

Al Jazeera article highlights criminalization of Mayan women land/ territory/ human rights defenders that Rights Action supports

<https://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/al-jazeera-article-highlights-criminalization-of-mayan-women-community-defenders>

Women land defenders face 'extreme criminalisation', added risks In El Estor, Guatemala, women lead fight for land rights despite added risk of sexual violence and stigma.

by Anna-Cat Brigida, 2 Mar 2019

<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/women-land-defenders-face-extreme-criminalisation-190302183740983.html>

El Estor, Guatemala - Since her teen years, Maria Magdalena Cuc Choc, now 39, has defended the natural resources of El Estor, a predominantly Mayan Q'eqchi' community on the western edge of Lake Izabal. The calm, blue water surrounded by lush forest cover is home to hundreds of species of freshwater fish, lizards, crocodiles, manatees and more.



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Maria Cuc Choc. Photo: Anna Cat-Brigada

The natural beauty of El Estor makes it an area of intense conflict in [Guatemala](#), with petroleum and mining companies frequently clashing with local communities over rights to resources.

Cuc Choc started attending activist meetings in El Estor at age 13 with her brother Ramiro, another prominent activist, but their experiences quickly diverged. While both have been subject of threats and smear campaigns, Cuc Choc has been threatened with sexual violence, physically abused by her father and ex-husband because of her work, and received vulgar and explicit gender-related insults.

"It's hard to find women who are well-organised in this work, because there always exists machismo behind us," said Cuc Choc.

Guatemala is one of the most dangerous countries worldwide for natural resource conflicts, with 26 land rights defenders murdered in 2018, more than double than the year before, according to Frontline Defenders' [annual report](#).

Of the 321 rights defenders killed worldwide that same year, Frontline Defenders found that 75 percent were in Latin America, where relaxed regulations, corruption and weak protections for defenders often mean such murders go unpunished.

Berta Caceres

Saturday March 2nd marks three years since the murder of prominent Honduran environmental activist Berta Caceres, who was a vocal opponent of a hydroelectric dam project in an indigenous community and a feminist leader who believed that land and environmental rights are inextricably linked to women's rights.

Although [seven men were recently convicted](#) and Honduran prosecutors have indicated the mastermind of the murder will be charged, rights groups [say](#) the Honduran government has a responsibility to punish all those involved and "send a clear message to Honduran society and the entire world that there will be no impunity for this type of crime against defenders of the land and the environment".

Female land defenders exposed to additional violence and intimidation

Only 12 percent of the land rights defenders killed in 2018 were women, but female land defenders are exposed to additional violence and intimidation. Pressure to stop pursuing their work comes both from their critics and their own community.

"We as women are even more affected," said Genoveva Marroquin Chavez of the National Union of Guatemalan Women (UNAMG), an organisation that supports female activists and feminist social movements, including women land rights defenders in El Estor.

"Male human rights defenders are criminalised, but they don't say he is out looking for wife, or that he is a prostitute, or so many other things. There is another form of criminalisation women face, which is more extreme, just for being a woman," she said.

Campaigns to criminalise these women and delegitimise their work often attack them on the basis of gender. Sexual violence against female land rights defenders and their daughters is used as an intimidation technique. When these women return home, they often lack the support of their fathers, brothers and husbands for their work, and may even suffer physical violence at the hands of their male family members. Plus, women face the added burden of carrying out their activism on top of household and childcare responsibilities.

Women are an indispensable part of the fight for human rights worldwide, but without specialised networks to protect them, they can end up vulnerable and excluded.

'Men's work'

From a young age, Cuc Choc realised defending the land was designated for men. Her father was involved in community activism, but disapproved of her getting involved, even beating her on at least three occasions that Cuc Choc could remember. "He had the mentality that women shouldn't leave the house," she said.

At meetings with Ramiro, men always spoke up, while women sat quietly in the back. Yet women have "brilliant ideas", Cuc Choc said. "So often, we are threatened by own fathers, brothers, or husbands," she said. "A woman may be shy, quiet and silent, but you don't know why." "I always made sure the women claimed their space and participated," she added. "I broke this tradition even though it annoyed my brother sometimes."



Maria Cuc Choc with Margarita Caal Caal, of Lote Community.
Photo: Anna Cat-Brigada

Cuc Choc soon became a well-respected activist in her community, organising key actions against the Guatemalan Nickel Company (CGN for the Spanish acronym), a local subsidiary of Canadian mining company Hudbay Minerals, over a controversial nickel mining project in El Estor.

But along with her growing profile as an activist came threats, intimidation and the delegitimisation of her work by critics.

Arbitrary arrests

On January 17, 2018, Cuc Choc was arrested on charges of aggravated usurpation, threats and illegal detention, one year after authorities issued a warrant.

Activists working in the region claim detaining human rights defenders on these grounds is a common criminalisation tactic. "These are crimes they accuse all human rights defenders of in all of the judicial processes," said Marroquin Chavez of UNAMG. "Since the charges are always the same, [the government] often can't sustain the arguments for these crimes, because they don't exist."

Authorities often wait for key moments in land conflicts to arrest defenders, she added.

Cuc Choc was let out on provisional release after two days of detention. She now has to report monthly to officials and she cannot travel outside the department of Izabal.

Threats against her and her family, including threats of rape, have increased. "We as women are not only being attacked by a system that is against human rights defenders," said Marroquin Chavez. "They also threaten your body and your integrity."

Dozens of land rights defenders in Guatemala have gone through the same process of arbitrary detention, according to UNAMG.

When male land rights defenders are detained, the entire family is affected, particularly their wives.

On June 29, 2018, vice president of El Estor's fishers' union Eduardo Bin was detained for illegal usurpation of a protected area. His wife Alicia Caal Pop, 50, now struggles to support their eight children without him.

"It's difficult for me now. My kids are still studying and the only work I have is doing my neighbours' laundry," she said in Q'eqchi through a translator. Without the additional food and income from her husband's fishing, the family scrapes by with barely enough corn and beans to eat.



Alicia Caal Pop's husband was arrested in 2018, and now must carry the weight of supporting her family as she continues to fight for her community's land.

Photo: Anna-Cat Brigida/Al Jazeera

With the extra burden of caring for the family without her husband's support, maintaining her role protecting the lake has been difficult. But she sees activism as a way to set an example for her children. "It's my responsibility as a mother to take care of my kids, but also to educate them," Caal Pop said. "We as women also have to participate in the meetings. I have to show this to my kids, that they shouldn't just stay behind."

Sexual violence

On January 17, 2007, police, military and private security guards forcibly evicted the residents of Lote 8, El Estor, to clear the land for nickel mining, at that time for Canadian company [Skye Resources, later bought by Hudbay Minerals].

The men of the community were in the fields, and the women at home. Eleven women, including Margarita Caal Caal, have now come forward to say they were raped during the forced eviction.

"It's the women who end up being affected the most because the woman is the one who is there fighting for these lands," said Caal Caal in Q'eqchi' through a translator.

In [2011], the 11 women filed a lawsuit in a Canadian court for their rape during the eviction, despite fear of repression.

"They often say that whoever files a lawsuit against these people is threatened with assassination, so that's a fear that we carried," she said. The women still await a verdict in the case, but believe the sheer act of coming forward can help shed light on the violence that women face defending their land in Guatemala.

"Searching for justice is more about bringing public attention to what is happening to people," Caal Caal said. "When you decide to seek justice, you are also thinking about leaving something for your kids so they can see the benefits of your fight."

Continuing the fight

Efforts to support women like Cuc Choc, Caal Pop and Caal Caal have increased in recent years. In 2010, a group of women formed the Mesoamerican Initiative of Women Defenders of Human Rights, a coalition of human rights organisations that focuses specifically on gender threats against women working in Mexico and Central America. Other regional initiatives exist in the Middle East and Africa.

In December 2013, the UN General Assembly issued a resolution recognising the unique challenges that female human rights defenders face and calling on countries to ensure these women's right to carry out their activism in peaceful ways and to provide specialised protections, including legal, medical and social services.

"We as women are always in this work, staying active, even though many want to put out the flame that we have inside us," said Cuc Choc. "But we are always giving a little bit more firewood so that the flame stays active. Despite the struggles, there is always a woman there supporting the cause."

(Anna-Cat Brigida is a freelance journalist covering politics, immigration and human rights in Latin America. [@AnnaCat_Brigida](#))

Why Hondurans & Guatemalans Flee

The U.S. and Canadian governments, the U.S. military, and North American businesses and investors (hydro-electric dams, mining, African palm, tourism, cattle, fruit, etc.) maintain profitable relations with corrupt, repressive governments in Honduras and Guatemala, turning a blind eye to and benefitting from repression, environmental devastation, human rights violations, corruption and impunity.

Once in a while, the mainstream media reports on the plight of tens of thousands of Guatemalans and Hondurans fleeing, year after year, ignoring why they flee.

U.S. & Canadian problems

Keep on sending copies of this information, and your own letters, to families, friends and networks, to your politicians and media, to your pension and investment funds, asking: Why our governments, companies and investment firms benefit from and turn a blind eye to the poverty, repression and violence, and environmental and health harms in places like Guatemala and Honduras?

Direct support for community defenders - Rights Action (U.S. & Canada)

Rights Action funds human rights, environmental and territorial defense organizations in Guatemala and Honduras; we provide relief funds to victims of political repression, health harms and natural disasters; we expose and work to hold accountable the U.S. and Canadian governments, companies and investors, international actors (World Bank, etc.) that cause and profit from the repression, environmental harms and human rights violations.

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