

FABIENNE DOIRON

Widows, Mothers, Activists

Indigenous Achí Women's Experiences of La Violencia in Rabinal, Guatemala

This paper explores Indigenous Achí women's experiences of militarisation and armed conflict in Rabinal, Guatemala during the period known as La Violencia (1978–1985) and its aftermath. The aim of this paper is to challenge accounts of armed conflict that portray women as essentially passive victims of violence by examining widows' resiliency in ensuring their own and their family's survival after the loss of their husband and their agency in organising around issues of truth, justice and reconciliation in the aftermath of the conflict. The discussion is especially focused on the influence that women's role as mothers has had in shaping their experiences of the aftermath of armed conflict, as recounted in participant-led interviews with survivors of La Violencia. Interviews were conducted in rural Rabinal communities between December 2005 and May 2006 in the context of Master's thesis research and fieldwork with the Association for the Integral Development of the Victims of the Violence in the Verapaces, Maya Achí (ADIVIMA).

Discussions on relationships between 'Women and War' have abounded in feminist, development studies and conflict and peace studies literatures—including questions surrounding the links between femininity / masculinity and peacefulness / aggressiveness; the impact of armed conflict on women; as well as women's role in peace-building and post-conflict reconstruction. While the debates continue, it is increasingly acknowledged that simplistic gender dichotomies do not accurately correspond to or represent women's experiences of armed conflict (Afshar and Eade; Enloe 1983; Kumar; Moser and Clark; Turshen and Twagiramariya). Indeed, to describe women as essentially 'passive-victims' of armed conflict—an approach still much too commonly adopted in humanitarian responses to armed conflicts—not only denies women agency, but also impedes the recognition of the roles they play in peace-building,

reconciliation and reconstruction (Eade; Moser and Clark).

In the research I conducted for my Master's thesis in International Development Studies in 2005–2006, my goal was to gain a more comprehensive understanding of Indigenous women's experiences of armed conflict and militarisation in Guatemala.¹ I tried to adopt a more balanced approach, recognising both the gendered dynamics and impacts of armed conflict as well as women's resiliency and agency in coping with violence and its aftermath. Based on the fieldwork and findings of my Master's research, this paper presents the experiences of Indigenous Maya Achí women of the internal armed conflict in Rabinal, Guatemala, as recounted in participant-led interviews with fifteen women. The women I interviewed—most of whom had been widowed by the conflict—were all involved with the *Association for the Integral Development of the Victims of the Violence in the Verapaces, Maya Achí* (ADIVIMA), a grassroots organisation founded by and mainly composed of indigenous widows with whom I was volunteering during the course of my fieldwork.

In this article, I wish to recount the stories that women in Rabinal shared with me of their experiences of violence during the late 1970s and early 1980s—a period commonly known as *La Violencia* (The Violence). While my intention is for women's voices to be heard, I do not claim to be 'giving them a voice.' During my time in Rabinal and in other parts of Guatemala, it has become quite obvious that women survivors of the internal armed conflict do not need outsiders' help in speaking out about their experiences—many are already doing so quite courageously. However, I also realised that, having heard what women in Rabinal had told me and having 'witnessed' the recounting of their experiences,² I had the responsibility to "give voice to sight" (Gerald Sider qtd. in Green); that is to say, I, in turn, had the responsibility to speak out about what they had told me. To do this, and to recognise women's agency in understanding their own experiences and shaping their own history, I have included extensive quotes from interviews with women in Rabinal.

I will present these experiences in a loosely chronological account, beginning with a brief history of *La Violencia*, followed by an overview of the gendered violence that accompanied the acts of genocide committed against the Maya Achí people of Rabinal. I will then turn to widows' experiences of becoming heads of households after their husband's disappearance or murder. These are stories of survivors who have shown remarkable resiliency in the face of the extreme social, cultural, psychological and economic disruptions caused by the counterinsurgency campaigns and genocide of *La Violencia*. As we will see, not only have widows adapted their survival strategies to provide for themselves and their families, they have also organised to participate in—and, in many cases, lead—the struggle for truth, justice and reparations in the aftermath of this violence. As I listened to these women and delved into their testimonies, it became impossible to ignore the level to which their experiences of violence and its immediate aftermath were framed by their role as mothers.

Five Hundred Years of Genocide— A Brief History of *La Violencia*

In most of Guatemala, the period between 1978 and 1985 is referred to as *La Violencia*, distinguished from the decades of war that preceded and followed it by its unparalleled violence. Since the outbreak of the armed conflict in 1960, repression had been of a more ‘selective’ nature, targeting social or political organisers, community leaders, union activists, students and *catequistas* (catechists) mainly through threats, torture, forced disappearance and extrajudicial executions (Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico [CEH]; Proyecto Interdiocesano Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica [REMHI]). However, by the end of the 1970s, the Guatemalan Army had succeeded in institutionalising and consolidating its political and economic power despite the expansion of guerrilla and social movements that had begun to form in resistance to the 1954 *coup* and successive military regimes.³

During *La Violencia*, repression became increasingly generalised and collective: massive counterinsurgency campaigns designed to eliminate “any individual or group suspected of assisting, or even sympathising with, the guerrilla insurgency” (Lovell, 2000: 56) were carried-out by the Guatemalan Army across the highlands—often with the help of Civilian Defence Patrols (PAC). As these scorched-earth campaigns took shape, the definition of the ‘internal enemy’ also became increasingly inclusive, eventually conflating ‘Maya’ with ‘subversive’ and leading to massacres of entire villages (Sanford, 2003). By the time peace accords were signed in 1996, more than 400 villages had been completely eradicated in at least 626 massacres; over 200,000 people had been killed or “disappeared”; one million people had been subjected to internal displacement and an additional 100,000 became refugees in neighbouring countries (CEH). Despite the extremely violent and bloody history of Spanish conquest and colonization in the region, George Lovell described the years of *La Violencia* as “the bloodiest of times the Maya have known” (59).

Rabinal, one of eight *municipios* (municipalities)⁴ of the department of Baja Verapaz, was never the stage of major confrontations between the guerrilla and the Guatemalan Army at any time during the internal armed conflict; however, the people of Rabinal were nevertheless targeted in the state’s scorched-earth campaigns. Between 1981 and 1983, over 2,000 people (approximately 20 percent of the population of Rabinal) lost their lives in a series of generalised massacres of Rabinal communities; while the Maya Achí only represented 82 percent of Rabinal’s total population, 99.8 percent of the victims of *La Violencia* in Rabinal were Maya Achí (Valle Cóbar; MCRA; REMHI). The United Nations-mandated Truth Commission concluded that the Guatemalan state committed “acts of genocide” against five Mayan groups during the internal armed conflict, including the Maya Achí of Rabinal (CEH, 1999).

Violence Against Women and Genocide

Because we are Indigenous, they killed us all!

Feminist analyses of militarisation and armed conflict have long established that sexual violence and rape are not merely coincidental by-products of armed conflict, but rather, are often used as weapons of war (Enloe 2000; Kumar; McKay; Skjelsbaek and Smith). In the context of genocide, women are often targeted for rape and sexual violence because they are seen as symbols of the family, pillars of the community and ‘cultural backbones’ of the ‘enemy’ society (Enloe 2000; Kumar; Sorensen). In Rabinal, patterns of violence aimed at ‘destroying the seed’ of the Maya Achí included forced displacement, sexual violence and systematic rape of women and girls during massacres of Indigenous communities, and the deliberate targeting of children as well as pregnant women and their foetuses for particularly brutal forms of torture and violence (MCRA). Many of the widows that I interviewed seemed to make a link between the deliberate targeting of women and children and the genocidal nature of the repression:

Because we are Indigenous, they killed us all. Oh! Here they didn't kill the women, thank God! In some place they killed the women. (Doña Maria [3])⁵

They said that first they would finish off all of the men, and then the women. That's what they said. Thank God that He didn't want this to happen to us, that they kill us all, because we are not animals, we are human beings! Like we heard about Río Negro: they killed pregnant women, children... (Doña Teresa)

Indeed, the Guatemalan state's official and extra-official security forces were trained to view Indigenous women as enemies who “gave birth to *guerrilleros*” (Norma Cruz in *Killer's Paradise*). While Maya Achí women were systematically targeted for sexual violence because of their responsibility for social and physical reproduction of Achí society, their motherhood was also used against them as a weapon of psychological torture since “one of the most powerful ways of pressuring women was to use their children to control, dominate, or crush the psyches of their mothers” (REMHI 74).

This use of women's motherhood as an instrument of torture is illustrated in Doña Trinidad's story. She was in her third month of pregnancy when her husband was killed. Five days after she had given birth to her son, soldiers came to her house and took her baby from her, putting him on the ground outside her house, threatening her:

A soldier came inside with me, “That child, that kid isn't nice people's kid, he's

a son of guerrilleros,” that’s what he told me ... I was crying ... wondering if he was going to kill my son, you never know.... (Doña Trinidad)

Widows’ Experiences of the Aftermath of *La Violencia*

Only the women were left, the men all died.

The project of recuperation of historical memory of Rabinal concluded that Indigenous women were by far the group most affected by the conflict in Rabinal since they not only witnessed the brutal violence unleashed on their communities, but were also themselves victimised by this violence and survived—often as widows—to cope with a future in which they faced incredible economic, social, cultural and psychological hardships (MCRA, 2003). These impacts were intensified by the loss of their husbands, who were their partners in life and work. Doña Maria and Doña Pedrina reflected on this:

Only the women were left, the men all died, so the women were left with sadness, because they no longer had anywhere to go. There were no men left. Women raised their children ... women no longer have a good life because of the violence that the community endured. (Doña Maria [4])

La Violencia changed [women’s lives] a lot. When their husbands were killed it’s like they cut off one of their arms and they were left with only one hand. And that hand had to work hard because they were left as both mother and father of their children. (Doña Pedrina [1])

For all of these women, providing for themselves and for their children became a daily challenge as they struggled to survive in a universe now dominated by violence and fear. Almost invariably, when speaking of how their lives changed during *La Violencia*, one of the first things the widows mentioned was how many children they were left with and had to support after the death of their husbands. Since a large proportion of the Indigenous population in Rabinal already lived in precarious conditions before the onset of the war, this was no easy feat:

I have suffered, because it isn’t the same now as when my husband was here because he helped us, he brought food for the family. But now I’ve become like the family’s mother and father. (Doña Ramon)

Becoming Heads of Households

We became like mother and father of our families.

The Maya Achí people of Rabinal, like most of Guatemala’s Indigenous popu-

lations, had historically and traditionally ensured their subsistence through small-scale agriculture and animal husbandry (MCRA). Given their dependence on land for subsistence, survivors' ability to subsist was particularly affected by the destruction of food stocks, crops, and agricultural tools, and the theft of livestock that generally accompanied massacres (MCRA). Doña Ramon expressed this clearly:

They took all our animals. We had two milking cows, beef cows, they took them; three mules, they took them; pigs, hens, turkeys, they took all of those animals, these people! We could no longer do anything! (Doña Ramon)

In some cases, the widows' houses, crops, land, animals and possessions were not looted during the conflict, however, they still had to try to 'carry on' without their husbands. This was a significant challenge for many women considering that, according to the traditional gendered division of labour in Maya communities, this type of work was generally done by men, while women worked primarily in the home (Green). After the death of their husbands, widows had to take over their husbands' work in the field in addition to their own responsibilities; Doña Juliana explained:

When I was left with my children, I became like two, a man and a woman, by myself, just a woman, but I worked there in the field and I worked here in my house. (Doña Juliana)

Indeed, it was the only way many widows could ensure their own survival and sustain their families:

We had to find a way to make a living, to feed the children. We weren't going to be able to raise our families, so after we had to work in the house and in the fields. (Doña Maria [2])

Doña Maria explains how this differs from the life of women who did not lose their husbands during the conflict:

This is women's life now. If there is work we are going to work because there are no men anymore, they don't have their husband anymore. On the other hand, the ones who have a husband, only the men go out to work, the women are working in the kitchen, making atol, cooking, going to bring the food [to the men in the fields]. On the other hand, we who are widows, we have to go out to work. (Doña Maria [3])

Despite their efforts, it has been very difficult for many widows to maintain their subsistence livelihood, especially when they did not have access to enough land, as Doña Trinidad explained:

I had nothing! My husband didn't leave enough land to raise all the little ones that I was left with. And so, we struggled until they had grown up.

Since harvesting corn is quite labour-intensive and few could afford to hire someone to help with the harvest, many widows were compelled to abandon their fields and look for other ways of sustaining their families.⁶ The various survival strategies taken on by Indigenous women in Rabinal after the death or disappearance of their husbands included taking on paid domestic work (such as taking in clothes to wash) and selling tortillas, food or other goods in markets. For some women, this meant having to leave their community in order to find work in neighbouring communities, as did Doña Rosario and Doña Maria:

I left with my children to another community. There, I started to make tortillas, to sell tortillas to help feed my children. That's why I went. But I still suffered quite a lot. (Doña Rosario)

I went to work for the ladinos⁷ over there for seven years in [neighbouring community] ... that's where I raised my children. (Doña Maria [3])

Given the context of the ongoing armed conflict and scorched-earth campaigns, many newly widowed women migrated to other regions of the country as much to escape violence and repression as for economic reasons:

We had to flee the community because the Army and the civil patrollers were persecuting us. We had to go to the South coast to be able to survive. (Doña Pedrina [1])

Like Doña Pedrina, many widows migrated to the South coast with their children in tow to work on plantations where women generally earn a lower wage than men and countless children die of malnutrition and disease.⁸

Mothers' Resiliency in the Aftermath of Armed Conflict

We sought out a living in order to feed the children.

Regardless of the kinds of changes the widows made in their lives, one thing that stands out from all of their testimonies is the degree of hardship that they endured in order to survive and, especially, so that they could support their children. Indeed, many widows told me that they had to keep going for the sake of their children and so, as Doña Maria stated, they had no other choice than to go on working:

I was left with five children and after the violence we kept on working because if we didn't work, we didn't eat. (Doña Maria [2])

Whether they went to the coast, to the capital or to nearby communities, women who migrated to find work dealt with the difficult conditions as best they could in order to support their families:

There, on the South coast, we worked for a boss who treated us like slaves. They only paid us with food, they didn't give us money but only some food, that's all! So we got sick and didn't have any money to get well because we weren't earning any money. But we resigned ourselves in order to survive. I spent eight years on the South coast and five years in the capital working in a house where they paid me 20 quetzals per month [less than US\$7 at 1989 exchange rate]. That's how I raised my two children.... But I suffered a lot because what I earned wasn't enough to pay for medicine for my children; and let's not even talk about buying clothes or buying anything else! It was barely enough to survive. (Doña Pedrina [1])

As many women explained, they did so because they did not see any other way of feeding their children:

I was three months pregnant when my husband passed away. Once my baby was born, when he was six months old, we went to the coast and I started working again, to support all of the children. What could I do? (Doña Trinidad)

When my husband died, when they killed my husband, I was left with seven children. And with those seven children, I had no way of surviving, so I went back to the coast. (Doña Francisca)

When I was left alone, when they killed my husband, I left. I left to travel to the coast to raise my children. I was left with three boys, three little boys. What was I going to live off of? Nothing, if I didn't go to the coast to earn some money. Who was going to take care of my children? No one! (Doña Juliana)

As alluded to by Doña Juliana, widows were often left in precarious economic situations—especially if their crops had been stolen or destroyed during military or paramilitary raids—and going to the South coast to work was one of the ways they could adapt to this situation:

So I'd better go to the coast to earn my money, earn money to buy corn. And why was I buying corn if there is corn here? They had taken it away. They took it all away, so I had to start buying corn. So then, I was going to the coast to buy clothes for my children, all of the clothes for my children, all of the things I needed. (Doña Juliana)

As has been observed elsewhere, women have shown exceptional resiliency, resourcefulness and agency when their own survival, and that of their families and communities, is threatened (McKay). Over two decades after *La Violencia* violently disrupted their lives, many Achí widows in Rabinal expressed happiness and pride at having managed to support their children, most of whom are now adults:

Thank God that I didn't abandon my children. They grew up here and they are working here now. (Doña Juliana)

We endured hardship, we endured a lot with the children ... but thank God that I managed to support my children, out of sheer struggle ("a la pura lucha") with my family. (Doña Maria [3])

Many women are also proud that, despite all of the obstacles, they have managed to put their children "on the right path," as Doña Francisca explained:

They are grown up now, they are working in the capital and the children are helping me now, because I brought them up and they are working so they are helping their mother. My family grew up without problems because I struggled for them, so now they are on the right path. (Doña Francisca)

Widows Breaking the Silence

We were not going to remain voiceless.

Despite the incredible hardships that Achí widows have endured in the aftermath of *La Violencia*; they have demonstrated extraordinary resiliency and have managed to raise their families, albeit often in poverty and with great sacrifices on their part. While they struggled to ensure their families' survival, widows also started to break the silence and speak out about the violence to which their communities had been subjected at the hands of the Guatemalan state's security forces. As in other parts of Guatemala, where women organized to form, among others, the Mutual Support Group (GAM) and the National Coordination of Widows of Guatemala (CONAVIGUA), many Indigenous women in Rabinal began to organise while the war was still raging on.

In the early 1990s, Rabinal widows started to organise into the *Association for the Integral Development of the Victims of the Violence in the Verapaces, Maya Achí* (ADIVIMA)⁹ to "make known"¹⁰ what had happened in their communities despite the sadness and pain that came with remembering and recounting the brutal violence that they had witnessed and suffered during *La Violencia*.

It was a war that was so unjust. They murdered my family. And I heard,

from other people, on the radio or in the media, that they were talking about everything that happened over here in Rabinal, that no one had mobilised to make known what we had lived through, so ... I gave him my testimony ... It all started with the CEH [UN appointed Commission for Historical Clarification]. (Doña Pedrina [1])

We weren't just going to stay like that, we weren't going to remain voiceless or to leave things as they were. (Doña María [3])

I know how I suffered, as the compañeras say, we endured La Violencia to make known in other places. We are still here, we are here, but it does not just end here. (Doña Teresa)

The Maya Achi people of Rabinal have been among the most active in the country in the struggle to end impunity for the violence and human rights violations committed during the counterinsurgency campaign of the 1980s. They have spearheaded legal actions against the perpetrators of genocide on the local, national and international levels¹¹ at the same time as they work towards material, economic, psychosocial, spiritual and cultural restitution for survivors and to 'dignify' victims of the genocidal violence.¹² ADIVIMA and the women who participate in the organisation have been at the forefront of this struggle in order to ensure that the past does not repeat itself:

We are fighting so hard and we hope that it never goes back to what happened in the past, because it's been very hard for us. It's the same as having to grow up again, it's hard for us to recover. (Doña Teresa)

Continued Struggles for Memory and Justice

So that our generations may know the truth.

More than a decade after a formal peace process ended the 36-year Guatemalan internal armed conflict, the impacts of that conflict are still palpable. Many of the survivors of *La Violencia* continue to suffer the physical, psychosocial, spiritual and economic consequences. Not only is daily violence rampant, but the structural violence that led to the outbreak of the conflict in the first place are far from resolved. The peace process had presented some hope for progress—albeit limited—in terms of gender equality, indigenous rights and demilitarisation. However, these hopes soon evaporated as the peace accords quickly came to be understood as agreements struck up between the *guerrilla* movement and the PAN, the ruling party at the time. The successive governments that have come to power in Guatemala since the accords have barely bothered to enact the peace accords, much less implement them in their entirety (Blacklock and Crosby).

The implementation of an integral process of reparations through the creation of a National Program for Reparations (PNR) was recommended in the CEH's 1999 report *Guatemala: Memory of Silence* and steps towards its creation were undertaken by the Guatemalan government as early as 2001 (Pazy Paz Bailey). However, survivors and victims' families have largely been left to themselves to deal with the aftermath as they try to heal the wounds of the armed conflict and re-weave the social fabric that was torn apart by genocide.

While the peace accords may not have ushered in peace or deep social change in Guatemalan society, the mobilisation of women and Indigenous peoples—especially Indigenous widows—around issues of truth, justice and reparations represents a significant first step in the 'right' direction. Indeed, through their mobilisation and activism, Indigenous women have created new political spaces in which to continue their struggle (Green; Sanford 2003). Rabinal women—widows, mothers and activists—have seized this space in order to voice their demands for greater social justice based on a more holistic vision of peace, as expressed by Doña Ramón:

We hear this morning that there is a dead, tomorrow there is another dead, the next day another dead. This is not peace. It's more like the war has come back again and is starting in our midst. We hear that there's been a gunfight over there; that is not peace! I say that we need to demand that this thing not come back. That we ask the government that there be no more violence and that they stop making more weapons! Because they are the ones who make the weapons. And that there be no more soldiers, because they say that they are here to protect us, but they are the ones who kill us! The police who protect us, they are the ones who do the dirty work. That is what I say and I apologise, but that is my word.

¹See Doiron for a more detailed account of these experiences, including discussions of measures of reparations, healing and widows' visions of peace and development for their communities.

²See Sanford concerning the act of 'witnessing' a testimony: "Both the testimony of the witness as well as the involvement of whoever listens to the testimony and produces it in written form are also part of that real and continuing history in the making" (2001: 41). "In the process of giving and witnessing testimony, survivors create new public spaces for discourse and practice—the essence of human agency" (2003: 208-209).

³See Schlesinger and Kinzer and Coatsworth for an in-depth account of the participation of the CIA in the coup. See also Schirmer for a detailed analysis of the Guatemalan military project during this period.

⁴The *municipio* of Rabinal includes the town of the same name, 27 villages and nearly 50 settlements spread over approximately 500 square kilometres in a depression of the Chuacús mountain chain that crosses the department

of Baja Verapaz, at the foot of the Western Highlands, in the central region of Guatemala.

⁵Some names are pseudonyms chosen by the research participants and others are the participants' actual first names, depending on if they wanted their name used or not. In using their names, I wish to recognise the incredible courage and strength that all of these women have demonstrated in continuing to push forward in their struggle for memory, truth and justice in their communities. However, out of concern for their safety and security, information that could identify the women's communities of origin has been removed or modified. When women share the same first name or pseudonym, I have identified each of them with a number, given in the order in which I interviewed them.

⁶This is reflected in Doña Maria [3]'s comment: "If we want to hire a worker, how are we going to pay them?" While the destruction of corn or the inability to cultivate it represented an important challenge to widows in terms of subsistence, it was also a cultural affront since the *milpa*—the cornfields that surround most rural Mayan homes, where squash and beans also grow—is an important part of Maya culture and worldview. In fact, Linda Green explains that "corn is identity, a site of not only material but also cultural production and Mayan agency" (18). This idea was strongly expressed in the way and frequency with which many women spoke of corn and of their *milpas*. Doña Pedrina [1], among others, made reference to the "sacred tortilla." When speaking of having little or no food to give their children, many women would insist on the fact that they didn't even have "a tortilla" to give them.

⁷The term *ladino* is typically used to refer to people of mixed Indigenous and Spanish heritage. See *Guatemalan Indians and the State: 1540–1988*, edited by Carol A. Smith, for a comprehensive look at how intersecting factors and ideologies (race, class, culture, language) have interacted to shape the changing systems of social classification throughout Guatemalan history.

⁸For more in-depth descriptions of women's life on a *finca* (plantation) see Menchú and Burgos; Smith-Ayala.

⁹ADIVIMA was officially founded in 1994; however, work in communities to collect testimonies and start to mobilise survivors of the armed conflict began earlier. While ADIVIMA is not strictly a "widows' organisation," it is commonly known as such in Rabinal. Most of its co-founders are widowed women and many people I met in town would ask me if I worked "*con las viudas*" (with the widows).

¹⁰This idea was repeated by many women at the end of the interview. When I thanked them for having accepted to share their story with me, many replied by explaining that they hoped that people "far away" would learn a bit more about what transpired in their community during *La Violencia*.

¹¹See Dill for an account of the Pak'oxom trial—one of the first examples of local-level justice undertaken against perpetrators of *La Violencia* in Guatemala—and ADIVIMA's participation in it. The Maya Achí people of Rabinal have also been involved in cases brought forth against the intellectual authors

of genocide in Spain's High Court as well as in the Inter-American Court for Human Rights—an example of which is the case brought forth by the people of Plan de Sánchez against the Guatemalan state for the massacre of over 200 unarmed civilians on 18 July 1982 (Corte Interamericana de Derechos Humanos).

¹²The concept of *dignificación* espoused by ADIVIMA includes the “return of dignity” to victims and their memory as well as the recognition of victims’ and survivors’ experiences and, by extension, the vindication of their names.

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