

CENTRAL AMERICA: Gender-based Violence, the Hidden Face of Insecurity

By José Adán Silva

MANAGUA, Nov 16 (IPS) - Gender-based violence and sexual abuse are serious public security problems in Central America, and Nicaragua is no exception, according to reports by United Nations agencies and women's organisations.

The Central American Human Development Report 2009-2010, released on Oct. 20 by the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Regional Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean, says violence against women, adolescents and children is the "hidden" and "most invisible face" of public insecurity in the region.

According to the study, entitled "Opening Spaces for Citizen Security and Human Development", two out of three women murdered in Central America are killed for gender-related reasons, a phenomenon that is known as femicide.

Gender violence, however, remains largely concealed by prevailing social attitudes that condone it and by the victims' reluctance to report abuse.

But a murder committed early this year in the small town of Diriomo, in the eastern Nicaraguan province of Granada, led to a far-reaching investigation on the issue.

What made this crime stand out and highlight the violence women face daily is the fact that Luz Marina Lezama wasn't just another victim. When she was shot to death by her husband on Apr. 20 she was serving as chief of the local women's police station, an institution created to help women gain better access to justice and protection.

This prompted the Nicaraguan National Police Force to conduct an investigation to determine what percentage of the crimes committed against women were motivated by gender reasons.

The results, published in September, revealed that at least 25 of the 45 women killed in Nicaragua in the first half of 2009 were victims of domestic violence.

When she presented the outcome of the investigation, national police chief Aminta Granera informed that of the more than 65,000 women who reported that they had suffered some form of abuse, only 15,000 filed a formal complaint with the police.

The women who pressed charges had suffered the worst abuse, including sexual assault, bodily injuries, mutilations and torture, Granera said. More specifically, 4,129 were cases of domestic violence, 2,253 were cases of sexual assault, and 8,645 were cases of physical and psychological harm, such as threats, blackmail and verbal abuse.

"The rest of the victims kept quiet. This shows that even though it is the leading public security problem (in Nicaragua), it is the least reported crime, and, therefore, the one with the greatest impunity," Granera said.

The UNDP report, which assessed levels of public insecurity in Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama, reported that Central America has become the region with the highest levels of non-political violence worldwide.

However, the report clarifies that while the countries of Central America's so-called "northern triangle" have homicide rates five to seven times higher than the global average of nine per 100,000 people - 48 per 100,000 in Guatemala, 52 per 100,000 in El Salvador and 58 per 100,000 in Honduras - Costa Rica, Nicaragua and Panama to the south are significantly safer, with murder rates of 11 per 100,000 population, 13 per 100,000 and 19 per 100,000, respectively.

Invisible crimes

Women, adolescents and children, ethnic minorities and groups with alternative sexual orientations are the main victims of what the study refers to as the region's "phenomenon of 'invisible' (or rather 'invisibilised') insecurities," whereby certain groups are "exposed to an exceptional disparity between the risk of violent or predatory crimes they face and the protection they receive."

According to the report's Nicaraguan consultant, Francisco Javier Bautista, these crimes are severely affecting the quality of life and normal development of families across Central American society.

"These are the most invisible of all crimes. They're generally hidden within the private sphere of the home, where most are committed," he said to IPS.

Bautista noted that the report presents at least six atrocious forms of "invisible crimes" that plague children in Central America: murder, forced participation in criminal activities, police brutality, domestic abuse, sexual abuse and assault, and forced labour and prostitution.

As for Central America's women, more than 45 percent reported different forms of violence and aggression, said Bautista, who participated in the establishment of the Nicaraguan National Police Force in 1979.

According to the UNDP study, most cases of violence against women occur in the family and the perpetrator is usually the husband, intimate partner or ex of the abused woman.

The study underlines that continuous verbal violence in Central America is as commonplace as it is underreported. In Nicaragua, in particular, at least 48 percent of all women in a relationship are subjected to verbal violence from their husband or partner.

For María Teresa Blandón, of La Corriente, a Managua-based region-wide women's organisation, the UNDP study and the figures for Nicaragua confirm what activists have been denouncing for years.

The highest rates of violence occur in the home. This contrasts with a common claim by most Central American women, who "say the home is one of the safest places on earth," Blandón told IPS.

"In our region, the home is precisely where the most widespread and alarming forms of violence against women, adolescents and children - such as femicide, rape and domestic abuse - occur," the activist said.

"What happens is that when abuse ends in murder it's easier to identify the crime and document it; but with rape and sexual assaults, two out of three cases stay in the home," she said.

And even femicide is under-recorded, said Blandón, who added that 60 femicides had been committed in Nicaragua this year as of October, 15 more than the number indicated by police statistics.

With respect to the various forms of domestic violence, Blandón said that in 2008 the Nicaraguan Institute of Legal Medicine conducted forensic examinations on 11,172 female victims. Of these, 44.5 percent were women who had been sexually abused, 41 percent had suffered psychological trauma, and the rest were victims of physical violence.

Fátima Millón, an activist with the Central American organisation Network of Women Against Violence, told IPS that two factors determine the high incidence of these crimes in the countries of the region: a lack of awareness-raising efforts on reporting such crimes, and the

fact that the security and justice systems are dominated "by men who re-victimise abused women."

Millón protested that when women file a complaint for machista violence, the police officers who write up the reports tend to treat them with hostility and question them in such a way as to make them wish they hadn't gone to the police in the first place.

Typical questions are "Were you leading him on?" or "Did you like the guy?" and similar insinuations that the violence had been provoked by the woman's behaviour.

"They ask things that are so insulting and out of place that many women often feel ashamed and decide not to follow through with charges," Millón complained.

In Millón's opinion "there's a total lack of clear mechanisms and public policies aimed at preventing gender violence and providing effective access to justice for the victims."

Based on data from the Women's Police Station, Millón said that domestic violence in the country has escalated in recent years, especially between 2007 and June of this year.

In Nicaragua, one out of three women married or living with a man has been subjected to physical violence, including sexual abuse, at some point in her life. Half the victims report that they first suffered abuse before the age of 15.

"According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), in 2008 alone there were 1,400 pregnant girls under the age of 15. Most of these pregnancies were the result of rape," Millón said, citing a study published in Managua in June by the multilateral agency.

The UNDP report for its part says there were 15,000 reported cases of rape from 2002 to 2005 in the four countries for which official records were made available - Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua.

Doing something about these "invisible crimes" is an obligation that the State cannot ignore, she added.

But violence against women - like violence against children or ethnic minorities - "is almost totally excluded from the official debate on public insecurity in the region," said Millón.

The report recommends implementing a strategy to prevent and eliminate violence against women, which must take into account the specific characteristics that set this crime apart.

The UNDP also highlighted the invisible nature of domestic violence, which is usually considered a private matter.

The first step that must be taken to make the problem visible, according to the report, is to increase awareness on the nature, magnitude and consequences for society as a whole.

It also underlines the importance of "combating impunity and defining more fully and specifically the behaviours that constitute forms of violence against women and must be treated as criminal offences punishable by law." (END/2009)

Source: <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=49279>