

THE REPORT ON OUR CONFERENCE ON WOMEN IN COUNTRIES IN CONFLICT

Lund, Sweden, 5 - 6 May. With support from SIDA and Folkuniversitet in Lund, *The English International Association of Lund* and *The Guatemala Association Miguel Angel Asturias* (Lund) held a Conference on **Women in Countries in Conflict** in Lund at their headquarters in The Green Library (Miljöbiblioteket). Speakers from five countries, Colombia, Guatemala, Nigeria, the U.S.A. and Zimbabwe gave captivating descriptions of how women were victimized by unconcerned State parties and large multinational corporations. Each speaker was as equally captivating as the other. After brief opening statements by Chairman **M. Arthur Diakité** and **Ms. Dina Bern** (one of the main organizers of this conference), **Mr. Alex Taylor**, a Ph.D. candidate with Calgary University, Canada, went to the podium as the first speaker.

Mr. Taylor gave the audience a historical perspective of the social and political situation in Guatemala. He pointed out how in 1954 the United States, under the mandate of the Monroe Doctrine, overthrew the democratically elected liberal government of President Jacobo Arbenz through the CIA (under Allen W. Dulles). Since then, military dictatorships and para-military groups have continually been on a campaign of genocide, murder, and oppression of the people using all sorts of excuses, none of which justify the mass human rights abuses of the population. The majority of the people of Guatemala, consisting of Mayas, Shinkas (also a group of indigenous peoples), garifonas (people of African ancestry) and ladinos (persons of mixed ancestry) live in the country-side and are under 20 years of age. The war for democracy in Guatemala is supposed to have come to an end in December of 1996, leaving a broken social fabric which unfortunately has not been possible to mend as of yet.

Mr. Taylor reminded us that the Guatemalan government is known for having the worse record for violating the human rights of its people in the Americas. In the past 25 years alone over 100 thousand people have been killed, and another 50 thousand have "disappeared". Guatemala has only 3% of the population of Latin America, but 50% of "disappearances" in that part of the world have taken place in Guatemala.

"Over 3 million Guatemalans became refugees and many are still living in other countries", he told the audience.

In 1992 Ms. Rigoberta Manchu received the Nobel Peace Prize for her human rights work in Guatemala, and a Peace Agreement was signed in December of 1996. But it has not led to any real peace and women and children are the greatest losers due to the lack of implementation of the Peace Agreement. Mr. Taylor also informed that, unlike in Argentina, the military in Guatemala, who have carried out the worse human rights violations, have not yet been publicly identified, which enables them to continue acting with total impunity.



Ms. Sithambisu Chisamba, a teacher from Zimbabwe, presented a comparison of the treatment of women in the Ndebele and the Shona communities in her country. She furthermore pointed out how women are greatly marginalized in Zimbabwe and how men are traditionally favoured economically by inheritance laws and politics in patriarchal Zimbabwe. Women lag behind in all areas. Only 75% of women are literate compared to 80% of men, and few women have fixed assets to use as collateral with banks for loans. Such statistics mean that men in Zimbabwe have a strategic 5% advantage over women in formal employment and other areas of life. Even the so-called "land grab" in the country, the result of the failed Lancaster House agreements to provide money to the government to buy out white farmers, totally ignores women. The young men who are

grabbing the land from white farmers only hand it over to older male members of the community or simply abandon the farms once the white owners are driven away. The irony here is that it is the women of Zimbabwe who are the real substance farmers, while the men who end up "owning" the land often know little about farming.

However, projects such as the Mutemachani Village Bank scheme are designed to empower women's economies. This project, and others like it, is a self-help scheme designed to provide soft-loans for entrepreneurial projects managed and owned by women. It enables women to participate directly in different business ideas and plans. Such projects will enable women to begin to break away from the traditional bondage to their husbands, brothers and other males in their communities, which has been the tradition in Zimbabwe.

The speaker from Colombia was **Ms. Blanca Lozano**, a researcher who works for DEMOS. She told us about the psychological and physical effects that the violence towards women was causing in her country. Generations of women (and their children) are now damaged forever in Colombia due to the physical and psychological violence there, she told the audience. Ms. Lozano complemented her seminar by telling the audience that much of the political violence in the country is supported and even sponsored, by the so-called "U.S. war against drugs", which is merely a smoke screen for the violent oppression of the people whose human rights are violated with impunity by both military and para-military forces.

Ms. Dina Bern, the representative of URNG in the Nordic Countries (which has an office here in Lund) and is one of the founders of the *Guatemala Association Miguel Angel Asturias* (the association is named after the 1967 winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature).

Ms. Bern told about the political activities that took place in Guatemala at the time of the last elections (November-December 1999), and the difficulties in implementing even the most basic principles of the Peace Agreement. One of these is



What Does A Woman Dream Of...

exercising the right to vote, which is only possible if citizens have state-approved identity cards.

"Millions of people live their entire lives without an identity card", she pointed out. To register a new-born child costs about 20 SEK, which is a high amount for people as poor as most Guatemalans. If you fail to register your child, there is the risk that he or she will never have an ID card."

Ms. Bern added that this is why projects designed to pay for identity documents so that

the population can exercise their right to vote in Guatemala in the next elections are most welcome and appreciated.

Mr. Stanley Worgu, a Ph.D. candidate at Lund University, presented a causal loop diagram describing the dynamics of the West African conflicts and its impact on women in general. He presented pictures showing how the control of resources and political power are the principal causes of these conflicts with the major actors been a tiny clique of male-dominated and very elitist West African rulers and their collaborators, who are mainly management-level leaders in Trans/national corporations based in the West. Mr. Worgu went on to present pictures of the horrific sufferings of women and the young girl children in West African countries in conflict. Some of the pictures presented showed a girl-child victim of the Revolutionary United Front's "right hand removal" policy during the Sierra Leone civil war. Mr. Worgu fortified his case with a reference to the Liberian conflict, where the rush for diamond mining and looting plunged the country, particularly its women folk, into multiple cases of suffering, rape, death and destitution. The case of the Niger Delta in Nigeria, particularly those of the Ogoni area, was equally highlighted. Mr. Worgu argued that the apparent insensitivity on the part of trans-national corporations and the Nigerian government was responsible for the rape and killing of women by the Nigerian soldiers. He concluded that the bottom line was to empower women, and for the international community to stand up and promulgate strong legislation for the prosecution of person's accused of any form of violence against women.

Ms. Meredith Larson, the Acting Campaigns Associate of Amnesty International, Washington, D.C., talked at large about specific issues that affect women in Guatemala, particularly through the lens of civil/political human rights organisations such as Amnesty International, Coalition Missing, and other NGOs. Her discussion focused on how the political violence in Guatemala was very gender specific. There is much rape in detention, many women are tortured, and many women and children have disappeared. In addition, there are thousands of cases of the enslavement of women, atrocities committed against pregnant women as well as massacres. The violations of women's human, social cultural and economic rights are consistently being conducted in Guatemala, in spite of the Peace Agreement of 1996. Ms. Larson also revealed to the audience how she herself was a victim of violence at the hands of a para-military group. She then outlined a number of specific issues that directly concern women, such as impunity, domestic violence, torture and community mental health. These issues were of direct concern to women in the "post war" stages of life in Guatemala, where there is still a lot of political instability and violence. Ms. Larson also pointed out how Amnesty International is trying to get domestic violence and rape considered a form of torture when the State refuses to protect women from that form of violence.

"What friendly governments need to do is to put pressure on the US government to stop the human rights violations of women and others in Guatemala and other countries suffering the same fate", she said.

Finally, **Lisseth Pérez**, a URNG representative and a lawyer specialized in women's questions touched on legal issues affecting Guatemalan women and provided some ideas on the effects that assistance from different developed countries have on women in Guatemala.

"Women in Guatemala lack employment, earn low salaries when they do work and are abused in many, many ways", Ms. Perez told the audience.

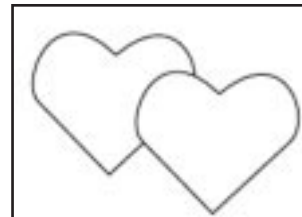
One problem which she emphasized was that the rule of law suffers because the congress is controlled by the official party. This undermines the purposes of the Peace Agreement. Ms. Pérez pointed out that impunity reigns because the judiciary in Guatemala is constantly under attack by those who rule. As an example, she mentioned that recently 107 judicial workers have been murdered, among them lawyers, judges, court clerks and others. The methods of murder have included lynching.

Ms. Pérez added that donor/friendly countries can make their aid more effective in dealing with governments like the one in Guatemala by conditioning their aid to compliance with the Peace Agreement.

During the question and answer session all the speakers expressed their appreciation to Sweden for its help and assistance to women's projects in particular. They also requested the multinationals to use their power not only to produce higher incomes for their owners, but also to bring about respect for the human rights of the peoples in the countries where they operate.

Report compiled by the Speakers and volunteer members.

"A Woman Dreams of Peace... and Development."



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