



Equipo de Mujeres Transformando el Mundo



Integrantes de la Colectiva Jalok U

Mujeres Transformando el Mundo –MTM– is a nonprofit association formed by a multidisciplinary team. MTM provides integral attention and accompaniment to girls, teenagers and women who had suffered sexual violence in current times and during the Internal Armed Conflict, always with a feminist approach.

Mujeres Transformando el Mundo joined the “*Alliance to End Silence and Impunity*” (Alianza Rompiendo el Silencio y la Impunidad¹) to give legal advice to over 80 indigenous women and to help them find justice for the sexual violence they suffered during the Guatemalan Internal Armed Conflict. That's how we came to know about the situation in *Sepur Zarco* and gave legal structure to a case. This case is about 15 Maya Q'eqchi' civilian women that suffered from sexual and domestic enslavement inside a military installation at the *Sepur Zarco* Community. These 15 women were the wives of local civil peasants who were seeking recognition for the ownership of their parcels of land since the 1960's. Most of these men were organized in “*Land Committees*” (Comités de Tierra) or were community leaders, and all of them were forcibly disappeared by members of the military and their collaborators in 1982.

General context:

The Internal Armed Conflict that developed from 1960 to 1996, left over 200,000 persons killed or disappeared. 42,275 of those cases were documented by the “*Commission for Historical Clarification*” (Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico), finding that eighty-three percent of the fully identified victims were Mayan.²

During this time, the historic conflicts over the property of the land in the Department of Izabal (where *Sepur Zarco* is located) aggravated. After the *Panzós Massacre*³, the worst massacre in the region, happened in 1978, the big landowners of the area requested the Guatemalan Army to “protect” their lands from the local peasants. Consequently, the military presence and repression increased considerably. In 1982 the counterinsurgency strategy in this region included the selective disappearance, torture and execution of men that were considered a threat to the big landowners' interests, for example the members of the “*Land Committees*”. These men's widows are now the *Sepur Zarco* Case's plaintiffs.

When these men were taken away by the members of the military, their wives – the 15 victims from the case- were raped, threatened and their goods and houses were destroyed. Immediately after this happened, a few of the women fled to the mountains, where they hid trying to save their lives and their children's. During these years they hardly had access to food, had no roof over their heads and were constantly escaping from the permanent attacks from soldiers and “*Civil Defense Patrols*” (Patrullas de Autodefensa Civil). Under these inhumane conditions many of their children died from starvation and disease.

The rest of the women were forcibly displaced to the surroundings of the recently built “*Sepur Zarco Military Installation*” (Destacamento Militar de Sepur Zarco). During 1982 and 1983 these displaced women were forced by the military officers, soldiers and commissioners (“*Comisionados Militares*”) to attend the so called “*shifts*”, which consisted in an obligation to go to the installation certain days of the week to cook, wash the soldiers' clothing and do other domestic chores for the military staff stationed at *Sepur*

¹ Alianza Rompiendo el Silencio y la Impunidad is also integrated by Unión Nacional de Mujeres Guatemaltecas –UNAMG- and Equipo de Estudios Comunitarios y Acción Psicosocial –ECAP-.

² Informe de la Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico “*Guatemala, Memoria del Silencio*”. (1999)

³ For more information about this: <http://www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/305724in.html>

Zarco. In each and every one of these “shifts” the women were repeatedly raped, threatened and even forced to take contraceptive medication. This situation lasted between four and ten months.

With the substitution of the commander of the *Sepur Zarco Military Installation* and the change of counterinsurgency strategies, the “shifts” ended and were replaced by a new form of enslavement which consisted in obligating these women to bring “tortillas” to feed the military staff, for about six years. Even after this change, military staff stationed at *Sepur Zarco* continued to commit acts of sexual violence and aggressions against them, but now this happened in the improvised huts where they had been forced to live in. It is important to note that all the time they were forced to make “tortillas” they had to find or buy the corn to make them. This meant not being able to provide the minimal conditions of life for their children and for themselves.

The Path Towards Justice:

In 2010, the *Alliance to End Silence and Impunity* organized the “*First Tribunal of Conscience for Sexual Violence against Women during the Guatemalan Internal Armed Conflict*” (Primer Tribunal de Conciencia Contra la Violencia Sexual hacia las Mujeres en el Conflicto Armado Interno en Guatemala), as a first step to end silence and open the path towards justice for women who suffered this type of violence.

From this experience, the women of *Sepur Zarco* decided to go beyond this symbolic form of recognition to the formal justice system. In September 2011, *Mujeres Transformando el Mundo* and UNAMG presented a formal complaint for these events, considering them as crimes against humanity. The formal investigation started and one year later a judge heard the pre-trial testimonies of the 15 victims and 4 men members of the community who witnessed what happened to these women.

Current State of the Process:

After almost three years of investigation, it got to the point where there was enough information to make arrests. It has been a very important accomplishment, considering that the investigation only started after three decades of absolute impunity. In addition, it is widely known that the State of Guatemala has systematically denied and avoided investigations on the gross human rights violations committed during the Internal Armed Conflict. Besides the challenges all the transitional justice criminal cases face, the “*Sepur Zarco Case*” has also faced the particular difficulties of investigating sexual and gender based violence in conflict. Even the “*Commission for Historical Clarification*” didn’t provide the necessary conditions for women to talk about these specific acts of violence.

By now, several investigation activities concerning the case have been conducted. For example, 20 pre-trial statements have been heard by the judge in charge of the investigation, 58 bodies have been recovered from mass graves in the area, and the Office of the Prosecution has interviewed several witnesses and gathered documents from different public offices and experts.

On June 14th 2014 two suspects, retired Lieutenant Colonel Esteelmer Francisco Reyes Girón and Heriberto Valdéz Asig, were arrested. Reyes Girón was the Sub-Lieutenant in charge of the *Sepur Zarco Military Installation*, and Valdéz Asig was one of the *Military Commissioners* for the area and it is believed that he participated in many of the forced disappearances of the plaintiffs’ husbands. Both of them are accused of participating on the forcing of the women to go to the “shifts”.

Cases like this reinforce what the “*Commission for Historical Clarification*” concluded in 1999 about how the rape of women “was a common practice aimed at destroying one of the most intimate and vulnerable aspects of the individual’s dignity,”⁴ and that the majority of rape victims were Mayan women. The systematic use of sexual violence as a strategic weapon of war has never been approached as the principal accusation in Guatemalan Courts. This case represents an important challenge to the national justice system to finally recognize the commission of gender based crimes by agents of the State during the internal armed conflict to properly investigate, prosecute and sanction them.

Please continue to support the *Sepur Zarco* women on their path to justice by following news about the *Sepur Zarco Case* and *Mujeres Transformando el Mundo* on:

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⁴ http://www.aaas.org/sites/default/files/migrate/uploads/mos_en.pdf