

Facing loss: coping mechanisms of mayan widows in Guatemala

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Introduction

In this paper I wish to discuss the theme of Mayan Widows in Guatemala and how they face the loss of loved ones in the so called time of «la violencia», the popular name for the former military dictatorship's overwhelming counterinsurgency campaign against Guatemala's rural, and mostly Indian citizens. Today, there are an estimated 80,000 widows in Guatemala. I will be focusing on psychological pain and coping mechanisms of these women. I shall be calling on definitions of trauma, explaining positive changes after trauma and coping mechanisms. I feel it is a worthwhile area of research as trauma and grief in relation to death of someone close, is something which shall at one point, touch everyone of us. However, in our society, as in most, death and our feelings towards it, are rarely spoken about. I became interested specifically in the plight of widows in Guatemala after spending two months there and witnessing the strength and resourcefulness of these women. Furthermore, little has been written on Mayan widows specifically and how the war reshaped social relations in Mayan homes and communities.

As we know, women are integral to all aspects of society- they are the pillar of the family. However, the multiple roles that they fulfil in society render them at higher risk of experiencing mental health problems than others in the community. Women bear the burden of responsibility associated with being wives,

mothers and carers of others. Increasingly, women are becoming an essential part of the labour force and in one-quarter to one-third of households they are the prime source of income (WHO, 1995).

What then does it mean to be a woman alone in the villages of the Guatemalan highlands after brutally losing your husband or partner? What are the survival tactics of women who were heading households alone: their coping mechanisms and how do they fulfil their dual economic roles, how does widowhood reshape women's behaviour?

My objectives are: To understand and describe what it implies to be a widowed women in Guatemala. Analyse their survival mechanisms that they developed as a consequence of the situation. Understand how this situation redefines their roles and behaviour.

To answer these questions, I shall be basing myself primarily on the research and fieldwork carried out by Linda Green in her study, «Fear as a Way of Life- Mayan Widows in Rural Guatemala» and Judith N. Zur in her text: «Mayan War Widows in Guatemala»¹.

I hypothesise, firstly that the way in which these women experience widowhood is intimately related to certain existing values within the Guatemalan society, in conjunction with the

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¹ GREEN, Linda, *Fear as a Way of Life*. Mayan Windows in Rural Guatemala. United States of America, Columbia University Press, [n.d].

significance of marriage, family, the division of labour and of death. Secondly, I hypothesise that, despite all the concomitant difficulties, Mayan widows in Guatemala manage to overcome the problems and trauma they face, to find a degree of self-empowerment in their status as widows and women.

1. History of la violencia

Guatemala found itself in a state of continual, low level civil war since the early 1960's.

Intense internal warfare that raged in the country during the 1970s and 1980s and which is referred to as la violencia; the total number of casualties may never be known to any accuracy, but the figures known are between 100,000 to 200,000 people killed or disappeared. Out of a population of around 8 million, half-a-million became internally displaced persons, it is estimated that about 150,000 people fled to Mexico as political or economic refugees with around 200,000 finding their way to other countries².

Whilst more men than women were the victims of la violencia, due to them being forcibly conscripted into the military as well as their higher presence in the ranks of assorted guerrilla forces, both men and women suffered in la violencia and both continue to live in fear of the possibility of falling victim to further acts of state sponsored terror.

Women were not only affected by la violencia as victims of violence and subject to extreme repression, but also as wives, partners, daughters and mothers to the killed or disappeared. This means that many women had double their share of trauma to deal with after the experiences of extreme violence that characterised la violencia. It was these experiences that have been many women's driving forces behind their prominent participation in and membership of human rights and grassroots women's organisations.

La violencia was a part of the battle between governmental military and non governmental guerrilla forces. The counterinsurgency war of the 1960's began with Government forces routing

guerrillas in eastern Guatemala. This was a state effort to meet guerrilla terror with counter-terror to battle the «communists» within.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s during the military regimes of General Lucas Garcia (1978-1982) and General Rios Montt (1982-3) the situation intensified as guerrilla groups mounted attacks on military installations, took over towns and threatened major landowners in the western highlands.

For the guerrillas however, this was not a war to bring communism, but an armed struggle to challenge the legitimacy of the state and the exploitation of Guatemalan peasants by wealthy landowners and the export focussed elite.

The guerrilla movement strengthened and extended their operations through the umbrella group Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG). However, many Mayan communities expressed their dissatisfaction with politics and its neglect of rural needs by joining grassroots activist networks such as the Comité de Unidad Campesina (CUC).

Many Mayans, then, were not as closely identified to the guerrilla movements as one might expect, due to the Governmental stance that being Mayan was in some way synonymous with being a guerrilla. However, this said, la violencia was an expression of unresolved tensions in Guatemalan racism, since the economic and class tensions that caused the guerrilla to struggle against the state are very much drawn along ethnic lines in Guatemala. It would be wrong to draw this equivalence out in a totally literal way. However, it must be remembered that the colonial and modern plantation economies in Guatemala were built on social ideologies and economic-political policies that put the impoverished Mayan to the yoke and subsequently kept them poor.

It is important and interesting to note the real character of la violencia for Mayans in Guatemala as well as the numbers killed in relation to the numbers of ladinos who died. It raises the question as to whether it was the «communists» within who were the government's target or the Maya. This view of la violencia not as a battle against «communism» in U.S style —influenced by the policy agendas of many very U.S influenced Guatemalan

² WARREN, Kay B., «Interpreting La Violencia in Guatemala: Shapes of Mayan Silence & Resistance.» In: *The Violence Within: Cultural and Po-*

administrations after their defining role in the topple of the Guatemalan government in 1957 and thereafter— but actually as a program of social ethnic than political purging aimed squarely against the Maya is not one that easy to dismiss. Menchú and Falla have both referred to la violencia as *genocide* since the Maya were purely targeted on ethnic grounds³. By the Guatemalan Army's own admission, over 440 rural villages in the altiplano were completely destroyed, and countless others were partially razed.

It can be said that economic status in Guatemala is more or less drawn along ethnic lines. This is one of the reasons used by the military for targeting Mayan communities, since the impoverished have a stake in trying to fight for rights for the poor to get loans to buy land and help pay for agricultural machinery or corn seeds, purposes which were seen as aligned with URNG (Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca) goals.

In addition to this, many Mayan villages ran co-operatives—seen by the military as communist— many of which had to close down during la violencia for fear for the workers lives because «no one knew who might come by» as Warren puts it⁴.

The UN-sponsored Historical Clarification Commission assigns blame for 93 percent of the atrocities to government forces and their allied paramilitary groups, while the Archdiocese of Guatemala sponsored Recovery of Historical Memory Project (REMHI) a project based on thousands of testimonies some 70 percent of which are taken in indigenous language, assigns a figure of 90 percent⁵.

The REMHI project is an attempt by the catholic church to create a space where people who had previously been silenced could speak out about what had happened to them. The goal was to further the prospects for reconciliation. Breaking the silence was only the first step along the path towards reconciliation that would address structural changes, land reform, poverty, injustice as well as memorising the dead- these efforts demand the cooperation of both national and international work. After more than thirty years of barbarity, embedded violence within the institutions, visible as well as invisible violence; On December 29th, 1996 the Peace Accords were signed, in

Guatemala City, between the Government of Guatemala and the National Revolutionary Unit (URNG).

2. The importance of marriage in ki'che tradition

Marriage is considered to be a very potent symbol in the culture of the Ki'che. It is virtually a social obligation to marry. Men who remain bachelors are neither respected socially nor possessed of economic status in the eyes of their peers. Women, on the other hand, who remain spinsters into their *late 20s* are thought of by some to be witches. This belief in the witch as one who acts to disobey the natural order stands in sharp contrast to the Ki'che belief that marriage is in itself «natural». The feeling that marriage is so natural is further substantiated, says Zur by a link to Mayan mythology in which the divine gods appear in *divine pairs*, in male and female couplings⁶.

This concept of divine pairs relates to an overall concept of dualism in Maya world view borne out of their creation myths. Within their universe—in itself sacred— being unmarried is thus very unnatural as it is out of alignment with this dualism. It is therefore very powerfully embedded in Maya culture that having a spouse strives towards this sacred balance and ideal of complementarity that is at the heart of their natural order. The status of the widows then, represents a sharp rip in the cultural, spiritual and social fabric of the Mayan world view in itself and even their spiritual existence. It is this factor among others that makes the position of Mayan widows all the more unique within their own cultural framework.

Indeed it can also be stated that the position of Mayan widows as clashing with strong concepts of dualism in the Mayan outlook is interpreted by those around them as *visible social failure* for not fitting into the cultural framework. This is because, at the time of marriage and the further acknowledgement and consecration of this sacred dualism, the willing pair are advised that they must stay together until death. Hence the loss of a partner during la violencia is thought of to be the woman's failure, as she has been unable to keep her vows of perennial matrimony regardless of the reason.

³ FALLA, Ricardo, *Massacres in the Jungle. Ixcán, Guatemala, 1975-1982*. United States of America, Westview Press, 1994. p. 4.

⁴ WARREN, Kay B., p. 32.

⁵ The English translation called «Guatemala Never Again».

⁶ ZUR, Judith N., p. 54.

3. Culture and the division of labour

At the heart of Mayan culture is the extremely important relationship between growing corn and the Mayan world view that survival is a collective enterprise between the living and dead. For this reason, land is thought of as belonging to the ancestors. It is lived upon by their grace.

One of the most important symbols and practices at the core of Mayan cultural identity is the production and consumption of corn. Corn is referred to as «*la milpa*», as Dona Margarita explains in Linda Greens study, «*The milpa is more than just corn; the milpa is an entire world, a way of life.*»⁷ Each part of the *milpa* has its own purpose: the cobs are boiled to feed the animals, the husks are used for medical uses such as an ingredient for cough medicine and for bandages, these outer wrappings can also be used for steaming corn-based foods such as «*tamales*» and the corn stalks are used as both a building material as well as a sweetener for food.

For many Mayans, working the soil reconnects them with the dead, the spirits of the rivers, trees, mountains and volcanoes and with Mother Earth. Through this social relation of the production of corn, as mentioned previously, a thread is woven, which connects Mayan people with their ancestors, sacred spirits and with their future through their children.

Although there is no specific cultural prohibition against women working the *milpas*, they have only done so most of the time only out of necessity. Gender roles are clearly separate, husband and wife have distinct areas of responsibility though interdependent. Women are responsible for the multiple daily domestic chores to keep the rural household functioning and the preparation of transforming the corn into edible food stuffs, this is seen as integral to the entire subsistence process. If a meal does not contain transformed maize products from ones own home, then one has not eaten. Grinding the corn is a very important part of a women's identity. Men are responsible for the maize crop fertility; there exists an association between maleness and corn production, as Wilson (1995) puts it there is «*an overt association between the planting activity and the human sexual act*»⁸. Seed corn is associated with semen and the earth

is regarded as female during planting. A women planting corn is interpreted as evidence of serious rapture within a family.

As was the case with many of the widows in rural communities, there was a shortage of male labour to call upon as many had lost not only husbands but also uncles, cousins, brothers, fathers and sons. In some cases the widows hired local men and boys as day labourers, referred to as «*mozos*» to plant their *milpas*. However, this requires having extra cash, which the majority of widows do not possess- meeting the expenses of the corn production is a major problem, some women have low corn supplies only lasting for part of the year, others sell a range of maize foods, prepared from their meagre corn supplies in order to meet these costs.

4. Burials and death rituals

Mayan traditions surrounding burial are complex and long-standing as they encompass ancient Mayan beliefs about the soul and the spirit and their journey to the afterlife.

As Lopata says when speaking in general about funerals, one of the functions that the funeral serves is to ensure that the body of the deceased is handled in an appropriately sanitary manner. In addition the funeral reminds the *society* of the deceased and builds a *collective* representation. Funerals also facilitate temporary disengagement and limbo for the widow i.e. they are allowed a social space and time to contemplate the death and life of their loved one on a different level, more distant from the subjectivity of events and their overwhelming feelings of grief and mourning by being compelled to be socially engaged in a *collective* mourning, rather than to focus on their own personal mourning process⁹.

Funerals obtain an extra significance for Mayan widows, purely because the lack of an opportunity for many of them to experience a funeral of a disappeared loved one means that they are psychologically denied a bounded-in social space and event in which to show grief and mourning, and extremely importantly in which to remember a life and thus fashion her *own* definitive image of the deceased and narrative of their life,

⁷ GREEN, Linda, pp. 17-18.

⁸ Cited by ZUR, Judith, p. 62.

⁹ LOPATA, Helena Z., *Current Widowhood. Myths and Realities*. Sage Publications, Inc, 1996. p. 13.

which is psychologically limited by the presence of these rituals and the act of the ceremonial burial of their remains. The absence of this opportunity means that the death can not be openly societally and psychologically integrated into the narrative of the widows life. It can therefore not be forgotten, it remains present.

Apart from the issues surrounding the funeral there are other extremely important attitudes rituals and beliefs to bear in mind concerning death, especially the kind of death experienced by those Maya killed by the military during la violencia.

Zur comments that —for whatever reason— the lack of a ritual to expel death from the village was profoundly disturbing for most Ki'che because their beliefs have always held central the concept of *animas*. The well being of the soul, believed to be profoundly connected with what happens to the body after death, was profoundly in doubt for many widows and families of the murdered.

Not only the lack of a burial ritual may be problematic for the Ki'che however as even those burials that were able to be carried out under the conditions of la violencia for security reasons, often were not able to follow the traditional mould and length. At the height of la violencia, people became accustomed to burying the dead from one moment to the next, often without necessities such as coffins or incense. Zur comments that no ritual is more problematic than *abbreviated rites*¹⁰. Many rites had to be abbreviated, as people were afraid to go out into outlying fields to find the bodies of the deceased since they felt that nowhere was safe because people were killed and dumped anywhere in knowing violation of the Mayan concept of cultivated and wild areas, the domain of the living and the dead. It is obvious to understand people abbreviating rites in fear for their lives, yet it left them in the psychological double-bind of knowing that if the rites are not the usual length, this is meant to show a lack of *moral sentiment*.

Use of alcohol after burial

After burial rights, if they take place, many mourners return to the home of the deceased and get drunk. The act of drinking

alcoholic liquor is said to help mourners release their feelings in a cathartic manner and so bear their grief. Ki'che usually attempt to avoid experiencing and expressing extreme emotion. However, wailing and crying are encouraged here as this expression of grief is thought to be beneficial to the bereaved. In this way alcohol is used ritualistically as a catalyst to societally acceptable mechanisms of mourning and coping processes, especially crying as a pressure valve to let off feelings of grief. At this stage, crying is very important as it is felt that a person who does not cry may be susceptible to illness. However, crying too much is thought to be damaging both to the health of the relative and the well being of the dead.

Regular drinking outside of this ritualised context to escape grief and other suffering after the death is fairly common among women. As here it is acceptable for feelings of grief to be displayed which are otherwise suppressed. Among Mayan women, alcoholism was uncommon before the violence. However, by the 1990s, anthropologists have noted that regular dinking had become common among these women, for the reason shown. Also, REMHI —Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica— report that the incidence of alcohol abuse has been increasing significantly since the 1980s among this group.

5. Spirit Dangers

Even more perilous a fate for the victims of la violencia however, was the traditional belief still retained by many Maya according to Zur that not being able to bury loved ones meant that their soul is not sent to the divinities of the dead. This belief is allied to that which states that people who meet unexpected deaths experience great difficulty reaching the after-life with *murder victims unable to enter the after-life whatever*¹¹.

This meant that the spirits of the murdered were thought by many Mayans to be extremely dangerous to them. The practical impact of this was that they felt themselves to be limited on a day-to-day level as to where they could actually go¹². They avoided ravines and other places thought to be the lurking grounds of the vengeful spirits of the unburied or improperly buried dead.

¹⁰ Zur, Judith N., p. 200.

¹¹ Zur, Judith N., p. 209.

¹² Zur, Judith N., p. 210.

They believe that the clandestinely killed are buried in those ravines, says Zur, because their disturbed suffering spirits paced up and down there. They say that fatal encounters between the living and spirit beings are said to occur with hitherto unknown frequency at these places. People are even more afraid than before to go out at night, not just for fear of the *patrulla* but also the wandering spirits of the murdered.

Feldman 1991 comments that the spirits appearance at the places where people were murdered creates a continuum of defiled space which collapses diachronic difference.

This means that the lack of proper death rites for the victims of la violencia not only profoundly affects the widows and the families of the victims, it also affects the village at large profoundly through its resultant control of their movements and augmentation of their terror of not only what has happened in the past, but of their own safety now through very real remnants of the past—the disgruntled spirits—threatening their physical integrity.

Quite apart from the fear engendered in many by the propensity of wandering spirits within the cultivated area of their village, the spirits present yet another problem to the living Maya. Their unburied status leading to the fact that their spirit wander without access to the after-life means that these dead cannot be remembered properly as they were in life. They go unmourned by the village, says Zur, with their widows unable to societally or psychologically release their grief. The living are never able to forget their wandering spirits who haunt the living maliciously and threaten the living with further death¹³.

The murdered were expelled from life by the military but as their death was not expelled their spirits cannot be gotten rid of they are felt, says Zur, to form a new sort of patrol, continuing to persecute the survivors, much like the local *jefes*¹⁴.

6. Women's lives as widows and Social status

In this work, I consider the wives of the disappeared, many of whom were not considered widows by their communities, as

widows in the same sense as any other women that lost her partner in a less clandestine way la violencia.

Judith N Zur comments that the loss of a marriage partner creates significant damage to the widows social and personal identity¹⁵. The Ki'che believe that this damage must be repaired as soon as possible, to allow the widow to re-assume full adult status. The only way this repair can possibly take place for the Ki'che is through the social and religious ritual of marriage—in this case remarriage.

Being married is, according to Poole (1982:103), «*the most important of those attributes, capacities, and signs of "proper" social persons which mark a moral career (and its juridical entitlements) in a particular society*»¹⁶. This raises the interesting question of the diminished social status of those widows who, for whatever reason, refrain from remarriage.

Some women, who had a negative experience of married life, of course decided not to repeat the experience. They see no advantage in having another husband that gets drunk, beats them and fails to provide them with *gastos*. Others, with a positive experience of married life, also avoid remarriage, because they wish to preserve the image of their husbands. Their determination not to be remarried reflects their resolve to maintain psychological ties with him, as Zur comments.

Marriage is, according to Linda Green nearly universal even today among the Maya of Mesoamerica. Marriage in Mayan communities has usually acted to give women in particular «*social protection, security and a degree of autonomy*» to the extent that there are hardly any young Mayan men and women living in rural areas who do not marry¹⁷.

The status of widowhood, conversely, for these Mayan women is the antithesis of the privileges that marriage bestows on them within the Mayan social framework.

The impact of widowhood is, in any case, more detrimental to the social status of women than men (regardless of whether they remarry) since the woman is the «*less powerful of the two complimentary elements comprising... the conjugal pair/household*»¹⁸.

¹³ ZUR, Judith N., p. 210.

¹⁴ ZUR, Judith N., p. 121.

¹⁵ ZUR, Judith N., p. 127.

¹⁶ ZUR, Judith N., p. 127.

¹⁷ GREEN, Linda, p. 86.

¹⁸ ZUR, Judith N., p. 127.

Women's status as the less powerful element in the household can be clearly seen to be related to the Ki'che socialising belief that women are supported and protected by the man on whose land they live. The property is generally passed down paternally. Therefore the status of the widow is weak in terms of security and it is also culturally anomalous.

The end of a marriage by death, separation or divorce throws into relief the inequality of the Mayan coupling that is masked through the system of complementarity within the Mayan union. This also puts widows outside the realms of societal norm concerning what their social role as widows should comprise.

Mayan traditional values dictate a pattern of behaviour a widow must follow in contrast to Western society's acknowledgement that marital status is a personal rather than a communal affair.

The traditional Mayan custom called into force when a woman is widowed is the following: The widow returns to the home of her parents and is supposed to «begin afresh», she is expected to deposit her children at the home of her dead husband's family. Furthermore, the widow was expected to deny her grief and seek a new partner as soon as possible and look forward to her new family. It was as if her first husband and children had never existed.

Garrad-Burnett comments that women in traditional Mayan society «normally have a sanctioned status within the community, where they enjoy respect and support». However, during and in the aftermath of la violencia «the complex and seemingly arbitrary nature of the violence stigmatised many war widows, who, as a result, did not receive the economic and emotional help they needed from their villages and extended families»¹⁹.

This failure to provide the needed support can be seen as closely linked to the Mayan disapproval of widowhood, in general, and especially the traditional customs associated with widowhood, such as the obligation to look for another partner as soon as possible and its brutal corollary, the obligation for the widow to act as if her husband and children never existed.

Obviously, such a societal attitude towards widowhood is chaffing when seen in conjunction with the grief processes of these women. Indeed, this can even be seen as a fundamental reason for widows to set up their own self help groups, as we shall see later. Because their grief and social position as widows were both things unacceptable to the traditional Mayan view of the women's role within society,

It may be posited that this view of widowhood is due to the comparative rarity of widowhood before la violencia: most indigenous women had a lower life expectancy than men and were expected to die before their husbands.

7. Female headed Households

Due to the precarious social position of the widow in the Mayan socio cultural framework as a condition to be soon remedied through remarriage, many Mayan widows as heads of households find themselves socially isolated within their communities.

These households were somewhat uncommon before la violencia. Even so, many women learned to fend for themselves before la violencia. This was due to the change in men's work patterns from exclusively taking part in seasonal work in the *campes* to additionally needing to migrate to urban areas to raise more money as street vendors. The long absences resulting from these periods of work outside the village, as well as the extended periods men spent in hiding after la violencia started, meant that women were left alone in the village much longer than the familiar seasonal male labour migrations.

In the late 1980s for example, between 10 and 25 percent of households in southern el Quiché were headed by women, says Zur. In her case study village of «Emol», 25 percent of households contained widows, but the number of families that had lost men folk was even higher than this, due to the fact that some widows moved in with their relatives, in laws or new husbands²⁰.

¹⁹ GARRAD-BURNETT, Virginia, *Aftermath: Women and Gender Issues in Post conflict Guatemala*. Washington, Centre for Development Information and Evaluation, U.S Agency for International Development. Working Paper No. 311. September /2000. p. 7.

²⁰ ZUR, Judith N., p. 133.

The aforementioned long separations were, naturally, also detrimental to marriage and household. Some men's second relationships in their place of refuge during la violencia became permanent and they stayed there with their new partner after la violencia.

Meanwhile, the wives not only had to cope with the new responsibilities and deprived economic status but they also had to pretend that their husbands were away working and not in hiding.

Many women's economic situation changed little when their husband's status changed from missing to dead, although the psychological difficulties were immense. These difficulties are something I will come back to later in this paper.

The widows however, additionally had to deal with all the dynamics of widowhood and the depreciated social status it brought in the Mayan societal view.

8. The «Disappeared»

Grieving is an extremely problematic process for those women not afforded the opportunity to have seen the bodies of their dead husbands. This is because, as has been said previously, the lack of a body denies the woman a possibility of psychological closure. She can neither bound off the traumatic experience of the disappearance of her husband, the lengthening failure of him to return and the growing doubt as to his physical integrity with a body visibly seen in her presence, nor can she —although aware of the possibility of her increasing irrationality with each passing day— extinguish the possibility that he may still be alive somewhere and might yet return.

As is explained in the ICRC fact sheet not knowing the fate of relatives and not being able to mourn and bury loved ones, are terrible burdens for the survivors of an armed conflict. The effects on their ability to cope (inheritance and social security problems) and the chances of reconciliation between communities are enormous.

International humanitarian law expressly recognises the right of families to know the fate of their relatives. «...*the activities of the... Parties to the conflict (with regard to missing and dead*

persons) ...shall be prompted mainly by the right of families to know the fate of their relatives» (Article 32, additional Protocol I)²¹

Stewart and Hodgkinson (1998) feel that this doubt as to whether the husband is still alive or dead to be central to the widows of the disappeared being able to accept the reality of the death of their husbands. This «questioning syndrome» is said to be typical of inhibited grief.

This doubt is further exacerbated by the woman's doubts about whether their husband has befallen some mortal fate, or if he has used the cover of the situation during la violencia to abscond of his own accord —she may also think he might have eloped with another woman or joined the guerrilla.

This «questioning syndrome» then is seen to be at the core of the grief of the widows of the disappeared, it is prolonged further by the official denials whenever they asked the authorities for news concerning the fate of their loved ones.

This denial to furnish knowledge which in some cases is definitely held by them further serves to increase the trauma to the living as they need to re-define themselves in the face of uncertain loss through which Oliver-Smith says they lose various aspects of themselves²².

Martin Beristain also points out that, in the study carried out by the Office for Human Rights of the Archdiocese of Guatemala (ODHAG 1998) in which is expressly stated that given the specific dynamics of the repression in Guatemala, the realisation of the pain and trauma need not only ceremonies and rites, but also clear information about the destiny of family members as well as public recognition of what had happened and institutional responsibility, as well as social restitution and the dignity of the victims²³.

Later, we shall come back to the enormous importance of reclaiming the dead, the search for the disappeared and the exhumations, for the widows of Guatemala.

9. Mourning process

Perez Sales talks at length about the psychological suffering of persons who have experienced trauma, it is defined as; «*any*

²¹ Women and War, ICRC, 31.10.2001. www.icrc.org

²² ZUR, Judith N., p. 207.

²³ BERISTAIN, Carlos M., *Reconstruir el tejido social. Un enfoque crítico de la Ayuda Humanitaria*. Icaria Antrazyt, nov/1999. p. 110.

extreme human experience that constitutes a threat to physical or psychological integrity of the person and makes them feel terror, despair and intense horror»²⁴.

After having experienced or heard of the occurrence, a series of symptoms which escape the survivor's control and create profound psychological suffering can appear. The most common of these, is to suffer an elevated sense of anxiety with irritability, predisposition to answer with alarm, nightmares, invasive images which occur repeatedly in the consciousness and provoke great anxiety, sensations of unreality in which the survivors perceive an emotional barrier that separates them from the world, sadness, desperation, feelings of guilt for not having known how to avoid the threat or for having survived etcetera. These types of symptoms are very frequent. Studies show that nearly half of those who have experienced traumatic events such as traffic accidents, detention, sexual aggression, loss of a loved one, torture, being witness to barbarity- suffer one or more of these symptoms.

These symptoms are natural responses of the human body. There is a certain biological base for these type of responses so that these symptoms appear relatively similar in all cultures and contexts.

This definition of traumatic experience fits very exactly the kind of experiences many Mayan widows of Guatemala underwent during la violencia. If the widowhood stems directly from this traumatic experience, for example the husband is disappeared during a village-wide round-up by Government forces in which the village was vandalised and many killed, then all the more so, as we have seen previously.

The specific symptoms of psychological suffering likely to be experienced by the widows are many and complex. Among them are:

Suppression of grief

As la violencia went on, says Zur, it became increasingly impossible for survivors to admit they had lost loved ones. Death was denied. The widows reality of this experience became

distorted through this echo of traditional attitude, in which the elders expected the widow to behave as if conjugal relations had never existed, as we said before.

Forced to suppress or «forget» the violence the usually resilient widows had witnessed, the women's pain often re-emerged as physical pain. The images women use to portray their pain include accounts of changes in the form of various body parts. Extreme pain, usually traced to la violencia, is usually referred to as «*thorn of the heart*» or «*tristeza*». The most significant concept is that of «*lifeforce*» as Zur comments which is in the heart and the brain²⁵. Green explains that the heart is the centre of the vital forces of the spirit in Mayan thought and as such it is the centre of awareness and consciousness²⁶.

Significance of dreams and nightmares

Ki'che tradition allots great significance to dreams. Zur comments that some women have talked of seeing their murdered men in dreams, sometimes crying. Recurring dreams of the deceased have extra meaning —they are meant to signify the deceased's inability to gain access to the other world. Dreaming is of course universally a part of grief work in general.

A large part of the intrusive symptoms such as nightmares, dreams and traumatic images can be conceptualised as unsuccessful attempts of the mind to look for logic and integrate the experiences into their pre-existing psychological life scheme. These dreams can be seen as the Freudian dynamic of compulsive repetition of the trauma. This compulsive rehashing of the events of the trauma is part of the questioning process in which those affected strive to answer questions such as: Why like this? Why him or her? Why in that place? So that these events can be firmed up into a bounded off occurrence, which can then be successfully integrated into the widow's pre existing life scheme or narrative. When it is not possible to find logic in them, the traumatic experiences are dissociated from the consciousness to preserve some basic assumptions about oneself and the world —they cannot then be integrated into the pre-existing narrative of the survivor's life.

²⁴ PÉREZ SALES, Pau, *Reconceptualizar la psicología del trauma desde los recursos positivos: una visión alternativa*. GAC-Grupo de Acción Comunitaria. Centro de Recursos en Salud Mental y Derechos Humanos. www.gac-enred-o.org . p. 1.

²⁵ ZUR, Judith N., p. 213.

²⁶ GREEN, Linda, p. 123.

Dreaming is however, also the most common form of contact between the world of the living and the spirits for the Maya²⁷. Traditionally for them, spirits, ancestors and guardians communicate with the elders, letting them know the future. During and after la violencia, dream communications between the spirits and the living became more common and many of these were terrifying, leaving the dreamer afraid for some time afterwards.

Memory and reconstruction processes, distortion and reshaping of memory

When widows try to come to terms collectively with the traumatic events of their past, we find that they together go through a process of reshaping memories. First fashioning one version of events and then discarding it to remake another version of the past. This process is continual and without end, since they are narrating events that are unfinished, uncertain such as an unnatural or questionable death.

It is extremely important to note that this distorting or *reshaping* of memory can be therapeutic for these widows. This is because, each time the memory is retold it can be given a shift in emphasis. Sometimes new details can be added. Crucially this allows the widows a space in which they can acknowledge certain details of their traumatic experiences they had previously denied. This happens through the mechanism of communal sharing of memories. This detail will come from their partners in remembering. If the detail is an important one at the heart of something surrounding the death of their loved one they have not yet been able to face up to, this collective retelling and integration of the detail into the widow's narrative of her own life can be seen as exceptionally psychologically empowering. The widows are thus integrating these memories into their lives *in a way that makes sense in the present*, as Zur observes²⁸.

Collective remembering, then, is a way to remember that the events happened, what was unjust and what should not be repeated. For the victims and their families a prime motivator is knowledge of the truth. A public recognition of their past which has not previously been heard is what is needed by them, according to Beristain.

Pennebaker has also demonstrated that it is beneficial for health to share traumatic experiences whilst those who can not do this have more difficulty getting over these experiences. This is because sharing permits first, a cathartic release of, or abreaction to the traumatic events. Second, it gives coherence and an inner meaning to the experience that facilitates its integration. Third, the sharing gives validation and social recognition to the events. Fourth, it permits the sharers to share other experiences and potentially helpful coping mechanisms.

However, sharing is not a universal necessity and it is not always universally beneficial according to Pérez Sales. This is because one has to bear in mind that the denial of traumatic experiences constitutes a useful tool for the progressive assimilation of those experiences «little by little». Additionally, there is a risk of re-traumatisation when extraordinarily painful images and memories, that the person has already started to integrate into their own psychological resources, are raked over once again. Also, certain cultures advise against the manifestation of «negative» emotion, saying that these debilitate the person and can even cause illness in those that surround the person.

This public hearing additionally implicitly requests new dignity for the sharers/victims. It is very closely linked to the recognition of the injustice and the judgement that the victims are people whose dignity should not have been removed and it demands social sanction for the perpetrators.

Within the context of la violencia in Mayan villages in Guatemala, it seems unlikely due to the communal perception of the ever-presence of la violencia even today, that such a hearing could happen on a communal level. Therefore, the retelling of the traumatic experiences by the widows among themselves is as equally empowering to them, as it is fundamental in them forming yet another role for themselves as the listener and teller of the past, that lies outside that normally permissible for them.

10. Coping Mechanisms

Mayan widows, as Linda Green observes, have «*suffered doubly, as both victims and survivors. As victims they not only witnessed the unimaginable atrocities of the disappearances or*

²⁷ ZUR, Judith N., p. 260.

²⁸ ZUR, Judith N., p. 224.

*brutal deaths of family members and neighbours, but in some cases, they themselves were violated and raped. As survivors they live on the economic and social margins of their impoverished communities, more, they continue to experience the trauma engendered by the violence to both their bodies and memories.»*²⁹

It should also be noted that much of the violence was gendered, observes Linda Green, «*in that many of those killed were men, but for the women and children who lived, survival is a complicated affair.*» Indeed, Linda Green added that not only were people killed but the actors attempted to destroy the spirits of those remaining alive. She adds that some women have embodied the violence in «*memorias de sangre*» that create a division in their lives: a before and after. In this way the past is always there in the present³⁰.

As Beristain explains, the coping mechanisms employed to face losses as well as dangerous situations can be more or less positive depending on the person or the context, and vary in relation to age and social position. Coping strategies include thoughts and emotions as well as behaviour and resolution of problems. He goes on to say, that people can try to face problems thinking about how to find a solution, minimising them or trying to find some meaning. On an emotional level, people can share their experiences, attempt to find forms of relaxation, suppress their feelings. (I think, it is worthwhile to mention, that although the K'iche are socialised to suppress anger, the widows had to suppress more anger and resentment than they had previously thought it possible to feel.)

In the research (ODHAG, 1998) carried out in Guatemala about the coping mechanisms of the violence, the following positive strategies were found, the ones which can be applied specifically to the widows are:

- a) *Direct resistance and self control*: These include a combination of adaptive mechanisms to live amongst the violence: not speaking, behaviour of solidarity, resignation, direct resistance, the search for information and self control.
- b) *Cognitive and ideological resistance*: This factor combines a socio-political responsibility and a positive reinterpretation

of the events, in other words, dedication to change the existing reality³¹.

11. Positive changes after trauma

Kobasa and Madi according to Perez Sales developed the concept of *resistant personality* studying those people that have characteristics which protect them against negative experiences. People with a higher order of resilience against the effects of traumatic experience have the following things in common:

- The tendency to selectively remember the positive elements of autobiographical memory, whilst negating or forgetting the negative elements.
- They accept a certain dose of uncertainty and unpredictability in life.
- When comparing what has happened to them with that which happened to those around them, they are able to see positive elements.
- They perceive themselves as survivors —people who have come out of the traumatic experience strengthened with resources to face new situations³².

Later, we shall see how this, especially the perception of victims as survivors and strength, can be applied to the widows of Guatemala.

Tedeschi and Calhoun have studied the positive effects of traumatic situations and have placed the positive effects of traumatic events into three categories:

- a) *Changes in the perception one has of oneself*. Personal strength, to feel more confident, feel one has more experience and capacity to face future difficulties. The person develops a self image of strength, to be able to deal with new situations, including future traumas.
- b) *Changes in interpersonal relationships*. It is described how families are more unified after the trauma. Death of a family member, for example, can result in that the person becomes closer to the rest of the family, realising the importance they have, of how fragile they are and how

²⁹ GREEN, Linda, p. 111.

³⁰ GREEN, Linda, p. 170.

³¹ BEREISTAIN, p. 121.

³² Cited by PÉREZ SALES, Pau, p. 15.

quickly they can lose one another. On the other hand, there exists the need to share the occurred, speak about it and try to find some meaning, this can result in some people opening up more and expressing feelings which they would otherwise not have shared, to accept the help of others and for the first time draw on social support.

- c) *Changes in life philosophy*. One appreciates more what one has and changes what one values. Some people feel that their religious beliefs crumble, for others there is a re-discovery of ones faith³³.

This vision does not attempt to change the basic idea of the negative character of traumatic situations, but to show that positive elements can be found. In a study conducted by Aldwin and cols, cited by Tedeschi (1994) it is recognised that 100% of the people recognise some negative effect of the experienced traumatic event, however additionally 60% of people are able to recognise some positive effect over their lives³⁴.

In the case of Guatemala in general, there is a sense of solidarity and a demand for truth. We can see how the above concepts can be applied to the widows throughout this paper.

12. Women maintaining life of family

Daily life was already hard for women in Guatemala before la violencia, after this it became especially difficult because of the need to fulfil double workloads, firstly in the home and also outside, either working the soil or other form of labour. However, the war brought an added crisis to daily life, in the economic aspect, this forced women to assume other roles and take charge of the maintaining or even the survival of the family. In their struggle for survival many women's only option was to displace themselves from their place of origin to start a new life from scratch. In some cases the lack of work options, especially in rural areas and the need to meet the basic needs of the surviving family members, meant that some widows saw themselves forced to look for work in military bases, knowing the involvement of the army in the disappearance or death of their husbands.

Zur comments that taking on men's roles added to the widows' multiple identities with both positive and negative repercussions on psychological, social and economic levels; yet they do not perceive themselves as «male» because of the roles they are obliged to assume- despite their complaints that they are both «mothers and fathers» to their children. It is very important for them to continue with their own work as grinders of corn and to wear their traditional clothes, which state that they are available for the men of their own community and not *ladino* soldiers or civil patrollers³⁵.

It is important to note that although women were forced to take on traditionally male roles to varying extents and despite the extra laborious work this entailed, gained a sense of esteem from this, because of this necessity to cover the daily needs of those who the widows had to provide for, as well as their own survival, meant that the women were forced to diversify their work, be creative and resourceful to achieve new economic income. Furthermore, in assuming new roles women could experience and be protagonists in new forms of human interrelations. Their new responsibilities bringing them into contact with women in similar positions, enabling widows to create new support networks which, unlike those of previous family constellations, are relatively free from social control, and especially male authority. In many cases in their struggle for maintaining life women had the opportunity to have new experiences and so resulting in personal growth. Zur states, they say that they feel more knowledgeable and more capable (*más capaces*) as a result³⁶.

As we see, state-sponsored violence has debilitating effects on the survivors. However the survivors are not just passive victims, they are also psychologically resourceful agents. No matter how alienated they may be through the violence and however much it may break them physically, they are not mentally dominated by it.

Women have recognised themselves as the heads of their family through merit and authority. This re-evaluation of their own circumstances showed the force of the women to confront their personal consequences of la violencia. This process, in spite of the difficulties, has allowed many women, as said previously to have higher self esteem.

³³ Cited by PÉREZ SALES, Pau, p. 18.

³⁴ Cited by PÉREZ SALES, Pau, p. 18.

³⁵ ZUR, Judith N., p. 154.

³⁶ ZUR, Judith N., p. 155.

We shall now go on to look at further, specific examples of the actions these women have undertaken.

13. Women putting their energy into looking for disappeared, search for remains of loved ones

The search for family members who have been disappeared through the political repression in Guatemala, has constituted one of the most painful searches, whose driving force have been women. This inexhaustible search for answers and the hope to somewhere, some day find their loved ones, became the only alternative to confront the army and terror which provoked the disappearances. These mothers, wives, daughters and sisters dared to stand up in the face of the situation of violence. The search for the disappeared became the central objective of the social movement against this barbaric practice. Women were at the forefront of this movement and they constructed spaces in the fight against impunity. This search was a form of solidarity and a mechanism to face their own fears as **survivors** and the **victims** of political violence-the search became a collective process.

Especially at the beginning of the 1970s, numerous protests and specific actions were undertaken to know the fate of missing family members. However, it was in the mid 80s when these actions were developed into more organised movements such as organised protests and manifestations in Guatemala City. This search constitutes constant psychological work; that the truth be known, many with the hope to find their relatives alive, others hoping to bury their remains- and so giving these women the possibility to face their loss and grieve.

This brings me to the point of reclaiming the dead and more specifically, symbolic burials. Zur describes the significance of retroactive burials for the missing as an «*attempt to reincorporate the dead in their proper place in K'iche society*»³⁷. As once symbolically buried, the spirit is said to cease wandering- although some say that in some cases they still roam. When death breaches all cultural notions about a good or accepted death, the bereaved cannot simply take refuge in the conventional patterns or rituals of burial and mourning.

One of the subterranean secrets of the K'iche countryside are the clandestine graves beneath the surface. Knowledge as to where bodies are clandestinely buried is quite widespread. Efforts to locate missing relatives by checking local body dumps is common practice. At the end of the 1980s, few people dared to reveal the location of known clandestine cemeteries to human rights agencies. Some women whose relatives were killed by local men know that their kin are buried in the village's deep ravines and a few of them know exactly where their dead are buried. Women gather information about the whereabouts of their kin's graves through rumours or the drunken outbursts of local killers.

Most women long to exhume the bodies of their kin to give the dead a proper funeral and in some cases so they can, when their time comes, lay to rest beside one another. Yet many villagers are frightened to avail themselves their legal right to petition for the exhumation of clandestine cemeteries. Zur says that «*despite the women's personal and cultural driven motives, exhumations invade the space occupied by official history.*»³⁸ The unburial and reburial of the dead takes on political meanings, regardless of whether or not the women are aware of it. The dead can be used by both parties to symbolise complex ideological issues.

Having to face up themselves to experiences of extreme violence and to have to stop the consequences of the violence growing worse has lead some women to have a greater social conscience in that they affirm as women their rights and ways to fight for their own dignity.

According to Green, the widows spoke frequently not only about their economic needs, but also about their right to be recognised as human beings with dignity. Within a climate of fear and militarisation some widows reworked spaces to reaffirm social relations and cultural values in which they regarded survival as a collective enterprise. Some widows constructed alternative forms of community in the midst of their suffering this speaks powerfully about the resiliency of the human spirit³⁹.

14. NGO work

As Zianiecka Lopata so astutely comments, «*What a widow can do with the rest of her life depends also on the society*

³⁷ ZUR, Judith N., p. 127.

³⁸ ZUR, Judith N., p. 223.

³⁹ GREEN, Linda, p. 171.

developed resources ... and the roles available to her at her particular stage of life.»⁴⁰

If we look at the Mayan widows in light of this observation, it is clear that at least some of those widows mentioned in Zur's and Green's texts, have deeply challenged the roles usually available to them, considering their age and status as widows. Even for them to remain widows is not one of the roles available to them within the traditional attitudes of the village. One can see in their formation of support groups that this challenge to the available roles is implicit.

In fact, the formation of widows groups is especially interesting as it shows these women *defining their own roles*—irrespective of village societal constraints— as widows that openly acknowledge their status and its roots in la violencia. The meetings of these groups represents a role that is both within village constraints, physically, whilst being societally alien.

Some widows according to Zur, remarry in order to reject the identities others try to impose on them⁴¹. Others take on new, positive identities and have been mobilized politically into organisations such as CONAVIGUA, GAM or smaller NGO projects. Among the larger NGO projects are the following:

CONAVIGUA (Coordinación Nacional de Viudas Guatemaltecas) is a national widows group, founded by Mayan widows in 1988. CONAVIGUA brought public attention to the awful situation of the widows, demanding state compensation for those whose men folk were murdered during the war of counterinsurgency. They campaigned for an end to the forced recruitment of their sons into the military and they began to unearth the long-denied cemeteries of the victims throughout the highlands.

GAM (Grupo de Apoyo Mutuo) Members of this small human rights organisation which started as a collective response to the silence imposed through the terror began in 1984, are relatives of some of the estimated 42,000 people who have disappeared over the last three decades in Guatemala. Like the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, this group of men and women decided to break the silence. Going to the government offices to demand that the authorities investigate the crimes against their families. They marched in silence every Friday in front of the national palace holding up placards showing

photographs of those who had disappeared, they broke the official silence.

PAVYH (Programa para Asistencia para Viudas Y Huerfanos) is a state financed project to aid the widowed from political violence. This is a curious project since it straddles the Guatemalan state's contradictory understanding of widows. It views them both as victims of war entitled to relief aid and as enemies of the state suspected of guerrilla sympathies. This program consists of three phases. The first part was a census asking for personal information about each widow and the circumstances of her husband's death or disappearance. The second phase consisted of six food distributions every fifteen days for three months, comprising of 10 lbs of corn, a can of powdered milk and one litre of oil per family. To be eligible for the food, a widow had to answer the census questions. The third phase was the commence of income-generating projects in each village. The widows from each village had to submit communal business plans to receive a one-off distribution of a diesel corn mill, a sewing machine to use collectively or aluminium sheets for their roofs or initial capital to run a small store.

There are also smaller NGO projects set up to aid the highland Maya. For example cloth as a strategy of development has been used in various weaving projects that generate capital. However, this project has a heavy hint of negativity, in that it stifled the creativity on the part of the weavers with predefined patterns to be repeated over and over, week after week.

During the mid and late 1980's, many more development groupings were initiating small-scale projects for widows and their children. A particularly low-cost intervention was blackstrap-loom projects.

An undesired difficulty created by many of these projects is part of the very fact that they are NGOs dealing with widows. This created conflicts and resentments in the communities in which these projects were established. First, by defining the women as widows they were categorized and socially isolated from others in the community who—equally— had suffered during la violencia and who in any case were living in the same conditions of extreme poverty. Second, this exclusive focus on a single group lessened the community's ability to organise itself

⁴⁰ LOPATA, p. 17.

⁴¹ Zur, Judith N., p. 155.

and confront its own problems. This created a climate of bitterness towards the widows.

Participation in NGOs, however, is not without its own dangers for the widows of Guatemala. Widows who join these groups or human rights organisations are threatened with having bombs dropped on their gatherings or with being disappeared on the way to their meetings. *Jefes* would warn that they may have to kill them once and for all at military bases. Zur comments that «emol's» village *jefes* intimate that further violent acts are likely to take place. This in turn reminds them of past violent acts against them (p. 118).

Further examples of oppression of those involved in NGO work can be seen in the public demonstration hosted by CONAVIGUA in Guatemala City in 1992, demanding that the army be forced to stop recruiting sons of widows into the military. Seven busloads of people from Be'cal attended the protest, says Linda Green⁴². Several days after the demonstration a platoon of soldiers from the local garrison arrived in the village warning people—particularly the widows—that the village would be levelled. All the women who told of this event had, indeed, dropped out of public participation with CONAVIGUA.

15. Women in the political area

The violence in Guatemala resulted in an unexpected number of Maya women into the political field. As Virginia Garrard-Burnett observes the proximate cause of political mobilisation was trauma: the loss or disappearance of a loved one, or the economic and social exigencies of widowhood. Indeed, the most important national and local women's organisations have their origins in trauma⁴³.

Proportionally, there are a reasonable number of women serving in elected offices at national and departmental levels. However, the number is lower at the municipal level of government.

Another way for women into politics has been through influence of a significant family member. In cases such as these, says Garrard-Burnett, a woman enters politics to a large extent

as a proxy for a male family member who was lost to trauma, an example of this is Rigoberta Menchu who entered politics after the deaths of her mother, father and brothers.

What the future holds when the effects of *la violencia* subside and if there will be a space for women in civil society remains to be seen, but hopefully without trauma to expand the perimeters of politics within the boundaries of the domestic sphere, women will take advantage of this newly opened public area.

The Peace Accords include various specific agreements which address the rights of women, including the formation of the Foro Nacional de la Mujer. The National Assembly, since 1996 has announced a wide spectrum of laws in regard to women's rights within the family, protection against domestic violence and women's rights to own and sell land in their own name.

Conclusion

Thoughts and Recommendations

In North countries women may suffer a sharp drop in income, and some loss in social status at the death of their husbands but there is no legal or institutional discrimination against them. In South countries however, this is drastically different as a widow may lose all she has— affecting their access to basic goods and services necessary for survival, as well as customary and state laws governing their rights to inheritance, land and property, in addition to the wider impact this has on the community and the social fabric. In many parts of the world, the power of men over women's lives remains absolute, and the rights of widows, if they can be referred to as «rights», are repeatedly infringed, casually and without remorse. With the death of a husband, the already sharp divide between a Western woman and one in the developing world widens into a vast gulf.

What all widows have in common the fact that they outnumber widowers. Almost all married women, at some point will find themselves widowed. In Britain the 1991 census showed that 43 percent of women over the age of 65 were widows. In

⁴² GREEN, Linda, p. 155.

⁴³ GARRARD-BURNETT, Virginia, p. 14.

many parts of the developing world, this figure rises to more than 70 percent, although one must add that reliable figures are difficult to obtain as widows are regularly overlooked in censuses. Widows, as a subject in their own right, are to an extent neglected, both by the women's movement and by the international humanitarian community. The document agreed by the governments at the 1995 Fourth Conference on Women, the Global Platform for Action, makes no specific mention of them.

As is the case with Guatemala, women whose husbands have «disappeared» or are missing face much the same difficulties as widows, but without official recognition of their status. With the added difficulty of the psychological effects that stem from not knowing the uncertainty of their husbands' fate, and the direct consequences of not being able to bury their kin and not being able to remarry. Furthermore, they often feel unable to talk about their loss, as they fear ostracism and other punishments, this is particularly the case when the death of the man is associated with opposition groups of the armed conflict, as in Guatemala. Widows can be extremely vulnerable to intimidation, violence or abuse, and so widows often grieve in silence with the added burden of supporting a family. Children and the search for the truth, are often the main reasons for finding the strength to continue.

The World Health Organisation states that when investigating common mental, behavioural and social problems in the community it is found that more women than men are adversely affected by specific mental disorders, such as anxiety related disorders and depression. In contrast men are more prone to receive a diagnosis of antisocial personality disorder and alcohol

abuse/dependency. Explanations for the gender differences in mental disorders have been attributed to biological differences, the different ways in which women and men acknowledge and deal with distress and most significantly, social causes. (WHO, fact sheet 248, Women and mental health).

It is pivotal to evaluate how the socio-cultural, environmental and economic factors which affect women's mental health are composed in each particular country or community. Additionally, how culturally prescribed behaviour, affects the individual experience of trauma, loss and grief.

I feel that what Manz observes in her epilogue to Falla's study, is reflected in the widows of Guatemala, *«I have observed the villagers' extraordinary patience and ability to focus on the daily routine, taking one day at a time. Deep down they seem to hope that eventually things will turn out alright. Ultimately, just to have survived when so many perished is a consolation. Deeply religious to begin with, they look for religious explanations to make sense of what happened, why they are alive and what the future holds.»*⁴⁴

In this paper we have seen that despite the cultural framework of these women, their psychological reactions to grief and trauma are much the same to that of women in western countries, what differs of course, is the community's attitude towards them.

However, caution should be exercised when applying western psychological theories to non- Western peoples. Furthermore, it has been shown that, despite the trauma these women experience, they manage to find an extent of self-empowerment and strength in their status as widows and as women.

⁴⁴ FALLA, Ricardo, p. 200.

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