

The Mafia's Shadow: Slavery in Latin America

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InSight Crime

Investigation and Analysis of Organized Crime

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In a collaboration with four online news media organizations in Latin America, InSight Crime looks at the role of organized crime in driving displacement and slavery in the region -- and what authorities have failed to do about it.

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'The Mafia's Shadow' Highlights the Human Rights Consequences of Organized Crime

Steven Dudley

In April of this year, InSight Crime, with financing from the non-governmental organization Internews, met with journalists from four online news media organizations. The four represented the cream of the crop in terms of their online presence and focus, the presentation of their materials, and, of course, the quality of their investigations. And the meeting represented what we hope will be the beginning of a regional partnership with them covering the most pressing issue in the Americas: organized crime.

At the center of the April gathering was a discussion of stories on human rights and organized crime gangs. We began with a brain-storming session that, for us, confirmed our decision to work with these partners because none of them brought up drug trafficking. Instead, they discussed the military's involvement in the fight against organized crime, the displacement of civilian populations, the trafficking of women, and the use of child soldiers, among other subjects.

It's not that drug trafficking is not important. We all cover it regularly. And of course, we understand that it is the motor that many of these groups use to undermine governments, destroy social networks, and corrupt security forces. But when we talk about human rights, we are talking about impact of a different type.

Human rights violations are normally associated with repressive governments. And, legally speaking, that emphasis is correct. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights emphasizes state responsibility.

But the world is changing as are its conflicts. There are few civil wars and those left are largely asymmetrical. Still, the Americas, as a whole, has never been more violent. At the heart of this violence are an increasingly large number of criminal operations. They have varying degrees of ideologies. Some want to replace the state, but most just want to see the state remain weak and do their bidding.

However, if there is one constant, it's that the civilian populations are trapped in the warped logic of outside forces, and the governments are failing, either wittingly or unwittingly, to protect them from these forces.

Thus surged the need to recount these stories, and refocus our efforts at understanding at how non-state actors can violate human rights and how the governments are failing in their most basic mission: protecting their citizens.

The human drama the partners uncovered in the months that followed are detailed in this special. They are the result of field research in some of the most dangerous places

in the hemisphere in an effort to get an up close and personal look at what this phenomenon looks like and better understand how it is destroying these communities.

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Slaves of Organized Crime in Latin America

Sibylla Brodzinsky

In Latin America, the word slavery tends to conjure images of indigenous people subjected to forced labor at the end of a whip, and auctions of African men and women just off the slave ships. Today the images are different: women locked in brothels, deceived, tied up and forced to serve as sex slaves; migrants kidnapped, forced under threat to take up weapons and work as hitmen, 12, 13 and 14-year-old children carrying an automatic rifle in the name of some organization or another.

Behind these atrocities is organized crime. For large mafias they are a source of extra profit, in addition to their core businesses of drug trafficking, extortion and drug dealing. But human trafficking and exploitation are also the bread and butter of medium and small networks in the region. What they have in common is that they see in the most disadvantaged -- women, children, undocumented migrants -- the chance to make money.

For the second time in a month, an alliance of digital media in the region -- under the coordination of InSight Crime and with the support of the Internews non-governmental organization in Washington DC -- explores the impact of organized crime on human rights in the region, this time looking at how criminal syndicates enslave people for profit.

In Mexico, Animal Politico found that it's not just undocumented migrants who are forced to under the threat of death to work for the mafia, but professionals and technicians who are forced to help them set up communication networks. What's more, an estimated 25,000 children and teenagers have been enrolled in the ranks of different organizations of the Mexican underworld in the past six years.

In Colombia, guerrillas and organized crime organizations also forcibly recruit children and adolescents. Some estimate there could be as many as 18,000 children in their ranks. VerdadAbierta.com explored this phenomenon in the municipality of Tumaco on the Colombian Pacific, one of the largest production areas of coca in the country and an important shipping point for illegal drugs.

In Central America, large and small networks engage in the buying and selling of women lured with promises of jobs as glamorous models or maids, only to end up in seedy brothels. Eric Olson, an expert on security at the Washington, DC-based Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars, recently testified in US Congress that, after drug trafficking, human trafficking is the second largest money-maker for organized crime in Central America.

El Salvador's El Faro found horror stories that show how trafficking networks in the region function. They also chronicle the often frustrated efforts of prosecutors to do

justice. Guatemala's Plaza Publica details the various ways in which women end up being considered little more than merchandise.

Through trafficking, forced labor, and recruitment, organized crime groups in Latin America get rich off human suffering. Meanwhile, the anonymous victims of slavery demand their freedom and our attention.



Men who Sold Women: Human Trafficking Networks in Central America

Oscar Martinez for El Faro

A prosecutor asks. Grecia responds.

"Where did they do it to you?"

"On my right calf. They took us to a place where we did the tattoo. They made us eat something and inhale something that put us to sleep. When I woke up and had the tattoo. It's a butterfly on a branch, which forms the 'Z' for Zeta. That was the marking; it meant that I was theirs, that I was merchandise."

Grecia has gone. Twice she recounted how an organized crime group used her body as a container for whatever they wanted. Then she had to leave. She reported to the authorities in El Salvador and to those of Mexico. Grecia no longer lives in El Salvador. She is a refugee in another country. For her own security, few people know where.

I know Grecia is 29 years old, has two children aged six and three, and a ten-month old baby. She is married and was unemployed when she decided to migrate. The only time I have heard Grecia's words come from a 52 minute recording of my own voice

reading the words in the statement she gave to a Salvadoran judge.

In a hearing before the Ninth Court of Peace of the city of San Salvador, in front of a man who she recognized as one of her assailants, at 9 a.m. on the morning of July 2, 2010, Grecia answered questions about what had happened to her and how she survived.

A prosecutor asks. Grecia responds.

- You were cited by this court to seek justice for the crimes of kidnapping, rape and trafficking committed against you. When did you begin the trip to the United States?
- On April 13, 2009.
- With what intent did you travel?
- Because of the economic situation of the country.
- Who did you travel with?
- With Ovidio Guardado.
- Describe Ovidio.

- He's male, about 69 years old, white skin, short wavy graying hair, height of approximately 1.77 meters, he has no teeth. He has a scar on his head.
- What did this man do?
- He tricked me. He never told me he was a "coyote". He said we were going to the United States, but when we arrived in Mexico he showed his true intentions.
- And what were his intentions?
- His intention was to rape me, but he wasn't able to.
- How many people accompanied you on this trip?
- Only Mr. Ovidio.

Ovidio is a peasant, tan and wrinkled, but still strong, like a dead tree with no leaves that will remain standing for years. Ovidio is a relative of Grecia's husband. Ovidio is a neighbor of Grecia's mother and mother-in-law. Grecia trusted Ovidio.

Just as it happened in Grecia's case, the hook in most cases where women are converted into commodities is the hope of escaping poverty.

Another such case is that of the Barberena network that not only talks about the origin of the victims, but reveals many other facets of the groups of traffickers in the region. The structure of Barberena included 12 men and one woman and it operated until 2006 in the rural town of Barberena, in the Guatemalan department of Santa Rosa, on the Pacific coast of the country. The murderous network even had a corn farm where they performed bloody rituals to sow panic in their victims. It was a corrupt network that was fortunate enough to have a Salvadoran judge set most of its members free.

The Barberena network operated from a bar called El Pantanal. The pattern of deception was simple. They sent Salvadoran men or women to cantons and villages of the border departments of Santa Ana and Ahuachapan in El Salvador. They would approach humble homes with the excuse of being employees of a supermarket and a new diner in Barberena where they needed staff. They offered \$70 per week plus all travel costs to Barberena, and even a \$50 bonus for the "new hire's" family.

The four countries of the northern part of Central America are the source, transit points and destination for victims of trafficking and in all four countries there are cases of sexual slavery. Officials say that Nicaragua, El Salvador and Honduras are the origins of the victims. And Guatemala is the place where most of those victims are enslaved. All four countries are, thanks to the thousands of migrants these countries produce, a vast pool from which Mexican traffickers take their pick. Experts -- non-governmental organizations, prosecutors, police, international organizations -- say the

proximity to Mexico and the huge influx of migrants passing through Guatemala make that country an ideal place for human trafficking gangs.

The scammers who search for victims in villages and hamlets live in the area, know the people, pose as benefactors, and settle there under false names. Some of the “recruiters”, according to Silvia Saravia -- who is charged with the psychological care of trafficking victims for the Salvadoran Attorney General’s office -- know much about their targets: their age, habits, even if they have been raped or abused. Traffickers smell helplessness and vulnerability like sharks smell blood.

The desperate women who accepted these offers had to travel an hour to reach the gates of El Pantanal bar. Without delay, they were received by armed men and a Guatemalan woman, Sonia Garcia. Sonia would tell them to change their conservative, almost evangelical clothing and don the miniskirts and shirts with plunging necklines and garish colors that were offered to them. They were told they had to go to the main room of the house and convince drunk men to pay 50 quetzals (about seven dollars) to “blow off steam” with them for 30 minutes. They, the victims, usually said no. They would protest that this work was not what they had signed up for. Then the men who surrounded Sonia, Salvadorans mostly, explained to the women with fists and baseball bats that this was not an offer but an order.

When I met in mid-August in the Apanteos prison with Rigoberto Moran Martinez, one of the six people convicted for being part of the Barberena network, he said that almost none of the women worked the first week. Most of them would spend that time with purple, disfigured faces. And the customers of El Pantanal did not like purple-faced women. That was how it was during the first two years he worked in El Pantanal anyway.

In late 2007, 16 survivors of El Pantanal testified in a Salvadoran court. Twenty-six women in total had been rescued in a joint operation between Guatemala’s Interpol and the Salvadoran Attorney General’s Office. Twenty of them were Salvadoran. The other six were Nicaraguans and Guatemalans. Most of the recruiters, it seems, were from El Salvador.

The annual report by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime this year says that in El Salvador 79 percent of the victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation detected by the police between 2005 and 2010 were Salvadoran nationals. In contrast, in Guatemala, in the same period, only 4 percent of the victims were from that country; 89 percent came from Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua.

Experts agree, though, that all of the victims from Central America have one origin in common: poverty.

One Salvadoran rescued from El Pantanal was underage. To protect her as a witness during the hearings she was called Carmencita. Asked why she accepted at 15 to leave

her family and go to work to Barberena, she responded: "There were days that my mom didn't have enough money to buy beans."

What she endured to get those beans was quite simply brutal.

"There were days when I was with as many as seven men," she testified. "But since I didn't like any of that, I would throw tantrums. One day the owner went nuts. He started hitting us with a machete and wounded my leg. Crying, I told him to take me to hospital. The wound became infected. He just told me to clean it because it disgusted the customers."

What the customers felt for a 15 year old girl with a deep wound in the leg was disgust.

A prosecutor asks. Grecia responds.

- And then what happened?

- One evening, Mr. Ovidio took me to a barn, which is about four hours from a river called Las Palmas. It was about 11 p.m. I only saw three horses. He told me that his God had spoken to him and that I had to be his.

- Did you do anything?

- I got angry and didn't let him touch me. (Ovidio) became violent, he threatened me with a long fingernail and said that it wouldn't be the first time he'd killed someone with a fingernail. I told Mr. Ovidio I was going to go to the bathroom. Then (I) tried to flee. I ran. I got to a place called The Battalion. I ran for 45 minutes. I told them I was fleeing because Mr. Ovidio wanted to abuse me. A soldier told me not to worry, that I could stay in that place and sleep.

According to her account, five days after leaving El Salvador, while in the Mexican state of Tabasco, Grecia separated from Ovidio. Before she fled, he warned Grecia that she would know hell on earth.

After sleeping one night in front of the Mexican garrison, Grecia made it back to the train tracks in Tenosique, the Mexican city that marks the beginning of the Atlantic Route of the so-called "Tren de la Muerte" (Train of Death), which Central Americans board as stowaways for a ride to a better life in America. Grecia found a group of migrants from different countries in the area and asked if she could join them, telling them what Ovidio had tried to do to her during the trip. They welcomed her and together they approached the tracks, which Grecia describes as follows: "There are huts, shops. In the front there is an abandoned hotel. There is also a swamp. There were other undocumented people and people who were armed."

Tenosique, which nearly borders Petén, Guatemala, is one of the accursed cities of migration. The hotel Grecia mentioned in her testimony was used by criminal groups to hold kidnapped migrants kidnapped before they took them to other northern cities. Ironically, the name of the hotel was California.

A prosecutor asks. Grecia responds.

- What do you mean armed people?
- They are responsible for taking people up north. They wore jeans and T-shirts. They dominated the place. They gave the orders and controlled area around the train tracks. They mentioned they were from an organization called the Zetas, which ruled the area.
- How many people were there?
- About 20.
- What kind of weapons did they have?

- They were guns, big guns, pistols. A Honduran who was there said it was an Uzi...

Rigoberto is a 48-year old man who had one year of schooling. As a kid, he worked on the cornfields. In 1982, when he was 18 and the Salvadoran civil war was just starting, he was drafted into the army. When the war ended he continued to work carrying a gun, as a private security guard.

"Who guarded the women in El Pantanal?" I ask him. We are talking in a courtyard known as the green zone of the Apanteos prison in El Salvador.

"It was people trusted by him, his family," he says, referring to Adan Cerritos, the leader of the Barberena gang. They guarded the women all the time, Roberto adds.

The Barberena gang is typical of traffickers in Central America. It relied on people with close ties to each other, relatives if possible, to administer the brothels. Below them there were a few employees without power -- recruiters and thugs who beat the women. Though it worked internationally, it was really a small group. Rather than resembling the monstrous structures of drug cartels, the Barberena group chose to consolidate its stronghold in a remote and rural area of Guatemala. But small does not mean it acted alone.

"Why didn't you ever report what was happening there?" I ask Rigoberto, granting him the benefit of the doubt -- he had said, after all, that he was merely a "sweeper, a handyman" at the bar El Pantanal. Rigoberto, after two years on the run, was sentenced to six years in prison in February 2011 for human trafficking. The maximum sentence in El Salvador for selling someone to be used as an object is ten years, three months and three days. You can only get this sentence if there are

aggravating circumstances such as if the victim is a minor. Rigoberto's version is that he went to El Pantanal deceived by a Salvadoran woman, who was a recruiter for the Barberena network. He was in love, he told me.

"I couldn't (report it) -- the police had been bought off. No one could. I would have risked my life. I could have been killed. I don't know how much money (Cerritos) would give them," he says.

The sun is setting.

"You never saw women escape or ask for help?" I ask.

"It was impossible," he says. "Maybe I would have helped them, but I couldn't because (Cerritos) had bought off the entire police force in Cuilapa, in Barberena. When [investigators] would come from the capital city to search for women, the police would warn him to hide the women. He would leave some of the ones who were legal, but the others were hidden in the bar. Or he would take them out the day before to a farm where there was plenty of coffee and corn."

The Barberena network, though small and discreet, with just one brothel, operated like a large-scale trafficking ring through corruption. Rigoberto says cops in Barberena and Cuilapa, a neighboring municipality, would collect weekly payments from Cerritos, and that they were VIP clients in El Pantanal, as were some municipal employees.

The partnership did not end there. Rigoberto says members of the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) gang in Ahuachapán on the Guatemala border, also acted as recruiters. In fact, a Salvadoran gang member, Marco Antonio Godoy, is serving time because of his role in this group.

The Barberena network, though small and discreet, operated like any big scale criminal network: They were involved in all types of crimes within their reach, as long as they were profitable. During the trial, two women rescued from El Pantanal repeatedly said the business owners sold the newborn babies of the trafficked women for up to \$5,000.

Salvadoran prosecutors managed to win nine trafficking cases against small groups in 2011. And even though the number of victories sounds small, it was the most successful Central American country in prosecuting these crimes that year.

Human trafficking is a crime of opportunity. The victims belong to the legions of nobodies in this region; and the perpetrators are not necessarily hardened criminals with long rap sheets but entrepreneurs of the underworld. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) points to the grim prospects: only one in 30 victims of trafficking in the region will ever be detected.

The Barberena ring, compared to other traffickers, were a cohesive network. Contrast them, for example, to the Salvadoran group of Mauricio Angel Ayala, Kevin Oswaldo Girls Lobato and Joshua Joel Mendoza who were sentenced in 2011 to six years and eight months in prison for coercing two Nicaraguans seeking employment in the eastern province of San Miguel into prostitution in a beer hall. One of the victims was considered too old to service customers, so she was forced to work without pay as a cleaning lady. She was 24 years old.

Then there was Orlando Nelson Campos and Juan Humberto Ramirez Carranza, who tricked two teenage Guatemalan women. Instead of modeling clothes, the women ended up crushed underneath sweaty men in a beer hall. Nelson and Ramirez are serving nine and eight years, respectively.

Or think of Juan Alfonso Cuellar, who sold a Salvadoran migrant headed for the United States in Mexico. The Salvadoran was exploited in a case similar to Grecia's. And Cuellar was sentenced to four years in prison and could get parole in two.

"He sold a human being!" Violeta Olivares screams indignantly, referring to Cuellar.

Olivares is the coordinator of a specialized unit in the Attorney General's office charged with human trafficking. In this unit, the sentences are seen as laughable.

"A petty shit of a punishment," a prosecutor who is part of the unit said in a moment of candor.

In El Salvador, a man assaults a bus, then takes passengers' cell phones, wallets and rings, and is arrested and convicted, would spend more years in prison than Cuellar, who sold a woman. The thief would receive between six and ten years. The human trafficker received four.

El Salvador has recognized this crime in its penal code since 2003, but it is only since September 2011 that the issue is gaining recognition with the creation of the National Council Against Trafficking.

A prosecutor asks. Grecia responds.

- How did the people you mention dominate the area?
- They went around in cars, armed.
- How many days were you there?
- Three days until Mr. Ovidio arrived.
- What did the armed men do?

- They told us to join the organization, that they would give us work and food. They were the group called the Zetas.

- What kind of work did they offer?

- They said I would cook for the people who were kidnapped. That was April 20 or 22, 2009.

To recap: At this point Grecia was in Tenosique, Mexico, at the beginning of road for migrants heading north. She was in a town dominated by the Zetas. Grecia had escaped from Ovidio after he tried to rape her in an abandoned pasture, and she had taken refuge in a group of undocumented Salvadorans and Guatemalans.

- What happened when Ovidio arrived?

- He stared at me with a mocking smile and went to the Zetas house. He went to talk to Chicho, a guy between 24 and 29 years old with a scar on his left cheek. He was part of the organization. They talked about 45 minutes with Ovidio. They looked at me, pointed at me. I was with the group of people which I had joined.

At that point in the story, Grecia embarks on the journey by train along with other kidnapped migrants, guarded by armed men who threatened to kill anyone who tried to escape. The Zetas used the train to transport their hostages. The Tenosique train travels to Coatzacoalcos, Veracruz, and along the way makes a series of stops in small towns and isolated villages. In one of those lost villages Grecia recalls that a

Salvadoran of the Zetas who was called El Pelon tried to sell her to a man. It appears that El Pelon wanted to do Grecia a favor, and told her that where they were going, there was a lot of suffering. However, the sale didn't pan out. With time, Grecia found out that El Pelon was right: there was a lot of suffering in store.

A prosecutor asks:

- When you mention the act of selling, had you seen that before?

- Yes, Mr. Ovidio...Right in front of me, they gave him the money for me.

- Mr. Ovidio was on the train?

- No, he went to El Salvador with the money they gave him.

- How much did he get?

- They say that \$500...Chicho (one of the Zetas) told me.

- Then what happened?

- We were loaded onto buses and driven to Reynosa ... From Veracruz to Reynosa it takes a day and a half. It was April 26, 2009. It was a Sunday.

From that point, Grecia described a classic kidnapping of undocumented migrants by the Zetas.

Reynosa in Tamaulipas State, is a Zetas stronghold. It was there that 72 bodies of illegal migrants appeared in August 2010; it was there in September 2011, that authorities captured El Coss, considered a leader of the Gulf Cartel, the organization that gave birth to the Zetas; it was there that 49 more headless, limbless bodies were discovered last May under an enormous Z painted on a bridge over a highway.

The group of about 300 migrants was split up in three safe houses. They were locked in damp dark rooms with no ventilation. They were visited by men with guns and bats that warned that those who did not give the phone number of a family member who would pay a ransom would be tortured. As always some migrant would resist giving a phone number, refusing to pay the \$300, \$500, or \$700 dollars, and would try to resist the torture that followed. Grecia's whole group had to watch how the gunmen would make those people scream. Then the gunmen would promise to come back if anyone else wanted to resist. That is how Grecia spent the first three days. On the third day, Omega appeared.

A prosecutor asks. Grecia responds.

- Can you describe him?

- Tall, fat, a large double chin, white. He was called Omega, Kike or Apa. He was told that there were some Salvadoran women the way he liked them. He took us from the room to see if we were pretty because in the room there was very little light.

- Did you stay in the same house?

- No, I was taken to a residential neighborhood, 10 minutes away, in the same buses that were used to take us to Reynosa. There were several people, and again we lay down on the floor. There I was raped by Omega. He hit me in the face because I told him to wear a condom. He said I was in no position to demand anything. The abuses were constant, and not just by him.

- Could you recognize these people in person or in photos?

- Yes.

- What else happened?

- He raped me about eight or nine times. He said that he enjoyed it, and that I had to enjoy it too. That I wasn't to suffer. He beat me. The same happened to other people, but the women that he liked, he was the first to rape them.

Grecia remembers several weeks of abuse and beatings. Grecia says she spent three months there and, despite the fact that her relatives in the US had already deposited the ransom money for her, she was sold again.

- How long did this go on?

- Three months, and my family had already paid all the money, but they were going to profit more from me. I was sold again to a bar called La Quebradita. They took me there to be a prostitute. The first day we were rejected. The lady who was in charge of the bar told us we didn't have the mark -- several of us were taken to a bar -- and we had to be branded. I didn't know what that meant, but it's a tattoo.

- Where did they do it to you?

- On my right calf. They took us to a place where we did the tattoo. They made us eat something and inhale something that put us to sleep. When I woke up I had the tattoo. My leg burned because it bled, though not much, just a few drops. It's a butterfly on a branch, which forms the "Z" for Zeta. That was the marking; it meant that I was theirs, that I was merchandise. There were five other women. I saw the marking on four of them on different parts of their bodies: arms, back, chest, and they were different colors. The one I have is between black and green. After being branded, we went to the place and started prostituting ourselves with customers who were part of the same mafia. The customers paid for us, but we didn't get any of the money. I don't know how much they paid.

Grecia's customers forced her to smoke crack and to snort cocaine. Grecia says her customers never agreed to use condoms. A month went by. Grecia says that during that time she never went out, that her life was the safe house, the bar La Quebradita and some motels where clients would take her. If a client took Grecia to a motel she was always accompanied by a man from the bar man who guarded her. Grecia says that it was normal to be beaten, especially for not wanting to drink alcohol or for being less than enthusiastic when giving up her body to customers of La Quebradita. One man hit Grecia so hard that he broke her nose.

Both the broken nose and the tattoo were found by doctors at the Institute of Legal Medicine in El Salvador, and are part of the prosecutor's file.

Grecia never tried to escape. Few would want to do if they had seen what Grecia saw.

- Did something else happen?

- Yes, Sonia. They let her go because her family had paid the ransom. She went to report to migration authorities. The migration authorities turned her back over to the same guys (the Zetas). They burned her alive, they beat over and over with a bat. They told her that she shouldn't have done that. That they were not playing around. That she had lost her chance to be free. They told us that it would happen to us as well if we said anything.

- What was the result of Sonia's beating?

- Death.

- How did they beat her?

- With a bat, but as she was dying, they set her on fire with gasoline. She screamed in pain, and they beat her more. Half an hour, 45 minutes. The body was unrecognizable, charred, you couldn't see her feet. Bald charred flesh. She was placed at an altar to la Santa Muerte there.

Court records show that the Barberena case was uncovered because a victim reported the group to the authorities. That survivor is one of the 16 women who testified at trial with their identities protected.

The owner of the bar El Pantanal, Adam Cerritos, had an estate with cornfields surrounded by coffee plantations. The farm was in one of the more rural areas of the municipality, on the outskirts. This network at the same time it operated a sexual exploitation ring, also used forced labor in the fields. The same women who worked Monday through Thursday in the cornfields, were abused by dozens of men in El Pantanal from Friday to Sunday.

That farm, according to the testimonies collected by the prosecutor, and according to the trafficker I spoke to, was also a safehaven and a place where the group metted out punishment. Women were hidden there when corrupt cops warned them of police sweeps from the Guatemalan capital. It was there where women who had been beaten so badly they were not fit to work at El Pantanal, were forced to work in the fields.

There they were also shown that disobeying carried consequences.

On one occasion, survivors reported to prosecutors, they were made to form a circle at night on the farm. In the middle of the circle, there were two men and a woman. Outside the circle, armed men were on guard to make sure no one tried to make a run for it. The two men beat to death a woman in the circle during a ritual that lasted for several long minutes. The woman had tried to escape from El Pantanal.

She was not the only victim. The anonymous woman who later became a witness experienced a similar situation. Her constant refusal to seduce the customers of El Pantanal won her a beating so fierce that the traffickers thought they had killed her. They left her bloody body heaped on the farm and decided they would get rid of it the next day. The woman awoke in the night and slowly dragged her beaten bones to the road. From there, in a way that is not detailed in court records, the survivor reached the border, and, on the Salvadoran side, collapsed in front of the cops. When she came to, she recounted her ordeal. In less than a week, the Salvadoran Attorney General established an operation in coordination with Interpol in Guatemala. Coordinating prosecutor Violeta Olivares, is very clear when explaining why they did not call the Guatemalan police: "We did not trust them."

In 2006, a special judge in Santa Ana, Tomas Salinas, decided that none of the eight Salvadorans linked to the Barberena ring needed to be held in custody during the trial. They were allowed to leave but were required to appear for hearings. Some members of the network who had gotten word about the operation at El Pantanal, had changed addresses in El Salvador, and were trying to hide when they were captured. The judge thought the men who were caught trying to flee would not flee. Everyone has fled. The prosecution appealed, and the Supreme Court reversed Judge Salinas' ruling. Arrest warrants were issued. Of the eight that Judge Salinas freed, six have been caught, the last of whom is Moran Martinez. Two remain at large.

Gunmen murder. Drug traffickers destroy, kill or threaten. Car theft gangs are lightning fast. Human traffickers are like water that wears away the stone: harsh, persistent. They need their victim alive and scared. Alive and terrified. Alive and submissive. Beatings at the Barberena farm were used as a corrective for those who resisted. The beatings were a warning to other women: see what can happen to you if you disobey.

The stick, fists and rape are the main method of punishment. Both the head of the prosecution unit in Guatemala, Alexander Colop, and his Salvadoran colleague Smirna de Calles, said the leaders of these gangs often rape the victims.

"They are the first to cut them down, to use them, to impose themselves on them," said Colop. Just like what Gracias lived through.

Julio Prado, the anti-trafficking prosecutor of the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG), says not all groups are alike. Prado said that in the worst places where he has participated in rescue operations of victims, women were forced to surrender to any man for 15 minutes in exchange for 50 quetzals (\$6), which were collected by the dealer. He has also seen cases of Russian and Colombian women for which some customers pay \$500 per hour.

"The question," says Prado, "is what kind of customers can pay that amount for one hour to have fun."

Beginning in 2006, Guatemalan authorities investigated a network of trafficking and prostitution that catered to high-income customers. Prado was involved in the raid on a nightclub called Caprichos. It was owned by a businessman named Herman Smith. Smith was accustomed to hobnobbing with officials and celebrities of the country. Police found underage Salvadorans, Hondurans and Russians and a system of hidden doors and tunnels that connected with neighboring houses. At the houses there were self-help and self-improvement books, and numerous tomes on economic theory. Some of the victims said that Smith, who was called "Papito," used to tell them that

despite having reached the place under false pretenses, they could become entrepreneurs if they learned to see their bodies as a commodity. Smith convinced his victims that he was not their assailant but their benefactor. The trial was never completed because a gunman shot Smith in the temple on May 6, 2008, in the Caprichos nightclub. The gunman fled.

Guatemala has already convicted several Colombians for human trafficking. They were accused of belonging to a ring known as the Pereira network, which was dedicated to bringing voluptuous women from that region of Colombia under the guise that they will be models. These networks, according to Colop even molded its victims, offering breast and buttocks implants, assuring them that they were necessary to succeed in the world of fashion.

"They were first taken to Honduras, and when they were bored with them there they would be brought here," explains Colop.

The women would be locked up and told that they had to pay with sex for the implants, transportation, food, and clothing. It was a debt that could never be paid off.

In El Salvador, the highest authority in charge of creating strategies to combat the crime of human trafficking is Deputy Minister of Justice and Security Douglas Moreno.

"There is a structure of people with great economic power that has profited from this situation and we did not know about it," he says. "There are people involved who you would never have imagined would be involved in this business but unfortunately we still don't have evidence linking them to it."

Networks like Smith's or the Pereira ring represent that other side of trafficking networks. These networks try to justify slavery in some way: because you owe me, because I'm helping to improve yourself, because you have no papers and you must give me something for my protection. Other networks, like the Barberena ring that use local corruption and small arms, prefer the cheaper mechanism to get their victims to do what they order them to do: fists, bats, fire, fear.

Silvia Saravia, leader of a team that helps trafficking survivors before Salvadoran prosecutors prepare them for trial, has seen dozens of cases of women who faced this modality of local networks.

"Those who have been locked up show extreme fear, tremendous fear for themselves and for their families, who suffer the consequences of her escape," says Saravia. "They are emotionally blocked. They are shut in. Many require psychiatric care. They have suicidal thoughts. They believe they can't trust anyone. They know that people are not playing around, they know that the assailant will carry out their threats. They have anxiety disorders, insomnia, loss of appetite.

"Grecia, for example, will need process of comprehensive care," she says.

After almost three months of being forced to service clients in the Quebradita, a week after seeing Sonia set afire, and after her aunt deposited a \$3,500 ransom, Grecia was freed by Omega. They gave her \$300 pesos (about \$25), left her at the bus station in Reynosa and ordered her to go away. One of the prosecutors who interviewed Grecia during the trial says that she told them that something was happening at the time, and that it seemed the Zetas group was dismantling the houses where they kept hostages and were fleeing. With 300 pesos, Grecia only managed to buy a ticket to Monterrey. There, Grecia said a kind taxi driver took her to the migration service office, a government shelter where the woman in charge understood Grecia's symptoms. According to the medical checkup she received, Grecia had a vaginal infection and an inflammatory pelvic disease.

One of the prosecutors asks. Grecia responds.

- What happened at the migrant house?
- The woman in charge of the house saw that I was crying, screaming, I didn't act normal and she started to ask. Gradually I started telling her...They found me shelter at a house of the archdiocese, especially for people who have been through the crime of human trafficking...I saw a psychologist...I moved from Monterrey to Mexico City...For five months [I] was given psychological treatment and legal advice.
- Did you participate in an investigation?

- Yes, the whole time I was there.

- Was anyone arrested?

- Yes, charged with kidnapping and human trafficking. They showed me some pictures, and there are approximately ten to twelve detainees between Hondurans and Mexicans.

On November 23, 2009, Grecia was already in Mexico City, in the hands of the Special Prosecutor for Crimes of Violence Against Women and Human Trafficking (FEVIMTRA). According to the prosecutor, in the first session of psychological care she was: "Depressed, distrustful and unable to cry."

It took 11 sessions to get her statement. Thanks to what Grecia told Mexican authorities in 2009, raids were conducted on several houses in Reynosa and 12 suspected members of the Zetas were captured. The case against these men continues, as do the scars on Grecia.

When, in December 2009, Grecia returned to El Salvador, her situation got worse. Grecia explained that Ovidio, as she feared, had threatened her mother and her

mother-in-law. In the psychological review that was conducted by the Institute of Legal Medicine of El Salvador, it was noted that Grecia: "Cannot sleep at night, she feels every sound is a gunshot. She has gone without food for two or three days. Lighting a fire she remembers Sonia. Her sexual appetite is gone. She pushes her partner away when they have relations."

The report concludes with a summary sheet.

Thought: depressive, anxious.

Orientation: In her statement there are holes because she does not remember. Blackouts.

Current psychological functioning level: neurotic.

On Wednesday May 26, 2010, a 29-year-old Salvadoran woman saw a newspaper photograph of someone who looked familiar being lowered from a pick-up truck handcuffed to two other men. Police had arrested him the night before in the parking lot of the nightclub Kairo's, on the Boulevard de Los Heroes, along with four Salvadoran men and a Salvadoran woman in a black SUV with Guatemalan license plates. Inside the van, in a secret compartment that opened with electrical switch, the police found a Galil rifle, two M-16s, a 30.30 rifle, two shotguns, a revolver, a grenade, military lighting and 11 telephones. The 29-year-old woman thought she knew the fat man in the photo, but tried not to think about it during the day. On Wednesday evening, the fat man reappeared on the news, and when he said a few words, she heard his shrill voice. The woman could not just ignore the fat man she knew. She knew him very well. The woman was Grecia and the fat man, Omega.

Omega's real name is Enrique Jaramillo Aguilar. Age 35, he was born in Apatzingan, Michoacan, Mexico. In December 2011, he was sentenced to nine years in prison in El Salvador on charges of possession and carrying of weapons and false documentation. Currently he's locked up in the prison of Apanteos.

Jaramillo identified himself as a Guatemalan to Salvadoran authorities, showing a false document. His arrest that Wednesday, May 26, was the result of a police operation linking him to the Zetas. An informant had said he learned that the false Guatemalan was linked to the November 2008, massacre in Agua Zarca in Huehuetenango, on the border with Mexico, when alleged Guatemalan members of the Sinaloa Cartel and the Zetas clashed for several hours and left 19 bodies scattered in the area. That is still remembered as one of the most important events in recent underworld history because it showed just how deeply large Mexican groups had penetrated Guatemala. Jaramillo was arrested accused of being one of the Zetas who participated in the fighting in Huehuetenango, but the prosecution failed to prove it before a Guatemalan judge.

When Grecia recognized the man who she says raped her in Reynosa, sold her to La Quebradita, and took \$ 3,500 from her aunt, she decided to report it to the Salvadoran Attorney General's office. Grecia gave an affidavit before a judge, two prosecutors, two defense lawyers hired by Jaramillo and Jaramillo himself. Grecia asked to testify ahead of the trial because she planned to leave the country. She was terrified that Omega would send someone to hurt her. After that, Grecia, with the support of the International Organization for Migration and the United Nations Agency for Refugees, left the country for an unknown destination, got a new identity and is trying to rebuild her life.

Wednesday July 4, 2012. Specialized Sentencing Court B of San Salvador. 8:30 a.m. Final arguments against the accused and Enrique Jaramillo Aguilar and Jesus Ovidio Guardado.

Jaramillo waits by Ovidio outside the room. Jaramillo's double chin hangs loose. He has lost a lot of weight since those pictures when he was arrested at Kairo's nightclub. He has lost hair too. He wears a gray horizontal striped polo shirt and pink jeans with a tear on the left knee. His wrists and ankles are handcuffed. Ovidio looks even more awkward, more consumed, after a year in jail, awaiting trial. The white button-down shirt and khaki pants hang off him.

Inside the courtroom, the two private lawyers hired by Jaramillo take away from the solemnity of what will happen in the room. They joke about an alleged suicide attempt that Grecia survived as a teenager.

"They say she took 200 pills, she was narcotized," says one lawyer to the other. "What I'm wondering is where the hell she would fit so many," the other responds. They both laugh out loud.

Then one of them puts on a reggaeton tune on his cell phone and turns up the volume. The clerk asks him to please leave the room.

The two prosecutors make closing arguments: Ovidio sold her on the railroad...At the Quebradita bar she is treated as a commodity...Jaramillo constantly raped her...She was tattooed on her right leg...The expert said the damage to her was caused by what happened in Mexico...For Ovidio, it was attempted rape and aggravated human trafficking...For Jaramillo, repeated rape and aggravated trafficking. Prosecutors ask for the maximum penalty for both.

Jaramillo's lawyers answer: What is this about the Zetas? Where does it say that? Lies...The expert talks about blackouts...The victim says one thing and then another...She is an unstable person...Her seven-year old boy dresses like a girl...She is a victim who does not deserve credibility.

Ovidio's public defense attorney says attempted rape does not exist. "Was there penetration or wasn't there?"

Then, suddenly, Jaramillo asks to speak. With his shrill voice he addresses the judge as "your honor" and tries to exculpate himself. First, he says Ovidio is too old to be involved in migration. The second part is a little more confusing. He says Grecia said that Ovidio had only five teeth, but when asked if she knew how many a person normally has she said yes, 36. "And as far as I know, there are 32," he says.

The third part of his defense is that he does not live in Reynosa, or know anyone there; that he is from another state, Michoacan (however, the background file sent from Mexico says he has been on the run since 2006, mostly in the state Tamaulipas, where Reynosa is).

The fourth part of his defense is that he has never been a soldier, and that the Zetas are military. He says he's heard songs that say that the Zetas are 30 strong, and he is not one of them.

Friday 6 July. Reading the verdict.

Acquitted.

In sum, Judge Roger Paz Rufino Diaz decided that Grecia contradicted herself. The main reason is that Grecia gave different versions to Salvadoran and Mexican prosecutors. There, she omitted Ovidio from the story and said she had been sold to the Zetas by people linked to a shelter in Veracruz. The prosecutors in the case say that Grecia did that because she knew that Ovidio was in El Salvador. He knew where her family lived, and he lived very close to his mother. Grecia, say prosecutors, was afraid that if she denounced Ovidio in Mexico, it would be reported to the Salvadoran authorities, and once he got word, he could harm her family. So she erased him from the story when she was there, and was only able to include him when, back in El Salvador, she knew that her family was fine and she could warn them of the risk. The officials explained that Grecia's psychological evaluation makes that version credible. Grecia, as the psychologists who evaluated her said, was afraid. Very afraid.

Lead prosecutor Smirna de Calles calls a press conference that same day. She regrets the decision, and explains that victims of this crime must deal with their traumas as they testify. She says she would appeal to the Supreme Court. The appeal has not yet been decided.

Grecia will not testify again. Not even the prosecutors know where she is. She is somewhere, surviving.

A prosecutor asks. Grecia responds.

- Where did they do it to you?

-On my right calf. They took us to a place where we did the tattoo. They made us eat something and inhale something that put us to sleep. When I woke up and had the tattoo. It's a butterfly on a branch, which forms the "Z" for Zeta. That was the marking; it meant that I was theirs, that I was merchandise.

Grecia has gone. Twice she recounted how an organized crime group used her body as a container for whatever they wanted. Then she had to leave. She reported to the authorities in El Salvador and to those of Mexico. Grecia no longer lives in El Salvador. She is a refugee in another country. For her own security, few people know where.

I know of Grecia that she is 29 years old, has three children aged six, three years and ten months; she is married and was unemployed when she decided to migrate. The only time I have heard Grecia's words come from a 52 minute recording of my own voice reading the words in the statement she gave to a Salvadoran judge.

In a hearing before the Ninth Court of Peace of the city of San Salvador, in front of a man who she recognized as one of her victimizers, at 9 am on the morning of July 2, 2010, Grecia answered questions about what had happened to her and how she survived.

A prosecutor asks. Grecia responds.

- You were cited by this court to seek justice for the crimes of kidnapping, rape and trafficking committed against you. When did you begin the trip to the United States?

-On the 13th April 2009.

- With what intent did you travel?

- Because of the economic situation of the country.

- Who did you travel with?

-With Ovidio Guardado.

-Describe Ovidio.

- He's male, about 69 years, white skin, short wavy graying hair, height of approximately 1.77 meters, he has no teeth. He has a scar on his head.

- What did this man do?

- He tricked me. He never told me he was a "coyote". He said we were going to the United States, but when we arrived in Mexico he showed his true intentions.

- And what were his intentions?

-His intention was to rape me but he wasn't able to.

-How many people accompanied you on this trip?

-Only Mr. Ovidio.

Ovidio is a peasant, tan and wrinkled, but still strong, like a dead tree with no leaves that will remain standing for years. Ovidio is a relative of Grecia's husband. Ovidio is a neighbor of Grecia's mother and mother-in-law. Grecia trusted Ovidio.

Just as it happened in Grecia's case, the hook in most cases where women are converted into commodities is the hope of escaping poverty.

Another such case is that of the Barberena network that not only talks about the origin of the victims, but reveals many other facets of the groups of traffickers in the region. The structure of Barberena included 12 men and one woman and it operated until 2006 in the rural town of Barberena, in the Guatemalan department of Santa Rosa, on the Pacific coast of the country. The murderous network even had a corn farm where they performed bloody rituals to sow panic in their victims. It was a corrupt network that was fortunate enough to have a Salvadoran judge set most of its members free.

The Barberena network operated from a bar called El Pantanal. The pattern of deception was simple. They sent Salvadoran men or women to cantons and villages of the border departments of Santa Ana and Ahuachapan in El Salvador. They would approach humble homes with the excuse of being employees of a supermarket and a new diner Barberena where staff were needed. They offered \$ 70 per week plus all travel costs to Barberena, and even \$50 in hand for the "new hire's" family.

The four countries of northern Central America are the source, transit points and destination for victims of trafficking and in all four countries there are cases of sexual slavery. Officials explain that Nicaragua, El Salvador and Honduras are the countries from where most of the victims of trafficking come. Guatemala is the place par excellence where those victims are enslaved. And all four are, thanks to the thousands of migrants that these countries, a vast pool from which Mexican traffickers take their pick. Experts – NGOs, prosecutors, police, international organizations -- explained that the proximity to Mexico and the huge influx of migrants passing through Guatemala make that country an ideal place for trafficking gangs.

The scammers who search for victims in villages and hamlets live in the area, know the people, pose as benefactors, and settle there under false names. Some of the "recruiters", according to Silvia Saravia, who is charged with the psychological care of trafficking victims for the Salvadoran Attorney General's office, know so much about the women they have their eyes on that they even know if they have been raped. Traffickers smell the helplessness and vulnerability like sharks smell blood.

The desperate women who accepted had to travel almost an hour to reach the gates of El Pantanal bar. Without any delay, were received by armed men and a Guatemalan woman, Sonia Garcia. Sonia would tell them to change their conservative, almost evangelical clothing and don the miniskirts and shirts with plunging necklines and garish colors that were offered to them. They were told that they had to go to the main room of the house and convince drunk men to pay 50 quetzals (about seven dollars) to blow off steam with them for 30 minutes. They, the victims, usually said no, they would protest that this work was not what they had signed up for. Then the men who surrounded Sonia, Salvadorans mostly, explained to the women with fists and baseball bats that this was not an offer but an order.

When I met in mid-August in the Apanteos prison with Rigoberto Moran Martinez, one of the six people convicted for being part of the Barberena network, he said that almost none of the women worked the first week during the two years he worked in El Pantanal. Most of them would spend the first week with purple, disfigured faces. And customers of El Pantanal, did not like purple-faced women. But the conversation with Rigoberto, a man who all his life has used a gun as a tool, will teach us other lessons.

In late 2007, 16 survivors of the sexual slavery ring at El Pantanal testified in a Salvadoran court. Twenty-six women in total had been rescued in a joint operation between Guatemala's Interpol and the Salvadoran Attorney General's office. Twenty of them were Salvadoran. The other six were Nicaraguans and Guatemalans. This is because most of the recruiters were from El Salvador.

The report published this year by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime says that in El Salvador, 79 percent of the victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation detected by the police between 2005 and 2010 were Salvadoran nationals. In contrast, in Guatemala, in the same period, only 4% of the victims were from that country. 89% came from Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua.

Studies and experts agree, though, that all of the victims from Central America have one origin in common: poverty.

One Salvadoran rescued from El Pantanal was underage. To protect her as a witness during the hearings she was called Carmencita. Asked why she accepted at 15 to leave her family and go to work to Barberena, she responded: "There were days that my mom didn't have enough money to buy beans."

On what she endured in her quest to get those beans, Carmencita said: "There were days when I was with as many as seven men, but since I didn't like any of that, so I would throw tantrums. One day the owner went nuts, he started hitting us with a machete and wounded my leg. Crying, I told him to take me to hospital. The wound became infected me, he and just told me to clean it because it disgusted the customers.

What the customers felt for a 15 year old girl with a deep wound in the leg was disgust.

One of the prosecutors asks. Grecia responds.

- And then what happened?

-One evening, Mr. Ovidio took me to a barn, which is about four hours from a river called Las Palmas. It was about 11 pm, I only saw three horses. He told me that his god had spoken to him and that I had to be his.

- Did you do anything?

-I became aggressive and didn't let him touch me. (Ovidio) became violent, he threatened me with a long fingernail that he had said that it wouldn't be the first time he killed someone with a fingernail. I told Mr. Ovidio I was going to relieve myself. Then tried to flee, I ran, I got to a place called The Battalion. I ran for 45 minutes. I told them I was fleeing because Mr. Ovidio wanted to abuse me. A soldier told me not to worry, that I could stay in that place to sleep.

According to her account, five days after leaving El Salvador, while in the Mexican state of Tabasco, Grecia separated from Ovidio. Before she fled he warned Grecia that she would know hell on earth.

After sleeping one night in front of a Mexican garrison, Grecia made it back to the train tracks in Tenosique, the Mexican city that marks the beginning of the Atlantic Route of the so-called Tren de la Muerte (Train of Death), which Central Americans board as stowaways for a ride to a better life in America. Grecia found a group of migrants from different countries in the area and asked if she could join them, telling them what Ovidio had tried during the trip. They welcomed her and together they approached the tracks, a site that describes Grecia as follows: "There are huts, shops, in the front there as an abandoned hotel, there is also a swamp, there were other undocumented people and people who were armed."

Tenosique, almost bordering Petén, Guatemala, is one of the accursed cities of migration. In fact, the hotel Grecia mentions is a hotel that operated until early 2009, and was used by criminal groups to accommodate migrants kidnapped before transferring them to other northern cities. Ironically, the name of the hotel was California.

One of the prosecutors asked. Grecias responds.

- What do you mean armed people?

-They are responsible for taking people up north. They wore with jeans and t-shirts. They dominated the place, they gave the orders and controlled areas of the train

tracks. They mentioned that they were from an organization called Los Zetas, which ruled the area.

- How many people were there?

- About 20.

- What kind of weapons did they have?

- They were guns, big guns, pistols, a Honduran who was there said it was an Uzi ...

"Who guarded the women in El Pantanal?" I ask Rigoberto in a courtyard known as the green zone of the Apanteos prison in El Salvador. Rigoberto is a 48 year old man who studied one year at school, he cultivated cornfields throughout his childhood and adolescence, who in 1982, when he was 18 and the Salvadoran civil war was just starting, was drafted into the army. When the war ended he continued to work carrying a gun, as a private security guard.

"It was people trusted by him, his family," says Rigoberto of Adam Cerritos, the leader of the gang of traffickers Barberena. They guarded the women "all the time," he says.

The Barberena gang is typical of traffickers in Central America. It relied on people with close ties to each other, relatives if possible, to administer the brothels, and, beneath them, there were a few employees without power, recruiters and thugs who are responsible for occasionally beating down the women. Though international because the Barberena gang tricked women in three countries, it was a small group. Rather than resembling the monstrous structures of drug cartels, the Barberena group chose to consolidate its stronghold in the comfort in remote and rural Guatemala. But the fact that it was small does not mean that it acted alone.

"Why didn't you ever report what was happening there?" I ask Rigoberto granting for a moment the benefit of the doubt when he said he was merely a "sweeper, a handyman" at the bar El Pantanal. Rigoberto, after two years on the run, was sentenced to six years in prison in February 2011 for the crime of human trafficking. The maximum sentence in El Salvador for the crime of selling someone to be used as an object is ten years, three months and three days if there are aggravating circumstances such as if a victim is a minor. Rigoberto's version is that he went to El Pantanal deceived by a Salvadoran woman who was a recruiter for the Barberena network, with whom he had fallen madly in love.

"I couldn't (report it) -- the police had been bought off No one could. I would have risked my life. I could have been killed. I don't know how much money (Cerritos) would give them," he says as the sun sets.

"You never saw women escape or ask for help?" I ask. "It was impossible," he says. "Maybe I would have helped them but I couldn't because (Cerritos) had bought off the

entire police force in Cuilapa, in Barberena. When people would come from the capital to search for women, the police would warn him to hide the women. He would leave some of the ones who were legal but the others were hidden in the bar or he would take them out the day before to the farm where there was plenty of coffee and corn.”

The Barberena network, though small and discreet, with just one brothel, operated like a large-scale ring through corruption. Rigoberto says cops in Barberena and Cuilapa, a neighboring municipality, would collect weekly payments from Cerritos, and they were also VIP clients in El Pantanal, as were some employees of the municipalities in those same municipalities.

The partnership did not end there, Rigoberto explains that members of the Mara Salvatrucha gang in Ahuachapán on the Guatemala border, also acted as recruiters. In fact, a Salvadoran gang member, Marco Antonio Godoy, is serving a sentence as part of the group of traffickers.

The Barberena network, though small and discreet, operated like any big scale criminal network: they were involved in all crimes within their reach as long as they were profitable. During the trial, two women rescued from El Pantanal repeatedly said that the business owners sold the newborn babies of the trafficked women for up to \$5,000.

El Salvadoran prosecutors managed to win nine trafficking cases in 2001 against small groups. And even though the number of victories sounds small, is the most successful Central American country in prosecuting these crimes to 2011.

Human trafficking is a crime of opportunity. The victims belong to the legions of nobodies in this region; and the perpetrators are not necessarily hardened criminals with long rap sheets but entrepreneurs of the underworld. The UNODC points to the grim prospects: only one in 30 victims of trafficking in the region will ever be detected.

The Barberena ring, compared to other traffickers, were a cohesive network.

In contrast, for example, in El Salvador, Mauricio Angel Ayala, Kevin Oswaldo Girls Lobato and Joshua Joel Mendoza were sentenced in 2011 to six years and eight months in prison for coercing two Nicaraguans seeking employment in the eastern province of San Miguel into prostitution in a beer hall. One of them was considered too old to service customers, so she was forced to work without pay as a cleaning lady. She was 24 years old.

Orlando Nelson Campos and Juan Humberto Ramirez Carranza tricked two teenage Guatemalan women and, instead of modeling clothes, they ended up crushed underneath sweaty men in a beer hall. The men are serving nine and eight years, respectively.

Or Juan Alfonso Cuéllar, who sold in Mexico a Salvadoran migrant headed for the United States who ended up being sexually exploited there in a case similar to Grecia's. He was sentenced to four years on 9 August last year. That means that on August 9, 2013, when he has served half his sentence, if he has been an exemplary inmate, he could get parole.

"He sold a human being!" complained indignantly Violet Olivares, the coordinator of a specialized unit in the Attorney General's office charged with human trafficking. In this unit, the trafficking convictions are viewed as laughable. "A shit of a punishment," a prosecutor who is part of the unit said in a moment of candor. In El Salvador, a man who commits the offense of theft, for example, assaulting a bus and take cell phones, wallets and rings, and is arrested and convicted, would spend more years in prison than Cuellar, who sold a woman. The thief would receive between six and 10 years. The human trafficker received four.

El Salvador has recognized this crime in its penal code since 2003, but it is only now that the issue is gaining recognition with the creation of the National Council Against Trafficking in September 2011.

One of the prosecutors asks. Grecia responds.

- How did the people you mention dominate the area?

- They went around in cars, armed.

- How many days were you there?

- Three days until Mr. Ovidio arrived.

- What did the armed men do?

- They told us to join the organization, that they would give us work and food. They were the group called Los Zetas.

- What kind of work did they offer?

- They said I would cook for the people who were kidnapped. That was April 20 or 22 2009.

To recap: At this point Grecia was in Tenosique, Mexico, at the beginning of road for migrants. She was in a town dominated by Los Zetas. Grecia had escaped from Ovidio after he tried to rape her in an abandoned pasture, and had taken refuge in a group of undocumented Salvadorans and Guatemalans.

- What happened when Ovidio arrived?

- He stared at me with a mocking smile and went to the Zetas house. He went to talk to Chicho, a guy between 24 and 29 years old with a scar on his left cheek. He was part of

the organization. They talked about 45 minutes with Ovidio. They looked at me, pointed at me, I was with the group of people which I had joined.

At that point in the story, Grecia embarks on the journey by train along with other kidnapped migrants, guarded by armed men who threatened to kill anyone who tried to escape. Los Zetas used the train to transport their hostages. The Tenosique train travels to Coatzacoalcos, Veracruz, and along the way makes a series of stops in small towns and isolated villages. In one of those lost villages Grecia recalls that a Salvadoran of Los Zetas who was called El Pelon tried to sell her to a man. It appears that El Pelon wanted to do Grecia a favor, and told her that where they were going, there was a lot of suffering. However the sale did not pan out and Grecia was to find out that El Pelon was right.

The prosecutor asks:

- When you mention the act of selling, had you seen that before?
- Yes, Mr. Ovidio ... Right in front of me they gave him the money for me.
- Mr. Ovidio was on the train?
- No, he went to El Salvador with the money they gave him.
- How much did he get?
- They say that \$500 ... Chicho (one of Los Zetas) told me.
- Then what happened?
- We were loaded into trucks and driven to Reynosa ... From Veracruz to Reynosa it takes a day and a half. It was April 26, 2009, it was a Sunday.

From that point, Grecia described a classic kidnapping of undocumented migrants by Los Zetas.

Reynosa in Tamaulipas State, is a Zetas stronghold. It was there that 72 bodies of illegal migrants appeared in August 2010; it was there in September that authorities captured El Coss, considered a leader of the Gulf Cartel, the organization that gave birth to Los Zetas; it was there that 49 more headless, limbless bodies were discovered last May under an enormous Z painted on a bridge over a highway.

The group of about 300 migrants was split up in three safe houses. They were locked in damp dark rooms with no ventilation. They were visited by men with guns and bats that warned that those who did not give the phone number of a family member who would pay a ransom would be tortured. As always some migrant would resist giving the number, would refuse to lose those \$300, \$500, or \$700 dollars, and would try to resist the torture. Grecia's whole group had to watch how the gunmen would make those people scream and promise to come back if anyone else wanted to resist. That is how Grecia spent the first three days. On the third day, Omega appeared.

One of the prosecutors asks. Grecia responds.

- Can you describe him?

- Tall, fat, a large double chin, white. He was called Omega, Kike or Apa. He was told that there were some Salvadoran women the way he liked them. He took us from the room to see if we were pretty because in the room there was very little light.

- Did you stay in the same house?

- No, I was taken to a residential neighborhood, 10 minutes away, in the same trucks that were used to take us to Reynosa. There were several people and again we lay down on the floor. There I was raped by Omega. He hit me in the face, because I told him to wear a condom. He said I was in no position to demand anything. The abuses were constant, and not just by him.

- Could you recognize these people in person or in photos?

- Yes.

- What else happened?

- He abused me about eight or nine times. He said that he enjoyed it, and that I had to enjoy it too. That it wasn't for me to suffer. He beat me. The same happened to other people, but the women that he liked, he was the first to abuse of them.

Grecia remembers several weeks of abuse and beatings. Grecia says she spent three months there and, despite the fact that her relatives in the U.S. had already deposited the ransom money for her, she was sold again.

- How long was this?

- Three months, and my family had already paid all the money, but they were going to profit more from me. I was sold again to a bar called La Quebradita. They took me there to be a prostitute. The first day we were rejected. The lady who was in charge of the bar told us we didn't have the mark – several of us were taken to the bar -- and we had to have the branding. I didn't know what that meant, but it's a tattoo.

- Where did they do it to you?

- On my right calf. They took us to a place where we did the tattoo. They made us eat something an inhale something that put us to sleep. When I woke up and had the tattoo. My leg burned because it bled, though not much just a few drops. It's a butterfly on a branch, which forms the "Z" for Zeta. That was the marking; it meant that I was theirs, that I was merchandise. There were five other women, I saw the marking on four of them on different parts of their bodies: arms, back, chest, and they were different colors. The one I have is between black and green. After being branded we went to the place and started prostituting ourselves with customers who part of the

same mafia. The customers paid for us but we didn't get any of the money. I don't know how much they paid.

Grecia's customers forced her to smoke crack and to snort cocaine. Grecia says her customers never agreed to use condoms. A month went by. Grecia says that during that time she never went out, that her life was the safe house, the bar La Quebradita and some motels where clients would take her. If a client took Grecia to a motel she was always accompanied by a man from the bar man who guarded her. Grecia says that it was normal to be beaten, especially for not wanting to drink alcohol or for being less than enthusiastic when giving up her body to customers of La Quebradita. One man hit Grecia so hard that he broke her nose.

Both the broken nose as the tattoo were found by doctors at the Institute of Legal Medicine in El Salvador, and are part of the prosecutor's file.

Grecia never tried to escape. Few would want to do if they had seen what Grecia saw.

- Did something else happen?

- Yes, Sonia. They let her go because her family had paid the ransom. She went to report to migration authorities. The migration authorities turned her back over to the same guys (the Zetas). They burned her alive, they beat over and over with a bat. They told her that she shouldn't have done that that they were not playing around that she had lost her chance to be free. They told us that it would happen to us as well if we said anything.

- What was the result of Sonia's beating?

- Death.

- How did they beat her?

- With a bat, but as she was dying, they set her on fire with gasoline. She screamed in pain, and they beat her more. Half an hour, 45 minutes. The body was unrecognizable, charred, you couldn't see her feet. Bald charred flesh. She was placed at an altar to la Santa Muerte there.

Court records show that the Barberena case was uncovered because a victim reported to the authorities. That survivor is one of the 16 women who testified at trial with their identities protected.

The owner of the bar El Pantanal, Adam Cerritos, had an estate with cornfields surrounded by coffee plantations. The farm was one of the more rural areas of the municipality, on the outskirts. This network at the same time it operated a sexual exploitation ring, also used forced labor in the fields. The same women who worked

Monday through Thursday the cornfields, from Friday to Sunday were abused by dozens of men in El Pantanal.

That farm, according to the testimonies collected prosecutor, and according to the trafficker I spoke to, was also a place of punishment and a hiding place for the criminal group. Women were hidden there when corrupt cops warned them of police sweeps from the Guatemalan capital. It was there where women who had been beaten so badly on that they were not fit for consumption by customers of El Pantanal, were forced to work in the fields. There they were also shown that punishments were serious.

How Mexico's Zetas Enslave Engineers

Paris Martinez for Animal Politico

The date was January 25, 2009, and Jose Antonio Robledo Fernandez was talking to his girlfriend on the phone as he parked his car in front of a mechanic shop in Monclava, Coahuila.

Jose Antonio was an engineer. He was born in Mexico City, but he had been living for months in this northern city, where he was working for a construction company known as ICA Flour Daniel.

He was good candidate for this job and others. Jose Antonio spoke perfect English and was experienced in installing sophisticated communications systems. His job in Monclava was to oversee ICA's sub-contractors in this municipality. Monclava may not have been Jose Antonio's first choice of places to work, but it was a chance for him to make some extra money so that he could get married.

Still, he had not taken into consideration the dangers around him. He didn't know, for instance, that the Zetas crime syndicate -- Mexico's fiercest and bloodiest group -- charged a so-called "operating tax" from the company that had contracted him. Nor did he know that some of the people he worked with also collaborated with the criminal group.

After he parked his 2004-model Xtrail in the mechanic's lot, three armed men approached Jose Antonio.

"Who do you work for?" one asked.

"With ICA," the engineer said.

"Give me the keys and get in," they told him.

The last thing Jose Antonio's fiancée heard was the men beating him.

Three years and ten months later, Jose Antonio is still missing. He is one of at least 36 professionals and skilled technicians who, in the last four years, have been snatched up by organized criminal groups -- not for ransom, but for enslavement.

"It is No Coincidence"

In 2011 alone, the Mexican Senate's Security Committee learned of nearly a dozen such cases in which professionals like Jose Antonio disappeared.

"The fact that skilled workers have been disappearing in these areas is no accident," says Felipe Gonzalez Gonzalez, head of the Senate Security Committee. "I said it in various security meetings, when the army and navy started to find antennas and

highly sophisticated systems; I am sure that the missing specialists were forced to develop that infrastructure."

Indeed, in September last year, the army dismantled a telecommunications network run by organized criminal groups in Jalisco. They found another one in Coahuila, and the navy found one in Veracruz, with 13 functioning antennas.

The most important discovery came on December 12, 2011, when the army found a clandestine radio communications network used by the Zetas, with stations in Nuevo Leon, Tamaulipas and San Luis Potosi. It had 167 antennas and 155 relay stations, linking 1,450 radios, 1,300 cell phones, and 1,350 Nextel devices -- all controlled by 70 computers.

The antennas were installed on hills and in remote, high-altitude locations in the northeast of the country, sometimes in spots that could only be reached by a five days' walk. Some of them even ran on solar energy.

So far in 2012, the armed forces have destroyed clandestine telecommunications facilities in Sonora (seven antennas and 20 relay stations), Chihuahua (one aerial and one relay station), Veracruz (13 antennas), Tamaulipas (two antennas and one relay station), and along the Monterrey-Nuevo Leon highway (one 50-meter wide antenna, and one relay station)

In total, more than 400 antennas and relay stations have been destroyed by the authorities.

"I don't see how it (the disappearance of the technicians) could have been a coincidence," said Senator Felipe Gonzalez, who served as secretary of the Bicameral Committee on National Security for six years, and who also chaired the Counter-terrorism Committee of the Latin American Parliament. "None of the systems engineers who disappeared have been found. Just last year armed men stopped a bus and forced two people who said they worked for a systems company to get out. The problem was they weren't technical specialists, but mere operators. They reappeared later, but were dead."

More and More and More

In 2010, the families of the disappeared in Coahuila created an organization to collectively express their frustration. The United Forces for the Disappeared in Coahuila (Fundec), has since tracked, between January 2007 and July 2012, a total of 256 victims of forced disappearance in that state. This does not include victims who were kidnapped for ransom. It includes only relatives of families that never received any ransom request, who had no criminal record or ties to organized crime, i.e., "innocent civilians."

In 2011, Fundec became the United Forces for the Disappeared in Mexico (Fundem). Since then, it has registered 80 more cases elsewhere in the country. Of these, 25 percent are reportedly professionals.

In addition to the case of Jose Antonio Robledo, Fundec has documented the forced disappearance of industrial engineer Dora Elba Solis Parrilla; marketing specialist Martha Dene Guerrero Guevara; banking executive Dan Jeremeel Fernandez Moran (who was taken by soldiers and police; after three were detained, they were themselves murdered by an armed group, which entered the lock-up to kill them).

There is also the cases of Antonio de Jesus Verastegui Escobedo, a student at Saltillo Technical Institute, and his father; veterinarians Isaias Uribe Hernandez and Juan Pablo Alvarado Oliveros; businessman Victor Adrian Rodriguez Moreno; biology professor Javier Burciaga Vazquez, and, 10 months later, his brother Luis Carlos.

Additionally, the families of 25 other professionals have reported kidnappings in Veracruz, Colima, Guadalajara, Nuevo Leon and Zacatecas. They are architects, engineers, oil technicians, financial specialists, doctors, and lawyers. Nelly Montealegre, a federal prosecutor who works on human trafficking, says she is aware of their cases, but she also admits with an innocent smile that there is not a single active investigation into them.

They Should Look for them Alive

On January 27, 2011, Alejandro Alfonso Moreno Baca got into his red Mazda and left Mexico City on his way to Laredo, Texas, where he planned to visit a friend. At kilometer 13 of the Monterrey-Nuevo Leon highway, near the Sabinas Hidalgo toll booth, he was stopped at a roadblock manned by Zetas gunmen. He has not been heard from since.

"It wasn't money that they wanted. They never communicated with us to demand a ransom payment," says Lucia Baca, Alejandro's mother. "So, we ask ourselves: Why do they take them? Why do they take them? There must be a logical reason: Why? Why? They are all young, and the authorities are looking for their bodies, looking for their graves, when they should be seeking them alive."

Lucia holds a missing person card with a picture of Alejandro in her hands while she speaks. Alejandro had been working at IBM-Mexico for four years when he was disappeared. Alejandro's father, Alfonso, sits next to his wife. He holds maps marked with the coordinates of the places their son crossed on the last day that they had news of him. They also have with the reports from his cell phone, and the photos of other victims who disappeared in that area.

"Between 2007 and October 2011, 16 people disappeared in that zone," says Alfonso. "We know of cases of victims who were coming from Monterrey, from Jalisco, from Guanajuato, all young: Miriam, Perfecto, Andres, Braulio, Ismael, and various others,

who all disappeared close to the Sabinas Hidalgo toll booth. There has been no ransom demand in any of these cases."

In fact, the Nuevo Leon-based civil society organization known as the Citizens in Support of Human Rights (CADHAC) calculates that, in 2011 alone, 800 people disappeared in the state, 200 of which were kidnapped from highways. Of these, CADHAC says 65 percent were kidnapped by members of criminal groups and the rest by police, Marines or soldiers.

Three days after Alejandro was kidnapped, his parents went to Monterrey to begin their search. They visited the offices of the federal police, where they were told not to worry.

"Your son will be given back to you in three months, and don't hurry to find the car, it will appear on some ranch somewhere," the on duty police officer told them.

"It was then that we became aware the scale of the corruption in the state," Alfonso explains. "We returned later only to realize that all the municipal police in Sabinas, starting with the commander, were protecting organized criminal groups. In fact, the man who was their commander is now in prison."

In January, on the stretch of highway near Sabinas, another systems technician was kidnapped, along with a teacher, two athletes and a student of international relations, among others.

"In Nuevo Laredo they are also investigating the kidnapping of two technicians who were taken from their homes," Alfonso says. "The common denominator is that they are all between 20 and 40 years old, both men and women. Those who are engineers or systems technicians are put to work creating their communications networks, and those who are specialists in other areas are put to work elsewhere... But that is the hope, that they are still alive, that they have them working, telling them they must obey or die. We must search for them alive."

In October last year, the army attacked a Zetas camp in Sabinas. There were allegedly an estimated 200 people at the camp. Twenty-two gunmen were reported dead. The rest fled during the fighting using mountain roads. It is not known there were people being held against their will among them.

"If they say that this narco-camp had 200 people, and the soldiers killed 22, then where are the other 178?" Alfonso wonders. "Why didn't the army get them, who were they, and where are they now?"

Nine...

Technicians started going missing in 2009, when a group of nine people contracted to install radio antennas in Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, were kidnapped by armed men. The nine were from Guasave, Sinaloa, and some had up to 10 years experience in installing communications equipment.

They had arrived at the border city some two weeks before, on a six-month work contract, where they had rented an apartment. At midnight on June 19, neighbors say a group of masked men in black uniforms, driving various dark-colored trucks, ordered them out of the house at gunpoint. Hours later, the kidnappers returned for the technicians' tools and vehicles. Since then, there has been no trace of them.

The case led the Senate to approve a memorandum in December 2009, calling on the federal authorities to: "Take the necessary steps to work with local and municipal security agencies in the state of Tamaulipas on investigations to swiftly locate the nine Sinaloans who went missing in Nuevo Laredo."

The case may be related to the workers' origins. The Zetas and the Sinaloa Cartel are arch-rivals. And the victims, according to Senator Mario Lopez Valdez, had been warned not to enter the territory of Nuevo Laredo, because of the insecurity in the state, and because they were Sinaloa natives, "which made them unwelcome."

Despite the federal plea for action, the investigation has stalled.

"They Get in the Way"

On January 27, 2009 -- 48 hours after the engineer Jose Antonio Robledo was kidnapped in Monclava, Coahuila, while speaking to his fiancée -- his parents, Guadalupe Fernandez y Jose Antonio Robledo Chavarria, reported the case in person to the state and municipal authorities. Their efforts lead nowhere.

"There is a lot of inefficiency and apathy on the part of the authorities," Guadalupe said. "In Monclava, even the officials at the Public Ministry made it clear that the fate of our son was not important to them."

However, in those first few days, they clinged to hope. Three days after speaking to the state and municipal authorities, they reported their case to the Attorney General's Office. Then they waited for a phone call, a demand for ransom. Instead, they got a visit from the ICA security chief, Joaquin Benito de Angel. He came with two others who said they members of the Zetas.

"They told us not to go to the police and that they controlled the ministerial police in Monclava as well as in Saltillo. They said that they were going to help us, and that our contact would be ICA's security chief," recounted Guadalupe. "They had all the information that we had given to the authorities. We talked for 15 minutes with those men, and as soon as the conversation ended and they left, we fled from the hotel and went straight to Saltillo to see deputy state prosecutor (Jesus) Torres Charles. We told him everything. We were very frightened, but he refused to add the information to the kidnapping report. 'It would risk the life of your son. Don't risk it,' he told us."

"Sometimes we feel terrible. We think that maybe it would have been better to negotiate with them, with the criminals, instead of trying to do things via the legal channels," Jose, Jose Antonio's father, said.

Torres Charles rose to become state attorney general and legal advisor to the current Governor Ruben Moreira, but then in February 2012, he was removed from public administration when it was discovered that his brother, Humberto Torres Charles, who worked for the Attorney General's Office in Coahuila, was taking 300,000 pesos a month from organized criminal groups in exchange for protection. Currently, the Attorney General's Office is offering a three million pesos reward to anyone who can give information leading to the capture of Humberto Torres Charles. Claudia Gonzalez Lopez, ex-delegate of the same federal institution in Coahuila, is also being held for her alleged links to the Zetas.

The Attorney General's Office told Jose Antonio's parents that five other engineers of ICA had also disappeared. Last year, the family of an ICA welder, who also disappeared in Monclova, approached them; they lost touch when that family stopped contacting them, perhaps out of fear. They found another case, an ICA engineer kidnapped in Michoacan, and the company admitted that some technicians had been taken, but it offered little support.

"Our son had been working for the company for a year and three months," Guadalupe said. "They sent him to Monclova, and when he disappeared, they didn't tell us anything. The only reason we found out anything was because his girlfriend was talking to him over the telephone when he was attacked."

"Two days after the kidnapping, on January 27, 2009, ICA distanced itself. They told us that whatever we did or wanted to do was our own business, that the company was not involved...The only thing that I managed to tell [them] was that my son had not arrived alone in Coahuila, that the company had brought him there, and that if they weren't going to do anything for him, we, his parents, would do it ourselves."

The disappearance has them still clamoring for answers.

"We know that the reason wasn't to get money from the family," Guadalupe explained. "Because they never got in touch with us to demand a ransom payment."

"We also know that the Zetas charge an operating tax from ICA, and that there are threats against their employees if they don't pay. In fact, this money is handed over to the criminals by two of the company's employees, colleagues of my son: Joaquin Benito, security chief, and the driver who took Jose Antonio from his house to work, and in whose car they found a submachine gun and 148 packets of cocaine."

The ICA employees, and three other accomplices, are now in prison. But they have refused to reveal what they did with Jose Antonio. They are charged with criminal conspiracy, murder and kidnapping.

Jose, Jose Antonio's father, says one of those detained was responsible for charging the "operating tax" from the companies that provided services to ICA. Jose Antonio was the one who made sure those firms fulfilled the technical requirements. Jose's theory is that it might have annoyed the criminal groups that Jose Antonio may have cut some of the companies that did not fulfill the requirements, but had already paid their quota to organized crime. Their utility was therefore measured by their ability to pay the criminals rather than do the work they were contracted to do.

When asked if it is possible that, given his professional profile, his son may still be alive, held prisoner by a criminal group, Jose hardened his gaze and measured his response word by word.

"I know that my son could have been useful to them: he spoke perfect English and had experienced with antennas. He could well be useful for setting up communications systems or for building clandestine airstrips...However, the situation in Mexico is not like that in Colombia, where the armed groups control areas of land where the criminals can keep their hostages prisoner for a long time, and with some measure of comfort.

"In Mexico there is a violence which is so primitive, so aggressive, so murderous, that even though some of the captives are initially used by the criminals, employed by them, I think that after a while the prisoners would get in the way. After they have been exploited, they become a danger...I hope they have him working somewhere, but I think that organized crime doesn't need to hold them indefinitely. When they need specialists they catch them, use them, and discard them; and when they need specialists again, well, they take more."

Of Slaves and Serfs: Guatemala's 'Occupied' Bodies

Alejandra Gutiérrez Valdizán for Plaza Publica

Organized crime networks dedicated to human trafficking have had a great deal of time to perfect their system and ally themselves with new players in Guatemala, including drug traffickers. Small criminal structures exploit indigenous women, trafficking them from rural areas to the capital. Dozens, maybe even hundreds, of women are trafficked from other countries to Guatemala by larger criminal organizations. Sexual exploitation -- in a country with high crime rates, a woeful human rights record and a judicial system that is only just starting to recognize it as a crime -- is flourishing.

Her Body is Her Body

In the nameless bar everything is a little grim, a little dirty, a little sad. A little like a funeral. One of the men grabs a woman by the belt, and they slowly stagger against the brightly lit jukebox without looking at each other. On a chair against the wall sits another woman with an older man, separated by a table cluttered with empty beer bottles. She is trying her hardest not to fall asleep, waking herself every now and again to serve a beer. In the corner of the room, there is, relative to the rest of the place, a festive atmosphere: A heavysset man sits with a woman clothed in luxurious güipil fabric, the colorful embroidery that distinguishes the various Mayan tribes in this country. The güipil is a sign of who is doing well economically -- these Mayan blouses use some of the finest cloth available in Guatemala.

The light in the room is dim. The walls -- dirtied and peeling -- are covered in posters of blonde, bikini-wearing models advertising beer. They stand in stark contrast to the Q'eqchi indigenous women who serve it.

The woman who was dancing with the man against the jukebox disappears from the scene. That will happen all night long: suddenly one of the four women will vanish with a man, returning half an hour later from one of the cheap motels around the corner.

The canteen is located on Ninth Avenue in the middle of Guatemala City. It is a dimly lit area with dirty walls, barred windows and pick-up trucks coughing smoke. Some refer to this place as "Tijuanita," or "Little Tijuana."

The area is in flux, as the government tries to rejuvenate the central district. Only three blocks away is the rejuvenated pedestrian area along Sixth Avenue, which is littered with newly opened cafes. Also, three blocks from Ninth, sits the government-sponsored National Culture Palace.

The women in the bar are suspicious at first and try to hide their surprise that we -- two women -- would enter a space where the unspoken rule is that only men are welcome. The usual clientele are those who pay double for a beer, a price that includes time with one of the “ficheras,” or escorts. Escorts earn commission based on the amount a “customer” of theirs drinks, essentially making it their job to get drunk with these men. Sometimes they will drink up to 24 beers a night, the escorts later confess to us.

The woman who was nearly falling asleep raises her glass in a toast and bursts into laughter. The man next to her drinks in silence. The one who was dancing passes. We ask her who owns the place. She answers by pointing to the happier contingent in the room: “Madam over there.”

The heavysset man, who is sitting next to the supposed “owner” in her güipil garment, approaches our table. He raises his voice in a feigned foreign accent, thinking we will understand him better.

“Good evening ladies. Welcome to my establishment,” he says, before asking us more directly what we are doing.

We tell him that we are out on the town -- which is a lie -- and that we came in the bar because we like jukeboxes -- which is the truth. We are feeling nostalgic, we tell him, and just want to get drunk. He is convinced, sits at our table and assures us that this is his bar; that the woman in the corner is just a manager.

He then dives in, without caution. He has a BMW. He went to university, though he mumbles when saying what exactly he studied (criminology maybe). He claims he is a former Kaibil, a member of Guatemala’s elite military commando unit.

“Do you have security problems here?” we ask, trying to be casual, like we are asking about the weather.

“No,” he answers, “And do you know why?” He lowers his voice, “I don’t give a shit, because I work in the presidency.”

Hidden under his shirt is an ID card, which he proudly shows us. On it is his photograph and the government logo. He quickly tucks it away. We get his name, but not his institutional affiliation.

“One time the police came and tried to extort me,” he continues. “But I have a buddy in the Office of Professional Responsibility (ORP). I rang him, told him what was happening and within 10 minutes they arrived.”

At this point it’s impossible to know how much of what he says is true and how much is just posturing.

“Usually I come by here in a government car, but I never come in when I do that. I just come by to collect money,” he says.

“Have any of the girls ever had problems with violent customers?” we ask him.

“That’s their problem,” he replies without thinking. “I don’t give a shit. They need to know how to look after themselves. A woman’s body is her body.”

Her body is her body. Their bodies are always drunk. They vanish between the curtains and reappear in a motel room with a stranger for under 100 quetzals (\$12). It’s not uncommon to find unidentified women murdered in these types of motels. Her body is her body.

He talks on, declaring he is also the owner of a private security firm. Then he receives a phone call, and leaves abruptly.

There are a few women left, and a table with some kids aged somewhere between adolescence and adulthood. And there is a solitary man and a youth in a baseball cap trying aggressively to get people to dance.

We invite the sleepy woman to join our table. She is tiny, dwarf-like. She puts Calle 13 (a Puerto Rican rap group) on the jukebox and now seems more awake. She is a single mother and former maid who tells us she started here after one of her friends invited her. She assures us she only drinks with the men and does not turn tricks. But the money is better than cleaning houses, and she makes enough to send back to the village where her three children still live.

With time, more emerges. They treat her poorly. They do not feed her enough. At least at the other place she worked, they fed her well. The conditions are startlingly inhuman. The girl sleeps in a back room where she is hidden away by a curtain behind the bar. These mattresses are normally placed on the floor in a crowded, busy area of the place, another sex worker tells us later.

It’s the same in other Tijuana places, that same sex worker tells us. They get 800 quetzals (\$100) a month for this work. This is about 40 percent of the legal minimum wage (2,040 quetzals). The salary is padded if the clients “occupy” them. In El Salvador the words “occupy” and “use” are synonymous. The dictionary says: “occupy: to take possession or take over a territory. To fill a space, a place.”

Three people are sitting at our table now, including the manager. Only the youngest of the girls stays behind the makeshift bar to serve beers. The customers are now drinking alone, though they remain intent on buying drinks for the girls and inviting them over to join them. We talk with the girls, smoke, listen to music and laugh together.

They are single mothers who come from small villages where they leave their children in the care of relatives. They have few employment options and so take jobs like this in non-descript places with names such as El Trebol, El Cerrito or La Terminal.

The manager is technically also the owner.

"The titles are in my name," she says proudly.

However, this carries risk. She is responsible for any transgression or police raid. Our friend from the presidential palace has little to worry about in this regard.

We ask the manager about violence against women here. She smiles.

"You can't be stupid. You can't think about it too much. You think about the money. Money is money," she says.

Money is money. That is the mantra. You can't think about the rest.

The police arrive on Ninth Avenue to carry out their routine weekend inspections. There is a 12-car convoy with armed officers at the back. The flashing lights illuminate the dilapidated area. Two agents enter the bar

"They already left," says one woman, referring to local drug traffickers.

The dealers often sell on street corners, but sometimes bring their trade inside the bar, whispers another woman.

"Nothing going on here," another woman says to the police. "My cousin is a cop," she adds.

The agents have a quick look around and leave. Nothing happens.

One of the clients in the bar admits to being a police officer. He pulls out a photo of himself in uniform. The women start to whisper among themselves that they must be careful with this one, as well as with the customer who has been aggressively trying to get people to dance. He has been stealing cell phones in the area, they say.

The dwarf-like woman perks up again, telling us she has a boyfriend and that he doesn't like the fact she has to work here. She lowers her voice so the boss doesn't hear and confides in us that the next day she will go to work at another bar called El Trebol where they feed their workers.

Suddenly, the manager -- the one who seemed so sure of herself; the one who said you just have to focus on the money and not the violence -- breaks down crying. She says her husband is in prison and that she is working to support her children who are being cared for by her mother in another province.

"Tomorrow I'm going to see my husband in prison," she says between sobs.

Soon, the regime's modus operandi becomes clearer. The dwarf-like woman says the male boss carries a gun. It's not surprising. In Guatemala, there are 14 million people and over 1 million guns, 800,000 of which are not properly registered.

It's still raining outside when we leave. The women stay at the table. The mood is downbeat. Thinking of their children has made them sad.

The noise of the rain and cars on the street drown out the sounds. Couples continue to enter cheap motels. You can no longer hear the sound of the jukebox in the nameless bar.

In the Maze

That nameless bar seems normal, harmless almost. The women are not tied up and seemingly not forced to be there. There are no open displays of force, or armed men walking around. The owner of the nameless bar is just a one man.

But in reality, this man forms part of a micro-criminal network. In Guatemala, sexual exploitation -- including brokering or "pimping" sex -- is against the law. The network that operates in bars such as the one we visited lures victims into working there, then enslaves them.

In businesses scattered throughout the Guatemalan capital, and in urban areas throughout the country, this system plays out in the following way: captors seek women in small villages, deceiving them with the promise of work to get them to leave; or paying their families for their "services." In isolated cases, they simply take the women by force. They bring the women to bars where they live in poor conditions under the "care" of fellow females, who are in charge of administering the criminal network.

Not all the workers are physically coerced. Another category of women enter the trade out of sheer necessity after reaching the brink of economic collapse, in order to support themselves and their families. These same desperate women later recruit others like them, and the vicious cycle continues.

Most of these women end up low-scale bars -- nicknamed "cevicheria," "chicarroneria," or "comedor." But some find their way to more luxurious places, which work as "night clubs." All of them are sexually exploited.

Sex trafficking networks are woven together with invisible threads. Experts, prosecutors and academics all say that the crime is difficult to detect. The victims sometimes do not even know they are being victimized. Discovering the extent of the networks is also difficult.

The United Nations says the phenomenon is gigantic, that human trafficking networks are global and that their victims may number in the millions. The majority are women and children, trafficked between countries or in their own countries through

deception, manipulation and force. The sum total of these crimes points to one conclusion: this is modern-day slavery.

Kevin Bales, author of the book “Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy,” says there are important things that distinguish it from traditional means of slavery: there is no paperwork to prove who is the owner of the slave; the low cost of acquisitions and the high returns; and the temporary nature of the abuse that means a constant turnover of victims.

After drug and arms trafficking, human trafficking may be the most lucrative illicit business in the world. Bales says there are up to 27 million slaves in the world, and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) says the business generates up to \$32 billion in annual profits.

Laundering proceeds from this business is easy in places like Guatemala. The country is one of only nine in the world where the Treasury cannot legally verify whether declared income matches the amount deposited into bank accounts.

Enslavement has many different faces and masks. It's not necessary to have victims chained to stop them leaving. The shackles are far heavier and more perverse: poverty, desperation, the lack of opportunity, deception, violence, blackmail, and emotional manipulation. Detecting this crime is like trying to find a fish in a lake that is clouded by oil.

Sexual exploitation has long been a crime in Guatemala, but nameless bars and “night clubs,” and the clients that frequent them, normally escape scrutiny. Society and the law give them a pass. The women are the focus, but the fact they are forced to be there seems to be overlooked.

In 2009, the National Commission for Adolescents and Children estimated that some 15,000 children and adolescents were victims of human trafficking in the country. The true number is unclear, however, especially when looking at figures from the Interior and Public Ministries. Activists responsible for providing shelter to victims say the issue is far more serious than the government estimates.

Leonel Dubon, director of the non-governmental organization Casa Alianza and founder of the Shelter Home for Children, which specializes in housing victims of sexual violence and trafficking, has registered 120 human trafficking cases so far this year and says there are certain regions of the country -- Alta and Baja Verapaz in particular -- where cases of missing women are detected far more regularly than official figures register.

Alexander Colop, a lawyer who leads human trafficking investigations for the Attorney General's Office, doesn't risk giving figures. The system that his office has used up until now does not differentiate between the various forms of trafficking (illegal

adoption, sexual and labor exploitation). Colop avoids making projections regarding the phenomenon due to ongoing investigations by the Attorney General's Office.

"You hear a lot of stories about trafficking, but without detailed studies we can't get reliable information," he stated.

Through August this year, the Attorney General's Office received 446 reports of trafficking. The Interior Ministry, meanwhile, had only registered 80 reports through July. Colop recognizes the statistical deficiency and says that the Attorney General's Office is implementing a new system to track and record the crime. However, the Attorney General's Office, the Interior Ministries, and the Human Rights Ombudsman's Office all present varying reports on human trafficking.

In 2009, as part of the law against sexual violence, exploitation and human trafficking, the government created the Secretariat against Violence, Sexual Exploitation and Human Trafficking (SVET). Three years later, this August, the SVET submitted a report and signed an agreement with the International Migration Organization to carry out monitoring.

The SVET signed the accord during a visit by Najat Maalla M'jid, the UN Special Rapporteur on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography. During her visit, Maalla found that it was impossible to get an accurate picture of the state of child trafficking in Guatemala, "due to the varying data from different government institutions." She also found that the institutions did not understand their roles.

Maalla's conclusion can be extrapolated to the case of adult trafficking. Guatemalan law criminalizes "the promotion, facilitation or favoring of prostitution," meaning that it prohibits the practice to the same extent as say, Sweden. However, there is a kind of tacit agreement between institutions -- the police and municipal governments, for example -- that if there are no allegations of wrongdoing, sexual exploitation will not be investigated.

There are a number of state institutions, secretariats and ministries involved in the prevention and prosecution of human trafficking, yet it appears that they all function in isolation rather than working together. They would, it seems, prefer to tackle cases as they arise instead of going after the root of the problem.

Until a few months ago, despite the law against prostitution, sex workers were obliged to carry a health card which showed whether or not they had any sexually transmitted diseases. The law implied that the Health Ministry sanctioned prostitution. This double standard leaves women vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

There's Nothing Good in this Kind of Life

Carolina is tired. She has teeth missing and rough skin, with caramel colored eyes and hair tied in a bun. She carries a baby strapped to her back. They have come from a

clinic where she had to wait in line for several hours. Today, she will find refuge in this well-lit house with high ceilings and white walls.

This is the Organization for Women's Empowerment (OMES). Here, sex workers learn to make crafts and jewelry. They receive sex education classes and psychological therapy. In one of the rooms you can hear the teacher recite: "Your body is your body."

OMES tries to make it clear that sex work is an option, but that the women should know that no one has the right to exploit them. It teaches them about other life options. Dozens of women go through its doors, many of them between 50 and 60 years old. OMES director Yanira Tobar says one of their regular visitors is an 84-year-old woman who prostitutes herself in the main bus terminal.

Tobar is a sex worker. The key for her is "dignity," and making one's own decisions. But she recognizes that it is sometimes difficult to discern whether the choice has been made by the individual or whether they have been trafficked, exploited because of their desperate situation.

One woman at OMES agrees to speak to us. "Carolina" asks that we only use her working name. Her real name is a beautiful play on words, but few people know it: she has spent too long now being Carolina.

She was born in San Vicente, El Salvador. She never knew her father and her mother died when she was 9 years old. She grew up with her grandparents until they died, then went to live with her aunt. At 14, her aunt took her to Guatemala, telling her she would work cleaning houses.

"The first night I arrived the madam of the house made me wash a pile of dishes," she recounts. "She told me to wash and then go to a little room where I'd find some clothes. I asked, 'You mean to sleep?' And she replied, 'No. Your aunt didn't tell you what you're going to be doing here? This is a brothel.' Luckily, I had studied until third grade and understood what she meant."

Carolina continued, "'I've never worked as a prostitute before,' I told the woman. She simply said, 'No you haven't, but you're going to start here.' I told her I was scared and she said again that I would start here, and that I was going to see how quickly I would start to like it.

"I bathed and she gave me a towel. 'In the closet is a pair of shoes you're going to wear,' she said to me. When I opened the closet there was a big man there. He startled me. 'I came to get some shoes,' I said. 'You're not going to find shoes in here,' he replied. 'Take off the towel. I'm going to be your first customer. You've come here to be a whore.'"

"I started to shake. He was drunk; I could smell it on his breath. 'If you don't do it willingly, you're going to have to do it the hard way. Lie down,' he said. I lay down, very afraid. 'You've never been married?' he asked. 'No.'

"He took out his penis and put Vaseline on it. He then started to touch me, grabbing me hard on the back and violating me with his fingers. 'Don't move because nobody is going to help you here,' he said. Fearing something worse would happen, I did nothing. I bled a lot. I was only 14 years old. My back hurt afterwards, and I had a headache -- maybe it was emotional, maybe fever. 'I feel like I have the flu,' I told the madam of the house. She just threw me some pills."

Carolina was locked in the house for three years. There were two other minors in the house, she says. The owner would tie her hands and feet, and beat her. Occasionally she was allowed to go to the market with another person, but always dressed as a boy.

As she talks, Carolina is holding her baby, the child she had in confinement.

Who was the father?

One of the clients, she replies.

The owner of the house never paid Carolina. She said Carolina should take it up with her aunt, and that Carolina owed the madam money for the shoes, clothes and makeup she used. Carolina suspected that the woman paid the police in cash. She said some officers were also clients. There was even a lesbian officer who used to come to the house, she says.

At 17, Carolina took her child and told the security manager she was going to buy tortillas. She fled, but not far. In another part of the city, she started selling herself on the streets.

"I kept working as a prostitute," she recounts. "You're treated slightly differently there, but ultimately it is all the same because you're still a victim. They sexually abuse you and don't pay. They beat you. There's nothing good in this kind of life."

Eventually Carolina went to another brothel. Then she lived with a man with whom she had seven children. He was an alcoholic who beat her. Still, that was better than her previous existence. "He gave me a decent life," she says now.

Her first child, the one who was born while she was locked in the house for three years, was killed in Mazatenango a few years ago. Another child died at 5 months. She eventually left her partner because of the abuse and went back to the streets where she became addicted to drugs and alcohol. There, she fell in love with a man who lived on the streets and had a child with him as well. This is the baby she carries in her arms as she speaks me at OMES.

Carolina's story is typical. At the time she was sold there were no laws against what her aunt did. And for a long time, she believed she was helping her aunt pay off some kind of debt.

Rodolfo Kepfer, a psychiatrist who has dedicated his life to working victims of violence, says this type of exploitation is not new.

"It has always existed," he says. "Remember, in the 1970s you had many Salvadoran women working here in brothels. Many indigenous women began arriving from rural areas as well and the bars took them in with open arms."

Kepfer speaks about the 1970s. What happened to Carolina was in 1985. In other words, human trafficking and sexual exploitation has existed in Central America for decades. How many women have been exploited? How many women like Carolina are scarred, still imprisoned or on the streets? How many trafficking networks have been strengthening and perfecting their operations?

A Common Story, Retold

Alexander Colop, recognized by many as a diligent and honest prosecutor, does not theorize or make generalizations. This man, who has led cases against many traffickers and dismantled numerous trafficking networks, prefers to use examples. One case he uses to illustrate how traffickers work is that of the "Nicaraguan woman."

Dinora is from Leon, Nicaragua, a single mother and a victim of domestic abuse. She was raped by her stepfather. She dropped out of sixth grade and started working at a job that didn't provide enough to live on. A man who she had had a relationship with and who lived nearby told her that he could find her a job as a waitress or a maid.

Dinora went to Guatemala City and was taken to a place named Cow Boys III. It is on Marti Street, a busy thoroughfare where all traffic coming from the Atlantic Coast passes through on its way downtown. Cow Boys had legal paperwork that defined it as a nightclub. Once Dinora arrived, her passport was taken away and she was forced into prostitution.

Guatemalan prosecutors began investigating Cow Boys after receiving reports from Nicaragua. When they spoke to Dinora, but she remained silent, saying she was there voluntarily. The other girls did the same while the girls' "caretaker," or more accurately their trafficker, pretended to be one of the sex workers.

When immigration officials arrived, they decided to simply expel all of the sex workers from the country. Since there was no formal complaint about what was happening in the nightclub, and since the women did not file a report, none of them was considered a victim. The victims and their caretaker got on a bus that was to take them to their country of origin. But at the border a taxi was waiting to bring them all back.

This time, the women were taken to a house in another area where they were locked up and exploited. After a few months, Dinora managed to escape, made it to the police and begged them to take her back to Nicaragua. Instead, the police took her to immigration services where they tell her she must pay a fine for exceeding her time allowed in the country. The fine is a ruse to extract money from her: Guatemala and Nicaragua form part of the CA4, which allows the free movement of citizens between four Central American countries and permission to stay for six months in a country without obtaining a visa.

Desperate, Dinora called a client of hers, who gave her money for a taxi and told her to go to the Human Rights Ombudsman's Office. There she met Sandra Gualarte, the head of the Attorney General's Unit for the Prevention of Human Trafficking. Gualarte could tell immediately that Dinora was a victim. Gualarte remembers her well.

"[She was] a dark skinned girl without any hair, wearing a hat. I never asked her why she had no hair because there was little point in doing so," she tells us.

Gualarte handed the case to the Attorney General's Office where an investigation enabled them to unravel the network operating Cow Boys III. Dinora gave evidence to the authorities and was given a full psychological exam before being returned to Nicaragua, where she lives under a false name.

Colop, the prosecutor, managed to build what seemed like a solid case, including evidence submitted by another victim who worked at the same place as Dinora, and by Nicaraguan authorities. The defense lawyers, however, said there was no evidence that any crime had been committed. They said the psychological assessment showed Dinora had not suffered from the trauma normally associated with a trafficking victim, and that Dinora had come to Guatemala voluntarily. The defendants were acquitted.

Colop has not given up. He and Sagastume are certain that Dinora is a victim, but the burden of proof is on them and, of course, Dinora, since the victim must themselves be convinced that they have been victimized. Adding to this is the transnational nature of the crime. Guatemala is country where many migrants transit and many end up staying. A large number of these are women. The question is: how many of them end up being victims?

The country's nearly-constant tumult makes it a prime recruiting ground: its 36-year civil war, the 1976 earthquake, ongoing violence, a state which neglects the outlying provinces, the stream of rural migrants moving to the cities. According to the Institute of Economic and Social Research (IDIES) in the Rafael Landivar University, 57 percent of Guatemala's internal migrants are women who in the majority of cases go to the capital or other urban areas. Many women go to work in domestic services. Many others end up as sex slaves.

Then there are the foreigners. Thousands of migrants from Central Americans pass through Guatemala on their way north. One in every five Hondurans lives in the United States, and one in three Salvadorans. Claudia Lopez of the National Bureau for Migration (MENAMIG) says there is no information on how many undocumented migrants remain in Guatemala, nor is there information on how many become victims of trafficking and sexual exploitation.

The Turbulent River

Suchiate River, which separates Guatemala and Mexico, is like a duty free zone but rather than smelling like perfume, it smells like shit. Goods, migrants and temporary workers are moved down the river on wooden planks strapped to tractor tires. The journey is treacherous. During the rainy season people sometimes die, and their bodies wash up 20 kilometers downriver in the ocean.

Makeshift rafts piled up with soap, toilet paper, two-liter bottles of soda, pipes, biscuits and sweets come from Mexico to Guatemala via the river. Second-hand clothing, fruit and vegetables go the other way. Men line up like ants to help unload the goods. Official check points are just a kilometer away from the rickety flotillas. There are also police pick-up trucks on both sides of the border. But no one interferes with all the informal economic activity.

People also cross here. Some of them arrive penniless and have to stay, scratching out a living. The Suchiate becomes a place where people wait in a state of limbo, either for a job, a lucky break, or a guy who will pay for sex.

A motorcycle taxi driver signals to one of the liquor stores with wooden walls and beer advertisements painted on it. It's midday, and a group of women stand outside, waiting.

On the Mexican side of the river, it's illegal to open a bar at this time of day. They can only operate when the sun goes down. "No drugs, no guns and no uniformed men," it says on the outside of the bars. Women prefer to work in Mexico because in Guatemala everyone carries a gun, a few of them told us. In Ciudad Hidalgo, the Mexican side, the brothels and liquor stores lie along the abandoned train line.

In one bar called Charlie's, there are three women. A tall, strong, dark woman from Honduras, a flirtatious Mexican woman of medium height, and a short, very quiet Guatemalan. Mariana, the Honduran, is the "administrator." The girls only provide company. They don't turn tricks. If she wanted, Mariana says, pointing to the Guatemalan, she could make good money turning tricks.

Clients are always looking for something new, she adds, referring to the young girls, who seem to cross the Suchiate to the Mexican side every day.

Sex workers lose their value as they get older. Those who are 30 to 35 are too old.

"We're like shoes," OMES director Tobar explained. "We get worn out."

Mariana folds napkins while the fan whirs in the background. She is keen to tell us that the bar where she works -- the owner is also the boss of a grocery store on the corner -- is not like the other ones up the street. In those bars there are hidden rooms where there are "many Central American minors," who are forced to work, she says.

On the surface, the town seems quiet, normal. In the police station there is a board with a list of positive and negative "events" on it. The positives are captures; the negatives crimes. The list is dominated by traffic accidents and fights, with three or four murders registered in the year. There is no mention of human trafficking or sexual exploitation. The police officer sitting at a computer doesn't know why these crimes are not part of their purview. They patrol the bars, he says, but just to make sure there is no fighting.

Not far away is the Migrants' House in Tecun Uman. It is a neat, solid building, painted blue, with a mural that tells the story of the migrant's flight: a tree with its roots torn up.

Brazilian priest Ademar Barilli is the director. Barilli is critical of the press, and of the academics who after a few days of interviews write books expounding on the phenomenon of migration. Critical, above all, of the politicians and governments that turn their back on the migrants' situation, on what is happening in the country that causes them to flee. He mistrusts government forums and conferences, and organizations that waste tons of resources and time discussing the problems that he is trying to solve in this place he founded 15 years ago.

"There has always been trade in a certain form," he explains. "Now the situation is more dramatic with organized crime, the groups. I don't blame everything on the Zetas. Not everyone is part of the Zetas. Now is the moment of the Zetas and the Alfas and the gangs. But all this has been possible because migration has been criminalized. If Mexico gives out visas, everyone will get on a plane and the violence ends. There wouldn't be a need for the coyotes, the traffickers. The same policies in the United States have created and fomented and enriched the trafficking of persons. They are also guilty of causing violence."

Barilli says that almost all the Central American women have had to "take jobs" when they arrive along the border, because they have no money.

"When I say 'job' you know what I mean," he says, without a hint of irony. "Dancing, prostituting themselves, serving everyone, because it's not just the narcos, it's the whole world that looks for those places, [and the women] need money. They're victims, but the same system that criminalizes migrants keeps them from reporting [abuse]. The majority of them have children, and they need to support their families."

For Barilli, the key is prevention.

"We know that each migrant is a possible victim of trafficking and that women are the most vulnerable because they are women," he says. "The crux of the matter is keeping them from becoming victims. Why do we have to wait until they die to help them?"

Barilli speaks from experience, his encounters with the drama of the migrants. From the blue house he sees human beings go by who perhaps, despite his warnings, could fall into the net of human trafficking.

There's no better description for these organizations than that of a "net." It's a fabric that crosses borders, rivers, and carries its victims in planes, in trucks or pickups. It attracts poor women from the towns of Verapaces to rundown cantinas in the capital, or those who seek to go north.

It's difficult to identify victims. They are in the shadows. But it's even more complicated to identify those who exploit them: they are the shadows.

The Hands that Weave the Nets

There's a diverse range of niches in the market and a diverse range of organizations that take advantage of them. Sandra Gularte, of the ombudsman's office, defines three types of traffickers. First, there is the lone trafficker who is a relative or acquaintance of the victim. This person sells her. There is no relation to organized crime, though the consequences are similar for the victim.

Then there are the small networks of three or four people who buy or coerce women - including those who feign romantic relationships in order to convince them. These groups trick women by offering them work as maids or waitresses and then selling them in bars. These "medium" networks, as Gularte defines them, supply women to businesses with a "lower and middle class market." The Guatemalan victims are often taken from a poor region and transferred to a less poor one -- for example, the Q'eqchi women in the nameless cantina at the beginning of this story.

Finally, there are the big networks that coordinate with networks in other countries. "Mafiosos, politicians, military men, businessmen, industrialists, religious leaders, bankers, police, judges, assassins, and average men make up an enormous chain in the international map of organized crime that has existed throughout centuries," asserts journalist Lydia Cacho in the investigation "Esclavas del Poder" (Slaves of Power). For this large machine to function, the gears have to be oiled. And one of the principal oils, without doubt, is that of the officials who ignore the problem and, even worse, are part of it.

"The ones who get caught, normally, are the lone traffickers and those in small networks," Gularte says. "But the traffickers from the big networks aren't brought to justice. Those aren't touched."

Colop from the Attorney General's Office says he has no cases that implicate government officials. He only remembers one case in which it was rumored that the owner of a brothel was a police captain, but it was never proven. Carlos Menocal, interior minister during the government of Alvaro Colom (2008-2012), says it's hard to know who runs these networks. They use third parties and figureheads.

There are other explanations: impunity, lax migratory controls, an overwhelmed justice system, under-prepared personnel. Or, even worse, that the networks are shielded by economic and political powers. But the one constant in the booming trade of trafficking and sexual exploitation is drug trafficking.

The Long Shadow

July 2011 must be marked in red on the calendar. That month two isolated incidents would reveal to authorities the workings of organized crime in Guatemala. On July 11, gunmen killed Argentine singer-songwriter Facundo Cabral in Guatemala City. On July 12, police raided a country house in Ixcán, Quiché, in northeastern Guatemala on the border with Mexico, and captured a number of suspected drug traffickers.

Cabral was murdered while on his way to the airport with a Nicaraguan concert promoter called Henry Fariñas. Fariñas didn't just organize concerts, though. He used his nightclub as a center of prostitution and to launder drug money. The Fariñas case - the victim turned assailant - was eventually transferred to Nicaragua, where he was tried and convicted for drug trafficking, money laundering, identity fraud, and organized crime.

According to the Nicaraguan attorney general, Fariñas' businesses have laundered \$3 million since 2005. The one charged with killing Cabral is Alejandro Jimenez, alias "El Palidejo." Jimenez is on trial in Guatemala for murder and attempted murder. He does not face the charges that the Nicaraguan and Costa Rican attorney generals have placed against him: drug trafficking and money laundering.

The murder of Cabral revealed information about the Central American trade and the system of money laundering through "legal" businesses. But at the same time it leaves a big question unanswered: Why are neither of the two, Fariñas or Jimenez, being tried for human trafficking or sexual exploitation?

The party the day after the murder of Cabral in July of 2011, with horse races, liquor, girls, and music, didn't end how the organizers hoped it would. Investigators had their eyes on unusual activity in the tiny town. The party had hardly begun when a leak alerted party-goers to the pending raid. They fled -- in vehicles and on foot, into the mountains -- leaving behind a home video, weapons, and cash. The evidence was enough for authorities to make a series of arrests and raids which would yield valuable information about the Zetas in Guatemala. Indeed, over the next few days, 21 people were arrested, among them four Mexican women.

"In addition to moving drugs, the capo traffics young women, to prostitute them and introduce them into clandestine networks of prostitution," says Carlos Menocal, who was Guatemala's interior minister at the time of the raid. The "narcofiesta" on the farm in Ixcan is the clearest example, he says.

"The young [Mexican] women confessed to the investigators that they were victims of forced recruitment," he says. "Almost all of them were from Tamaulipas. They came clandestinely and in many cases in collaboration with the police, who even transported them while on patrol."

The former minister explains that the women, who were freed and repatriated to Mexico, didn't identify any members of the organization, though he says they did "contribute to the clear understanding that the problem of trafficking is not one that just goes from south to north, but also that the narco himself brings young women from Mexico to Guatemala."

The former minister said the authorities found evidence of trafficking in other Zeta-controlled territory as well, including Coban, Huehuetenango, Quetzaltenango, and Quiche.

"There's documented evidence of young women on the payroll," he says.

But even with these facts, with this evidence, there are contradictions in how the networks work.

"I was in charge of hiring the prepaid girls," says Mariela, a false name given to the woman who worked for the Zetas. "Prepaid" women are the sex workers who agree in advance on a meeting place and the price for their services.

Mariela says one of her duties was to make contact with agencies to hire women, especially Colombians, who were taken to private parties. She doesn't mention if there was some kind of business directly related to the sex trade or exploitation inside "the company," as she calls the organization.

Menocal says there are various branches within the Zetas' organization: one for arms trafficking, one for drugs, and many for the sex trade. It's possible that one wing could contract women and not make use of the organization's own networks.

There are two cases that illustrate how these specialized networks function. One was a well-oiled structure that tricked women into coming from Colombia and kept them in Guatemala by force. They also told the women that if they fled, the traffickers would kill their families in their home country. One of the women threw a piece of paper out of a window, which helped investigators rescue the victims and arrest the Guatemalan and Colombian traffickers.

Then there was the “Jordan network.” According to Menocal, this network lured Guatemalan women to Jordan using false promises of domestic work to trap them into prostitution in subhuman conditions. It also was involved in human trafficking within Guatemala. The “Jordan network” revealed how one organization can work with different types of clients and in different places. While it was taking women to Jordan, it was also exploiting women in exclusive brothels and running various businesses in the city.

And that is how the victims are revealed, little by little -- because they succeed in escaping, because they find support, because some investigations work, because a raid is successful or because of some lucky break. The identity of the owners of these criminal networks is, however, harder to determine.

In the end, these stories are like a trapeze act in a sordid circus. The audience, drunk and macho, watches the show while applauding hysterically -- with glassy eyes and full wallets, with credit cards. The networks: big, medium, small, violent or manipulative. Tense, well-spun. Waiting. The trapeze artists: their sweaty hands are holding on to a feeble bar. They're balanced, each with a different story, but with chapters in their biographies that seem exactly the same. With leotards of mended possibilities. The invisible and lethal revolver of necessity, of children to care for, of absent parents, of domestic violence, of lack of education, is aimed at them.

They leap. And they fall.

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