

EL SALVADOR: 'Police never turned up': The devastating epidemic of femicide

Pressure is growing to tackle the rising toll of violence in one of the world's most dangerous places to be a woman

The Guardian (06.06.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2Lsjo4Q> – the day before she was found dead in a garden in a suburb of the El Salvadoran capital, Graciela Eugenia Ramírez Chávez had gone to buy shoes for her wedding. Her fiancé was later arrested and charged with her murder – she had been stabbed 56 times – in a case that briefly made headlines in a country where femicide is a grisly daily reality.

The death of 22-year-old Ramírez on 13 February came less than a month after Dr Rosa María Bonilla Vega, 45, died in hospital after being found injured at the foot of the stairs at her home in the city of Santa Ana. Two months later Karla Turcios, a 33-year-old journalist, was found, strangled and suffocated, on a road near the western town where she lived. The partners of both women have been charged with their murders.

These were just three high-profile cases among 152 murders of women between 1 January and 1 May in El Salvador, according to the National Women's Development Institute (Isdemu). The statistics mark an increase from last year, when 123 women were murdered from 1 January up to 30 April in the Central American country, considered one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a woman. As the rate of femicide has increased, so have demands for the government to act.

Last month the attorney general's office responded by launching a new unit to combat the crisis. Four officials will coordinate nationwide efforts to halt violence against women, children and adolescents, the LGBT community and other vulnerable groups. Graciela Sagastume, who led the investigations into the murders of Bonilla and Turcios, will head up efforts to stop violence against women.

"The goal of this new unit is the standardisation, creation and coordination of criteria, strategies and guidelines that permit the attorney general's office to pay integral attention to the process of investigation and victims of violence," said the attorney general, Douglas Meléndez, as he inaugurated the unit.

"We have confidence that this will get results and make a difference," said Silvia Ivette Juárez Barrios of Ormusa (the Organisation of Salvadoran Women for Peace). "This integrated approach is what we asked for in the strategy we developed."

She said the crisis was linked to impunity and tolerance by authorities and police. "When the authorities don't react, that sends out a message that nothing will be done."

Meléndez said that in the case of Ramírez, police had failed to act on warnings in the months leading to her murder. "On repeated occasions neighbours called the [emergency number] to report the victim was being attacked but the police never turned up."

The main reason that women did not report violence was that they found it difficult to access public services, said Vanda Pignato, the secretary for social inclusion, adding that women were often disbelieved if they did manage to report it. Accounts of violence did not match surveys that found, for example, that four in 10 women had experienced sexual violence in their lifetime.

The new unit will focus on better allocation of resources and will prioritise prevention, including mobilising civil society to raise awareness, said Salvador Martínez, at the attorney general's office. "We won't just be working on cases where murders have occurred, but on prevention. We have found many women are not even aware they are being abused and schools and other institutions will be mobilised to educate people."

He attributed the rise in femicide to "a total social breakdown – a lack of values, a lack of education, a lack of respect and tolerance".

Pressure to tackle the femicide epidemic has been mounting. In March the UN office in San Salvador called for government action to strengthen special tribunals for women and specialist services at PNC (national civil police) branches. A month later women's rights organisations protested outside the attorney's general's office, with banners reading: "It's not a crime of passion, it's a crime of patriarchy", and "We demand the state guarantee the right to a life free from violence".

According to the UN, Latin America and the Caribbean is the

most violent region in the world for women, with femicide occurring on a “devastating scale” in Central America, where two out of three women who are murdered die because of their gender. In El Salvador 468 femicides occurred in 2017, one every 18 hours, according to the Institute of Legal Medicine.

For Graciela Ramírez, whose family released photographs of the wedding dress she planned to wear, her murder ended a life long marred by violence. She had fled to a new area of the country to escape a former partner who had abused her. Police had simply advised her to “take justice into her own hands” when she reported those attacks, her mother told reporters. “It never stops. People talk about violence against women, but when you look for help, nothing happens.”

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