women are the other Ayotzinapa, because we also experience impunity and because there are hundreds of mothers who began to organize and became activists to demand the return of their daughters.”

Pan y Rosas has held forums in universities and community centers since December. The events open up discussion on the call for a gender violence alert in the State of Mexico, first requested in 2011 and rejected by then-governor and current president Enrique Peña Nieto, and the recent feminicide of a woman employee of the Liverpool department store in Mexico City. Members of the collective participated in a panel with mothers of the missing Ayotzinapa students March 7 in Mexico City.

“It was very humbling to participate in the panel with the mothers of the 43 students, who are women activists in search of their children, who the state wants to silence and who distrust the official versions that say their children are dead and instead continue to search for them,” said Francisca.

Broadening the Human Rights Frame

Rosa-Linda Fregoso is a leading feminicide scholar from University of California Santa Cruz who served as a judge on the Permanent People’s Tribunal (PPT) hearings on gender violence and feminicide held in Ciudad Juarez Sept. 21-13, 2014.

Fregoso, along with four other judges, heard 27 cases of feminicide and gender violence, including forced disappearance and trafficking, domestic violence, women under conditions of war, violence against human rights defenders, forced exile, and structural violence. The judges listened, witnessed, validated and rendered judgment on the human rights violations and violence committed by the Mexican government, through the direct action of government officials or indirectly by persons or groups acting with the authorization, support, or complicity of the state.

The Americas Program asked Fregoso about the lack of mobilizations against feminicide in light of the mass demonstrations to protest the disappearance of the teacher’s college students in Guerrero.

“I don’t think feminicides have been necessarily overlooked as much as they have not received consistent support and attention from the media and progressive activists,” said Fregoso.

“There are a number of reasons for the mass mobilizations for the students of Ayotzinapa. For one, the specter of the Tlatelolco massacre of October 1968 continues to haunt Mexico, when security forces killed three hundred student protesters and arrested hundreds more. Similar to the earlier Dirty War, in this new Dirty War – coined the Drug War- the Mexican government has 5used its forces to suppress political rivals, by subcontracting state violence either to paramilitary force like the Batallón Olimpica of Tlatelolco or via municipal police to drug traffickers involved in Ayotzinapa,” Fregoso told the Americas Program.

Fregoso believes that the Ayotzinapa case represents the tipping point for this new dirty war against civil society. She recounts the human cost of the war on drugs launched by former president Felipe Calderon, which has resulted in over 130,000 people murdered and 30,000 disappeared, with more than 5,000 disappeared in 2014 alone.

“We heard dozens of cases of ‘enforced disappearances’ during the PPT hearings on gender violences and feminicides, in testimony by mothers, family members, and non-governmental organizations like the Women’s Human Rights Center in Chihuahua, which has been participating for years in the movement for justice for the disappeared. So Ayotzinapa was just the tipping point for the ongoing atrocities and instances of State-sponsored terror against civil society,” stated Fregoso.

The lack of mass mobilization for disappeared women, says the academic, may also have to do with a hierarchy within the human rights regime, in which violations of civil and political rights are seen as more intolerable than encroachment of economic, social, and cultural rights.

“The college students of Ayotzinapa were disappeared for exercising their political rights to protest, whereas the motives behind the disappearances of women and girls are much more varied. Some women have been disappeared and/or murdered for demanding justice or exercising their political and civil rights, but many others have disappeared and/or been murdered because they are members of a social group, as women.”

The reluctance, indifference, disregard, and disrespect of government and state authorities in human rights violations related to feminicide represents a form of indirect state violence that also warrants mass mobilizations, according to Fregoso.

She explains that it is necessary to convince people and human rights activists of the importance of mobilizing for justice on behalf of disappeared women and girls and expand the frame of human rights violations and state-sponsored violence. Expanding the human rights frame implies classifying feminicides as enforced disappearance, a category defined by international law that compels direct or indirect state involvement.

Defined as “the arrest, detention, abduction or any other form of deprivation of liberty by agents of the State or by persons or groups of persons acting with the authorization, support or acquiescence of the State,” according to the International Convention on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances, ‘enforced disappearances’ if applied to feminicides 7would push government authorities to resolve the overwhelming number of cases. Currently feminicide is classified with ‘disappearances’.

“The connection between feminicides and ‘enforced disappearances’ needs to be made because what we are dealing with in Mexico is a failed state, a feudalized state. One of the mothers who testified at the Hearing on Feminicide and Gender Violence stated about the culprits behind her daughter’s disappearance, ‘They are one in the same, state agents by day and hit men by night,’” concluded Fregoso.

The relentless work of feminist organizers, mothers, human rights scholars and the people who took to the streets this past March 8 in Mexico City and globally prove that the fight against the state-sponsored gender violence gripping Mexico will rest only when justice is served for the thousands of victims of feminicide.

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