

Department of Psychology

“They did Not Kill the Seeds”:

*The Struggle for Cultural Survival and Gendered Growth among
Guatemalan War Widows*

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Susanne Normann

Master thesis in Psychology May, 2014





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PSY-3900
Master Thesis in Psychology
Department of Psychology
University of Tromsø

Spring 2014

PIEDRAS

No es que las piedras sean mudas;
sólo guardan silencio.

(Humberto Ak'abal)

STONES

*(It is not that the stones are mute;
They just keep their silence)*

Author: Susanne Normann

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Abstract

This study explores the relationship between the socio-political context in Guatemala and women’s chosen strategies to struggle for recovery in the aftermath of the war related violence and state terrorism (1960-1996). It examines how the widows in the grassroots organization National Coordinator for Guatemalan Widows (CONAVIGUA) have struggled to “defend life” after surviving the extreme violence in the 80s, and how their chosen strategies are influenced by the socio-political context in post war Guatemala. It also examines how the women benefit from their activism and engagement in justice seeking processes through CONAVIGUA, and if the women have experienced any positive psychological change such as Post Traumatic Growth (PTG) (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004) as a result of their struggle. The study is based on interviews of 19 widows from four different municipalities in the Chimaltetango province in Guatemala. The women are ethnically homogeneous Mayan- Kakchiquel, and their age’s ranges from 40 to 79 years old. The interviews were subjected to Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The IPA analysis resulted in three superordinate themes; (1), Strategies in the context of wider oppression; (2), Painful memories of war and cultural resistance; and (3), Growth through participation with setbacks. An engagement in multiple strategies to survive was identified, including searching for explanations of the causes of the war, political and economic participation and transgression of gender roles, and efforts to strengthen their own and their communities’ cultural identity. The strategies were related to the women’s socially constructed gender roles, and their ethno-political group belonging. The women expressed growth in several domains of the PTGI (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), though they suffering from distress related to the injustice and social exclusion in post war Guatemala.

Forfatter: Susanne Normann

Tittel: “They did Not Kill the Seed”: The Struggle for Cultural Survival and Gendered Growth among Guatemalan War Widows

Masteroppgave i psykologi

Vår 2014

Abstract- norsk versjon

Studien undersøker forholdet mellom den sosiopolitiske konteksten i Guatemala og 19 kvinners valgte strategier for bearbeiding av den krigsrelaterte volden og statsterrorismen fra 1960 til 1996. Studien undersøker hvordan enkene i grasrotsorganisasjonen Nasjonal koordinator for guatemalanske enker (CONAVIGUA) har kjempet for å «forsvare livet» etter å ha overlevd den ekstreme volden på 80- tallet, og hvordan deres valgte strategier påvirkes av den sosiopolitiske situasjonen i dagens etterkrigs- Guatemala. Studien undersøker om, og hvordan, kvinnene har dratt nytt av sin aktivisme og engasjement i rettferdighetssøkende prosesser gjennom deltakelsen i CONAVIGUA. Den undersøker om kvinnene har opplevd noen form for positiv psykologisk endring og vekst (PTG) gjennom denne deltakelsen. Studien er basert på intervjuer av 19 enker fra fire forskjellige kommuner i Chimaltetango-provinsen i Guatemala. Kvinnene er fra samme etniske gruppe, Maya- Kakchiquel, og deres alder spenner fra 40-79 år. Intervjuene ble analysert med Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA-analysen resulterte i tre overordnede temaer; (1) Strategier i sammenheng med bred undertrykkelse; (2), Smertefulle minner fra krig og kulturell motstand og (3), Vekst gjennom deltakelse, med tilbakeslag. Flere strategier for bearbeiding ble identifisert, blant annet å lete etter årsakene til krigen samt skape mening i volden; politisk og økonomisk deltakelse, og overskridelse av sosialt konstruerte kjønnsroller, og styrking av kulturelle identitet. Strategiene kvinnene brukte var knyttet til deres sosialt konstruerte kjønnsroller, og deres etnisk-politiske gruppetilhørighet. Kvinnene uttrykte vekst i flere av PTGIs (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004) domener, men har likevel psykologiske lidelser relatert til fortsatt straffefrihet, statlig vold og sosial ekskludering i Guatemala.

Acknowledgements

First of all I want to express my appreciation and respect to the women who shared from their experiences in the present study: Your struggle is admirable and filled with courage and an example to follow for other women. Moreover I want to thank the directive board of their organization, CONAVIGUA, who had faith in the project, and gave indispensable professional and practical support during the research process. Special thanks goes to thank Carmen Cúmez and Petrona Meletz who collaborated as advisors and interpreters during the process.

Then I want to thank my tutors, Svein Bergvik and Eva Therese Næss for your patience and understanding, and important professional advice. I have learned a lot from all of you. I also want to thank Floyd Webster Rudmin, who supported me as a tutor in the beginning of this project. I also use this chance to declare my love and gratitude for my family.

My respect and appreciation also goes to the people of Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra in Mato Grosso, and Ingrid, for your patience and help in the last phase of this project. Also a big thanks to Cecilie, Kari, Kristin and Lisbeth, and to Rode for the front page photo. Thank you so much!

An important source of inspiration for me are the resistance and struggles of the Mayan peoples in Mesoamerica, and especially the women and men organized in the EZLN, Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional in the South of Mexico. A search for liberation and justice was an inspiration also for this project.

Susanne Normann. 29.04. 2014

Preface: The Efraín Ríos Montt Trial

During spring of 2013, an historical and important process took place in the Supreme Court of Justice in the Central American country Guatemala. The former General José Efraín Ríos Montt, who ruled the country after a military coup, from March 1982 until August 1983 was prosecuted for genocide of the ethnic group Maya-Ixil, and crimes against humanity. From the 19th of March until 20th of May, around 100 witnesses sat in front of the judges and described the brutal massacres they had witnessed, and survived from, and how they lost their family members, and their communities were burned down. The moment was historical and unique; few officials have been convicted for the atrocities committed against the civil society in Guatemala during the conflict. This was also the first time someone was prosecuted for charges of genocide in Latin America. It may seem like post-war Guatemala finally was moving in a right direction.

The most stressful moment in court took place on the 2th of April, when fifteen women, survivors of sexual torture, testified about the atrocities committed against them by soldiers. Their lawyers had pledged the judge to close the courtroom for journalists and put restrictions on the audience access this day. They feared for the women's security. Some of the women were according to the lawyers threatened by former paramilitary forces in their home communities, while others had never told their male relatives or communities about the rapes and sexual torture they had experienced, and feared reactions from the males in their families, or social exclusion in their communities, if their identity was revealed. The judges did not accept their request. «The Guatemalan people need to know the truth», they claimed. Journalists were asked not to take photos of the women's faces, or publish their names. Consequently, the old women covered their faces in woven scarfs, and were guided in to the courtroom, as they could not see their own steps. From the early morning, the first rows in the courtroom were occupied by female human rights activists holding clove-flowers in their hands, trying to dignify this very rough experience. The women witnessed about severe and humiliating violence and sexual torture against themselves, and sometimes also against their mothers and daughters. They told the judges about traumatized lives after the rapes, marked by fear, depression, social isolation, self-blame and anxiety. All of the testifying women said they had chosen to talk in court because they believed justice is necessary for this “never to happen” again.

The pressure was enormous. Military veterans and the economic oligarchy mobilized in the streets, claiming the alleged genocide was an invention by foreign embassies and


interests. The president of Guatemala, Otto Pérez Molina, also him a former military general, denied the occurrence of any genocide in national newspapers. The judge was escorted in bulletproof vest to and from the courtroom. On the 10th of May, the historically important sentence finally came. Efraín Ríos Montt was convicted to 80 years in prison for genocide and crimes against humanity. Guatemala had taken a small but important step towards justice and what many considered a possible reconciliation process. But the celebration of the conviction later that same night, soon turned into despair. A few days later, on the 20th of May, the sentence was annulled by another judge, displaying the weaknesses in the Guatemalan justice system. One year later, in April 2014, the trial is paralysed, while the former dictator is hoping to be granted amnesty. The judge that sentenced him has been suspended from court for a year. The general prosecutor in the country is being displaced before time, in what seems to be a joint effort from the conservative political sectors of the country to make perpetuate impunity (Elias, 2014). A weak and clearly politicized legal system made it possible to repeal a genocide conviction due to a trivial error in court room. Notwithstanding certain press notes from United Nations and different international human right organisms (Maclean, 2013), international society is ineffective in the application of sanctions of this violations of Guatemala's international commitments in human rights.

I chose to describe these events from the Ríos Montt trial, even though the trial happened after the empirical part of this study was completed, and therefore did not directly motivate the present study. But the study is situated in the broader post-war context in which the trial occurred; where efforts and struggles of the civil society to achieve justice have faced serious setbacks. Human rights organizations often claim that justice is necessary to «heal the wounds», both on an individual level, for the war devastated communities, and for the nation as a whole. One can also ask if the Guatemalan society, almost twenty years after the peace agreements were signed in 1996, still haven't reached a point where the truth telling can be a more dignified experience. The present study is a collaboration with the widows' organization CONAVIGUA, an organization of war widows that since 1988 have worked for the rights of the women who lost their husbands during the war, and who has been engaged in truth seeking processes in Guatemala. I have worked with CONAVIGUA since 2006.

The trial started while I was transcribing and analysing data of the present study, and I was attending most of the daily sessions in the Supreme Court in Guatemala City. Listening to the survivors words and the expert witnesses offered a unique insight into an array of psychological, socio-political, forensic, militaristic and economic perspectives of the

genocide, and along with daily discussions with human right lawyers, psychologists and activists, it enriched and broadened my abilities to reflect on the interviewees narratives in the present study.

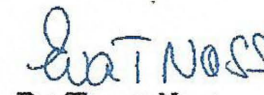
While the study's practical and empirical part, such as selection of participants, designing of research questions, and SSIQs, realization of the interviews, transcribing and data analysis was done by the author with accompaniment from CONAVIGUA, the supervisors Svein Bergvik and Eva Therese Næss at the Department of psychology at the Arctic university of Norway have supported methodological aspects of the analytic process; guided in the search for relevant literature and theoretical issues concerning the research questions, and questioned my findings and reflections in important ways. I initiated the process with Professor Floyd Webster Rudmin, and he was also a part of the theoretical considerations in the earlier phase of the project, and has also guided me methodologically.



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Introduction

War and Gender

Throughout history, social and political conflicts, between national states or within national borders, have caused enormous human suffering many places around the world. Human lives have been lost or impaired, either as direct consequences of violent acts performed by the troops or fighting forces, or as a consequence of poverty, famines or epidemics caused by wars. Millions of people have been displaced, either temporary or permanently. Conflicts have been motivated by a range of various reasons, including religious, political, ethnic, economic, and competing territorial interests. During the last 60 years, there have been over 200 wars and armed conflicts, in which the main targets have often been marginalized ethnic groups and the poorest sectors of society (Kienzler, 2008). While in World War 1, 80 per cent of casualties were soldiers, by the 90s, 90 per cent of the casualties were civilians, mainly women and children (Borer, 2009).

Violence during war is also gendered (Crosby & Lykes, 2011; Borer, 2009; Skjelsbaek, 2006). Women's roles in wars are different than men's. This relates to the socially constructed gender inequalities, affecting women's social and economic situation in different ways than men's. Women's possibilities to participate and influence peace processes have also historically been limited (UN Women, 2012). In the context of wars and violent conflicts women are victims of rape and sexual violence in a significantly higher frequency than men. Though, there is still no consensus on why and how sexual violence is used as a war weapon (Skjelsbaek, 2001). In a meta-analysis Skjelsbaek found that the research differs in their views on sexual violence in war. Some considers sexual violence as part of the overall unequal gender relations in a society, accentuated by the violent climate in war times. Others observe that the gender category interrelates with class, ethnicity and politics (Skjelsbaek, 2001). The women's body is converted in to another battlefield in order to demoralize the enemies' communities, or as part of genocidal strategies such as in Bosnia, it is used in order to destroy social networks in ethnic communities, and prevent reproduction (Skjelsbaek, 2006). Another conceptualization combines these two explication models, and focus on how masculinity through its association with power gets accentuated among the perpetrators and their ethnical or political groups, while the feminized identity, associated with being victim/powerless gets accentuated in the victims, and their ethnic or political groups (Skjesbaek, 2001).

Research in Geographies Submerged in Wars and Violent Conflicts

Traumas and PTSD. War and violence has increasingly drawn the attention of researchers from social science. Since the 1950s, in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, there has been a growing research body on human suffering in the aftermath of traumatic events (Pedersen, 2002). Trauma research has made significant contributions to our understanding of trauma by documenting the multiple negative effects of victimization (Radan, 2007). The inclusion of the concept of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as an anxiety disorder in DSM-III in 1980 was a result of this increasing interest in the field, and also a stimulation for further research (Blore, 2012; Bracken, Giller & Summerfield, 1995).

The concept of PTSD achieved wide acceptance and has been applied to describe human reactions to trauma in widely different trauma situations. The traumatic event can be such as a natural disaster, a traffic accident, a rape, war, losing a family member, being diagnosed with a chronic disease, witnessing or experiencing violence etc. One of the central concepts of PTSD is the direct link from a traumatic event to the later psychological suffering (Breslau, 2004). This has made PTSD -diagnosing important for social change agents and activist working in countries where conflicts is part of the recent past as PTSD serves to address population health problems to a specific cause. The PTSD construct has therefor been important to address unjust aspects of a society and to implement health programs. PTSD has also been used in courtrooms to sentence sexual abusers (Breslau, 2004). Research has suggested a relatively higher prevalence of PTSD and other trauma reactions among women than among men (Tolin & Foas, 2006). One possible interpretation of the higher frequency of PTSD among women and girls is that they are more likely than their male counterparts to experience sexual assault and abuse. Tolin and Foas (2006) meta-analysis of 25 years of research on the topic showed inconsistency when controlling for types of traumatic events. They suggested that there are gender differences in the lived experience of a trauma between women and men, and differences also between men and women's coping styles as well as in the society's expectations and tolerance of reactions from men and women. They found that society has a tolerance for more aggressive behavior in men and for more anxiety in women (Tolin & Foas, 2006).

Controversies in trauma research. Simultaneously there has been a debate within the trauma research field on the universal validity of PTSD and other trauma-related disorders. Contributions come from cross-cultural psychiatry (Kienzler, 2008) and from different sciences, such as medical anthropology (Farmer, 2004) and indigenous studies (Elsass, 2001; Comas- Díaz, 2000). The most radical positions are on one side the research

that is supporting the existence of universally valid diagnostics, such as PTSD and other trauma-related disorders. On the other side of the debate are the researchers whom argue that a western biased “medical model” approach emphasizing individual psychopathology, diagnosis, and treatment has played a predominant role and has failed to take into account the context in which both violence and recovery from violence take place (Radan, 2007). From a cross-cultural psychology position, it has been argued that the DSM-criteria of PTSD and trauma may fail to include social and cultural aspects of trauma, as the constructs are perceived as universally adequate measures of mental health (Bracken, Giller & Summerfield, 1995). The clinical tools for diagnosis developed in western medical settings are by many researchers seen as unreliable when applied to people from a different culture and language (Kienzler, 2008; Pedersen, 2000). Some have called for a re-conceptualizing of PTSD, while others have rejected the diagnosis all together (Summerfield, 2001). Kienzler (2008) observed that the more recent “culture debate” is getting less radicalized and has led to development of new approaches to war-traumas and PTSD.

Power and social status in trauma research. Health professionals working with war survivors in non-western cultures have also noticed that survivors’ health is affected differently across other social constructs such as gender, social belonging, political group, and not just the ethnic group. There is a growing body of evidence suggesting that the interrelationships between political violence, ethnic conflict and population health are more complex than initially thought (Pedersen, 2002). Social epidemiology and critical social theory converge in the argument that structural inequalities are the most important determinants of population health (Pedersen, 2002). A current debate on trauma and PTSD is going on between Miller and Rasmussen (2010) and Neuner (2010) in *Social Science and Medicine* on the relative significance of human suffering of specific traumatic events during wartime (the trauma framework), or the accumulation of daily stressors (the psychosocial framework).

According to Foucault (1982), power relationships can influence a person’s actions by making these actions either easier or more difficult. Foucault (1982) examined the manner in which power is exercised and what happens when individuals exert power on others. Researchers working in post-war areas have proposed a Foucauldian power analysis in the debate on the relation between socio-economic structures and traumas (Farmer, 2004; Prillettensky, 2008). They find trauma reactions to be stronger, or longer lasting, in a population suffering from exclusion and marginalization (Farmer, 2004; Galtung, 1990).

Liberation Psychology from Latin-America also incorporates a Foucauldian analysis of power, and has developed a profound critique of what the researchers call a medical-psychiatric framework (Martin-Baró, 1986; Montero, 2007). They reject an exclusively therapeutic focus' when it is intended to adjust individuals to their social reality. Martin-Baró (1986) argued that since war traumas are caused socially, the social setting also needs to be transformed for healing to occur. Trankell and Oven (2004) affirm that western medical standards in former colonies also could be considered as "tools of empire", to establish governability.

Frantz Fanon, a psychiatrist and philosopher who also grew up as a black man in the former French colony Martinique, wrote that treating individuals therapeutically must also be followed by "treating" the socio-economic or cultural-political contexts in which people live. Erich Fromm wrote in 1955, "It is difficult to be sane in insane places" (Fromm, 1955; in Farmer, 2004). Recently, some psychologists have developed what they call an *ethnopolitical psychological framework*. Building on Fanon's earlier theories, they pose a construct of Post-colonialization stress disorder (Comas-Díaz, 2000). They find that PTSD is a limited diagnostic category because it fails to capture the magnitude of the racism in the former colonies, and how racism still cause trauma in the population. In post-colonialization stress disorder the traumatic process is considered as repetitive, protracted, and ethno-politically mediated (Comas-Díaz, 2000). While the construct of Post-colonialization stress disorder might seem a radical position, it resembles the debate between the trauma and psychosocial framework referred above, but integrates to a wider extent a debate on power relations and structural causes. It should be noted that some of these researchers lived or worked in countries devastated by war. Martin-Baró was an El Salvadorian Jesuit and psychologist, and he was writing in the middle of a civil war, until the army finally killed him. Fanon grew up in the French colony Martinique. We may assume that their life and experiences had strong influence on their analysis of power.

Purpose Statement for the Present Study

The present study turns the focus away from the debates on PTSD and trauma responses and over to the survivor's strategies to recover after war. In the words of Hydén (2005, p 171), who constructs feminist research with a Foucauldian analysis of power, "In every story of oppression and suffering there will be a parallel story of opposition". The scope of the study is to explore the struggle and resistance employed by 19 Mayan women in post war Guatemala, and how their strategies are influenced from the Guatemalan socio-political context. The participants are members of the grassroots organization National Coordination of

Guatemalan Widows (CONAVIGUA), and the study also seeks to explore if their participation has been beneficial for them, and why. Since the study is interested in learning from the subjective meanings the women find in their own experiences, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was found as a suited methodology and is being applied.

As a premise of the present study is the fact that the surviving population of Guatemala suffered enormously because of the violence in the war. The human suffering that ample parts of the population were inflicted can probably never completely heal, and will be influencing individuals and society in the future. The study shares this position with the waste majority of debates on PTSD and other post war related trauma reactions. Few researchers question human suffering in wars and conflict. It is the causes of trauma, and the ways out of it that is debated (Kienzler, 2008).

The 19 interviewees are Mayan war widows that survived the political violence during the 36 year long civil war, and who later were integrated in the Guatemalan grassroots organization CONAVIGUA. CONAVIGUA is dedicated to promote the rights of the Mayan women and their communities and the struggle for demilitarization, truth and justice after the war (Rapone & Simpson, 1996). The relatively long time period that has passed provides an opportunity for the surviving women to reflect on their own individual and collective strategies and political struggles to “defend life” after the violence, and how their experiences are influenced by the socio-political context in Guatemala. CONAVIGUA is a historical reference of Mayan women's struggle in Guatemala. As members, the women hold important and unique experiences and knowledge relevant for the field. The women are active subjects engaged in transforming their social reality, and their perspectives have a potential to contribute in expanding our understanding of processes of individual and collective recovery in post war contexts.

Research Questions. To narrow down the research on how socio-political context in Guatemala interacts with the women's recovery processes, two research questions are being examined:

- How have the women in the study struggled to defend life after the violence, and how is their choice of strategies related to the socio-political context in Guatemala?
- Has the participation in CONAVIGUA or other strategies employed by the women contributed to positive changes in their lives?

The study is situated within several psychology traditions. As it seeks to explore the relation between individual experience and the broader socio-political context, it draws on

Political Psychology (Skjelsbaek, 2006). It is influenced by Peace and Conflict studies (Galtung, 1969), reflected in the study's topic; women's struggles to recover after the war atrocities in Guatemala, and their participation in CONAVIGUA, a grassroots organization dedicated to justice seeking processes. The study assumes that violent conflicts and wars are gendered. The socially given roles of men and women in wars are different, and while women and men are affected differently, gender relations also are accentuated (Skjelsbaek, 2006). The study is hence influenced by feminist psychology and social constructionist approaches. Latin-American Liberation Psychology has further influenced the research, particularly its work to situate psychology in geography and time, and integrate socio-politics in our understanding of human psychology (Fanon, 2009; Martin-Baró, 1986; Montero, 2007).

Further Outline of the Thesis

The introduction chapter has in the past pages presented the study topic and relevant theories from trauma research in post war contexts, and will in the continuous expand on the theoretical and socio-political background of the study. The socio-political context in Guatemala differs from the Norwegian context, and the reader will therefore be provided with a framework to contextualise the women's arguments and experiences. Central theories for the post war field, and relevant for the processes in CONAVIGUA will be presented. The theoretical framework is relevant in the Guatemalan socio-political context and post war discourses. These theories have guided the research, but other aspects of recovery processes are not excluded.

The second chapter is an account of the research methods, which is a qualitative research design and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This methodological chapter gives an account of epistemological, practical and ethical qualities of the chosen method. It aims to offer a description of the conduction of the study, from the experiences that led to the interest in the field, through the interview process and to the written text.

The third chapter presents the results from the analytic part of the study. Through rich quotations from the interviews the reader is introduced to the women's reflections on the research questions. Three superordinate themes and their respective sub-themes are presented, and connections between them are explored and suggested. The three superordinate themes are (1), Strategies in the context of wider oppression; (2), Painful memories of war and cultural resistance; and (3), Growth through participation with setbacks.

The paper's last chapter provides a discussion where the relation between the findings and other research is further explored, suggesting practical implications for the research and reflecting on limitations of the present study.

Background

In order to situate the reader in the socio-political context the women live in, the paper will make a brief account of some characteristics which is central to understand the Guatemalan society today. Knowledge about their context is considered necessary to understand how the women reflect and argument about the research questions, acknowledging that our socio-political context influence how we make meanings about our life experiences. This is particularly important as the readers might be unfamiliar to the post-war challenges and discourses within Guatemala. The brief account is divided into three parts. First, the Guatemalan history and some central socio-economic characteristics in the country are presented. Second, the war and a brief summary of the findings from two different truth commissions is described; and third, the political struggle of the women's organization CONAVIGUA. Such a brief account will be partial and coloured by the researchers own experiences, knowledge and interpretations. IPA research admits a researchers previous experiences as a part of the interpretations made in research, as long as the researchers pursue transparency and openness (Langdridge, 2007).

Guatemala's colonial history. As the rest of Latin America, Guatemala is a society marked by its colonial history. This colonial history has signified deprivation and violence against the indigenous mostly Mayan population since Pedro Alvarado in the beginning of the 16th century led the Spanish invasion of the territory which is today Guatemala. The early, extreme violence exerted against the Mayan people, was described by the Dominican bishop Fray Bartolomé de las Casas in the book *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* (de las Casas, 1974). Colonization disrupted indigenous people's way of life and limited their access to land and productive labour, forcing seasonal migration and slave labour conditions for entire families (Crosby & Lykes, 2011). When Guatemala became independent from Spain in 1821, the new political elite continued to deprive the indigenous population of lands. This direct and structural violence exerted from a very small *ladino*¹ elite upon the indigenous population, causing extreme poverty, high mortality, lack of education services, and an intentional deprivation of land access has led to periodic rebellions throughout history (Lykes, 2000). This culminated in the more than 36-year long war, which lasted from a state coup in 1954, until peace accords were signed in 1996. The peace accords were supposed to address these structural inequalities, but almost 20 years later Guatemala still confronts huge

¹ "Ladino" is the common word in Guatemala for a person who is not indigenous. In other Latin-American countries the term "Mestizo" is usually preferred.

challenges in human rights violations. Structural problems like economic injustice, impunity, discrimination and the unfair distribution of land and income still exist in Guatemala (Anckermann et. al., 2005). The indigenous population, consisting of 21 language groups, represents over half of the population, and are still highly marginalized (Lykes, Blanche & Hamber, 2003). The country has high violence rates, especially in urban areas, terrifying many Guatemalans, and permitting the re-entrance of militarization in the country in 2011, this time by votes in national elections.

The Truth Commissions. In the wake of the peace agreements in 1996, two different truth commissions were created in Guatemala. The *United Nations* established the *Historical Clarification Commission (CEH)*, while the *Inter-diocese Project for the Recovery of the Historical Memory (Remhi)* was created by the archdiocese of Guatemala. Both commissions made important efforts in documenting the violence that occurred against the civil society during the war (CEH, 1999; Remhi, 1999). Over 200 000 people were documented as killed; while a minimum of 50 000 people were documented as disappeared by the states security forces, such as special police and army. About 100 000 people exiled to Mexico, while around one million people was internally displaced as they fled to the mountains. Both reports estimate governmental forces to be responsible for about 93 per cent of the documented atrocities. The victims were identified as mostly unarmed civilian indigenous people. The darkest chapter of the war was the period from 1980 to 1983, when Romeo Lucas García and Efraín Ríos Montt were in power. The CEH report documented genocide against four different Mayan ethnic groups in this period, as more than 440 indigenous Mayan communities got wiped out and burned down by military forces.

Both reports documented sexual violence against women in captivity or before they were killed during massacres. The use of sexual violence was identified as a systematic, generalized, planned practice, intended to exterminate the indigenous communities (CEH, 1999). The CEH report documented 1465 cases of sexual violence against women. Even though the commissions did important work in documenting the sexual violence, they also suffered a significant under-reporting and under-examination of the amount and scope of the sexual violence (Crosby & Lykes, 2011). This was explained in several ways. The sexual violence had not been expected, and the truth commissions failed to ask the women questions that could have been more adequate. The sexual violence also got naturalized and therefore not examined, and many women chose not to tell about it as they faced a risk of social stigmatization or exclusion (Diez, 2007). The CEH report has been criticized from a feminist

perspective, as it fails to recognize women's agency during the more than 36 year long war, and reduces women to victims of sexual violence (Rosser, 2007). The reports documented significant human suffering as a consequence of the violence. On an individual level it was reported fear, uncertainty, guilt, grief, pain, frustration, loss of hope, loss of trust, rupture of life projects, while on societal level, and in the communities it was reported silence, social apathy, rupture of community projects, militarization of minds and social structures, division, polarization and confrontation between community members and groups (Anckermann et. al., 2005).

The widows' political engagement and the creation of CONAVIGUA. The present study is organized in agreement with, and with extensive support from, the Guatemalan grass-roots organization National Coordinator for Guatemalan Widows (CONAVIGUA). Mayan war widows established CONAVIGUA in 1988. The women lost their husbands either in the massacres or by disappearance during nightly raids by secret security forces and never returned. Among their 12 initial demands were economic and political rights for Mayan women, demilitarization of the communities and political institutions, respect for the human rights and measures to recover the remains of their dead family members (Rosser, 1996). In militarized Guatemala, CONAVIGUA comprised one of the first important steps in breaking the paralysis of social isolation grounded in peoples fear, and the members faced serious threats and violence as they were organizing publicly (Rapone & Simpson, 1996). Today CONAVIGUA continues to struggle for human rights and collective rights in indigenous Mayan communities. While CONAVIGUA struggles especially for the rights of Mayan women, the organization rejects to be feminist, and rather work within a dualistic and communitarian perspective, which for CONAVIGUA means to work with both women and men. The organization is profoundly engaged in the processes related to the historical memory and truth after the war, and coordinate with forensic anthropologists in opening the clandestine cemeteries from the war in order to identify the victims. They assist communities in their identification of the remains, with the aim of giving the families the answers about what happened to their disappeared family members, and bury them in graveyards close to their respective communities, where the families can visit and pray.

Central Theories for Positive Psychological change in the Guatemalan Post War Debates

In the following, some central theories that can shed light on the research question will be discussed. They are relevant to the socio-political context in post war Guatemala, and particularly for CONAVIGUAs struggle. These theories have oriented the process of developing the interview guide that will be described in the next chapter.

Positive psychological change. In the book “Trauma & Transformation: Growing in the aftermath of suffering”, Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995) undertook a profound research on positive life changes in some individuals that had been exposed to severe traumatic events. Their observation was not new, but had conceptual roots in Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Since the 70s, psychologists had been researching on similar construct, under different names, such as thriving, psychological changes, adversarial growth, transformational coping etc. (Blore, 2011). Post Traumatic Growth (PTG), as the theory was named by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995), is considered a tendency in some individuals to report important positive changes in their perception of self, philosophy of life, and relationships with others in the aftermath of events that are considered traumatic in the extreme (Tedeschi, 1999).

Models of PTG do *not* question whether the same individuals experience adverse effects of trauma; as negative effects indeed must occur before growth is possible (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1998). Further, the growth is *not* due to experiencing a traumatic event in itself. It is the struggling that an individual implements to cope and rebuild his or hers new life within the new reality after the traumatic event that provides an opportunity for positive life changes and growth. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) define PTG as “positive psychological change experienced as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life circumstances”. They identify five domains of post-traumatic growth: (1) warmer, more intimate relationships; (2) a greater sense of personal strength; (3) greater appreciation for life and changed sense of priorities; (4) spiritual development; and (5) recognition of new possibilities or paths for one’s life (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996), and developed an inventory consisting of 21 items to measure the construct.

Researchers have also related the PTG construct to another line of research, building on the original theories of Victor Frankl (1969), about humans striving to make meaning in our lives. Frankl was a survivor of a concentration camp during the Holocaust, and wrote about how people usually have a *global belief system*, which would consist of schemas through which people interpret their experiences in the world. The schemas can hold beliefs about human values as fairness, justice, luck, control, predictability, coherence, benevolence, and personal vulnerability (Park & Ai, 2006). A traumatic event can represent a shattering of this assumptive world (Tedeschi, Calhoun & Cann, 2007), forcing the need to search for a meaning to the devastating experiences.

According to them, when traumatic events violate our core beliefs and life stories, we create new appraisals in order to make meaning of the events (Park & Ai, 2006). Our understanding of the traumatic events can be decisive for how we experience severe traumas, such as wars or torture (Park & Ai, 2006). The way we create meaning can foster new identities (Skjelbaek, 2006). The focus on cognitive appraisals also links the PTG to the research on coping strategies, where our coping mechanisms, personal resources and cognitive appraisals relate to the psychological outcome in a stressful situation (Lazarus, 2013; Park & Ai, 2006).

There has been some debate on the relation between the psychological construct of resilience and PTG. Resilience is defined as when an individual who suffered a trauma returns to the emotional and cognitive pre-trauma state (Harvey, 2007). Some researchers postulate that a certain degree of resilience is necessary for PTG to occur (Harvey, 2007), while others find that PTG and trauma symptoms can co-exist in the same individual. A meta-analysis from 2000 (Park & Helgeson, 2006) suggests that growth was related to more positive affect and less depression, but similarly to more intrusive thoughts about the stressful life event. Another discrepancy in clinical psychology is if growth should be considered a one-dimensional or a multidimensional construct (Park & Helgeson, 2006). This means if the different domains of growth reflect the same construct, or if they are really different processes or results.

While research on PTG is growing, it has received some critique. Among this is the critique from a cross-cultural stand, calling for more research in non-western populations (Pals & McAdams, 2004). Other researchers observed that if survivors are too determined to focus on the “bright side of life”, they may be doing a type of cognitive avoidance, which could have negative long term outcomes (Maercker & Zoellner, 2004). These researchers call for more, and varied research.

Justice and truth. Doing justice and engaging in truth telling processes has been identified as important resources in promoting recovery processes after serious human rights violations have occurred (Farmer, 2004; Prillettensky, 2008; Staub, 2006). Human rights organizations and activists are vociferous about the importance of overcoming impunity (McKay, 1998), and justice has been found to be a requisite in order to foster reconciliation between survivors, perpetrators and bystanders (Staub, 2006). On an individual level, continued impunity to the perpetrators may lead to feelings of insecurity, fear, and helplessness among the survivors (Isaksen, 2008). Impunity may enhance post-traumatic

stress responses, self-blame, and guilt among survivors (Isaksen, 2008). It also implies the acceptance of violent behaviour in a society.

Alongside punitive justice, restorative justice for the survivors has been recognized to help survivors improve their economic situation demolished by violence (Staub, 2006). Critical psychologists state that such immediate measures must be followed by a profound transformation of the unfair societal structures that led to war in the first place (Martin-Baró, 1986; Farmer, 2004; Staub, 2006). Within Community Psychology, such as the Latin-American Liberation Psychology, it has been argued that survivors and bystanders engagement in justice seeking processes may have healing effects both on an individual and on a societal level (Martin-Baró, 1986; Montero, 2007). Traumas in wars and violent conflicts are socially caused, and can therefore not be addressed exclusively by efforts of individual therapy (Martin-Baró, 1986).

Truth telling processes let the survivors' voice be heard by judges and society, and truth telling is identified as a potentially important element in the recovery processes (Bailey, C. P. P., 2006). Truth telling processes may include punitive or symbolic prosecution of perpetrators (Crosby & Lykes, 2011; Lykes, 2003). While holding perpetrators accountable for the crimes, it is considered to relieve mental anguish and self-blame among survivors by permitting the witnesses to reveal stories about how their loved ones suffered. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004), suggest that truth telling processes can have the potential to facilitate processes of *societal growth*, by challenging and changing social shared schemas after wars. Just as the case for individuals, a societal struggle to recover from events can create new social narratives of "who we are". Recently the assumption of the benefits of justice and truth telling processes has been questioned (Shaw, 2005). Researchers call for attention to an increased risk for re-victimization and cyclic rumination, and points to the increased safety risks for witnesses on both sides during trials (Shaw, 2005). Lack of empirical evidence to claim that justice and truth telling processes may help to recover psychological wounds has also been identified (Mendeloff, 2009).

Feminist researchers have also addressed the potential risks of re-victimization following truth telling processes (Crosby & Lykes, 2011). It has been argued that while wars are gendered, peace processes are also gendered (Borer, 2009), making the risks for experiencing re-victimization higher for women than for men. The truth commissions that followed the peace processes in South Africa and in Guatemala did not anticipate the gendered stories about sexual violence against women. As a consequence they did not succeed

to interrogate on a conceptual level how gender and ethnicity conditioned the experience for the survivors. Additionally, the interviews were not organized in a way that made it safe for women to «break the silence» (Rosser, 2007; Crosby & Lykes, 2011). The result was an unintentional concealing of the magnitude of the sexual violence, and a victimizing representation of women (Borer, 2009; Rosser, 2007). Feminist researchers such as McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance (2011) explore the challenges that women face when narrating about sexual violence a patriarch society. The stories and discourses that prevail in a society, according to their analysis, will be the stories of the powerful; and there can be no neutral stories or language (McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2011). They refer to a medical narrative that prevails within today's psychology. Even if this frame can be helpful in identifying key aspects in the personal experience of war, the medical narrative individualizes, de-contextualizes and depoliticizes these experiences. Perceiving the trauma experience of rape as a medical condition, constructs woman's suffering as an individual pathology rather than a response to social injustice (McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2011). The witnesses in the Rios Montt- trial repeatedly stressed the importance of telling their story and gaining *justice*, so that the violence will not reoccur. They expressed that their «hearts were finally free» and that they now «could rest again». I wanted to explore the perspectives from grassroots women in CONAVIGUA on the ongoing justice- processes in Guatemala, and if the women in the study associate the demands of justice to their own recovery processes.

Social Support Networks. Social support networks have been found to constitute both important protective factor from psychological distress, and a coping strategy (Isaksen, 2008; Park & Ai, 2006; Schweitzer, Greenslade & Kagee, 2007). Some researchers identify social networks as a particularly important source for coping strategies in the collective cultures that value highly relationships in families and communities (Elsass, 2001). Members of informal social networks may include family members, friends, religious leaders, neighbours, and co-workers who are supportive (Isaksen, 2008). Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004), found through a review of growth literature a significant association between social support and growth. A study of peoples engagement in the demonstrations after the Madrid bombings in 2004, suggest that PTG can be promoted through peoples engagement in collective actions (Páez, et al., 2007).

A common consequence after wars and atrocities are various degrees of destruction of the social networks that existed prior to the events. People are displaced, killed, or may fight on different sides in the conflict. Victims and perpetrators may even exist within the same

family. Breakdown of community cohesiveness and social support networks are often found in societies where women have been raped as part of the war (Bracken, Giller & Summerfield, 1995). Reconstruction of social networks and cultural institutions is therefore considered vital in the healing process (Holtz, 1998).

The intentional destruction of the Mayan communities as part of the genocidal strategies was mentioned in the conviction read by the judges the 10th of May (Tribunal Primero de Sentencia Penal, Narcoactividad y Delitos contra el Ambiente, 2013). The majority of the women in the study are widows, and all of them experienced to lose one or more family members during the war. I therefore wanted to explore the women's narratives about the meaning of social networks in their efforts to cope after the violence, and in fostering or hindering positive changes among the women. I wanted to explore if their active engagement in forming new social networks through their engagement in collective action for truth and justice in CONAVIGUA was seen as beneficial by them, and why.

Definition and operationalization of concepts in the study

“Recovery” in the present study. To describe the women's recovery strategies, I will use the terms “recovery”, “healing” and “defending life” interchangeably in this study. For the purposes of the present study, these terms should be understood as broad and open categories. “Recovery” (*Sanar* in Spanish) is a term often used to describe the recovery processes in post-war Guatemala (Patterson-Markowitz, Oglesby & Marston, 2012; Duque, 2007). The understandings of “recovery” sometimes diverge in the literature. The present study adopts an ecological understanding of recovery and it is understood as a complex process involving individual, social and community aspects (Onken, et al., 2007). It should be clear for the readers that while the present paper acknowledges that psychological distress is an important part of the women's experiences, this study explores the variety of strategies the women employ to recover within a socio-political framework. Thus, the aim is not to gain knowledge about symptoms or levels of pathological distress.

Struggle, agency and strategies in the present study. While the majority of women in the study used the term “recovery” to describe their own processes, some of the women used a different term, “To defend life” (*Defender la vida*). I believe this term, “To defend life”, better illustrates the women's active agency in the healing processes. *Agency* should, for the purposes of the present study is understood as the women's capacity to resist, subvert and change power relations and discourses (Hyden, 2005; Bacci, 2005; Davies, 1991). Hence, having agency is in this study understood as resisting, either individually, or as a collective agency (Bandura, 2000). The term “To defend life” thus refers to the women as agents that

struggle for causes that go beyond their own well-being. As “defenders of life”, the women are participating in the reconstruction of their communities in post-war Guatemala. The term “struggle” will for in the present study be used together with “strategy”, as a broad categories that describe the set of different strategies and efforts the women choose. The term “struggle” is another term employed by Hydén in her understanding of women’s agency (2005), and reflects the women’s own words, both in the interviews and in the dominating discourses among social organizations in Post War Guatemala.

Method

Introduction to Method

The purpose of this chapter is to situate the study methodologically and epistemologically. The qualitative research design used in the study is Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, 1996), and the following paragraphs will first explain the epistemological foundation and then practical method. The choice of a qualitative approach and IPA is a consequence of the research questions. The study seeks to explore and understand the women’s individual experiences and engagements in individual and collective struggles to recover in the aftermath of the brutal political violence during the war in Guatemala, and they are asked to interpret how their socio-political reality influences these processes. A qualitative research design is most suitable to capture the richness, connections and possible contradictions in the women’s narratives. After situating the study epistemologically, the selection process, the researchers’ position, the empirical process and the data analyse will be described. Finally, the ethical considerations will be presented.

Epistemological Foundation of Study

In social sciences, our methods are traditionally divided into two different approaches; a quantitative approach, which stresses objectivity, and a qualitative method, which stresses subjectivity (Blore, 2012). Frequently it is considered that psychology was established as a modern science in Europe in 1897, when Wilhelm Wundt performed psychological experiments in a laboratory. Psychology as a science has taken a strong positivist turn, attempting to present objective verifiable results (Blore, 2012). Publications applying quantitative research designs predominates in the major journals (Lavery, 2003). A quick search in APAs info database shows 49 543 hits punching the word “Quantitative”, while the word “Qualitative” gives 3 181 hits. By adding the word “trauma”, the relation was 914 to 126². Public and private research funding seem to be more easily spent on quantitative

² The quick search was done 30.04.2014.

research rather than qualitative research designs. Still marginalized in the dominating journals, the number of qualitative articles published has increased the last years, and so has the number of critical journals willing to publish qualitative studies (Lavery, 2003).

Qualitative study designs seek to learn from people narratives along various dimensions, including argumentative, discursive, emotional, sentient, imaginary, spiritual and spatial (Frost et al., 2010). They recognize the subjective experience as valid for gaining knowledge in psychology.

Critical Latin-American social scientists are postulating the need to decolonize our knowledge production and generate new epistemologies. These post-colonial researchers ask who, when, why and where is knowledge generated (Mignolo, 2009), and reject that objective knowledge production can exist (Blore, 2012). In consequence they reject the *exclusive* use of empirically based and positivist research methods (Martin-Baró, 1986). Martin-Baró (1986) does not discard the use of experimental laboratory testing, and he does not deny that research designs grounded epistemologically in positivist traditions make valuable contributions for knowledge. However he considers «the laboratory» to represent another social reality that is just as influenced by social or political interests as qualitative research designs. He thus argues that positivist research and qualitative research in combination has a better potential to generate a better understanding of a social reality (Martin-Baró, 1983).

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis- IPA

In the practical and analytical parts of the present study, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was applied. The IPA- approach has its origins in *phenomenology* and interactionism, and holds that people interpret and understand their world by formulating their own biographical stories into a pattern that makes sense to them (Brocki, & Wearden, 2006). Husserl (1970), one of the founders of phenomenology, claimed that psychology was making a mistake in trying to submit human subjective experience to the methods of natural science. Husserl's approach to psychology is phenomenological because it involves detailed examination of people's life world and experiences (Brocki & Wearden, 2006).

Phenomenology attempts to explore personal experience, and is concerned with an individual's personal perception or account of an object or event, as opposed to an attempt to produce an objective statement of the object or event itself (Smith & Osborn, 2010).

In accordance with phenomenology, the IPA researchers explore meaning together with the interviewed subject and strives to take his or her perspective.

IPA is idiosyncratic as it explores in detail how participants make sense of their personal and *social world* and the meaning that particular experiences, events, states hold for

them (Smith & Osborn, 2010). IPA is grounded in this concrete social, political and cultural geographical and temporal reality, as it suggest that through an interpretation of the meaning people give to their social world, it is possible to understand something about this reality. To achieve this, the IPA researcher engages in a two-folded process (Smith & Osborn, 2010). First, the interviewed person is making sense of his or hers experiences. Secondly, the researcher intents to *interpret* the meanings of the persons narratives. The active participation of the researcher is acknowledged and it is therefore also accepted that the researchers own prior experiences and values will influence the research process; from the creation of research questions, and throughout his or her interpretation of the interviewees narratives, thus relating IPA to the concept of psychopolitical validity as proposed by Prilletsky(2008)

The IPAs grounding in the participants' social world makes it a good option for the present study. It is not possible to understand the women's experiences and arguments without including their social reality into our interpretations. Further, the critical perspective on power relations implicit in the present study made it imperative to apply a research design that put the women's understanding in the centre of attention. Not to "give voice" as is often stated (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006), but to "listen to the voice" of the women, often ignored by multiple power relations in their social world. In addition, the epistemological flexibility of IPA makes it possible to explore both discursive, affective and cognitive phenomena (Smith, 1996).

Furthermore IPA has a theoretical commitment to the person as a cognitive, linguistic, affective and physical being and assumes a chain of connection between people's talk and their thinking and emotional state (Smith, 2007). The cognitive focus of IPA matches the theoretical framework of the present research. Post-Traumatic Growth is a construct targeting people's cognitive appraisals. Research on meaning making processes and truth telling also involves assumptions about cognitive appraisals. Among the limitations of the research process was the one related to language. While the women are Mayan Kakchiquel speakers, my language is Norwegian. The language used under the interviews was mainly Spanish, and some of the interviews where done with an interpreter. This makes IPA more appropriate, as qualitative research designs such as discourse analysis place higher requirements on a direct understanding of the interviewee's words.

Relation to CONAVIGUA and the Research Topic

The present study explores how the CONAVIGUA members understand their individual and collective "struggle to recover", after the brutal political violence during the war in Guatemala. Moreover, it explores how they analyse the actual socio-political context in

Guatemala. Another scope of the study is to understand how the women believe their engagement in the historically important organization CONAVIGUA has benefited them in these processes. My interests in understanding the women's subjective experiences as activists in CONAVIGUA originates in several years of work related to CONAVIGUA. The Women's group (KU) of the Norwegian Committee of Solidarity with Latin America (LAG) has been fundraising and providing economical support to CONAVIGUA from the Forum for Women and Development (FOKUS), a Norwegian platform of women organizations and committees since 1989. As a board member in KU-LAG I have been working closely with CONAVIGUA since 2006. I have resided in Guatemala several periods during these years, and I have followed CONAVIGUA in the organizations activities in the communities with a special interest in the organizations work on the historical memory.

The Mental Health Program. From 2006 until 2011 FOKUS supported a Mental Health Program (MHP) in CONAVIGUA. The therapy sessions were given individually and as group therapy, as CONAVIGUA was developing a therapeutic method combining clinical tools with tools developed to strengthen Maya spirituality and culture. Professional clinical psychologists developed the methodology in close collaboration with the CONAVIGUA staff. The therapy was given partially by clinical psychologists, and partially by CONAVIGUAs own mental health promoters trained in the project. The program explicitly sought to:

“Contribute to improved quality of life, both mentally and physically, for Mayan women and their families who were directly affected by conflict. Many of these women were subjected to sexual and other forms of violence. The mental and physical consequences of conflict have had great impact and consequences for Mayan people's lifestyles and beliefs. The project aims to assist them through solving problems related to the severity of violence experienced during the war to overcome trauma and other psychosocial processes. They will also challenge the state's lack of response in terms of redress for women victims of violence, work to change the existing uncertainty and violence in society, and challenge impunity for abuses carried out both during and after the war. The project aims to strengthen women's access to the courts by providing legal advice, working with awareness of gender issues and strengthening women leaders (FOKUS, n.d.).

The MHP was given high priority in the organization, and was evaluated positively by an external evaluation of the project (Alvarez, Camey & Domingo, 2009). Still, it was discontinued after 2011, due to reduction in the Norwegian funds. The present paper is a result of a joint effort between CONAVIGUA, and me as a researcher after I made a proposal

to CONAVIGUAs directive board. CONAVIGUA decided to support the research project by discussing the research questions and the selection criteria, and by assisting during the practical interviews. I believe that my work together with CONAVIGUA during the last years has created a base for mutual trust. Most likely was our prior relationship important for CONAVIGUAs board members decision to support this process.

Sampling Procedure and Participants

IPA suggest that participants are selected if they are considered to hold experiences with high value for the exploration of the research questions. All participants in this study are women from CONAVIGUA. Most of them are war widows, while some were younger during the traumatic events, and turned orphans as a cause of the war. CONAVIGUA is a grassroots organization with around 10 000 members across the country, so it was necessary to limit the geographic scope of the study. This was done in dialogue with CONAVIGUA.

Initial criteria were developed:

1. Being a member of CONAVIGUA.
2. Having become widow or orphan as a result of the violence during the war.
3. Having completed CONAVIGUAs Mental Health Program during 2006- 2011.
4. Desire to participate in the study after an initial gathering in each municipality, were the objectives of the study got presented and were discussed.

As a result of conversations with CONAVIGUAs directive board, the linguistic Maya-Kakchiquel region, in the Chimaltenango province was selected. Three different municipalities were selected; Comalapa, San Martín Jilotepeques and Tecpán. The women from Comalapa (9) came from different smaller communities, but today they all live in the municipal centre Comalapa as a result of displacement during the war. The women from San Martín Jilotepeques (5) come from one small community, called “Estrella” for the purposes of the study, and the women from Tecpán (5) come from a community which will be referred to as “Esperanza”. One woman came from the municipality San José Poaquil. The Chimaltenango province was selected because of several reasons. I have a close relationship with CONAVIGUAs health promoters in this area, and considered this a positive and solid point of departure for the research process. This is in addition a region were the MPH had good results, according to CONAVIGUAs observations.

Prior to the interview process, I gathered with women from each of CONAVIGUAs local groups in the house of one of them (in each of the municipalities), and the study was presented. Members of the municipal boards from CONAVIGUA also accompanied these initial gatherings. The study got presented, and then it was discussed between all of us, and

the women gave their point of view. It was underlined that the women that desired to participate would not receive any material benefit for their participation, but that their travelling expenses and food would be covered. When the women had given their informed consent orally we explained that they at any time would have the possibility to withdraw from the interview, and if they choose not to participate in the interview the scheduled day that was their personal decision, and would be understood and respected by the researcher. Written consent was not used, as these are oral cultures and most of the women in the study were unable to read or write.

The women were informed of the anonymity in the process. For some of the women the anonymity was a precondition to participate. Others wanted to be identified. For CONAVIGUA a “non-exclusion criteria” was important during this selection process. That meant that within the local groups, all the women who wanted to participate, should be welcomed. As a result of this non- exclusion criteria, the data material became more extensive than initially planned for. The total of 19 women is a high number for IPA research designs. The data material to analyse turned more extensive and richer, but also more time-consuming to transcribe and analyse. The women were between 40 (1) and 80 years old, while most of them were between 50 and 70 years old. They were all Mayan- Kakchiquel speakers.

Interview Procedure

The interviews were carried out between August 2012 and January 2013. Each woman was interviewed twice, and each interview lasted between 45 minutes and 2 hours, with most of them being about 1 to 1, 5 hours. The interviews were audio-taped with a voice recorder for later transcription. At the end of each day, reflections and reactions from me as a researcher were taped. The interviews were held in the home of one of the women in each municipality, while four of the interviews were held in the archaeology park Iximxé, where the ruins of the important historic Kakchiquel city with the same name are situated. By the women's choice, they arrived at the same time in the morning (except Comalapa, where we divided the group in two, as it was impossible to interview 9 women in one day), and a schedule for the interviews was set up. The interviews took place in closed rooms, to assure discretion with the women, the promoter and the researcher present.

In the meantime, the other women listened to music, cooked, and danced. This was aimed to maintain a collective focus in spite of the individual character of the interviews, and to convert this day into a more joyful day. Before each interview it was repeated that the women could withdraw from the interview whenever they wanted, and that they could choose not to answer any question. This was sought to ensure that the women were in control over

the process and to ensure an informed consent. The women were informed that they were not expected to talk about the violence or other difficult memories, and that it was their struggle *after* the violence that was the topic to be explored. This was done to reduce risks of re-victimization, since the situation created a social script that could influence the women to narrate the violence, because the women previously have shared their stories to truth commissions, to the National Restorative Program (PNR) and to psychologists.

Interpreters and Mental Health Promoters. CONAVIGUAs health promoters accompanied interviews. The promoters are also widows from the war, and members of CONAVIGUA. They come from the linguistic kakchiquel- region, and in the case of Comalapa the promoter is part of the women's local CONAVIGUA group. The promoters had received training from professional psychologists in 2005, 2006 and 2007 to work with therapy in CONAVIGUA. They worked in the MHP between the years 2008 and 2011, and were already familiar with the participants' life stories. In some interviews they assisted as interpreters from kakchiquel to Spanish, as the women preferred to speak in their mother tongue. After each interview the promoters carried out a short physical exercise taken from the MHP, and did a shoulder and head massage with herbs such as *basil* and *ruta*, considered by the women to have a calming effect. This is frequently used by CONAVIGUA in their mental health work and in their spiritual ceremonies. The promoters' participation was fundamental for the realization of the present study. They had trust relationships with the participating women, and also with me through our earlier common work in CONAVIGUA. In addition, they had experience in Mental Health work. Their presence made it possible to turn the interviews into a more informal setting resembling a conversation. While also advising the whole process, the purpose of their accompaniment was to reduce risks of re-victimization.

Semi-Structural Interview. For the purposes of the present study, a semi structural interview design was used, where the Semi-Structural Interview Questions (SSIQ) were created to guide the interviews and assure that they explored the research questions. After two pilot-interviews, one of the SSIQs was reduced, staying with an extensive interview guide on 20 items. These two pilot interviews were later included in the analysis, due to an ethical consideration of not excluding the contributions from women who had shared of their experiences. In addition, the emerging themes from their narratives were found to be similar to the themes from other interviews, and the process that led to the interviews had been the same.

IPA research develops no hypotheses before the empirical part of the research process starts. The process typically starts with one or several research questions, and knowledge about central theories and research controversies can be beneficial. The interpretative work may be informed by the researcher's engagement with existing theoretical constructs (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006). For the purposes of the present study, the SSIQs were developed to explore the research questions, and in addition to explore aspects of the presented theories and theoretical discrepancies. They focus on the five elements in the construct Post-Traumatic Growth, on the so called turning points (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), on the women's use and interpretation of their social support networks, their analysis of the ongoing justice processes in Guatemala, and their participation in CONAVIGUA. Aspects of the post war debate in Guatemala, such as the women's analysis of the benefits of the National Restorative Program (PNR), were also included.

Translated version of interview guide. The interviews were performed in Spanish. In the following a translated interview guide is presented to the readers. The original interview guide in Spanish is presented in appendix B.

1. What experience made you seek counselling in the Mental Health Program in CONAVIGUA?
2. How were you and your life before this experience?
3. During the harder times in your life, how did you feel?
4. After the passage of the years, what aspects have changed in you? In which ways do you feel the same, and in which ways have you changed?
5. How do you practice spirituality? Do you think that changed in some point in your life?
6. How did your family go through this experience? Did your relation to your family change? What would you like your family to do?
7. How did your community go through this experience? Did your relation to the community change? What would you like your community to do?
8. Can you speak with people about your emotions? (*has this changed from how it used to be?*)
9. Today, what are your goals and hopes for life? (*has it changed from how it used to be?*)
10. Have you struggled to go on? In this context, what has this struggle been like? How do you feel about being able to XX (*repeat what the participant points out as*

achievement)? Do you feel stronger or weaker than before? Why?

11. You are a member of CONAVIGUA (*and possible other organization*). What has your membership in the organization meant for you?
12. What aspects of the Guatemalan society make it harder for women to go on?
13. Did you receive the National Restorative Program (PNR)? What do you think about this program?
14. Can you share two or more experiences that helped you to go on?
15. Have anyone supported you? Or have anyone tried to stop you from going on?
16. Have you experienced setbacks during this process? How did you struggle to “go on”?
17. What do you think about the CONAVIGUA Mental Health Program?
18. How can we explain the violence that happened in your community? What were the reasons, and who was responsible?
19. What kind of person are you now? How would you describe yourself?
20. What would you recommend for other women who experience similar things?

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were undertaken during the process that lead to the research design and later under the following research process. Ethical issues have been carefully considered with CONAVIGUA, and also subject to personal reflection during the various phases of the research process. The ethical guidelines of the Norwegian committees for ethics in research (REK) was carefully analysed, and it was concluded that the study was not considered research on medical or health issues, and were not aiming at providing new knowledge about health and illness (Helseforskningsloven, Kap. 1 § 4.). Rather, the focus was on the women’s experiences and challenges living in the aftermath of the war. The guidelines from The National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (NESH, 2006) were carefully analysed and integrated in the research design and process.

In Guatemala, no ethical research committee exists. The research and selection of participants was consulted with a clinical psychologist that assisted CONAVIGUA in developing the MHP in 2006. Ethical considerations should not be reduced to a simple verification of whether or not a study is in line with ethical research committees’ guidelines. Independent criteria related to the specific context should also be contemplated. The research topic, the relation between researcher and interviewees, interests and values that could be affected or promoted by the study etc. are aspects that should be closely analysed (Prilletensky, 2008). Cautions require to be taken within a frame of human-ethic values, love and respect and a commitment to the research topic and the participants.

Kvale (2008) describes that one challenge for qualitative researchers is to go beyond an internal qualitative, *ethicism* where a qualitative research method is regarded as good in itself. Researchers should address such as manipulative potentials, and power relations between researcher and interviewee (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2005). A conception of interviews as personal dialogues may for instance provide humanistic interviewers with an illusion of equality and common interests with their subjects, while the interview researchers at the same time dominate the interview situation and retain sovereign control of the later use of the knowledge produced in the interview (Kvale, 2008). With this in mind, cautions were taken to ensure the participants control over the interview situation and the research process, as described above. Working with participants who have experienced severe traumas, with a cultural membership to an ethnic group that suffers under systematic social and economic exclusion in their home country has unmistakable ethical issues that needs to be addressed and considered through the whole process. Being a white women belonging to a European middle-class arriving in Guatemala to interview Mayan women, runs the risk of reproducing an Eurocentric world system in academic research (Mignolo, 2010). I had been living in Central-America for more than eight years when I initiated the research process, but our social positions remains uneven. In addition, I represent a Norwegian organization, who canalized support for the Mental Health-program in CONAVIGUA between 2006 and 2011, and I was concerned that the women would feel a certain pressure to share their stories with me.

I tried to be auto-critical of the procedures during the different phases of the research to reduce the effects of these inherent power inequalities. Efforts were made to explain the study's goals before the process started, and it was explained to the women that the research was done independently of the Norwegian organization and the MHP. As described, the women were also made aware of that they could withdraw from the interview whenever they felt to and with no consequences. CONAVIGUAs mental health promoters, who had worked with the women during the therapy sessions some 1- 5 years earlier, accompanied the interviews. The women's histories had already been shared, to CONAVIGUA, to the PNR-program and sometimes to the truth commissions. The interviews were audio-taped without any personal information. After the transcripts were done, the audio-recordings were erased and no identifiable information was kept. The women were anonymised in the coding of the material, by the use of fictive names and use of age- ranges on 10 years. Their village names were also changed. These considerations were indispensable, but as a researcher it made me

reflect upon how my own ethical criteria also somehow contributed to the *culture of silence* in Guatemala.

It was discussed with CONAVIGUA whether or not to include women who had suffered sexual rape and torture in the study. The dilemma was discussed from an ethical point of view. Increased risks of re-victimization are known, and phenomenological approaches that require a connection with past experiences can increase the potential of contributing to re-victimization. Initially it was hence decided to propose the study to women who were not known to have suffered sexual violence during the war. But when we encountered a situation where these women would be excluded from the research, and *silenced*, while their companions from their own local groups would be included, we changed the criteria. The ethical problems related to excluding women that expressed a desire to participate were considered as stronger by CONAVIGUA. We were careful not to ask the women about their experience of violence and sexual violence. The present study is a phenomenological exploration of the women's personal and collective processes of “defending life” or recover in a socio-political context, and the research questions are not focused on exploring types of violence or pathologic symptoms. The risks for re-victimizing effects are therefore considered to be lower. The accompaniment of MHP promoters was also crucial from an ethical point of view for the whole process, and more so in relation to these women.

It is important to note that almost all the women described the violence that was exerted towards them, even when explained that this was not expected. It is possible that the women, even though they claimed that they found it important to explain the violence, did it because of demand characteristics inherent in the interview situation. They have shared testimonies before, for instance to the National Restorative Program (PNR); and the interview-situation may have contributed an unintentional expectation to tell about the violence.

It was important for me to convert the research into a longer process with the women. CONAVIGUA as an organization supported the research process, motivated by a need for an external perspective on their work. A summary of the findings will be translated in to Spanish, and discussed with CONAVIGUA's directive board. It was found important to contribute back to the women who had shared their experiences. In January 2014, it was therefore arranged a gathering between the participants and Mexican women who are also engaged in healing and justice- seeking processes, after a massacre in the small village Acteal,

in southern Mexico in 1997. The women visited Mexico for a week, and the women's exchanged experiences of struggle for justice. The promoters that followed the interview process held a workshop focusing on self-esteem and cultural identity. This rich experience was recorded, but not included in the study.

Another ethical consideration are the ethical responsibilities related to the objectives of this specific study. The aims of the present study were considered to be important and ethical. Bringing attention to recovery processes in post-war societies is important in today's world affected with complex and devastating wars and violent conflicts. 30 years after the war in Guatemala, the researchers' interest in the country is no longer overwhelming. Qualitative study designs placing participants' experiences in the centre of attention have a potential of being ethical. As Brinkmann and Kvale (2005) explain, this does not lower the demands on the researchers to take ethical considerations, and examine inherent power relations in their micro and macro- levels. As a platform in the present study are sizes such as respect, admiration, and interest for CONAVIGUA and these brave women's struggle, and a belief that their perspectives have a potential to enrich science and contribute to a more profound knowledge about the relation between psychological and socio-political aspects of human suffering and recovery processes in post-war countries.

The process of Data Analysis

In IPA the aim is to understand the content and the complexities of the meanings people make about their experiences, and their mental and social world. In the analytic process the researchers' task is to engage in an interpretative relationship with the transcript, in order to capture and do justice with these meanings, which are not always transparent and directly accessible in the text (Smith & Osborn, 2007), and can be suggested by the researchers interpretative engagement with the transcripts. IPA is an ideographic method, which means that each transcript is analysed independently, while the final process involves clustering of emerged themes on a higher level to determinate the superior categories. As mentioned earlier, I had a big data material (n=17); bigger than what is usually the case in IPA research. This made the process very demanding and time consuming, in order to do justice to each interview. I followed recommendations from Smith (2010) and Landgrigde (2007) when I undertook the different phases in the analytic process.

Transcription of interviews. The transcribing process was as described a demanding process, which gradually permitted me to reconnect with the data- material from the interviews. I ended up with approximately 400 written pages. This process gave me a better

insight into the women's experiences (the data), and I was already on this stage starting to get new perspectives on the content of the interviews, and reflecting upon themes that I had not been aware of during the interview process.

Looking for themes and then connecting them in each transcript. The ideographic focus in this IPA design suggests that each transcript is analysed internally in order to look for emergent themes and connections. I chose to analyse the two transcripts that represented ~~of~~ the two interviews of each women of in a sequence; that is, the two different transcripts derived from the two separate interviews of one women was analysed as a whole. Only one of the interviews was found to internally reflect a somewhat discursive difference that was found meaningful (*Teresa*) to further analyse.

This process was completed in two steps. The first involved reading the transcript several times, and writing down the emerging themes on the left margins of the transcript, as it is typically done in IPA data analysis (Smith, 2007). At this point, the *phenomenological* aspect of IPA is in the centre, mapping out the participants concerns and cares and their orientation toward the world in the form of the experiences they claim (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006). The second step was commencing to connect the themes on a somewhat more analytical and theoretical level, and take the notes on the right side of the transcript. This way of doing the analysis facilitates to move back and forward in the analytic process, and make continuous comparisons and possible reconsiderations between the data, the themes and commentaries that were first observed, and the evolving interpretations and connections between those themes.

Connection of themes in superordinate and subordinate themes. A list of themes was created, and then related themes were clustered in to preliminary categories. From these preliminary categories, and through a further inductive process, the superordinate categories were suggested. This process characterizes IPA method and represents the researcher's dedication *to interpret* the interviewees concerns and experiences and relate them to their social world (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2007). I created tables with superordinate themes and subordinate themes, and copied phrases from the transcripts into the table to create transparency in the analysis. This was a demanding process of moving forward and back between the table and the transcripts to check if the emerging themes were really grounded in the women's own words. I repeated this process with all the transcripts, and I chose to analyse each one individually, instead of letting the first tables guide the next analysis, which would have been another analytical option used by some IPA researchers (Langdrige, 2007). After

the 17 tables containing superordinate and subordinate themes, and their passages and phrases from the transcript were finished, I moved on to the creation of on singular table, which represented an analytic combination of all the tables. The challenge here was to find superordinate themes that could be valid for all the women's experiences, which meant to prioritize data and reduce the richness in each individual analysis.

Writing up the results and discussion. This is the last phase of IPA analysis, and transmitting the results to the readers with rich descriptions and references to concrete passages from the interviews. This is vital to assure greater transparency and to give the reader an opportunity to estimate the validity of the researcher's analytic interpretation. The quotations are rich sources of knowledge and this way of writing up results has the potential of generating a dialogue between the reader, the interviewees and the researcher's interpretations. Due to space limit it was difficult to select which passages to use, and much interesting data was lamentably left out. Since the women were so many, another challenge was to represent a variety of voices in the text. This was even more challenging owed to the variations in the richness from one transcript to another. For instance, some women made rich descriptions, while others had been more limited in the amount of details in their narratives. Since the original data is in Spanish, it was in this stage I translated the passages into English. I chose to separate the discussion from the results.

Results

In this chapter the results from the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis are presented as three superordinate and several subordinate themes. The three superordinate themes that were extracted from the women's meaning-making processes are:

- 1) Strategies in the context of wider oppression;**
- 2) Painful memories of war and cultural resistance.**
- 3) Changing paradigms: Growth through participation with setbacks.**

On the next page the table illustrating superordinate and subordinate themes is presented.

Table 1: Superordinate and Sub- Themes

Superordinate themes	Subordinate themes
Strategies in the context of wider oppression	Socio- economical exclusion and its gender dimension Ethnic discrimination Gender violence during childhood Marriage as strategy
Painful memories of war and cultural resistance	The memories of war and its gender dimension Explanation models Collective and individual agency and strategies Struggle for justice and to dignify
Changing paradigms: Growth through participation with setbacks.	Changing paradigms through economic participation To marry again as strategy Political participation and social support leading to growth

In an effort to find structure and patterns in the women's experiences, there is an obvious risk of simplifying too much the complex reality, and creating overlapping themes. Given the extensive data-set, the analytic process was quite demanding, and it was a challenge to keep the idiosyncratic focus suggested by the IPA tradition (Langdrige, 2007), and at the same time to identify common themes in the experiences expressed by the 19 women. Most of the dimensions that were identified in the analysis are closely related and influence each other mutually.

The gender dimension was a source of some consideration while doing the analytic assessments. Should it be treated as its own superordinate category? The gender condition influenced all of the major experiences that the women narrated about. For the purposes of the present study it was found more propositional to consider gender as a subtheme in all three superordinate themes, as the women were more chronologically oriented in their narratives, while gender was a returning part of their experiences.

The life before the war is treated as a superordinate category, even though the scope for this study was to explore the women's strategies and perspectives in the aftermath of the war related violence. However, their memories from the life before the war related violence seemed closely related to their experiences during the violence, while also determining personal and social resources available in the aftermath of violence. Further, the war came to represent such a huge turning point in the women's lives, that it was decided to treat it as a separate, superordinate theme. Three major time periods are then observed; pre-war, war and

post-war, and the superordinate themes in the women's narratives are somehow related to these periods, as will be shown. Rich quotations from the women will be provided to contribute to increase the readers' understanding of the women's experiences.

Strategies in the Context of Wider Oppression

All of the women told about a childhood where they and their families needed to struggle to survive. The childhood memories are important for the women, and were in the interviews sorted out and told separately from the war, even though the women later would argue that the structural causes of their childhood suffering and the violence they experienced in the war would be similar.

Socio-economical exclusion and its gender dimension. The women shared memories of having suffered extreme material insufficiency during infancy. This situation was caused by an arguably ethnically caused social exclusion. Many of the participants needed to travel periodically with their families to the coast to work, due to a land shortage in their home villages, and the stories about the coast are generally filled with suffering.

Flor: My poor dad did not have anything, my poor mum did not have anything, and they did not have education. Nothing. We had nothing to eat. I left with them to the coast, and got my skin infected. Who knows which animal(s?) bit me. I was 10 years old when I left, that's how it is.

The social exclusion also meant poor education possibilities. Some of the women told about teachers who would be mistreating the children during classes. The women also experienced that their families differentiated them with their brothers in their access to basic education. The brothers were prioritized, while most of the women were kept home, or had the opportunity to go to school just for a few years.

Camila: We could not continue to study, because their heads were filled up with us being women, we are only good for helping and working, and not for studying. A woman must marry, and they study for nothing.

Ethnic discrimination. The women and their families were also targets of ethnically motivated discrimination when they left their communities and went in to *ladino*³-dominated spaces. This could either be on the coast, in the schools or in the bigger municipal villages.

Tania: I felt that the people from the big villages mistreated us, we could not speak Spanish, and in the market places, there was discrimination. We were most affected for being Mayans, for our clothes and our language. I remember how the boys pinched us,

and called us indian.

Gender violence during childhood. The women suffered under ethnic discrimination and social exclusions together with their communities and families. While the gender dimension is evident in almost all the passages, the women also experienced direct violence from male relatives. This was manifested in different ways. Either as relatives direct violence and sexual violence their mothers, or against themselves.

Rosa: Mum always cried, and I was always sad together with her. I was always sorry, because on Sundays when my dad got drunk, he would always hit my mum, he would hunt her in the backyard, and she tried to hide in different places.

Marriage as strategy. The difficult economic situation and the violence many of the women experienced in their families, made “matrimony” a coping strategy for all the women. Many of them chose to marry at a very early age, 15-16 years old, or sometimes even younger, in what seems to be a deliberate strategy in search for possibilities of a better life by leaving violent family situations and finding ways to battle the material insufficiency that they had grown up with.

Luz: I did not have love in my house. My mum and dad almost did not love me. When will you get married? You are old, they said. This is occupying my heart, that they did not love me, while I loved them because they are my parents. So I decided to marry, and I left.

Some of the women experienced violence and alcohol abuse in their new homes as young wives. As the custom is in many of their villages, the women had to live with their family-in-law, which for many of them meant hard work and obeying their mothers in law.

Luz, for instance, did not get freed from violence in her new family:

My family in law also mistreated me. My husband prevented them from hitting me. I put up with them because of him, and when my husband disappeared, I had to go back to my dad's house.

Some had a good life with their spouses, and remembers the short marriages as the only really good time in their life. Many remember how they collaborated with their young husbands with the daily work. It may be, of course, that the women idealize their marriages, as part of their grief processes. One interviewee, who also got married as a young girl after years of suffering from two alcoholic parents, remembers her husband intensely:

Katrina: It was a life of pain, bitterness and sorrow. Then he came, and fell in love with me. We were just kids. But he never left me again. He said, I can take you with

me. So finally I accepted. I accepted him on a Friday of grief⁴. It was a pain to get married. I was sitting there with my veil on. My husband whispered to me, "Lets sing together?" "Well, then, lets sing", I said. "Let us sing «I will leave the wider path", he said. And that song is a song of pain, sorrow and death. "The world is not a place for me, the world is not a place for me. I will leave the wider path, the world is not a place for me⁵".

While this narrative is almost dramaturgical in announcing the husband's death during the wedding, Katrina sang the song during the interview, evidencing the strong feelings she had for her husband, 30 years after his disappearance.

Painful Memories of War and Cultural Resistance

Memories of war and the gender dimension. The memories of great suffering are central in all the women's life experiences. The war-related violence would be changing their lives in significant ways and causing irreparable damage. Most of the women remember with much detail how the violence came into their lives. For most of them, the violence appeared at first by rumours in their communities about disappearances in neighboring towns, and then the violence reached their own houses and bodies. The suffering and the struggle to go on with their lives in the war-context were sometimes shared with their male family members, while the violence also targeted women in specific ways, and also influenced their possibilities for agency and their resources for resistance in the wake of the violence. All of the women remember clearly how their husbands were killed, or disappeared. In Comalapa, almost all the women lost their husbands during nightly raids in their houses, by masked men from the secret services who operated in Guatemala.

Rosa: They had already detained him one time, but that time they brought him back. They came back again, and they captured him in our front gate. They killed him there. He fell down on his corncob and his blood painted the soil and the door. I buried him.

In the villages Estrella and Esperanza different patrons organized the violence. Military raids forced the whole population to flee. In the meantime, the soldiers occupied public buildings for weeks, and ate the corn, beans and animals that the fled families had been forced

⁴ She refers to Good Friday, but uses another term. The choice of term seems related to her narrative of the death of her spouse.

⁵ The songs title is in Spanish "La senda ancha dejaré", and it is a Christian song, referring to the ascension of Jesus.

to abandon, and burned down their houses. The population stayed in the mountains for over two years, hiding under rocks and in a constant move to avoid the bombs, until a collective surrender in 1985 (CEH, 1999). Some of the women experienced losing the majority of their family members in massacres. That was the case of Brenda:

We went to the mountains, but my spouse gave up in 1985. He died because of fear, and of seeing too many soldiers. They burned our house, and they burned our soya bean seeds. Everything was lost, and I could never grow beans again, because I found no seeds. And many things happened to us. I lost my family, and my spouse, and I was left alone with my daughters. We had to escape in the mountains, and there was this wild plant, Zucanil, and we ate it. But we were always hungry.

The quotation echoes in many ways many of the arguments used in the genocide case against Efraín Ríos Montt. First of all it illustrates the brutality of the violence. Brenda escaped the massacre, but lost the majority of her family in the soldiers' hands. She had her husband left, but he died after their forced displacement in the mountains; a situation provoked by the soldiers in order to operationalize genocidal strategies, according to the truth commission CEH (1999) and the judges in the Ríos Montt-case (Tribunal Primero de Sentencia Penal, Narcoactividad y Delitos contra el Ambiente, 2013). It also illustrates the cultural dimensions of the war in two ways. First, Brenda lost her seeds, and was never able to recover them. The Mayan communities have during centuries cultivated ecologically, and each harvest they collect seeds, to plant them again the next year. This is part of the families' cultural economic activities, and probably important for Brenda's Mayan identity. This process was interrupted for Brenda, and is mentioned as a loss in the same passage as she speaks of the loss of her house and family. The second way the quote illustrates the cultural dimensions of the war is by the means in which the communities were able to resist. They survived in the mountains, due to culturally provided knowledge about plants they could eat to survive.

The gender dimensions in the experience of war are strong. Some of the women were targets of brutal sexual torture by soldiers. Most of them came in a vulnerable position after losing their husband. They had less protection, and got stigmatized for being a "Guerrilla soldier's widow", which seem to be a dehumanizing discourse targeted to legitimate violence against them.

Ana: I have a lot of problems now because in the beginning I did not tell. They raped me, I don't know how many of them that passed by me. I don't know because I did not want to look, because I was scared. I think it took around an hour and a half. Maybe

that's the reason for my abortion. I had 5 months of pregnancy, and the kid was big when he came out.

Another woman was captured by the soldiers and taken to a military camp where she was held for some time. She had been politically active in CONAVIGUA, and that was the reason of her forced disappearance. During captivity she suffered severe physical and sexual torture, until she was able to escape.

Teresa: If there was only the violence, maybe it would be easier to get over. But it was also the torture. That's more physical, your organs get wounded.

For many of the women the social consequences of the disappearance of their spouses and/or the sexual violence were hard to bear. Some of them had to leave their family-in-law's houses and were accused of being responsible for their husband's death. Some had to move between neighbour's houses to escape from the soldiers. Some got help in this early desperate phase, while others suffered social stigmatization or were not let in to the houses of their neighbours due to a fear of suffering military raids.

The experiences told by *Libertad* illustrate how the violence against women may be seen not only as a trauma coming from war, but connects with a context of a wide gender oppression, that has made the women's struggle extremely difficult in Guatemala. Her story also illustrates why silence was a strategy by so many women that were exposed to sexual violence. *Libertad* was living with her family-in-law, their first baby and her spouse when the violence started. She had been through hard violence during her childhood, and shared with the other women an explanation of the marriage as a strategy to get a better life. She had felled in love with her husband, and she remembers a good and loving relationship with her new family-in-law. Her spouse disappeared following a soldier's raid, and in the beginning her in-law parents welcomed her to stay in their house in order to share the grief. One day when she was alone in the house, three soldiers broke in and raped her. *Libertad* was left in shock and pain, and she confessed to her mother-in-law when she returned. *Libertad* remembered her mother-in-law's words:

Let's see what your father-in-law will say when he comes back. I will tell him everything you said to me, that you let those bastards do what they pleased with you". She was mistreating me, and she hit me in the face. "Tonight you are leaving", she said.

Her family-in-law took away her baby, and kicked her out. They said she should not oppose, because they would give her name to the military register, and accuse her (probably of

being part of the guerrilla). The fear made her give up on the baby. *“I had no one to defend me”*, Libertad said. It actually seems like Libertad predicted the possible social consequences of the sexual abuse. While narrating, she says that the soldiers also stole some food in the house after raping her; which meant that there was evidence that something had happened. Libertad never got her baby back, and was only able to re-establish contact with him when he turned 18. He was already an alcoholic, and died some years later. In the meantime Libertad had married again, with a violent and alcoholic man, who still controls her life. They have ten children together, but it seems like Libertad has spent many years of her life in pain because of her lost child. Today she has regained contact with her first family-in-law, and she is caring for them, as they are getting old and sick.

Explanation models. The women presented mainly four different models for explaining and making sense of the war. (a), The war was to exterminate the indigenous (genocidal model); (b), The war was to fight the guerrillas (political model); (c), The war was described in the bible – it had to happen (religious model); and (d), Confusion and uncertainty (individual model) Finding meaning or making sense to why the violence happened has been an important, but not an easy path for the women. While their cultural identity as Mayans seem to be linked to their explanation models, their possibilities to explain the violence against them also reflect a gender dimension.

The most frequent explanation model among the women in this study was linking the war directly to genocidal politics. The genocidal explanation model relates the superordinate theme of war to the first superordinate theme, a wider context of oppression, because the war is perceived by many of the women inside a framework of wider ethnic discrimination and exclusion. Frequently, in the women’s experiences, the war was aimed at exterminating their communities and their people, though this genocidal politic was not only present during the war. In some of the women’s experience this politic is still present in Guatemala.

Katrina: There is this long history of our people. And also with everything they did to us, the disappearance, everything done by the army. It was genocide and their objective was to exterminate our lives as indigenous, as Mayans. But as the saying goes; they cut down the tree, but not they did not kill the seeds.

Brenda: Why they did it? They have always wanted to terminate us, the indigenous. Because we grow beans, vicol⁶ and other products, and we sell it in the markets. That's why, I think, that the government gave the army the freedom to kill people. But what are

⁶ Vicol is a vegetable that is commonly eaten in Guatemala.

we to blame for? We were not provoking anyone, we were not stealing from people. Right now we hear that many people are stealing, there in Guatemala City, you only got thieves. They had a plan to do this to us. The Ladinos do not want us here. Today, some things have changed, but before you could take a bus, and they did not give you a seat, there was and there is still a lot of discrimination. And I don't know why they thought they could terminate us. Because God gave us the life too. But since they have money and we don't, they do things like that.

The passages belong to Katrina and Brenda, two of the women who had political responsibilities in CONAVIGUA on a municipal level. They have probably had access to more political training than the majority of the other women in the study. Their observations are among the more explicit observations on what they consider genocidal politics as the motivating factor that led to the violence against themselves during war. This might indicate that they were benefitting from their political training in order to make meaning of the violence they experienced. However, other interviewees also indicate a genocidal explanation model.

Petrona: I am ignoring the reasons. Why did it happen? What law approved it? I don't know. I guess it was the army. They want the economic power, and since we are poor, the indigenous, they want to exterminate us. Because they want our land, and the whole country for themselves.

Some of the women expressed doubts about the real reasons behind the violence. The following experiences from three different women in the study suggest that the women's own experiences made them question the official discourse that the civil lives that got lost was due to excesses in a war against the guerrilla forces, which would be representing the political explanation model, very often reproduced in governmental discourses today.

Juana: Some say it was because of the guerrilla war. But the truth is that the soldiers... The truth is that the soldiers killed boys. I saw it with my own eyes. They brought boys to a cliff, and sat them down there. And the poor boys died right there.

Camila: They said it was to catch the guerrilla. But there is one thing I will never forget. An alcoholic man, we knew him. They said he was guerrilla, and they killed him right outside his house.

Maribel: Before, maybe the soldiers would accuse us of being part of the guerrilla? Guerrillas? What kind, I say. Just so they can kill us easier. It's not right.

Researcher: Do you think that they accused you of being guerrilla fighters, because they really thought so, or do you think it was an excuse?

Maribel: *Those are fucking lies. They were not guerrilla fighters, just fucking lies. They put the guerrilla-name on us just to justify their own actions. They killed an old man and they dumped him. Would that be right? An old man. People were just right here, in their houses. An old man, what would he know! Sacrificing the lives of poor people. Really, it was not right. It is not true that they were searching for guerrilla. They came to our houses, they would kill chicken and steal. If the owner were there, they would kill him to. They were thieves, it is not right. They became crazy because they also killed the dogs.*

Several women also constructed religious explanation models of the war. Four of the five women coming from the same village, Estrella, referred to the Bible when they were asked why the war related violence happened to them. This suggest that the engagement with a spiritual or religious meaning-making was a collective process among the women from the same community, possibly connected with the social processes of meaning-making and through validation of ones beliefs (Neimeyer, 2004) and strengthening of group identity in their community. At the same time it suggests a strong role of the church in their community.

Cecilia: *It was written. We should not doubt that. I always go to church to calm a little bit my headache that comes when I think too much. What they have told me is that it was really written. So little by little I accepted it.*

Some of the women expressed to be confused in their intents to explain the violence. They presented somehow individual explanation models, referring to jealousy or personal conflicts with neighbours as possible causes for the violence. Women coming from Comalapa only expressed these explanation models. As described earlier, the violence was organized by different patrons there, with more nightly raids in the women's houses – something that might have individualized the experience of the violence.

Luz: *He was just working with his products, it was not right for them to take him. People were abusive, if they were jealous, they would go talking, talking badly about him. That's how it was during those times.*

Collective and individual agency and strategies to survive. The women engaged in a variety of strategies to survive in the wake of the terror. Their agency is present in their narratives, and might be an important part of their current understanding of the self. The women from Comalapa experienced to be helped by neighbors, who in spite of own fear often let them live during the first most critical period in their houses, as the widows were particularly vulnerable to sexual violence from soldiers. The women that fled to the

mountains in Esperanza and Estrella experienced to be helped by other families while they were in the mountains, indicating that the communities responded to the violence and terror not only with social isolation and with mistrust, as identified by the truth commissions, but also by strengthening social networks in the communities. The women's available defense strategies had also been gendered in many different ways. Some of the women had tried to convince their husbands of migrating to the cities, as they feared the violence, but when the husbands denied leaving in fear of losing harvest and animals, the women had to accept it, since the men decided.

There might be a relation between explanation models and other coping strategies in addition to meaning-making during the violence. The cultural aspects of the genocidal explication model were for instance also present in narratives that explained how the communities could defend themselves, and possibly strengthening the women's group identity. *Tania* is referring to a big mythical rock which is placed near her home community. The rock is associated with a historical figure who in the oral history took part of the resistance against the Spaniards during the colonization:

During the violence, he helped us a lot. My mother has told me that when she was little, there sometimes came a lightning from that place. One time, around 11 in the night, 10 army vehicles came. The soldiers were shooting in the air, and ringing the village bell, which means that we had to gather. But all of a sudden they got scared. They ran away, they returned to where they came from. And another time, around 3 o'clock in the afternoon they came back. And when they passed by the big rock all of a sudden they saw many women in green uniforms. The women were armed. They said "we must leave, look at all these armed women, their husbands must be even more armed, and we can't see them". Ha! There was nothing there. Nothing! We were all civil, and we had no weapons. It was the rock that defended us.

The Mayan culture, targeted by the war according to the genocidal explication model, also gave the women means to struggle for survival.

Tania: As part of our struggle we asked our grandmothers and ancestors to make them give back my husband. That's why he was not killed, and he was just tortured. If it was not for these ceremonies he would not have returned.

The religious explanation model similarly offered a way of accepting and creating meaning in the new lives. Most of the women claim to be more religious or spiritual than before.

Rosenda: *The bullets passed over my head. But God defended me. He protected us because he still did not plan for us to die.*

The faith in God have moreover been a way to keep contact with their husbands, through prayer, while for some women, the religion gives strength to go on with life. *Miriam*, for instance is living in a violent relationship, but her faith in God makes her go on:

My celestial father is helping me. I go to church and prayer. He gave us another way to live. With his greatness we can do anything. So I will stay alive as long as he asks me to.

Luz has found answers to her doubts and also a way to speak with her husband:

Before I used to pray but I was crying. I said, where is he? Where did they bury him? How is he? But then God changed my thoughts. I said, Lord, do you know were my husband is? Did he go with another woman, did he steal something? No, he did not do anything. I said to God that he should rest, wherever he is; if it is in a street, or a ravine. Little by little I get consoled.

For *Ana*, an increased spirituality has also been important. She had turned alcoholic, and explained that a dream made her accept the charismatic Catholics that had been pursuing her for some time:

I went then with my religion, and now I am there. I am happy and I feel God's presence in my life. He gave us everything. It is very difficult to live, but we have to. We have to struggle and go on.

A number of the women also believe that the perpetrators will be punished by God. This appears as related to a sense of belief in justice, and can possibly be strengthened by the experiences of hopelessness confronted with the impunity which is observed in the Guatemalan legal system

Libertad: If you do well, you will also receive well. If you do badly, you will get bad things in return. Maybe the men that did those things against my spouse, maybe they are suffering? It is better that God do the justice, I think.

The women who had the individual explanation models explained with few details, suggesting that these explanation models were very little developed by the women. It might respond to a perception from the last years in the war, when the violence and terror already had damaged the social networks in the communities. During this time, it is known that some people accused neighbors of being members of guerrillas in the military camps. Jealousy just does not seem very plausible as an explanation for the war. This explanation model might

respond in part to the women's gender condition. As women, they might have had lesser access to information than their husbands, and this might have caused a big confusion in explaining why their husbands were taken away.

Almost all of the women claimed that neither they nor their husbands had belonged to any guerrilla, politic or social organization before the violence. It is correct that many people who were targeted by the soldier's persecution and violence, accused of being guerrilla members, probably never really was considered being one by the state; the persecution of them responded to a terrorizing tactic (Figeroa, Ibarra, 1990), and/or to a genocidal strategy (CEH, 1999). Still so, it is plausible to reason that at least some of the husbands had been active in some kind of community organization. Some of the women explain that their husbands did not participate in "anything", although their memories about the last hours before the disappearance of their spouses, the death seems somehow announced. Either by a sudden fear, a need to eat his favorite meal, or an urge to speak about the possible death and the future, it seemed like their husbands had been warned. In *Katrin*'s narrative, the last hours before the disappearance her spouse started to sing "*I will leave the wider path*", again. This suggests that this individual explanation model could respond to another resistance strategy in Guatemala, which is *the maintenance of silence*. In a violent conflict, were the state was behind the attacks and persecutions; talking was beyond question dangerous, and it still might be.

Cecilia: *In our community everyone is quiet (calladito in Spanish). We can't go there and here talking, thanks to God we are good. As I said, I see the man that helped the soldiers. He pointed us out. He is still alive.*

Many women referred to the fear they still feel in their communities, as the perpetrators are s free, and protected by holding local power positions in political parties or in the church. The women have had to maintain silence as a strategy to survive, and to break the silence has been a returning theme of much psychosocial work done in post war Guatemala (Aguilar & Méndez, 2006). Not acknowledging their own or their husbands' political participation prior to the disappearance may also respond to a discourse which still seems to dominate many debates in Guatemala, which is that if you participated in organizations you deserved the violence, because you were guilty of *something*. This attaches their silence strategy to the political explanation model. This explanation model maintains that the violence happened due to a war between a guerrilla and an army, and that the civil indigenous people that died either got caught in the middle, or were secretly collaborators of one of the

parts. The lawyers in the Ríos Montt- trial that was referred to in the preface of this paper, used this as their defense arguments. The deaths of so many civilians were according to them unfortunate excesses in warfare, or corresponded to the fact that the killed indeed were engaged in guerrillas and that the survivors that testified in the trial are lying when they deny so. Of course, international human rights guarantees the life and integrity of war prisoners, but this point is shockingly absent in right wing dominating post war discourses in Guatemala.

In the interviews, the women who had experienced sexual torture expressed the strongest conviction that the motivations behind the war was a genocidal politic. They also rejected and denounced the legitimacy of the social stigma placed on them as survivors of sexual torture and the voices that were blaming them for the raping. When the women chose to maintain silent about the violence against them it seems to be a strategy to avoid stronger social consequences and not because they really self-blame. *Ana*, experienced to be raped by several soldiers, and lost her baby:

I haven't told my husband. What if he rapes me? He could give me a problem. I did not tell when we shared our testimonies in Chimaltenango (PNR) either, I did not tell them that small part either, because my son was there. Even if he's my son, all of a sudden he could throw something in my face. I told my sister, and she once said "you are shameless, many people told me that you threw yourself at the soldiers. One knows that one did not do those things, but people talk like that; so people can say many things to mistreat other persons.

Struggling for justice and to dignify. This was another emerging subtheme in the women's experiences. Many of the participants defied their own fear and the evident risks and went to search for their family members in the military cartels. Some of the women went to Guatemala City, and left photos of their relatives in the San Carlos University, where the students were coordinating the dangerous work of searching for the disappeared. A dedication to this type of work was enough to be considered as a sympathizer with the guerrillas, and hence executed, as was the case with Rosario Gody de Cuevas, the director of the Mutual Support Group (GAM), found burned in her car together with her son in April 1985 (Doyle & Franzblau, n.d.).

The first reaction among the women seemed to be motivated by a hope to find their husbands alive, and refuse to accept that they had been killed. The time has passed and this hope has been converted to a continuing struggle where the motivation seems to be their remaining hope of finding answers, mixed with a more political fundament of contributing to

the broader truth-seeking processes in Guatemala, and a sense of doing one's duty. Many of the women who had participated in the exhumations supported by CONAVIGUA and the forensic anthropologists expresses that they would be able to rest only when they had found and buried their relatives.

Brenda: When we exhumed them we can now be calmer. We got calmer because we now know they are in their place. Those are my thoughts, I feel good. I felt good because we made the struggle to take their body's up.

Katrina explains her motivations in participating in the exhumations, and also the challenges the women were confronting:

The hope that I have is to find my loved one. Thanks to CONAVIGUA we became motivated, and we lost our fear. Because with all the fear we had, maybe we would have said no. It is not an easy thing, after all that we have experienced. Despite all of that, we managed to do the interviews, collaborate, and assist in the exhumation. We were threatened by the owner of the piece of land, the whole thing ended up at the police station. And besides, many people say: "What is it good for? Will you eat their bones"?

The exhumation processes also has caused distress, and many times deceptions, as the loved ones were not the ones they found. The experiences of *Luz* illustrate the distress caused in her by the exhumation process:

They started to dig. There were a lot of dead people in the backyard of the cartel. They had their feet up, or their faces upwards, and they were tied with wires, yes. They took them out. And it was exactly like I had dreamt it. So many poor people there. What a suffering! Were they living or dead when they got buried? Some were just kids with mouths open. I guess they got buried alive. This is 10 years ago now.

Many of the women had been in contact with the National Restorative Program (PNR), created as part of the peace agreements signed in 1996. PNR was created to do restorative justice through five measures, namely provision of dignity, cultural compensation, psychosocial rehabilitation, material restitution, and monetary compensation, but has been criticized for presenting weak and partial results (Hofsommer, 2012). The women had been in contact with PNR to get some material compensation for their dead family members, something that CONAVIGUA also had motivated them to do. The women's narratives suggest that their contact with PNR was not a good experience for them. The difficulties the women experienced were of mixed origin. Some had great difficulties in being believed. They struggled in order to get paid, but were not believed.

Rosenda: *It is not the same as a living person. If the person is alive you can speak with him, and be calm, but the person is not there anymore. Where can I speak? That money comes with a lot of pain. I received for my mum and dad. They gave me life and I got money for them. That hurts.*

Some had great difficulties in not being believed. They struggled in order to get paid, but were not believed. The following quotation suggests the negative effects of the PNR, as the women were turned in to receivers, while the original goals of the PNR to contribute to the dignifying of the victims and acknowledging the women as right-holders was (at best) under-communicated.

Luz: *For me it was just a small help. That scarce money is not enough for anything in our lives. If my husband was here, I would not need anything. But since he is no longer here, the president made me that favour, I could cure a little bit of the diseases with that money.*

Another women; *Denise*, was told that she already had been paid, and she believes that her signature was falsified somewhere in the system. She paid a private lawyer to help her, but ended up loaning money in the bank, and found no solution.

Denise: *He did not get them to erase my name, and I did not get indemnification. I now have a buzzing in my ears for thinking too much, I was thinking night and day. I told them my story, and got nothing. I am sad because of that, I have had the buzzing feeling for two years now, all the time.*

None of the women told the PNR about the sexual abuse. As with the truth commissions, it was much easier for the women to tell about the sufferings their family members were subject to, and not the violence against their own bodies. The women's narratives suggest that the PNR program turned out re-victimizing at worst.

Changing Paradigms: Struggle and Growth with Setbacks

When the women were left alone with kids to raise this seemed like an impossible task for them. The widows were profoundly affected by psychosocial consequences of the extreme violence they had witnessed or experienced, and at the same time they had to take care of their young children. All the women explained with much detail the psychosocial consequences they suffered as a cause of the violence. Fear, sadness, insomnia, not being able to eat, nerves, headaches, guilt, pain in the legs, pain in the back, were among the most common individual symptoms. They also told about social consequences of social isolation, stigmatization, and mistrust between neighbours and so on.

Luz: *I did not eat, I did not sleep, I was never sleepy, and I felt fear, and sadness. I was*

like that for a year. I was just skin and bones left. I looked drunk, I did not have strength to walk. I had a lot of nerves, a lot of guilt. That's why my head was hurting, I don't know if it opened up or if it was shrinking in. So much diseases, sadness, poverty.

Changing paradigms through economic participation. The process of searching for ways to survive for the family was hard for the women, and they felt badly prepared for this task. Many of the women mention that they were not taught to read and write as children, and describe how this created an even more difficult reality for them after losing their husbands. For the women, this struggle forced ahead a new economic participation among them, taking on tasks that their husbands usually had done, or migrating periodically to the coast to work there. The participants narrated this as a very hard burden for them, which at the same time has resulted in a satisfaction with their own effort.

Miriam: When we were left there, we were left without money, without housing, without animals, nothing, we had nothing. We did not have a husband. What could we do? A path was all of a sudden closed. There was no way out, that's how I felt my life.

Many of the women describe how they had to be «women and man» at the same time, implying this double burden, but also showing how the women were changing paradigms in their life's, and taking steps out of their socially assigned economic roles and tasks. This experience is described equally by on the one side the women that chose to marry again, and on the other by the women who express why they chose to stay alone with their children.

Brenda: Who would defend our lives? We had to be women and men, in our planning of life, how to earn our coins, even though we were still affected.

Rosenda: God knows that I am a very weak woman. I did not know anything in life. Not to work well, not to weave, not to saw. When he left, God opened my head, and taught me to weave in the night, to sell atol⁷, for 5 cents to people in another village with people that were not affected so badly. So when my husband was gone, it was like I got stronger. Because then I had to work.

Paradoxically, the strong and enduring grief of their lost spouses seems to be accompanied by a liberating process among the women. The almost impossible task of defending their own and their children's life after having survived the brutal violence and being left without anything, forced them into taking on new tasks, while the accomplishment of making their young children survive and sometimes also study, seems to be attached with a process of a better self-appreciation among the women. Among the economic activities the

⁷ Atole is a traditional drink made of corn.

women performed was learning how to weave, migrating to the Coast in search for work on the big plantations, learning to cultivate land, selling food in the streets, cleaning others houses etc. It suggests that even if the women were changing paradigms in occupying economic spaces usually reserved for men, a good deal of the motivation behind their actions was the gendered task related to maternity in new and extremely challenging conditions.

Maria: I value my efforts; I value myself because I defended the life of my children. I manage to make them go on during these difficult moments of my life.

The majority of the women were specially focused on creating education options for their daughters, to break up the social roles that had been so difficult for themselves. Those of the women who did not manage to have their children study, were going through distress because of this. The women who had lost children during the war seemed to be even more focused on creating options for their surviving children. Guilt of not being able to save their children's lives could have motivated them to struggle for giving their remaining children the best possible options. *Rosenda's* experiences with her daughters illustrate how she engages in changing the future for them:

Right now my dream is that my children continue the struggle to make use of their studies. I would like to support them, but I don't have a job. I grew up with ignorance, really much ignorance. I did not understand needs, I did not know how to work. If I was ok, why was that? Because I did not understand, I did not know. I married, and that was it. My spouse did not teach me to work with him, so I continued as blind. So right now I don't want that for my daughters. I say to them that they need to study, but also to weave. Take up your thread and weave, I say. Because you can graduate or be a teacher, but if you can't find work later? My daughters can do anything. And I talk to them about the history just the way we are speaking now. So life is happier now.

Marrying again as a coping strategy. All the interviewed women reflected upon whether they should get married again or not after losing their husband. For the ones that chose to marry, it seemed to be considered a similar strategy as their first marriage, where creating a future for their children seemed to be the decisive factor. Re-marrying seemed to have led to different outcomes for the women. Some of the women prioritized that the economic benefit of getting a new spouse would make it possible to pay for their children's education, while others feared that a violent man that would not love the children from their first marriage.

Maribel: I had admirers, and could have married again. But I thought that five kids were a lot, and maybe a new spouse would not love them. I stood up in front of my kids and

said “I will struggle for you”. And I did it alone. It is important to give them love, to have them study. Life does not last; you must take advantage of the moments.

Rosa: This one is not like the other husband. I am always paying for everything. He is there, but I am paying. He never helps. So my marriage is not good. But the kids, are they to blame? That is why I am struggling.

One woman who did not get married made the following reflection about her own efforts.

Cecilia: My children say to me; “Thank you mother, you struggled for us. That’s why we are good workers now. If you had searched for another man, we would have been left alone. What would we have done, other than walking the wrong road?” Some comrades in CONAVIGUA search for another spouse, but I did not think that way, because of my daughters. Should I have my daughters suffer while I was searching for different things? That’s what I thought.

The marrying seems to be a coping strategy related to socially constructed gender roles. They chose to seek protection and economic benefits for themselves and their children in a new man. Ironically, this strategy was at times simultaneous with more transgressor strategies of struggle, as performing tasks of “a man and a woman”, which will be explained below. The women who chose not to marry again also spoke about the loneliness they have felt in their lives.

Luz: With a spouse, for instance, we can talk about what we will do tomorrow, what we will do with this and that. Even though we have our children, it is not the same as a partner to communicate about the different tasks.

Some of the women seem to have avoided a new marriage due to a sense of guilt. One woman, who lost her husband, parents and her only daughter while they were fleeing in the mountains, remained single together with her three sons after the violence. She was blaming herself for not having been able to make her daughter survive. The decision not to marry again may reflect a strategy of compensating the loss of her daughter with a full dedication to the remaining three sons.

Sara: He looked for me, but I did not go with him. I did not go with another man to live together with him. No, I am going to accept life right here, and crying, falling, but I will be together with my sons and my people. Yes? Because it isn’t easy, it isn’t easy to go with another. It is happier to be alone, well yes, a man is not good for you, well yes.

Political participation and social support leading to growth. The women

confronted a precarious situation, severally damaged and abandoned by the government, the society and many times by their intimate family. The loneliness is present in many narratives, and some women seem to have some resentment with their children, and express a desire to have more support from them. In this scenery, CONAVIGUA has represented a possibility for social sharing and learning for the women.

All the women referred to CONAVIGUA several times during the interviews. As a politically and socially oriented grass-root organization, which also offered the women the Mental Health Program (MHP), the difference between the women's narrated experiences of benefits as CONAVIGUA activists, and that as target group for the therapy sessions in the MHP appears sometimes undistinguishable. MHP and CONAVIGUA is therefore treated as the same sub-theme in the present study. The two spaces, although different in many ways, have mutually created opportunities for sharing, learning and strengthening their own agency among the women, probably working mutually enriching. In the following sequence, *Rosenda* is describing how she felt the MHP helped her to gain a more positive appreciation of life.

We went there, to the CONAVIGUA course. (We were) sad and bitter. Everything was getting worse and worse, and we really needed to talk. We had sad faces. But thanks to CONAVIGUA we got lifted up. We were given motivation, and value, and shelter. They talked to us about mental health. They gave us massages, and many exercises. I appreciate what CONAVIGUA did. If it was not for them, who knows how I would be now. They brought us on a long journey. They must have used a lot of money.

Swimming pools with hot water and temascal (a traditional sauna). I felt happiness. I never would have left. I would always have stayed there. I said "I am leaving", and I left (for the courses). But everything has a beginning and an end. When it stopped I got used to it, little by little, and I stayed.

When asked about what it was with the MHP they experienced as most helpful, the women refer to the different exercises CONAVIGUA used as tools. Many refer to the use of massages, natural medicine herbs, music, and dancing as elements that made them feel good. The journeys to other regions in Guatemala, in order to visit other women with similar experiences, and to have baths in the famous warm baths in Zunil, in the western highlands in Guatemala are also mentioned as good experiences. Some of the women focus on the possibility to share with other women, learn that they were not alone, and that many women had similar experiences. Some also mention that it helped to learn that their experiences were not among the worst. *Camila* mentioned that when she learned that other women had been

raped, while she had not, she got a new perspective on her own experiences, and found out that they could have been worse.

For several of the women who had gone through sexual torture, it was the first time they found a safe place to tell about their experiences without fear of social sanctions. It might be the social sharing and the social support the women felt in the MHP is really the same broader experience the women felt as CONAVIGUA activists. Talking with other women and travelling *to meetings* seem to be important aspect of their experience with CONAVIGUA. Many of them mention that leaving their houses and distracting their minds helped. Whilst they assist at the meetings they forget their negative thoughts about their difficulties. Some of the women mention strong changes in their self-appraisals as a consequence of their participation in CONAVIGUA.

Petrona: With CONAVIGUA, well, I woke up. Because we women are very discriminated by men, they don't let us participate in a meeting. They don't value us. Since we are women, they don't let us participate in meetings. We are very discriminated by men. Now I feel that I can assist meetings. I have enough courage to speak. Before I couldn't, I felt fear. So I feel that being part of CONAVIGUA gave me courage.

The following passage is a longer and richer description of how a woman experienced to have benefited through her engagement in CONAVIGUA.

Katrina: Even though we still are in strong pain, I am very grateful to CONAVIGUA because through our work there we stopped being blind. We have courage, a courage that make us capable of working on proposals, claims, just as we did in 2006. Even if they say women can't to anything, that we can just be in the kitchen, to care for children and spouse, which we must marry. Even if we are discriminated as women, and poor Mayans, we could hold our heads up high and present a proposal in the Comalapa municipality. After all the suffering with the violent conflict, in CONAVIGUA I learned about my rights, and I started to participate. Before I could not travel alone, and I was too scared to talk. But the organization helped me to move forward, and to get out of all the suffering I had in my personal life and in relation to my kids. Klearn about participation, about discrimination, about the violent conflict, about intra-familiar violence, gender violence, politics, and many other topics, such as the courses in doing political incidence and in mental health. So, I was able to grow personally, even in spite of the obstacles, the suffering, the sadness, the fear, and

everything that I suffered as a cause of the war. It also gave me a lot of motivation and strength to be able to help other women in the work related to our organization and the justice and dignifying of victims work that we do. When I work with them that also helps me, and I feel like I am in no pain any longer, as if I had no problems any more. The truth is that we are not professionals, but through my own experiences I have been able to help other women.

The passage is interesting. Katrina lost her husband in 1982, and she became integrated in CONAVIGUA in the late 80s. She has had several responsibilities in the organization, and she has travelled to many parts of Guatemala to do political and organizational work thorough CONAVIGUA. In a comparison of Katrina's narratives and the narratives of women with less extensive organizational experience it seems like Katrina has had more benefits. The comparison could point to a process which starts with leaving the community, assisting meetings, and getting more courage; and that the more experience the women had in their organization, the stronger they also felt the benefits. One woman pointed to the journeys that CONAVIGUA activists sometimes realize to share their experiences as an important factor that made the women feel strong, and stated that the journeys made the women feel important. Another woman states that their participation in CONAVIGUA is beneficial because it distracts them, and makes them forget their suffering, for a while. It is important to note that Katrina also suffers the psychosocial consequences of the war. She focuses on the benefits, but underlines that she is still experiencing distress.

The women also had different arenas of participation and agency. Some of them had experienced to dream that they should turn into midwives, traditional healers or spiritual guides. In many Mayan communities, these tasks are performed by people who are called to do it, through dreams or through other symbolic events, which the women interpret as signs that they should take these tasks on. Midwives and spiritual guides frequently have special status in their communities. Many women also took pride in having their daughters using the traditional Kakchiquel clothing's, and to teaching them to weave and speak their language well. These practices were stigmatized and persecuted during war, and by recovering them the women consider that they are engaging in a struggle for cultural survival of their ethnic groups. Sharing their knowledge with other women also gives strength.

Miriam: Twenty years have passed since the violence, and I sometimes smile, now. I have more confidence with my children, I am happier. I work as a Midwife and receive children. I share my experiences, and take courses with other midwives. So I get

distracted. Now the government is taking away our right to work, so we struggle for this.

As mentioned the process of growth contains many setbacks. The following passage is from *Teresa*. She had been detained and tortured by the army, accused of participating in one of the guerrillas. Today she is engaging in several political spaces, as CONAVIGUA and in her municipalities' political structures. She is also a spiritual guide and has herself been working as a mental health promoter with CONAVIGUA. In her first interview she focused on her experiences of strength, through having escaped from the army's captivity and survived the torture.

Crossing roads, changing paradigms. It has risks for me and my family. I risked everything, I was deciding between life and death. If I can cross the river, I will survive. If I can't, I will fall, the river would take me, and my struggle would stop. I was captured. I was in the hands of the secret military. But I escaped. So I wanted the Mental Health Program for me. I said to myself; I will change my life.

Through her work in the municipal political structure, *Teresa*, is faced with gender discrimination. She takes pride in having defended female colleagues when the male companions have tried to block them out. Referring to how she managed to escape from captivity, and survive violence, she stated that the daily gender discrimination can no longer scare her. While analyzing male psychology she appears to be strong:

How can you win over men? Do you know about animal psychology? Or do psychology? If you are scared, they will feel it. It's like if you are on a motor cycle and the dog run barking after you. What you need to do is to stop the motorcycle and wait for the dog to come and then continue calmly. It is the same with men. If you blush they will feel that you're nervous. But if you are strong? I use to stare at them. I stare strongly at them, so they crouch and do not say anything.

She continues:

The experiences are not cheap. It is expensive. Between life and death the experience will win. It is not easy. You are in front of canons. There is a lot of work. But sometimes you are laughing. I think I am cured up to a 60 per cent. Sometimes it is worth it, when you know that you are helping people and following your calls in life.

During the second interview, *Teresa* reflected upon what she had expressed earlier. The turn in her arguments reflect the contradictions she faces in her struggle for recovery after the violence. The following passages suggest that even if the women's political participation are

perceived to give benefits, even the strongest women face an array of psychosocial difficulties:

Sometimes I speak about my strengths. But it is to forget the pain. Sometimes I think that all we did is worth it. But sometimes I regret it so badly. If I had not participated in anything, I would have been ok now. I would have some land by my parents' house, and I would be ok, even if I didn't know about the political conjuncture. So many women gave their lives for our organization.

I feel differently than other people. All the time I am different. Why did it happen to me? I am shamed and angry. I have dreams about the torture, I have pain in my back, my ear, and my head. I have nerves and I get sleepy. The capture was difficult. Sometimes I just want to die.

The passages from the second interview should be considered as equally important as the passages from the first interview. They suggest that growth and setbacks are parallel processes, and that the women with more political agency and responsibilities go through similar processes as women without.

The setbacks the women experience appear to be related to the socio-political situation in Guatemala. Many of the women believe things are better now, however, the political situation in Guatemala keep reminding the women about the violence. Some of the women expressed that they get nervous when they see soldiers or uniformed people. When Otto Perez Molina, former general and today's president in Guatemala won the elections in 2011 many women experienced fear:

Maribel: We got scared when he got to power, because we remember everything. The armed conflict would maybe start again, because he was a general when they were killing us.

Another woman told about her feelings about the impunity, referring also to the president Perez Molina:

Brenda: He gave the orders to the army that they should kill, and we always remember it, and won't forgive that. Many women turned into orphans, widows. And is he really helping now? No. You are left by yourself. He's filling his hands, but the poor remain poor. That's why I could not sleep when he won. He was a general, he has the power, so you can't touch him, and you can't judge him. But I think, really I do, that if people start to organize, maybe we could make Guatemala and the Guatemalan people recover again.

Discussion

The present study sought to explore the experiences of 19 Mayan Guatemalan women, organized through the widows' organization CONAVIGUA, in their struggle to recover from the brutal politically motivated violence and atrocities during the war that ended with the peace agreements in 1996. The present study aimed to understand how their struggle is related to the socio-political context the women live in, and what benefits the women believe to have gained through their struggles and in their memberships in CONAVIGUA. This chapter provides an interpretation of the obtained results and discusses the findings related to existing research. The findings in this study are based on the phenomenological interpretation and analysis of the data obtained in the semi structural interviews. Some relevant limitations of the present study will also be reflected upon.

Coping strategies and struggle to recover

The results suggest that the women in the study were affected by a violent reality that they identified to go *beyond* the traumatic experiences during the war. The women's realities are shaped by social exclusion caused by ethnical discrimination, but this structural violence (Galtung, 1990) affects them differently than their male family members, due to socially constructed gender roles. It might be useful to analyse the women's experiences under the light of intersectionality, which describes analytic approaches that consider the meaning and consequences of multiple categories of group memberships (Cole, 2009). There are basically two such group memberships; the gender and the ethnicity, where the second one could arguably also be identified as a political group in the Guatemala polarizing post war debates. Few of the participants in this study expressed to remember to have been happy during their childhoods. The results show that *marriage* was the common strategy among the women in order to search for better lives, and escape from violent fathers and material insufficiency in their childhood homes.

The women share strong, painful memories of the war, the disappearance of their husbands and the violence against themselves. In addition, the socio-political reality experienced by the women before the onset of the war influenced how they perceived it and how the war affected them. The disappearance or murder of their husbands put an end to the women's chosen pre-war strategy, -namely marriage. Immediately after losing their husbands or escaping the massacres, the women engaged in a variety of strategies to save their own lives and that of their children. It included moving from house to house, or escaping in the mountains. One woman joined the guerrilla. During this phase, social support networks were essential to their survival. Though several women experienced an additional betrayal, as their

families or families' in-law abandoned them, they also received help from neighbours and people in their community. This might have strengthened the women's cultural identity and their sense of own agency in this situation, and possibly contributed to them having a more positive perception of themselves today. The sense of own agency in trauma situations have been identified in the literature as a positive resource in posterior meaning-making processes, notably in the case of women who have been exposed to sexual assault (Cermele, 2010).

Searching for meaning through strengthening cultural identity

The results indicate that the women had been engaged in processes of searching for the meaning of the violence they had experienced. As referred above, Frankl (1969) wrote about how people usually have a *global belief system* in their lives. Those are schemas of (usually) positive beliefs, through which people interpret their experiences (Park & Ai, 2006). A traumatic event can shatter this presumably safe world (Tedeschi, Calhoun & Cann, 2007), forcing a need to search for a meaning to the devastating experiences. The majority of the women explained the violence through narratives of ethnical discrimination and social exclusion from their childhood, through the war and until post-war time. The results indicate that according to their view, the war happened in a context of wider ethnical oppression, where *Ladinos* seek to exterminate indigenous, either because they want the land (deprivation) or because the indigenous are poor (discriminative).

Such genocidal explanation models can have led to a strengthening of the women's cultural group identity. Research has identified that feelings of strong cultural identity can be a protective factor against PTSD (Johnson, Thompson & Downs, 2009). The women's immediate strategies for survival, such as resisting the army's attacks in the mountains together with other families from their community, or engaging in struggles for justice after the genocide, most likely strengthen the women's group identity as Mayans. A study from Bosnia found a similar *ethnical survivor identity* in a qualitative study of women who had been raped in the war (Skjelbaek, 2006). CONAVIGUA's work to strengthen the cultural identity of the organization's members might be beneficial. During the war Mayan cultural practices were persecuted and dehumanized as satanic, so a strengthening of the women's cultural identity might have fostered more positive self-thoughts.

The psychologists behind the concept *Post-colonialist stress disorder* (Comas- Diaz, 2000; Martin- Baró, 1986) propose that in post-colonialist societies such as Latin-America, the ethnic marginalisation lead to an internalization of the oppression, which again lead to a fragmentation of identities and community feelings. It is argued that subjects living as oppressed need to develop a socio-political understanding of race and oppression to move

from victim, to survivor and then to protagonist identities (Comas- Díaz, 2000). Following this perspective, the women's engagement in collective actions and in making cognitive appraisals to create meaning may have fostered an ethnic group identity and a socio-political understanding with positive psychological outcomes. The impunity that prevails today in Guatemala, might be strengthening the women's group identity and socio-political understanding of the violence, in a belief that "the perpetrators imposes impunity, while the Mayans struggle for justice". The women referred to the differences between the poor and government officials with military backgrounds and connections, where the latter keeps taking resources from people while he is responsible for atrocities during the war and should be punished. The psychological benefits of such an understanding might however come with great costs. Galtung (1999) posed a theory of the violence triangle, consisting of direct violence, structural violence and cultural violence. Being the *underdogs* in a society causes social exclusion, health problems and significant psychological distress (Galtung). Galtung also pointed out how such collective traumas can be incorporated in the social identity of the excluded group.

Religious coping and meaning making in the aftermath of crises is a phenomenon also described in the literature (Park, 2010). As described in the results, some of the women, almost all of the women coming from the village Estrella, explained that the Bible had predicted the war. The fact that the women from this village were so unison in their religious explanations may suggest that the processes of meaning making were collective processes. Research have found the benefits of religious coping to be related to the spiritual community, and the social support the survivors can find there (Matthews & Marwit, 2006). But religious coping has also been found to involve cognitive reappraisals of the shattered world assumptions and a strengthening of cultural identity (Matthews & Marwit). It is possible that the women were able to reconstruct a belief in the world as a fair and predictable place by explaining the violence through the Bible.

The same women also expressed a belief in that the perpetrators will get punished by God. Since the post war context in Guatemala is affected by impunity, this belief might reflect that the women used religion as a justice seeking process, faced with a negative socio-political environment. Recently, there is increasing research on the similarities in religious and spiritual coping strategies, where "spiritual" is defined as spirituality outside one of the major religions (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Such a distinction is out of the scope of the present research, but it is observed that the women engaging in catholic religious coping

expressed very different explanation models than the women who engaged in Mayan spirituality. The former explained the brutal violence by reference to the bible, while the latter used genocidal explanation models, possibly motivating to political action.

It was not possible to relate the “meaning-making processes” and the women’s cultural identity directly to *growth*, as defined in the Post-Traumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI) (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996), among the narratives of the women in the study. One possible explanation is the fact that data from the present study does not reveal if the meaning-making which related the war to a genocidal strategy came as a consequence of the war, or if it was present among the women before the war. In the latter case it could be associated with cultural protection (Johnosn, Thompson & Downs, 2009; Park & Ai, 2006) and in the former case with growth. This is because PTG is suggested as a process following the struggle to make meaning after the shattering of previous world beliefs, so PTG would not be predicted if the women before the onset of the war already were explaining the socio-political context in Guatemala in very negative terms (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

Pals and McAdams (2004) suggested that the growth construct, as posed by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996, 2004) might be less universal than originally thought. The 21 items in the PTGI could be shaped by Western philosophic standpoints and ontology reflected in the implicit linear narratives in the PTGI. Other researchers have questioned the validity of the PTGI across types of trauma (Park & Helgeson, 2006).

Research has further proposed that meaning making can motivate actions (Tedeschi, Calhoun & Cann, 2007). So, one can hypothesise that the strengthening of cultural identity that resulted from the women’s engagements in making meaning of their experiences might have motivated actions later undertaken by them. Some women expressed the importance of teaching their children how to weave their ethnic traditional cloths, and speak the Kakchiquel language, suggesting a strengthened self-esteem among these women closely related to their cultural identity, and a continued battle to avoid (symbolic) ethnical extermination. One interpretation of the results of the present study, suggest that values such as cultural identity in itself, struggle, collaboration or resistance *might* represent ethno-politically valid domains of growth after trauma, especially due to their significance in a meaning-making process.

Gendered oppression

While the women expressed a strong cultural identity that might have had a protective function during, and after the traumatic experiences, the gender oppression seemed more internalized or naturalized in the women’s telling’s. A possible naturalization of gender inequalities became perceptible when compared to the women’s complete rejection of the

legitimacy of ethnically motivated violence. When the women remembered the violence they suffered during childhood, they focused more on their strategies to escape that reality, through marriage, rather than searching for explanations of such a violent reality, though they denounced the injustice in not having the opportunity to study, like their brothers. The women's narratives reflect the patriarchal values held by their families. In most of the narratives, their fathers appear as the active part; either as a violent man, or as a teacher and good figure; while their mothers appear as victims, or they are not mentioned at all. When the women spoke about their actual life, they identified the problems they experience related to having a possessive spouse, but seldom expressed confronting their spouses or asked for explanations.

When the violence became extreme, the women had no difficulties in denouncing the direct violence against their bodies and lives as unjust. It should be noted that the women seemed to account for the sexual violence as an attack on their cultural group, more than an attack on them as *women*. This is supported by the fact that it was the women who experienced sexual torture themselves, who were more strongly convinced about the genocidal explanation models. They further rejected the legitimacy of the social stigma placed on them as survivors of sexual torture and the voices that blame them for the rapes. In agreement with Skjelbaek's study (2006) of women who survived the war in Bosnia, the protection offered by their cultural identities might have played a central role here. *They* were Mayan women, while the perpetrators were uniformed, soldiers and Ladinos. The symbolic effect in a historical perspective relates the rapes to the colonization in Guatemala. Following Galtung (1990), this might conceivably have had a strong effect on the women's cultural identity.

When the women chose to maintain silence about the violence against them, it seems to be a strategy to avoid the social consequences and not because they really experience self-blame. Although silence as a survival strategy must be considered adaptive in states marked by state terror such as Guatemala (Summerfield, 2000), and because the women avoid meeting counter-validating commentaries at self-disclosure, as Neimeyer (2004) observed, this strategy may have long-term negative effects. Though the broader post war discourse in Guatemala identifies the war in ethno-political terms, the solidarity that has been identified in Bosnia from the family males, offering women who survived rape a security to speak about the rapes (Skjelbaek, 2006), this seem not to be the case for the women in the study. The continued silence concerning sexual violence in Guatemala probably contributes to maintain

women symbolically as victims. The women who were raped are perceived as “wounded”, and this leads to an accentuated social representation of women as vulnerable. Research might also contribute to this, according to feminist researcher Hydén (2005). She observes in studies on battered women how researches fail to acknowledge silence or fear, as strategies containing agency and active resistance. While the silence of the women in this perspective could represent *resistance* as an adaptive strategy, researches discourses could end up further victimizing women, reducing her to one who *suffers in silence*.

The *silence* strategy could be connected with the individual explanation models of the war discussed in the results. The lack of more profound arguments or descriptions among the women who expressed these individual explanations for the war, possibly mirror that these explanations, more than responding to any true meaning-making processes, should rather be considered as an adaptive survival strategy of maintaining silence in a socio-political climate where speaking is dangerous. As described above, Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) proposed in a revision of their original construct that growth can be societal in addition to individual growth. In post-war processes aimed to recuperate the historical memory, this work can be seen as a collective meaning-making process that potentially cause positive changes and growth in a society. It is quite clear from the women’s narratives that they do not experience that the Guatemalan society go through such transformative processes. Their encounters with the PNR- program had for instance been negative, and they reported to experience fear and rejection when the Perez Molina government, with a military history took office.

Growth through transgression

As described, the women’s experiences could be analysed as an intersectional experience, where the social categories gender and ethnicity shaped their socio-political reality and therefor their available coping resources and strategies. In the present study, positive psychological changes and growth as proposed by the PTGI seem related to the women transgressing, or moving out from, their socially constructed gender roles and spaces, and taking on tasks that they earlier had accepted as belonging only to men. The women experienced that their previous “path to a better life”, through marriage, were washed away through the disappearance or deaths of their husbands. They were forced to struggle hard in order to make their children survive. As indicated in the results, the women were engaged in multiple strategies to make their families and communities recover from the violence. These strategies included such as their engagement in searching for truth and justice through their political participation in CONAVIGUA, search for new economic alternatives, changing their daughter’s futures by giving them opportunities to study etc.

While the women had counted on social support and cultural protection to cope immediately after the violence, their later struggles are described as lonely and distressful. The women expressed that their families had poorly prepared them for autonomy and independence. There is evidence in the present study suggesting that in this challenging situation, the women have experienced positive changes, and Post-Traumatic Growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). The women's narratives suggest growth basically on two of the five domains of PTG; (2), *a greater sense of personal strength*, and (4), *spiritual development*. Arguably, (3), *a greater appreciation for life and changed set of priorities* was also somehow present in the women's narratives, through the women's decisions to struggle and to participate in CONAVIGUA's activities. It seems like that this participation had encouraged growth in domain 2 and 4, more than to explain growth as such, pointing to growth as both a process and an outcome.

That is also the situation for the domain (1), *warmer and more intimate relationships*. While the women described the social networks offered by CONAVIGUA as a new option for life, and an important change, it seems like these social networks also helped them in a situation where previous family and community networks had been lost as a result of the war. The CONAVIGUA network then became a positive outcome and a coping strategy for the women, pointing to how the PTG can be intertwined as both processes and outcomes. Social sharing is identified as one of the greater benefits in the women's participation in CONAVIGUA, in addition to learning that they were not alone in being exposed to the violence. Neimeyer (2004) suggested that the sharing of one's narratives and receiving social support and validation of one's meaning-making can contribute to growth. The new support networks the women have created through CONAVIGUA, offering the possibility to share in a confidence group with other women, might surpass the confidence and/or support the women had in their families prior to the war. The fact that the women who experienced sexual violence chose to tell CONAVIGUA but not their own children might indicate that, although this could also be motivated by different appraisals such as their role and identity as mothers.

The results are quite substantial in indicating that the women in the study did experience growth in domain (2) *a greater sense of personal strength*. They considered themselves courageous, and their increased self-esteem appears to be related to their struggle for the survival of themselves and their children in a very difficult circumstance. The women emphasised that they needed to work as "man and woman". This could be interpreted as an

active agency, which is challenging the women's socially constructed gender roles. This new strength sprung a paradox out of losing their husbands in the armies' hands. It suggests that the social dynamics that affect the women are complex and multifaceted, and that these dynamics involve several social constructs such as gender and ethnicity. Tedeschi & Calhoun (1996) theorised that it is after extreme traumatic events that PTG potentially occurs. The findings in the present study support this; the loss of their husbands meant to lose their chosen path, coping strategy and loved mate. By commencing the lonely and seemingly impossible task of recovering psychologically, economically and socially, the women have learned that they are strong. Many of them also referred to having succeeded in creating a better future for their daughters, by securing their education, as a source of strength.

The women also expressed growth in terms of (4), *spiritual development*. As described above, many of the women had engaged in spiritual meaning making and sought explanations in religion. In the socio-political reality in Guatemala, still severely affected by violence and impunity, the Christian religion seemed to be a growth factor as well as a coping strategy. Many of the women had also connected with Mayan spirituality. Some of them by assisting in more rituals and ceremonies, others by dreaming of calls, and taking on culturally important tasks such as being midwives, spiritual guides or healers. CONAVIGUA seems to have developed spiritual strengthening as a strategy. The organization uses Mayan ceremonies with fire in the middle of a ceremonial circle as a gathering point and a way to get contact with ancestors and wisdom. They use medicine plants, fire, massages, traditional saunas and other elements in the therapy sessions in the MHP. The spiritual development also offered a different coping strategy for the religious women. Many women said that God would punish the perpetrators of their husband's disappearance.

The fifth domain of the PTG construct, *recognition of new possibilities or paths for one's life* was only present to a lesser extent in the majority of the women's narratives. Following Pals and McAdams (2004), cultural biases inherited in the PTG construct could be a reason. They point to how "changing priorities and finding new paths" reflect a modern capitalist society, with middle-class values, where some degree of individualism or autonomy is required. For the women in the study, their social, economic and cultural conditions might make it very difficult to "search for new possibilities and paths".

Only *Teresa* incorporated a narrative of her life as a something like a path where she had "special gifts to struggle and share". Teresa also seems to make a clearer connection between her struggle to make meaning of the torture she was exposed to and growth. Teresa is

the only women in the study who told about sexual torture during captivity. The explanation could be sought in that the violence exerted upon her was experienced as more brutal, so that it broke with her world beliefs, to a stronger degree than the other women. Teresa was expressing growth during her interviews, notably a greater sense of personal strength, spiritual development and a changed set of priorities (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Teresa's narrative suggests that the growth is a complex path, and that it co-exists with psychological distress, and a continued struggle to understand. During her interviews Teresa was battling between on one side explaining her special strength and gifts all the way from childhood, while on the other side asking "*why me?*", and "*is it really worth it?*". It seems like her current political participation is necessary to keep alive the meaning she constructs for her own life and to deal with the torture she went thorough, and avoid despair.

Limitations of the present study.

There are several limitations in the present study that might have influenced the research findings. First, there is the language. The participants in the study are all native Kakchiquel speakers who were interviewed in Spanish. In some interviews I also used an interpreter. This has undoubtedly reduced the richness in their words. The write-up is done in English, which means that the referred data has gone through two translations before reaching the readers.

Secondly, the study has its limitations relating to power. As referred to in the methodological chapter, there are power issues concerning me being a white European woman. There is however also another power-issue, which could have influenced the women's responses. While asking the women questions about CONAVIGUA, a power between the Mental Health promoters, and the fact that was presented for the women through CONAVIGUA might have stimulated the women to be positive about CONAVIGUA's work, reflecting a social desirability bias. It could be stated that the women themselves *are* CONAVIGUA, though there probably exists at least some kind of asymmetrical power relationship between the grassroots women and the women in more central positions in the organization.

The third limitation is related to the psychological constructs. While exploring different aspects of the women's struggle for recovery, the research was also inspired to explore if the women had experienced any domain in the Post-Traumatic Growth construct. While the research questions were designed to capture central aspects of the 21-itemed PTGI, this could be a failed strategy, and central aspects of the inventory might have mistakenly been left out. Related to this limitation are the subjective aspects of doing phenomenological

interpretation. The data analysis was performed by me, and was not controlled by a second researcher, opening for a possible bias. The results can therefore just be considered as suggestions.

The fourth limitation is related to the generalizability of the findings, and the relevance of the present study. The experiences the women hold are unique, so the research findings could arguably only be valid for the participants. Accepting this the findings are still thought to have a practical value for CONAVIGUA and similar organizations working in Guatemala or different post war areas, in that it suggest tendencies and dilemmas that are important to reflect upon.

Finally, a feeling of fear probably still exists among the women. Guatemalans seem to have developed some kind of culture of silence after the more than 36-year long war. This probably influenced how much the women chose to tell during the interviews, and yet this study seeks to interpret the women's experiences in this socio-political context where silence remains, it is not possible to know just how much the *silence strategy* has influenced what the women chose to share in the interviews.

Conclusion

The present study supports previous intersectionalist literature, documenting that women's experiences in wars are influenced by their memberships in different social categories, such as gender, ethnicity, social class, political memberships etc. The women in the study are engaged in complex struggles to recover from war. These struggles are hampered by the socio-political context in post-war Guatemala, which still produces fear among the women. It might be impossible to recover in a situation where life still is experienced as threatened. Societal growth, as proposed by Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004), seems absent in Guatemala in the women's experiences. Militarization, impunity, poverty, and criminal, political and gender violence mediates the women's appraisals and available strategies in their struggle for recovery. While the results of the present study suggest that the women's cultural identity has had a protective function, there are also enough support to suggest that the women's socially constructed gender roles did not always benefit from their cultural group membership. The gender violence the women experienced was accentuated during war, but originates in multifaceted patriarchal structures, also reproduced by their own families and communities.

The women expressed to have experienced growth in line with the PTGI (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004) first four domains, but the growth appears more related to themselves transgressing their socially constructed gender roles, than to their cultural identity.

CONAVIGUA seem to have played an important role here, in supporting the women in these very lonely struggles. While the women experienced growth, they continue to live with significant distress. The scope of the current study was the women's struggles and chosen strategies, and potential positive change. The study should hence not be considered part of any PTG- resilience debate (Harvey, 2007). If the women continue to live with distress, what is then the relevance of research on growth? Following the results in the present study, growth might be considered as a process of strengthening their agency, both individually, collectively and politically among the women. Agency has been identified as important to build survivor identities, which again is identified by research to have positive outcomes (Hydén, 2005). Building on other researchers, who have suggested that PTG could be biased as a Western construct (Pals & McAdams, 2004), we may also suggest that for the women in the study, due to their ethno- political group membership, values such as cultural identity, and struggle, collaboration or resistance *might* represent ethno-politically valid domains of growth. Further studies could contribute to shed more light on this.

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Apendix A
Social profile of participants

Table 2

List of participants

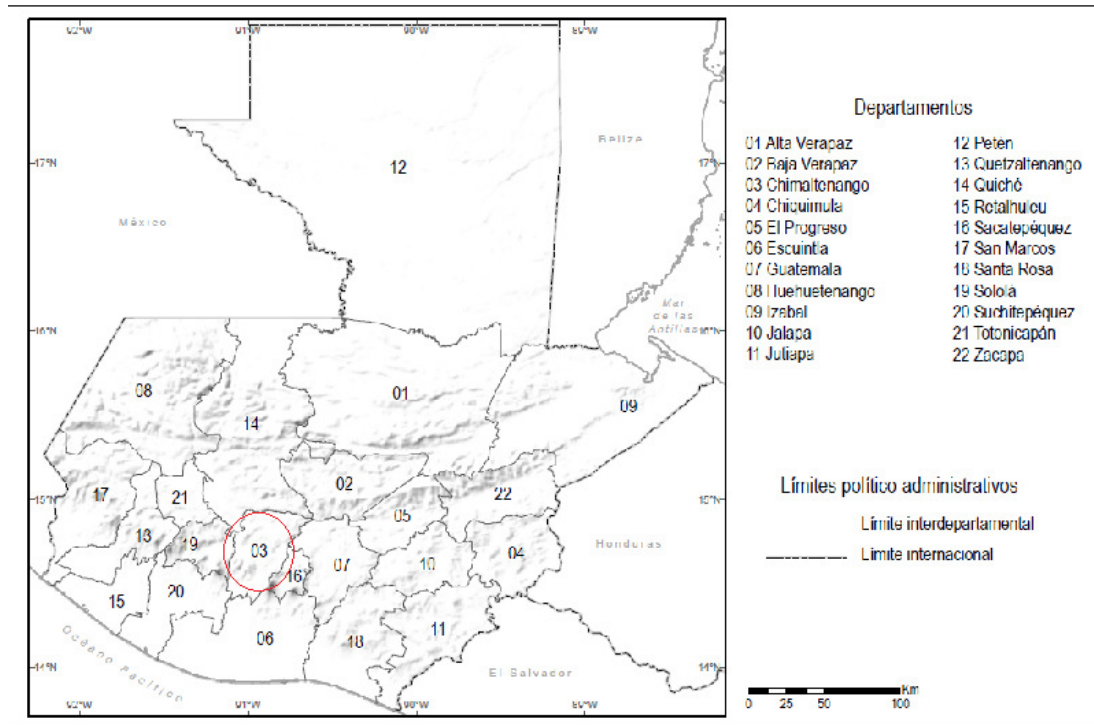
Fictive name	Age range	Municipality	Widow	Sexual violence
Esperanza	50-59	Comalapa	X	X
Maria	50-59	Comalapa	X	
Luz	70-79	Comalapa	X	
Libertad	50-59	Comalapa	X	X
Flor	50-59	Comalapa	X	
Juana	60-69	Comalapa	X	
Rosa	50-59	Comalapa	X	
Maribel	60-69	Comalapa	X	
Teresa	50-59	San José Poaquil		X
Ana	50-59	Comalapa	X	X
Catrina	50-59	Comalapa	X	
Denise	60-67	Estrella	X	
Sara	60-69	Estrella	X	
Brenda	70-79	Estrella	X	
Rosenda	60-69	Estrella	X	
Cecilia	70-79	Estrella	X	
Miriam	50-59	Esperanza		
Petrona	50-59	Esperanza	X	X
Camila	70-79	Esperanza	X	
Tania	40-49	Esperanza		X

Apendix B
Interview guide in Spanish

1. ¿Qué experiencia es la que le llevó a Usted a buscar el apoyo de las promotoras de Salud Mental de Conavigua?
2. ¿Cómo era Usted antes de esa experiencia?
3. ¿En los tiempos más difíciles, cómo se sentía?
4. Después del paso de los años, ¿que cosas se han cambiado en Usted? ¿De qué maneras se siente la misma, y de que maneras se siente cambiada ?
5. ¿Cómo practica la espiritualidad? ¿Esta práctica se ha cambiado?
6. ¿Cómo siente que la familia ha vivido esta experiencia? ¿De qué maneras se modificó su relación con su familia? ¿Qué desearía de su familia?
7. ¿Cómo siente que la comunidad ha vivido esta experiencia? ¿De qué maneras se modificó su relación con la comunidad? ¿Que desearía de su comunidad?
8. ¿Siente Usted que puede hablar con otras personas sobre sus emociones? (*esto ha cambiado con cómo era antes*)
9. ¿Cuáles son hoy sus objetivos y esperanzas para la vida? (*esto ha cambiado con cómo era antes*)
10. ¿Usted ha luchado para estar mejor? ¿Cómo luchó? ¿Y cómo le hace sentir que logró hacer XX? (*Repetir lo que mencionó*)¿Cree Usted que tiene más o menos fuerza? ¿Por qué?
11. Usted ahora es parte de la organización XX (*CONAVIGUA y posibles otras*). ¿Que ha significado esta participación para sanar?
12. ¿Cuáles son los aspectos en la sociedad guatemalteca que impidan/promuevan que las mujeres puedan sanar?
13. ¿Usted recibió el Programa Nacional de Resarcimiento? ¿Qué piensa sobre este programa?
14. ¿Puede Usted compartir una o dos experiencias concretas que le ayudaron a mejorar?
15. ¿Siente que algunas personas le ayudaron? ¿Siente Usted que algunas personas le impidieron mejorar?
16. ¿Usted ha tenido algunos retrocesos? ¿En que consistieron? ¿Cómo luchó Usted para superarlos?
17. ¿Qué piensa Usted sobre el apoyo de salud mental que Conavigua le dió?

18. Si Usted tiene que interpretar por qué le pasó la violencia, ¿que piensa que fue la razón?
19. ¿Qué tipo de persona se considera Usted ahora? ¿Como describiría a si misma?
20. ¿Cuales serían sus recomendaciones para otras mujeres que pasen experiencias parecidas?

Appendix C
 Departamental Map of Guatemala



SOURCE:UNAM, 2012.