

# Giving a voice to female victims in Guatemala



*In 2013, 12 Maya Ixil women victims of sexual violence during the armed conflict were heard by national courts in an unprecedented genocide case. Elena de Paz is one of them*

*"We couldn't stand the hunger, we were homeless, everything had been destroyed. We were desperate and so my mother decided to give herself up to the squadron ....but instead of welcoming us, they hurt us," recalls Elena de Paz, a survivor of the domestic armed conflict in Guatemala, who was raped by soldiers. It was 1982 and Elena was 12.*

Thirty-one years since she saw her family and community torn apart, she decided to tell her story. *"It is vital for there to be justice because I do not want my children to go through such a terrible ordeal, and I do not want such things to happen to anybody ever again."*

Elena is one of the 97 witnesses who gave their testimony during a trial for genocide and crimes against humanity in 2013. With support from the Peacebuilding Fund Project *"Support to the consolidation of the right to truth, justice, and reparation and measures of non-repetition for victims of the internal armed conflict in Guatemala"*, implemented by UNDP, for the first time in the country's history, Elena and other women from the Mayan town of Ixil shared their stories of sexual violence.

*"When I came to testify, I felt happy and sad at the same time, because I couldn't help but remember what had happened,"* Elena said.

The Peacebuilding Fund project supports capacity building for the State and civil society to enable the full exercise of the right to truth, justice and reparations for victims and promotes measures to ensure that these violations of human rights do not happen again.

The project supplies technical assistance and funding for civil society organizations, which have provided legal and psychological assistance to victims and witnesses. The Peacebuilding Fund Project also supports prosecutors and judges through the recruitment of specialized experts who implement training courses on international standards and facilitate coordination between prosecutors, civil society organizations, forensic anthropologists and UN agencies, as well as other international organizations.

The joint efforts between civil society and state institutions can yield favorable results in terms of the rights of victims. These efforts complement the capacity building for institutions that make up the justice system.

According to the Historical Clarification Report, 93 percent of the atrocities in the conflict were committed by the army. With the support of UNDP, more than 16 million documents from the National Police Archives are now accessible to the public and judicial institutions. In addition, a Gene Bank is allowing for the identification of nearly 2,000 victims, so that their remains can be returned to their families, and an average of 20,000 relatives of victims have received legal and psychosocial support during the process of searching for the remains of their loved ones.

*"Meeting other women who went through the same experiences gave me greater strength and courage, because I realized that I had not been the only woman who had faced such things,"* Elena added.

## **Highlights**

- More than 16 million documents from the archives of the former National Police are now available to the public.
- A Gene Bank that meets international standards has made it possible to identify nearly 2,000 victims.
- An annual average of 20,000 families of victims have received legal and psychosocial support in the process of searching for the remains of their loved ones.
- The Peacebuilding Fund has provided financing to civil society organizations which provided legal and psycho-social assistance to women like Elena de Paz, among other victims and witnesses involved in an unprecedented genocide case.
- The project also provided funding for the hiring of experts to provide technical assistance to prosecutors, implement training courses on international standards and principles to prosecutors and judges, as well as facilitate regular coordination meetings between prosecutors, civil society organizations, forensic anthropologists, UN agencies and other international organizations to achieve progress on cases of gross violations of human right and international crimes.