

Community Gender Emergency: Indigenous women's response to multiple forms of violence and territorial dispossession in Mexico

For decades, organized Indigenous women have wondered why some deaths in Mexico are more visible than others. Who decides which bodies matter? It's time to start talking about the violence perpetrated against us, Indigenous women. From within our community organizations, we are working to construct a collective memory and promote public policies based on our practices and knowledge.

By Fabiola Del Jurado Mendoza and Norma Don Juan Pérez - 1st May 2021

The National Coordinating Committee of Indigenous Women [*Coordinadora Nacional de Mujeres Indígenas / CONAMI*] is a political project that was born in August 1997 to coordinate and strengthen community spaces in which women play an active and leading role. Its goals are self-determination, autonomy, justice, respect for multiculturalism and full exercise of the rights of women and Indigenous Peoples. It has been a member of the Continental Liaison Group for Indigenous Women of the Americas [*Enlace Continental de Mujeres Indígenas de las Américas*] since its founding, one of the most important organizations for promoting global policies in favour of Indigenous Peoples.

In a press release entitled *Violence and Indigenous Women*, this platform's member organizations noted that violence against Indigenous women and girls, adolescents and youth was both political, social, economic, spiritual, physical, sexual, psychological and environmental. Each of these forms of violence has multiple dimensions: interpersonal and structural, public and private, State and non-state. Any analysis of violence in public spaces should, as far as possible, include all of these different perceptions. This is why we insist on the need to approach violence not as one but as *multiple forms of violence*.

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In order to understand violence against Indigenous women in Mexico, we need to construct our collective memory and go back to the time of the invasion. Colonization resulted in a “cultural and historic clash” of identities between Europeans and the Indigenous people who inhabited the Americas, who were considered ignorant and barbaric. The invaders believed that the Indigenous people should be tutored and educated in the Christian way, through the use of violence and slavery.

This process consequently shaped our identity because when we speak of the invasion of our territories, this also includes our bodies, minds and spirits, i.e., all areas of our individual and collective life. Even the conception of the feminine-masculine duality was displaced by a hierarchization of the sexes: men became dominant and women became the property of men. Women have therefore been violated in both public and private spaces.

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During his six-year term as President of Mexico, Felipe Calderón Hinojosa (2006-2012) decreed a war on drugs that led to an unprecedented escalation of violence: [intentional homicides doubled from 9.3 in 2007 to 18.3 in 2012](#). Despite the absence of clear figures, [there was also an increase in femicides](#) in Chiapas, Guanajuato, Jalisco, Nuevo León, Oaxaca, Puebla, State of Mexico, Veracruz, Quintana Roo, Mexico City and Ciudad Juárez.

Faced with this situation, feminist, academic and Indigenous women from the State of Mexico called for a [Gender Violence Alert](#). Alongside this, in Chihuahua, there were reports of, and protests against, femicides: in December 2010, Maricela Escobedo [was murdered outside the Government Palace](#), shining a spotlight on the Mexican State’s impunity and negligence in its response to the murders and cases of gender violence. Women have also mobilized to denounce violence and murders in Morelos, Guerrero, Michoacán and Oaxaca.

Despite the efforts of organizations, academia and the feminist movement, however, we Indigenous women still felt that we were invisible in the figures being reported on femicides and in the policies to combat gender violence. We therefore decided to establish the Community Gender Emergency in response to the refusal of Mexico’s different state governments to acknowledge their inability to provide protection and justice to women

generally, and Indigenous women in particular. The objectives of the Community Gender Emergency are as follows:

- To shine a spotlight on violence against Indigenous women and to understand the specific nature of these acts against them and their peoples.
- To recognize that the different forms of violence against Indigenous women are the result of a combination of historical and structural conditions.
- To understand that violence against women and violence against Indigenous Peoples are interlinked and therefore cannot be separately addressed.
- To generate culturally-relevant public policies aimed at eradicating all forms of violence.
- To promote legal pluralism and Indigenous Peoples' principles, values and practices for prevention, protection, access to justice, reparation of damages and eradication of violence.

How do we work?

The Community Gender Emergency has a virtual space on Facebook in which the members of CONAMI share journalistic notes and public reports on the multiple forms of violence circulating via the networks. From this platform, members of the Commission for the Eradication of Violence and Defence of Territory [*Comisión de Erradicación de Violencias y Defensa del Territorio*] are responsible for compiling the information into a database. On 25 November each year, we issue an annual report.

This information also generates inputs with which to prepare shadow reports to the [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women](#), the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and other advocacy spaces for the advancement of our rights. It is important to clarify that this database does not meet the scientific parameters established by some academic observatories since it does not have a statistical purpose but rather a political intent: that of challenging the Mexican State and society as a whole.

The contact with and handling of this information has led us to deepen our knowledge and reflection on the contexts of violence. For us, these multiple forms of violence are related to

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violations of human rights. We are starting from a broad definition, which includes situations of displacement, territorial dispossession and dispossession of natural resources. These circumstances are not a priority for Western feminist agendas but, for us, as Indigenous women, they are: we cannot separate our specific rights from the collective rights of Indigenous Peoples.

We also recognize the diversity of views and ways of understanding these forms of violence in our environments. It is a challenge for us to discuss femicide, forced disappearance, human trafficking and other forms of violence, which used to be ignored and unnamed in community spaces. This is the basis for eradicating the violence. We must give it political meaning to prevent fear from immobilizing us. We have to recognize that violence against Indigenous women is an affront to our peoples: it hurts and damages us all. The fabric of the community cannot be built and strengthened if these different forms of violence are not eradicated.

We particularly recognize the need to broaden our focus to urban areas, where we have an increasing presence. Young Indigenous women who migrate to the city in search of work or education are exposed to higher levels and greater forms of violence. Far from their family support network, they do not know how to deal with violence and, at the same time, they find themselves in an unknown place that considers them strangers.

Alongside this, we are strengthening our collaborative work with feminists and non-indigenous academics in order to embrace concepts, theories and methods arising out of academia. We want to establish a dialogue of knowledge so that the methodologies are inclusive and representative of the diversity of women that we represent. We are seeking greater support for the collection, systematization, interpretation and dissemination of the information we handle.

Finally, we are promoting a political and critical view that holds the State responsible for impunity. The State must eliminate the conditions of risk, recognizing and incorporating our worldviews, practices and knowledge into public policies for prevention, care, justice and reparation of harm. We recognize ourselves as protagonists with capacities, knowledge and practices that can contribute to comprehensively addressing the problems: **“Nothing about us, without us”**.

An eye to the future

We are currently fine-tuning the methodology of the Community Gender Emergency programme and improving CONAMI members' knowledge so that they are able to continue to systematize information, both locally and nationally. At the same time, we are forging alliances with the Centre for Research and Higher Studies in Social Anthropology [*Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social / CIESAS*] and the Canadian Association for Latin American and Caribbean Studies (CALACS) in order to develop collaborative research, promote reflection and enrich public debate between Mexico, the United States and Canada.

Our aim is to continue to raise awareness of the multiple forms of violence that Indigenous women experience until we form part of the bodies that matter. For the moment, some organizations such as [Tlachinollan](#) are beginning to follow up and systematize cases of violence against Indigenous women. A number of different media sources have published articles on the deaths but they did not consider it important to refer to or highlight the fact that these femicides were of Indigenous women. We will continue to name them so that they are known and acted upon accordingly. Because something that has no name does not exist. For our roots, for our territories, for life! Never again a Mexico without us!

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