Continuities and Discontinuities of Violence against Indigenous Women in Guatemala

Boston College CENTER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS & INTERNATIONAL JUSTICE

Irma Alicia Velásquez Nimatuj

October 18, 2012

Good evening everyone.

It feels like a dream - a dream come true - to be here at the Center for Human Rights and International Justice at Boston College. When I accepted the invitation, in April of this year, it became a personal challenge to come here. Today, I believe it is a wonderful opportunity to share the air, the life of this place, with you, and especially to learn how to interact with each other so that we can keep moving forward from our own settings and create effective actions for change using and testing the national and international legal frameworks to challenge the daily human rights violations that we face under the current international economic system. Today, hundreds of indigenous leaders and communities around the world experience persecution, displacement and annihilation at the hands of multinational companies taking over indigenous territories, which have become valuable loot due to the wealth of the natural resources held in their soil. In fact, you and I are here because we struggle and dedicate our work so that having access to a decent life doesn’t remain the privilege of a few but instead becomes a right for all people.

I owe my presence here to Dr. Brinton Lykes of Boston College and Dr. Alison Crosby of York University in Toronto. It was through their extensive research and accompaniment to the justice process in Guatemala, working with women and indigenous communities, that I met them and they invited me to share with you some of the work I’ve been doing with indigenous women, survivors of the most recent genocide of my country. In terms of logistical support, I would like to thank Timothy Karcz and I also want to thank Dr. Deborah Levenson Estrada for her long friendship and for her political commitment to my country.

Tonight, I want to share with you some of my experiences as a k‘iche´ woman, as an anthropologist and as a journalist, who has tried to understand how racism, sexual violence and poverty combined during the Guatemalan genocide. Specifically I want to focus on how genocide has affected the lives of indigenous women but also on the importance of committed
and activist geared professional training and its contribution and benefits to justice processes.

Guatemala is a small country in Central America, which is a bit smaller than the state of Tennessee, with 24 indigenous languages. But let me begin by telling you that what happened in Guatemala from 1960-1996 can be described as State Terrorism because, under the pretext of national security, the State, through the army, carried out one of the most despicable and gruesome crimes against humanity, which included the sexual violation and labor exploitation of indigenous women all over the country. Tonight however, I will discuss one case perpetrated against a small q'eqchi’ community- almost unknown and located in the eastern part of the country-called Sepur, situated in the department of Izabal.

In 1982, under the Presidency of General Efraín Ríos Montt, the army installed a military base in Sepur and executed and then disappeared the corpses of all men and some older children. Subsequently, all of the surviving widows of Sepur were subjected to domestic and sexual slavery for six years. Until this day, given the level of impunity in the national justice system and the complacency of the army, the victims had been unable to file complaints for these crimes in the courts. It was until exactly three weeks ago that for the first time, after 30 years, 15 surviving q'eqchi’ women from Sepur, many elderly and sick, and almost all hiding their faces, but with profound dignity, narrated their lives and the lives of their people in front of local judges. They are demanding justice for those killed, for those who were disappeared, and also for themselves after they were raped repeatedly for several years. They also asked for justice for their surviving children who to this day live in uncertainty and fear. (These crimes took place within the context of the internal armed conflict that lasted 36 years, from 1960 to 1996.)

As a k’iche’ activist I acknowledge that my training in activist anthropology, in addition to preparing me to carry out quality research, taught me that I have a social responsibility to do what is useful for the communities or groups with whom I work and support. The case of Sepur showed me the usefulness of activist anthropology and its diverse uses, because as a tool for knowledge it has multiple possibilities, from basic support to political processes to technical support and vice versa.

In my experience of working in indigenous and poor rural communities of Guatemala I have found an affinity towards activist anthropology because I found that an anthropologist often has
the job of an organizer or of a political and technical translator who helps highlight the difficulties of a community and interpret them using Western logic. Activist anthropology allows its user to show the technological achievements and knowledge that indigenous communities possess in a way that teaches the Western world how other worlds, worlds that it sometimes despises and discriminates against, create such knowledge and contribute to the contemporary world.

In my experience the methodological and political work of the anthropologist can be valuable because in remote, rural, and poor communities there are technical, administrative, financial and other limitations. Therefore, an academic, engaged and in tune with the grassroots and with the local leadership can help nurture the political discourse of organic leaders, who equipped with more arguments, can strengthen their demands before the state. This view also contributes to the strengthening of local leaderships and grassroots groups who, by having more tools, and by means of research and critical analysis of their situation and of the national and international context, can help energize and strengthen their arguments before the state or the powerful groups that control the country and with whom they must negotiate, almost always, from a position of disadvantage. From this perspective, of taking advantage of the usefulness of activist anthropology, is how I approached this cruel and horrendous subject of rape and sexual violence against the women of Sepur. I must reiterate that this type of human rights violations was also experienced by thousands of indigenous women in my country, although we don’t have exact numbers since many of them still remain silent.

Now I would like to contextualize my work. It is not that I didn’t know of the countless atrocities and violations committed by the army against indigenous peoples during the genocide of the 1980s. In fact, all indigenous peoples lived and survived the war differently. At the beginning of my professional career I tried to approach the study of my country focusing on class differences within groups of indigenous merchants from my hometown; to understand their privileges and how their demands were used to support the demands of the impoverished indigenous majority. After a brief period, I began working with different rural indigenous communities who were struggling for access to farmland while others were demanding the return of their lands taken from them before the war. In both scenarios, I found a permanent oppression towards women, regardless of their class. My data, however, showed that poor indigenous women were the least
likely to denounce male violence. This led me to research the reproduction of racism, patriarchy and capitalism within the Guatemalan state and its impact on organizations as well as urban and rural communities. I recognize that although I attempted to understand the multiple oppressions indigenous women faced, I had not analyzed the issue of sexual violence amongst armed conflict survivors. I did not do so until late 2009 when I was invited by colleagues of Mujeres Transformando el Mundo (Women Changing the World), the Union Nacional de Mujeres Guatemaltecas, UNAMG (the National Association of Guatemalan Women), and the Equipo de Estudios Comunitarios y Accion Psicosocial, ECAP (the Community Studies and Psychosocial Action Team), who asked me to write a cultural expert’s witness report for the Tribunal of Conscience for Women Survivors of Sexual Violence during the Armed Conflict. This event took place in Guatemala on the 4th and 5th of March 2010. Through this undertaking I had access to a vast range of materials including reports, interviews, videos, testimonials, research and publications about the lives of indigenous women from different language groups who were raped during the decade of the 1980's in different regions of the country.

Regarding the issue of sexual violence against indigenous women, the data from the documents to which I had access exceeded the information contained in the Catholic Church’s Truth Commission report, Guatemala Nunca Más (1998), and in the United Nation’s Commission for Historical Clarification Report (1999). I must admit that for me it was appalling to read and compare the information because the data detailed actions carried out by depraved minds. I mean, the actions executed by soldiers, most of who were indigenous, on the bodies of hundreds of indigenous women of all ages and regions, were so cruel, so inhuman. With the documents in hand, many times and with profound indignation I wondered: What social, political, economic and cultural conditions were at play so that indigenous soldiers, often from the same linguistic community as the women, became the vicious executioners of their own sisters? How was the process of internalization of racism, shaped and furthered by the Guatemalan army? The answer to these questions matter because the process of genocide ensured that indigenous men ignored the principles of their communal worldview and social networks in exchange for the power that guns and their commanders gave them. With weapons in hand, they took on the right to control, threaten, kidnap, disappeared, and kill men, the elderly and children and to rape women for years. To what extent can war dehumanize men, in this case soldiers and members of the infamous civil patrols, mostly indigenous, and push them to destroy the bodies as well as the
physical and emotional lives of indigenous women?

As an indigenous woman, this process hurt me. I felt that the abused women were my grandmothers, my mother or my aunts because most were illiterate women, working women, with various responsibilities within their communities and with many aspirations who suddenly felt that with the "arrival of the war to their communities, life changed.” At all times, knowing that they and I shared the same indigenous identity made me question my own privilege and the extreme variation between their lives and mine infuriated me. Regardless of my pain, I had to continue with my research and I had to rely on the discipline of history to help me frame and understand that servitude, violence, racial discrimination and violence against indigenous women have been constant in Guatemala’s history. I have come to realize that we cannot interpret sexual violence against indigenous women as non-historical facts because then, we cannot understand how, in the twentieth century, the Guatemalan State, through the army, executed with complete impunity and without any signs of mercy, crimes against humanity. In addition, it should be noted that sexual violence has been used in parallel to racial discrimination and both have been used in tandem to achieve a more effective control on the bodies and minds of individual and collective lives of indigenous women.

Therefore, racism and sexual violence against indigenous women have operated continuously. As I mentioned before, the present cannot be analyzed without its link to the past. The Spanish invasion of 1524 marked a starting point in the history of present day Guatemala. At that time, indigenous women were converted into domestic slaves and sex slaves. We do not have an exact number that indicates how many indigenous women were separated from their places of origin, culture, and families and who were forced to establish new villages for the benefit of the Spanish forces. For three centuries, during colonial times, thousands of them lost their lives in the encomienda and repartimiento systems (Severo Martinez 1980) and thousands never had the right to breastfeed their children, because even that right was denied, and instead they were forced to nurse the children of the conquistadors’ elite.

Three centuries later, racism and sexual violence were present during the 1821 independence movement from Spain, which did not mean freedom for indigenous women; on the contrary, independence never came for them and their communities. Forced labor requirements made women leave their families. They witnessed how their parents, husbands and children were
condemned to slavery on the plantations. The liberal era that began in 1871 and the introduction of coffee did not mean any form of economic development for indigenous women either. Guatemala's entry into the global economic system through coffee exports turned millions of indigenous women into cheap labor and their wombs produced children needed to harvest coffee. And in the coffee plantations, living under slavery or semi-slavery condition, women continued suffering sexual violence. For a small group of local and foreign families coffee became green gold, but for indigenous women, forced to harvest for several months, every year of their lives, coffee meant a system of racial oppression and sexual violence that was hard to break for generations.

The twentieth century did not change the situation of indigenous women. Instead, and ironically, it was the beginning of a century in which we noticed that we did not have an analysis of the levels of sexual violence to which women were subjected. It was only very recently that we began collecting data, evidence, documents and testimonies of women survivors of the aggravated racism and rape that the army committed during the armed conflict. However, there are still doubts about how racism and sexual violence operated against women before the war. There are stages of which we know very little and this is one of the critical gaps that history has yet to examine.

After writing an expert’s witness report in 2010, I continued assisting the work of the women’s organizations that promoted the first Tribunal of Conscience On for Women Survivors of Sexual Violence during the Armed Conflict and that's how I was asked to develop another expert’s report on the mass rape of 15 q'eqchi' women carried out by members of various ranks of the Guatemalan Army in the community of Sepur. The Guatemalan State installed one of the six military bases of the region in Sepur and this is where women were forced to do what they call "service for the military” which included: cleaning, preparing food for an average of 400 soldiers, washing soldiers’ clothes in the river, and serving as sexual slaves for the 6 years that the military base remained in the community.

During the research process I had access to many sources. I met with experts and other professionals who published on the subject of women’s violence. I also met with women’s organizations that accompanied the legal process. Most importantly, I had the great privilege of meeting and interviewing each of the 15 women. I knew all of them because I had read their
complaints filed with the District Attorney’s office. But seeing them in person and arriving in the community where they lived before and after the armed conflict was a privilege, but also emotionally devastating. Listening to the details of the events along with their pain made me feel helpless against the justice system, including the blindness of racist judges who seek evidence in the bodies of women, 30 years later, to determine whether sexual violence was truly committed against them. The psychological wounds, the destruction of their communities and the disappearance or murder of their husbands or children, are not enough. Judges are constantly demanding more scientific evidence and specific details about how and where the assaults and sexual abuse took place to determine the authenticity of their stories. These are things women are unable to provide because of the time lapse, but also because their emotional state does not allow them to relive their ordeals in specific detail.

I met, interviewed and shared with the women who decided to take their case to court. Their ages range from 52 to 75 years old. All the women I interviewed migrated from the department of Alta Verapaz to Izabal as babies or adolescents accompanying their parents or grandparents in search of arable land. According to their identification card all were born in plantations. That is, they were the daughters of small farmers who managed to break the colonial chains, at least temporarily, and gained independence by acquiring a piece of land in the department of Izabal. All were members of q’eqchi’ families dedicated to agriculture. All are monolingual, speaking only the q'eqchi' language. None of the 15 women attended school. All are illiterate and continue to wear their regional clothes.

In this process I tried to understand their lives in key moments. First, before they were subjected to sexual violence. Next, during the period when the actual sexual abuse took place. And last, the period after the signing of the Peace Accords in 1996 when they tried to speak but could not because the wounds were still fresh. At this latter time the women also feared a return of the violence because some of the civil patrollers, who collaborated with the army, were still living in the same community. The women also viewed the justice system as slow and centralized in the capital city. As I listened to their testimonies, all given in their mother language, q'eqchi', I needed the support of a translator, Olivia Tox, a q'eqchi' teacher, who has worked on documenting human rights violations in that region. During all the testimonies I saw them fall apart, at different times and with different intensity, because the effects and pains of the sexual
assaults are still present in their memories and in their bodies.

I witnessed how narrating their experience implied conjuring up the facts that disrupted and changed their lives forever. For them, the army’s arrival in Sepur was tragic in different aspects. It meant the destruction of the communal and family structure; the disappearance or murder of their husbands, children, fathers, brothers and children; their temporary escape with their children to the mountains and the agony and death of several of them due to lack of food and water. Soon after these atrocities the women were subjected to sexual slavery, constant rapes - individual and collective- and servitude. They also experienced a deprivation of their liberty; pregnancies, product of rape; abortions; and subsequent venereal diseases. Above all, sexual violence suffered at the hands of the army kept them and their families from living a normal life. Their communal life was destroyed by the burning of their homes, the destruction of their traditional clothes, the slaughter of their domesticated animals, the burning of their crops, closing the school, destroying the cooperative and closing the Catholic and Protestant churches. The women describe how the events made them feel like women who stopped having any value, and they felt they no longer deserved to live and did not want to live. For these and many other reasons that are difficult for the women to explain is that some interviews were more intense and extensive than others.

Throughout the testimonial process I tried to respect the women’s decision to either stop or continue with their interviews. I also pondered over the process of interviewing survivors of a bloody and racist internal armed conflict, in which the actions of the state and its executioners remain unpunished. How does one document, with all its complexity, the effects of the war in the post-war era? Meanwhile, I have witnessed how many of these women are getting older, sick, and many others dying, all without seeing the men responsible for the disappearances, torture, murder, abuses, rapes, harassment, kidnapping, and destruction of personal and collective honor, punished by the courts. For all of these women, seeing that middle and high rank officials who allowed, facilitated and promoted these crimes are still free, while the low ranking officials who have been identified by them continue living, in some cases in the same communities, with complete impunity and still with power, deepens their trauma.

One learns from anthropology that everything that is said, written or published must be based on solid research that must be cross referenced with data obtained from a serious fieldwork, a
continuous participative observation of the social space in which one works, and from an interaction, as equal as possible, with the women and men in the communities. However, the methodology does not teach us how to deal with emotions, the sense of social conscience and anger that overlaps when one works documenting crimes against humanity and when one shares the same racial identity as the survivors. In this case, they, as q'eqchi 'and I, a k´iche´, share a common identity as Maya people from Guatemala. So far I don’t have the answers to this dilemma. All I know is that these are some questions I’ve asked myself and are part of what has meant putting my anthropological skills at the service of my indigenous brothers and sisters in a country where sexual and racial violence against indigenous women continue to be used as tools of oppression.

The study for the expert’s witness report for the case of Sepur took place from December 2011 to June 2012. During this time, I identified numerous acts of racism and sexual violence committed against women. These acts were part of a series of crimes committed by members of the army, installed in the area. Based on their testimony, documents and statements I identified four different types of violence that disrupted the individual and community life of women after the military base was installed in the community.

1. A group of women were raped and then murdered by the army. Unfortunately, it is not possible to identify the exact number of women massacred because this requires a broader process of multidisciplinary research, documentation and the exhumation of mass graves.

2. A group of widows remained in the community. These women were forced into sexual slavery and forced to serve in the camp for periods of 6 to 8 months. Domestic service in the detachment included: cleaning facilities, making food for members of the Army, and washing uniforms. Sexual assault was perpetrated in the base, in homes, near the rivers or in areas close to the community. In short, women in the community faced death, rape, cultural and economic destruction, and emotional and physical abuse. All of these crimes altered their cultural identity, and the collective values of their community were destroyed.

3. Another group of widows ran away to the mountains. They escaped from the
military base but before fleeing they were raped and any time they came down from the mountains they were detained and raped again by the soldiers. Most women stayed in the mountains and while they escaped the abuse they did so at the cost of losing some or all of their children due to the lack of food.

4. All women who remained in the community and those who came down from the mountains in search of food or seeking information about the whereabouts of family members, or who decided to resettle with relatives or neighbors, were also sexually abused at different times.

These violations modified or destroyed their communities, their extended families, their systems of authority, system of property, production, construction and reproduction of medical knowledge, and their spiritual solidarity. In other words, physical, emotional, and sexual violence perpetrated on the bodies of these women marked a turning point in their lives.

Moreover, the presence of the army involved a constant damage to their already destroyed family economy. Many times they were forced to acquire, with their own money, supplies to serve the soldiers because the army did not always provide them. In addition, women who were living in the community, after completing their military service, were still required to bring six pounds of corn daily to the military detachment using their own money. And under the threat of death, they also had to look for firewood and invest part of their day buying corn, making tortillas and delivering them to the military base, even if it meant starvation for them and their children.

Therefore, besides the emotional and physical abuse, there was economic exploitation, which is why they are suing the state for damages.

Currently, all women interviewed for their witness testimony live in poverty. They state that their conditions are similar or worse than before the war (1960-1996). They showed and described their houses as shacks made of wood with tin roofs or natural materials of the region. Most adult women show signs of malnourishment, while the younger ones look older than their real age. In the interviews, the women explained that to them the war meant eating only once a day, and when they were lucky twice. The few women who remarried have their husband’s income to help with the household expenses, while those who are alone rely on what their surviving children can afford to give them.
In terms of the perpetrators and the role of the state, the declarations make evident that the army commanders, in collaboration with civil patrollers, were responsible for the forced disappearance of the women’s husbands. However, crimes executed by members of the military, in some cases with the help of the civil patrols, were not committed in an isolated, social and cultural vacuum. Instead, they were carried out within a context of the militarization of the country promoted since 1954 by the counterrevolutionary state and with the support of the U.S. government, the Catholic hierarchy and agro-export elites. Under the mask of an anticommunist strategy and as part of the Cold War, the Guatemalan state implemented a campaign of terror which included the physical extermination of any person or community they believed to be communist or communist sympathizer. Taking into account these and other elements such as historical hatred and fear against indigenous rebellions one can observe the complex national and international conditions which allowed members of the army to act with cruelty and impunity against indigenous communities especially those that were seeking legal titles to their land.

When the armed conflict escalated, ladino landowners sought to ensure that residents of Sepur, who did not have legal ownership of their lands, through their communal organizations such as church groups, cooperatives and land committees, did not join insurgent groups operating in the western part of the country. Despite the absurdity and impracticality of an alliance of residents of Sepur with insurgency groups operating at the opposite end of the country, the army decided to take control of the community by repressive means. The record shows that at first the practice was the selective killing of community leaders. When the conflict between army and rebels escalated the killings in the communities became collective even if the communities never met the rebel forces. Entire regions were militarized bringing indiscriminate terror through disappearances, collective murders and rape –in other words, genocide.

Through carefully analyzing the evidence of how soldiers were recruited, first, it is clear that there is a gap that explains the profound transformation experienced by indigenous soldiers, most of whom were recruited by force but who played a key role in these horrific acts. As Margarita and several other women remember, some of the soldiers were q'eqchi' and she was able to identify them because they spoke the same language. Second, there needs to be an analysis of the role of the civil patrollers, who were members of the same community and who were under the
army’s command during the different stages of the armed conflict. Women speak about the terror civil patrollers instilled in the community but it is still necessary to examine the actions and impact of these patrollers in communities like Sepur because they managed to restore their lives after the war ended. Therefore, we need to analyze and understand the transformation that indigenous men experienced and find out what led to them to carry out orders to kidnap, torture, and murder their brothers and sisters in their own communities. And third, based on the narratives one can deduce that severe and long processes of inequality in specific social spaces and groups, such as the army, enabled and facilitated soldiers to act against their own communities, because in the midst of extreme poverty, even if some were forced, they also benefitted from small or disproportionate shares of power.

The 15 women expressed that for them, the reason why the army installed six bases in the region, without a single insurgent group operating in the area, was because their husbands were fighting to legalize their land. They also said that the region’s landowners negotiated with the army the installation of the military detachments, first to provide security to the plantations and later, to evict and take away the land from peasants without land titles. Doña Manuela says: "Civil patrollers along with landowners prepared a list with the names of the men who should be taken.” Landowners achieved their goals since plantations dedicated to the cultivation of African Palm surround the community today. Doña Demesia states: "the war came because of the landowners, the rich, because the peasants were asking to legalize the land where we lived, but the landowners wanted those lands, and because we didn’t leave, the army took the men. For defending our land, the army took our husbands."

All of the women who have brought their case to court lost their husbands but some also lost their children. The most dramatic case is that of Doña Rosario, who witnessed all four of her children die from hunger and malnutrition one by one when they were four, three, and one years old when she went into hiding. There is also the case of Doña Antonia three of whose five children died in the mountains. All agree that they lost their community. They all say that life during those six years was imposed by the army, who closed the cooperative, the school and fired the teachers. Their children could not learn to read and write. Nor could they buy or sell items because the market was closed. The army also killed the Catholic catechists and evangelical pastors. Consequently, the evangelical and Catholic churches closed and q'eqchi'
spiritual rites were banned. Doña Candelaria said, "No doctors arrived during those years, because the army did not allow it", so they fed on roots and used herbs for medicine. For all, the community became a ghost town.

With no husbands and no help from anybody all women remained in extreme poverty. Doña Rosario was never able to recover her house and now lives with her mother. All women lost their crops and all the animals they had owned and were denied the right to grow food and cook for their own. As Dona Rosa said, “making food was interpreted by the soldiers as a crime, because we were accused of preparing food for the guerrillas." Although Doña Magdalena points out, she “never saw or imagined what a guerrillero looked like.” At that stage, they say, "We slept without eating." Doña Demesia summarizes this time as the time where “they left us without house, clothes, food, animals and without a husband. We survived from what we were given, from the generosity of neighbors. In the middle of the war we had to beg for food because we were out in the street without anything or anyone." Doña Maria expressed that during the war: "I stayed with a few pieces of clothing; I washed and dried them while I was bathing in the river."

In short, all women expressed that neither they nor their late husbands were armed and that they had never seen a gun. All they owned was their farming tools. Therefore, the case of Sepur refers to a group of unarmed families who were brutally attacked for years using racist and false ideological grounds. Doña Maria, for example says, soldiers raped her the same day they kidnapped her husband in 1982. To make things worse, none of the women received psychological care by the State, not even after the signing of the Peace Accords in 1996. Of the 15 women interviewed, all were sexually abused at different times, but four did not have to serve the army because they fled into the mountains. Those who did not fulfill these orders were punished, tortured and murdered.

Today, the 15 women are all sick: some have diabetes, others have heart problems, malnutrition, problems of their reproductive system, as well as emotional problems such as feelings of deep shame because of rapes, and they experience mental anguish when remembering this stage of their lives. They are also the subjects of ridicule and gossip; they suffer nightmares, depression, nervousness, and loss of memory, among others issues. As Dona Magdalena said: "Now I know that none of the women in the community have a happy life because we were all raped by the army, by our own government ... I feel angry, hurt, I hate those who did that to me." While Doña
Cecilia sometimes experiences nightmares, stress and she thinks the soldiers are coming back to laugh and make fun of them saying "you poor little women! You are alone with your children, poor things! Now you have to care for your children because your husbands are not coming back."

In their own manner, all women express that their religion and spirituality was severely damaged because they were forbidden to practice their q'eqchi’ rites, go to Catholic or evangelical church. Doña Rosa states that "during the war, when the priest came to the community and tried to celebrate Mass, soldiers threw bombs, and then the church became a temporary shelter where families were protecting themselves along with the priest and nuns."

Twelve out of the 15 women who testified received financial support from the National Reparations Program, which was a symbolic amount. Three of them are still waiting to receive some economic support. Today they all explain that their family economy deteriorated during and after the war and that they could never again recover economically.

Doña Candelaria says that life changed "when they got the news that the soldiers had arrived and that’s when the fear began.” For Doña Vicenta, this was the time when the army destroyed their communities with mass disappearances. What the women experienced can be described by the question asked by Doña Magdalena: "Why did this happen to us? And she answered herself – perhaps because we are poor?" While Dona Vicenta adds, also because “indigenous and mestizo soldiers saw us as indigenous women, that’s why they did what they wanted when they raped us, we could not defend ourselves because they were showing us their weapons, that’s why we let them abuse us”. Cecilia adds:" The army did not value us as people, for them we were only Indians who could not read or write, we were worthless in their eyes, therefore, they abused us, over and over again." Doña Demesia expressed that “past actions have implications in their present lives and that of their families”. She says that the government has not provided justice for the disappearance of their loved ones. For her, their only crime was living near landowners.

To understand why the q'eqchi´ women of Sepur faced sexual violence that was so vicious and inhuman, I propose that a fundamental pillar that must not be neglected in the analysis of these abuses is the structural and historical racism, which has been fundamental in the construction of the Guatemalan State. This social and political construct has operated for centuries to control
and exploit indigenous peoples. Racism, as a social construction, provides privileges and reinforces an unequal social structure. Therefore, racism is used as a tool of oppression that the Latin American elites reproduce and exercise through their control of the State.

Finally, sexual violence against indigenous women, as shown in their testimonies, must be analyzed within a larger historical and social context. This allows us to understand that sexual violence, physical violence, and servitude experienced by these women was not a new nor an isolated practice of the state but a regular practice in the long history of the lives of indigenous women. In other words, the human rights violations against indigenous women during the armed conflict were the continuation of an illegal practice that has never been brought to trial much less punished in the history of Guatemala. That is why, to understand Guatemala and its atrocious crimes against humanity, particularly against indigenous women and men, it is necessary to understand that racism and sexual violence have been practiced simultaneously.

The data collected in the Sepur case forms part of the larger acts of genocide committed in Guatemala. This case only dealt with the human and cultural destruction of an ethnic village, the perverted sexual violence, the constant labor exploitation, and the slavery against all q’eqchi’ women of Sepur. For justice’s sake, this case presents powerful evidence to put together a solid case before the Guatemalan courts so that the state finally accepts responsibility for these crimes in Sepur and, hopefully, for other Mayan villages as well. The evidence should also contribute to all surviving victims, women, their families and communities, obtaining financial compensation. What is being fought for, generally, is that sexual violence against poor, rural indigenous women does not remain unpunished, silenced or hidden under the cloak of impunity, but instead the cases can be studied, analyzed, brought and tried in courts and punished to set a precedent for the country and for humankind. Only then we can say: never again.

Muchas Gracias. Many Thanks.