Ending Femicide: Fighting Violence against Women

Story and photos by Debralee Santos

"Papi, Papi."

The anguished cries of a young woman echoed loudly in the room, filling the space with a terrible yearning.

That they were uttered by the very father to whom they were addressed, rather than in the voice of the young girl who called for him, made the plea even more devastating.

Jorge Velasquez Paiz, a Guatemalan father whose young daughter Claudina Isabel was murdered by persons unknown, had come to the Lehman College campus for an international conference on stopping violence against women in Central America.

He is still seeking justice for the Aug. 13, 2005 murder of his 19 year-old daughter, which has led to no arrests or conclusive inquiries, but is considered, rather, a "cold case."

Paiz had come to deliver the keynote address at the Center for Human Rights and Peace Studies’s "New Pathways to Justice" conference.

The Center, which debuted in February, has already hosted two separate such forums, and is led by Executive Director Dr. Victoria Sanford.

Sanford is a member of Lehman’s anthropology faculty and a 2009 Guggenheim Fellow, who has conducted extensive field research with indigenous peace communities in Colombia, refugee communities in Ecuador, and Maya communities in Guatemala—with a particular emphasis on uncovering femicide and social cleansing in Guatemala.

For Paiz, it was an opportunity to speak out not only against the brutal murder that had taken his only daughter from him and his family, but against the waves of rampant violence that have plagued his country’s women.

As Dr. Mendez pointed out, El Centro de Estudios de la Mujer (The Center of Women’s Studies) “is for my daughter, and for all the women who suffer. I will not stop.”

The violent acts are compounded, he explained, by a weak justice system, populated by indifferent authorities. Laws are rarely enforced by investigators and prosecutors alike.

Young women, like Claudina, explains Paiz, are routinely targeted, raped, mutilated and murdered in Guatemala, and their attackers are rarely pursued, allowing for impunity.

"El Paraíso de Asesinatos [A Murder’s Paradise]," is what Paiz says his country has devolved into.

It was a highly emotional presentation, and one that typified the revelatory nature of the Center’s commitment to exploring difficult human rights issues.

The day-long conference was divided into various panels tabled by women’s rights leaders representing Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, as well as the United States.

"These are hate crimes, and they should be prosecuted as such," exhorted Dr. Maria Marvis Jirón, of IXCHEN, a non-governmental organization that provides affordable educational, health, and legal services to the women of Masaya, Nicaragua and surrounding areas.

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Dr. Jirón herself is no stranger to violence.

Her advocacy work has made her and her colleagues targets in an already-hostile environment, where to demonstrate for women’s rights can often lead to be branded by the government as “state terrorists.”

In July of 2009, IXCHEN’s offices burned nearly to the ground and they were left with only walls standing.

"To demand justice is expensive,” explained Dr. Jirón.

She pointed to a recent instance in which two sisters in Masaya were killed brutally by machete; their cries, it was reported, were heard by many in neighboring homes.

No one called the authorities or intervened.

Their murderers have not been apprehended.

And the news of their deaths was buried in the back pages of the national newspaper, after the events in Libya and the tale of a Nicaraguan boxer who’d won an international bout.

They are not alone.

As Dr. Jiron explained, 21 women have been killed in the last 78 days in Nicaragua.

In Honduras, the statistics are no less chilling.

As Dr. Maria Virginia Díaz Méndez of El Centro de Estudios de la Mujer (The Center of Women’s Studies) pointed out, on average, one woman a day is killed in Honduras.

She spoke unequivocally about the need for forceful and systemic change.

"This is state terrorism, this is institutionalized hatred, this is social indifference,” said Dr. Mendez. "This must change."

Like the other panelists, she spoke to the need for comprehensive consciousness raising regarding the equality of women in an effort to counter the deep-rooted patriarchy and misogyny that led to the kinds of violence described.

Lehman College sophomore Hennessey Reyes, 19, who attended the conference, agreed that the issues presented were universal.

"Yo soy caribeña, y el tema también nos concierne [I am from the Caribbean, and the issue also affects us]."

She spoke with unfortunate personal knowledge: "Yo he visto violencia domestica [I know of domestic violence]."

But Reyes was certain that it was precisely this sort of forum that would help create different realities.

"We have to begin to educate and inform ourselves, men and women. We have to do the work together to change the ideology,” said the International Business major.

It is a sentiment echoed by Jorge Velasquez Paiz when he speaks of his own quest to continue to speak out.

"Si, si estoy muy cansado [Yes, I am very tired],” he says. "Pero mi amor es furioso, es verdadero, es por mi hija, y por todas las mujeres que sufren. No paro. [But my love is true, and furious; it is for my daughter, and for all the women who suffer. I will not stop]."

In Central American countries.

Claudina Isabel Velásquez, then 19 years old, was killed in Guatemala in 2005, and her case has never been solved.

Her father Jorge continues to speak out against the violence against women that afflicts Guatemala and many other Central American countries.