



Two Years Later: No Justice for 41 girls killed in the 2017 *Hogar Seguro* Fire in Guatemala

This March 8th, International Women's Day, marks the 2 year anniversary of a fire at the state-run centre for children and youth *Hogar Seguro Virgen de la Asunción* in Guatemala, in which 41 girls and young women (aged 13-17) were killed and another 15 were seriously injured. The case prompted massive demonstrations in Guatemala and solidarity actions globally to demand justice. Two years later, however, this state crime remains in impunity.

Estefani Sotoj is a survivor of the fire who spent 30 days in a coma, lost 9 of her fingers and lives with severe burns throughout her body. Estefani states, "We [the survivors] aren't well. We have changed. No one cares about us. Instead of helping us they made us worse. The state failed, and it is the state's fault."

Context

While it should have been a place where vulnerable children and youth were protected, the *Hogar Seguro* was far from that. Minors at the *Hogar Seguro* were subjected to sexual violence, physical abuse, forced abortion, human trafficking and forced prostitution, often by staff. They also endured poor conditions such as overcrowding and rotting food.

Reports of abuse and poor conditions have been public since 2013 and known by Guatemalan authorities. For instance, Guatemala's Human Rights Ombudsperson's Office (PDH) received 45 reports of abuses at the home from 2012 to 2016, and passed them on to the Public Prosecutor's Office (MP), which did not respond. UNICEF had also called for the *Hogar Seguro* to be closed down.

Events leading to the death of the 41 girls

On March 7, the day before the fire, minors at the *Hogar Seguro* began to protest the abuse and poor conditions they faced. That afternoon, workers at the home opened the doors and told the minors to leave. In total, 108 youth left in protest.

The police officers sent after the minors beat and intimidated them, before bringing them back and detaining them in front of the *Hogar Seguro*. At 6pm, an on-site meeting took place between officials from the Secretariat of Social Welfare (SBS), representatives of the Solicitor General of the Nation (PGN), the PDH and the National Civil Police (PNC). At the request of these officials and with approval from President Jimmy Morales, 100 police were sent to the *Hogar Seguro*.

Between midnight and 2am, the minors were escorted back into the *Hogar Seguro*, after having been held in handcuffs for over 6 hours without food, water or adequate clothing. While the boys were placed in a spacious area, the 56 girls were locked in a 6.8 metre by 7 metre room. After delegating responsibility for the minors to the PNC and seeing the girls placed in the room, officials from the SBS left.

The girls, in severely crowded conditions, had no access to a bathroom or water. They were forced to sleep in the tiny room without sufficient mattresses and to create a makeshift toilet.

In the early hours of March 8th, a fire began in the room. While it is reported that one of the girl locked in the room set fire to a mattress in order to be let out, Mayra Jimenez of the collective 8 Tijax disputes this claim. She says: "We strongly suspect that the fire was set from outside of the room." Regardless, police reportedly stood by, ignoring calls for help by the girls. The fire lasted approximately 9.5 minutes.

State responsibility

Responsibility for the deaths of these girls lies with the Guatemalan state, at multiple levels. Since these girls were in state care, it was the responsibility of the state to protect them. However, several state institutions failed these girls, from inaction on reports of abuse, to their response to the situation on March 7-8, 2017. The order to bring in police only intensified the already tense situation at the *Hogar Seguro*, which eventually led to the massacre.

No justice to date

There are currently 8 people facing charges for the incidents: Carlos Rodas, former head of the Secretariat of Social Welfare (SBS); Anahy Keller, subsecretary of the SBS; Santos Torres Ramírez, former director of the *Hogar Seguro*; Brenda Chamán, former head of the Department of special protection against mistreatment at the *Hogar Seguro*; Lucinda Marroquín Carrillo and Luis Armando Pérez Borja, sub-commissioners of the National Civil Police (PCN); Gloria Castro, Children's Advocate with the Human Rights Ombudsperson's office (PDH); and Harold Augusto Flores Valenzuela, head of the Ombudsperson for children and adolescents with the General Ombudsperson of the Nation (PGN). Unfortunately, the legal cases have faced significant delays with hearings being suspended on a regular basis.

Given the president's role, there have been calls to strip him of his immunity, so that he can be investigated. However, the Supreme Court of Justice has ruled against that process.

For almost 1.5 years, the Guatemalan state refused to provide financial support for all survivors. Finally, a law was passed on August 23rd, 2019 requiring the state to provide each of the survivors with a monthly stipend.

Key Asks of the Canadian Government

We call on the Canadian government, which has adopted a Feminist International Assistance Policy, to:

- denounce the Guatemalan state's role in the death of these girls;
- use its diplomatic channels to urge the Public Prosecutor (MP) to investigate and prosecute all those responsible in an effective timely manner, so that they don't remain in impunity; and
- undertake advocacy efforts aimed at urging the Guatemalan state to protect girls and women throughout the country.

For more info and suggested actions, visit us at: <https://bit.ly/2FQo6ul>

Names of the 41 girls and young women killed:

1. Rosa Julia Espino Tobar, 16
2. Indira Jarisa Pelicó Orellana, 17
3. Daria Dalila López Meda, 16
4. Achley Gabriela Méndez Ramírez, 15
5. Yemmi Aracely Ramírez Siquín, 15
6. Jaqueline Paola Catinac López, 15
7. Siona Hernández García, 17
8. Josselyn Marisela García Flores, 16
9. Mayra Haydeé Chután Urías, 16
10. Skarlet Yajaira Pérez Jiménez, 15
11. Yohana Desiré Cuy Urizar, 15
12. Rosalinda Victoria Ramírez Pérez, 15
13. Madelyn Patricia Hernández Hernández, 14
14. Sarvía Isel Barrientos Reyes, 14
15. Ana Nohemí Morales Galindo, 16
16. Ana Rubidia Chocooj Chutá, 16
17. Jilma Sucely Carías López, 14
18. Yoselín Beatriz Ventura Pérez, 15
19. Grindy Jazmín Carias López, 16
20. Mari Carmen Ramírez Melgar, 14
21. Keila Rebeca López Salguero, 17
22. Kimberly Mishel Palencia Ortíz, 17
23. Nancy Paola Vela García, 15
24. Estefany Sucely Véliz Pablo, 16
25. Lilian Andrea Gómez Arceno, 13
26. Mirza Rosmery López Tojil, 16
27. Ana Roselia Pérez Junay, 14
28. Grisna Yamileth Cu Ulán, 15
29. Melani Yanira De León Palencia, 15
30. Luisa Fernanda Joj González, 16
31. Daily Analí Domingo Martínez, 15
32. Iris Yodenis León Pérez, 14
33. Candelaria Melendrez Hernández, 17
34. Milenie Eloisa Rac Hernández, 17
35. Celia María López Aranda, 15
36. Hashly Angelie Rodríguez Hernández, 14
37. Sara Nohemi Lima Ascón, 17
38. Yusbeli Yubitza Merari Maquín Gómez, 14
39. Silvia Milexi Rivera Sánchez, 17
40. Yosselin Yamileth Barahona Beltrán, 15
41. Wendy Anahí Vividor Ramírez, 16