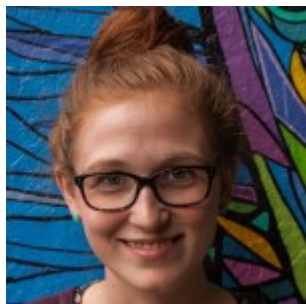


The Attack Against Mamá Maquín and Guatemala's "Eternal Spring"



Julia Hartviksen's doctoral project explores the materiality of femicide and other forms of violence against women in Guatemala's Northern Transversal Strip. Her research interests include critical feminist political economy, feminist international relations, violence against women, feminist historical materialism, extractivism, and masculinities. She holds a Doctoral Fellowship from the SSHRC Canada and a LSE PhD Studentship, and is a Visiting Researcher at the Women's Institute of the University of San Carlos, Guatemala City.

2016 will mark 20 years since the signature of the Guatemalan Peace Accords, which brought an end to Guatemala's 36-year long **armed conflict and genocide**. The war's casualties included over 200,000 mostly Mayan indigenous lives and thousands of disappeared and displaced. Yet, despite being a country officially at peace, high rates of ongoing violence – from violent crime to attacks on human rights defenders – suggest that the war and its traumas are being reconstituted in new ways everyday. Manuela Camus, Santiago Bastos and Julián López García (2015) refer to postwar violence in Guatemala as a "dinosaur reloaded"; similarly, Diane Nelson and Carlota McAllister (2013) argue that the aftermath of the conflict can be described as "war by other means".

One example of this came on September 15, 2015, when 3 masked men armed with guns broke into the offices of Mamá Maquín, an indigenous feminist organization which works in the promotion of women's rights and prevention of violence against women across Guatemala. The attack was against the organization's head office in the community of Nueva Libertad, located in the municipality of Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, Alta Verapaz. Mamá Maquín has recently celebrated its 25th anniversary as an organization, and has a long and important history in the struggle for the defense of women's rights, and the fight against violence in Guatemala. The community in which it is headquartered was established in recent years by refugees returning to Guatemala, after fleeing during the war.

During the attack, 4 women who work for the organization, and a 5-year old child, were held and threatened at gunpoint while the organization was robbed of its computers, files and other sensitive information. While it is unclear who is responsible for the attack, community members believe that the attack was likely an intimidation and scare tactic undertaken in order to try to silence the organization, and stop their ongoing resistance work.

In particular, women human rights defenders, commonly referred to as *defensoras*, have been at the forefront of struggles against human rights abuses in Guatemala. The legacies of resistance and struggle among organizations like Mamá Maquín is a testament to the fortitude and resilience of women, particularly indigenous women, in resisting oppressions in the country. Indeed, Guatemala, **where 2 women are reported murdered per day**, experiences some of the highest rates of gender-based violence and "**femicide**" in the world. Yet, the women's movement has historically defied the stereotypes casting Guatemalan women as victims of violence; *defensoras* actively resist the violence of postwar Guatemala.

Defensoras have played a key role in struggles against the country's expanding extractivist industry. In particular, women have been at the forefront of the resistance at 'La Puya,' a peaceful community occupying the entrance of the El Tambor Mine in San Pedro Ayampuc/San Jose del Golfo, located near Guatemala City. Similarly, *defensoras* have played a prominent role in the resistance to the Cementos Progresos cement factory and mine in San Juan Sacatepéquez. In the municipality of Chisec, located near Fray Bartolomé de las Casas in Alta Verapaz, indigenous women have been organizing from different communities to not only prevent violence against women, but also to resist the expansion of the contested oil palm industry. These *defensoras* link

violence against women with the social costs of extractivism, which, despite promises of community development made by companies, also brings pollution, social disruption, and threatens traditional livelihoods in these communities.

Women have also been active in finding ways to make their communities safer, particularly in terms of providing support for other women. In the municipality of Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, reportedly at least 5 cases of violence are reported to the local justice of the peace per day; in response, numerous women's organizations – in particular, Mamá Maquín, **INCIDE**, and the Municipal Women's office are targeting prevention and offering services to victim-survivors, despite incredibly limited resources and a real lack of funding.

The attack on Mamá Maquín will likely remain, like the vast majority of cases involving violence against women in Guatemala, in impunity. Indeed, recent ongoing, larger protests and movement(s) against political corruption will likely overshadow the attack in the small rural community. This is a tragic reality for many human rights defenders in Guatemala today.

Guatemala has recently made international headlines for the **ousting of its President, Otto Perez Molina**, accused of corruption, days before the country headed into the first round of presidential elections earlier this month. After months of peaceful protests, which began after the UN-appointed International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) linked former Vice President Roxana Baldetti's personal secretary with *La Línea* corruption ring, Baldetti and Molina were proven to be implicated as well. Otto Perez Molina, a former military general, has also been linked to genocidal massacres committed during the armed conflict, under former **General Efraín Ríos Montt**, who himself was convicted of crimes against humanity and genocide in 2013 (the trial was overturned on a technicality).

Ultimately, The CICIG's findings shook the Guatemalan political arena, to such an extent that the #RenunciaYa (Resign Now) movement has been labelled a "**Guatemalan Spring**". The phrase "Guatemalan Spring", however, is somewhat problematic. It suggests that Guatemalans are only now awakening after a winter of oppression and fear to challenge corruption, violence and impunity.. This perhaps misleads outsiders into thinking that recent protests and resistance against Guatemala's corrupt and violent political system is a novelty in two decades of postwar society. Certainly, there is no doubt that "fear is a way of life" (Green, 1999) for many survivors of the atrocities of Guatemala's brutal war. Yet, resistance movements against multiple oppressions, political corruption and impunity, are nothing new in Guatemala.

The resilience and work of Mamá Maquín, and the women's movement more broadly reflects legacies of resistance to broader structures of power and corruption in Guatemala. The *La Línea* corruption and bribe scandal meant that USD \$120 million destined for social services and other state programs – such as the prevention of violence against women- got diverted into the pockets of Guatemala's ultra-rich and powerful – including the former President and Vice-President. Despite the precarity of working in this context, evidenced by the attack against Mamá Maquín, the women's movement has grown in Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, and has fought to create safer spaces for women in the municipality. Guatemala, known colloquially as the "land of eternal spring" is ultimately, just that.



"Mama Maquin demands No More Violence against women" (via [elcanche](#))

Works cited:

Camus, M., Bastos, S. y López García, J. (2015) *Dinosaurio reloaded: Violencias actuales en*

NUESTRA SOLIDARIDAD CON LA ORGANIZACIÓN DE MUJERES MAMÁ MAQUÍN

Respaldamos el trabajo que han realizado durante 25 años en la defensa de la tierra, el territorio y la memoria de las mujeres y los pueblos. Exigimos investigación y JUSTICIA por la intimidación y robo del que fueron parte el 15 de septiembre.

UNAMG, 2015



Guatemala. Guatemala: FLACSO y Fundación Constelación

Green, L. (1999). *Fear as a Way of Life: Mayan Widows in Rural Guatemala*. New York: Colombia University Press.

McAllister, C. and Nelson, D.M. (eds.) (2013) *War by Other Means: Aftermath in Post-Genocide Guatemala*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

September 28th, 2015 | [Politics](#), [Society](#) | [0 Comments](#)

☺

