

Taylor Fights “Femicide” in Guatemala
BY CHARLOTTE OSTROW AND HANNAH OSTROW

“How many of you have ever worn nail polish? How many of you have a belly button ring? . . . A tattoo? How many of you have ever worn gold?” **Laura Taylor** asked at the beginning of her briefing, going on to explain that, “If you were found with that as a mark on your body in Guatemala, the government would not investigate your case. If you have red nail polish, they assume you’re a prostitute. Gold? Oh, you must be a drug smuggler. Tattoo? Gang. Belly button ring? Prostitute.”

Taylor is the program officer of the Nepal Project and a conference coordinator at the Joan Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice. Her research focuses on women’s social contributions to conflict transformation, with an emphasis on Latin America. At the WorldLink Youth Town Meeting, her briefing concentrated on genocide and state terror against women in Guatemala.

Taylor explained the “femicide”—which she defined as public, systematic killing of women to create a sense of fear in citizens—going on in Guatemala. There have been over 2500 deaths in the last five years, but only four of them were investigated and led to prosecution. The list of human rights violated by this crime is extensive, and includes the right to life, the right to protection, and the right to have a case investigated.

Understanding why these murders occur is difficult; minimal evidence exists since most of the victims’ bodies are buried in unmarked graves within 36 hours. However, several theories have been developed, including gang violence, drug trafficking, and the legacy of violence. The genocide continues because the Guatemalan people have been trained to fight and kill during the 30-year civil war. Impunity will not stop the killings—people will continue to commit murders because there are no consequences for doing so. Not only is there no end in sight, but also the ex-military is exploiting the situation by making money off people’s fear, marketing themselves as personal security officers.

There are several reasons for the gender-specificity of this genocide. Guatemalan culture is known in Spanish-speaking countries as a “machismo,” or patriarchal, society; because women are considered inferior, domestic violence is acceptable, even expected. In addition, since women are the child-bearers, the government wants to stop them from giving birth to more freedom fighters. Although more men are killed annually than women, 80% of the men are killed by a single gunshot, while almost half of the women are killed with greater violence, either by strangling, knifing, or being beaten. They also are often raped and tortured before their death.

According to Taylor, the most important thing that delegates can do to contribute to the betterment of Guatemala is to raise awareness and encourage action. The WorldLink delegates came up with many suggestions, including investigating the crimes, raising money to train police, raising international awareness, educating both females and “gender-sensitive” males, and raising support for House Resolution 1081, a campaign of zero tolerance for the abuse of and violence towards women.

To find out more about the genocide in Guatemala or how you can help, visit the website of the Guatemala Human Rights Commission at www.ghrc-usa.org.