

This Is Where Women Are Seeking Peace In The World's Most Violent Country

El Salvador's former first lady has founded six miniature cities spread throughout the country as a place where women can learn, grow, and escape from the death that looms outside. BuzzFeed News' Karla Zabudovsky reports from Usulután, El Salvador.

By Karla Zabudovsky

USULUTÁN, El Salvador — The threat came from inside a prison: Leave town or your body parts will be found inside trash bags.

Idalia's hand shook as she handed back the phone to the gang members her husband had hired to deliver her death sentence. On the other end of the line their boss had given her the ultimatum. She had come to expect violent outbursts from husband — he had beaten, raped, and choked her for the past 15 years — but involving a gang leader was a first.

Idalia, who requested that her last name not be revealed for fear of reprisals, needed time to think about whether she would stay with her daughters or heed the warning and leave everything she shared with her husband behind.

Days later, she lay in bed listening as the teenagers who'd delivered the message returned, stomping on the roof, reminding her that time was running out.

"I'm still terrified to ask for help," she said, nearly a year after the episode, putting her arm out to show how it was covered in goosebumps.

“Men continue thinking they own women.”

When Idalia, 37, decided she would defy his orders, her husband hired a hitman to kill her. Luckily for her, the assassin was himself thrown in jail before he could carry out the hit. Desperate to find out what was going on, Idalia went to visit her would-be killer in prison and found out how much her husband had paid to get rid of her. “\$10,000. That’s it,” she said in disbelief, crying quietly.

In El Salvador, where warring gangs have unleashed an unprecedented bloodbath, turning it into the country with the highest murder rate in the world, women’s lives are almost worthless. “Men continue thinking they own women,” said Alba Evelyn Cortez, a consultant on gender issues at El Salvador’s legislative assembly.

It is, frankly, terrifying to be a woman in El Salvador. The staunchly Catholic country of six million on the Pacific coast of the Central American isthmus is one of the most *machista* and patriarchal in the region.

Systematically beaten, raped, and killed in a country that has rarely held their aggressors accountable, women have become even more vulnerable since a government-brokered truce between the country’s two main gangs collapsed in 2014, experts and activists say. In 2012, when the truce was signed, homicides dropped by 60% from the previous year, but last year they shot up past pre-truce levels: There were 6,653 homicides — an average of 18 per week, or 115 for every 100,000 people.

This violence has spilled from the street into people's homes. "Gang members are at the center of families," said Silvia Juárez, of the Organization of Salvadoran Women for Peace, or ORMUSA, a nonprofit. "The violence that women in El Salvador face is more lethal now."

Femicides, or the killing of women because of their gender, have been on the rise in recent years. In 2014, there were 183 cases of femicide, up from 98 the previous year, though the numbers are believed to be significantly underreported. But it's not just femicides: The rate at which women are being killed is rising faster than men. Last year, women made up 8.6% of all homicides, up from 7.5% the previous year, according to the [Institute of Legal Medicine](#).

Despite this, there are few resources available for women who suffer domestic violence. The Salvadoran Institute for the Development of Women, a government agency, has just one overnight shelter for victims of domestic violence, making it impossible for most women to reach.

In recent years, however, a glimmer of hope has emerged in the figure of the former first lady, Vanda Pignato. She has led a campaign to bring women's rights into the mainstream, and has built six centers — known as Ciudad Mujer (or Women's City) — around the country, offering women a place where they can seek help. And most importantly, they can do so anonymously — essential in a country where speaking out against your male abusers can be fatal.



Idalia, who agreed to let BuzzFeed News publish her picture, at one of the Ciudad Mujer sites. *Karla Zabudovsky / BuzzFeed News*

It was 2014 and everyone in Idalia's neighborhood in the southern city of Usulután could tell she was barely surviving. One day, one of her neighbors, a state employee, pulled Idalia aside and told her about Ciudad Mujer, where women can do everything from seeking treatment for abuse-related injuries and getting small-business loans to attending talks about eating disorders or taking software development classes.

In a country where the cards are stacked against women, Ciudad Mujer saved Idalia's life.

"I was beyond destroyed when I first came here," she said, nervously pushing her hair behind her ears at a conference room in a Ciudad Mujer center. Shortly after she first went there, Idalia started seeing a psychologist, who convinced her to divorce her abusive husband. Ciudad Mujer employees helped her develop a life plan shortly after, advising her on how to set up a business, get her house back, and teach her daughters about their rights.

Women's rights advocates contend that Ciudad Mujer forced the state to make an investment in women for the first time in the country's history. "It marks a before and after," said Juárez, of ORMUSA. Other Latin-American countries like Honduras, the Dominican Republic, Paraguay, and Bolivia, where violence against women is also rampant, are planning to build their own Ciudad Mujer outposts.

A visit with Pignato to one of her Ciudad Mujer centers revealed how important they are to the former first lady, who is almost missionary in her desire to protect women. Sitting cross-legged and barefoot in an SUV on the way to a center 45 minutes away from the capital city, San Salvador, she said that living in her husband's shadow during the presidential campaign of 2009 — no longer Vanda but "the candidate's wife" — sparked her desire to bring Salvadoran women to the foreground.

"Ciudad Mujer is born out of my indignation at being forced to become invisible. I decided to look at the invisibles, like myself," said the Brazilian-born lawyer who supported the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua and the guerrilla groups during El Salvador's civil war in the 1980s.

Pignato, who cut off her shoulder-length hair last year while undergoing treatment for cervical cancer, flashed a broad smile while walking through Ciudad Mujer. She embraced visitors and told them she loved them; some wanted selfies with her. Pignato asked after a middle-aged woman who she knew had had a mammogram a week earlier and congratulated another woman holding a months-old baby, caressing its face.



Karla Zabudovksy / BuzzFeed News

Everything at the center is designed to educate girls and women about their rights: the coloring books at the daycare center contain illustrations of angry-looking men, below the caption: “The right to be protected from abuse”; the table mats at the

cafeteria explain the Comprehensive Law for a Violence-Free Life for Women, passed in 2011.

The hallways connecting the various brick buildings were flanked by healthy, well-tended lawns. Even though each Ciudad Mujer site is visited by as many as 240 women every day, the public spaces were impeccably clean and tidy. They were quiet except for the chirping of birds and the low hum of conversation.

Pignato noted that the peaceful atmosphere is not accidental, explaining that said she envisioned the project not just as a safe refuge for women but as a place where they could regain their dignity, a sliver of peace, and a sense of self-worth.

A group of straw-hatted women walked around a vegetable garden behind the center, immersed in one of the courses meant to give women financial independence. In order to participate in these, women must agree to share their newly acquired skills with six other women. Pignato noted that they were wearing regular shoes because women's-size rubber boots don't exist in the country — a sign of the reigning *machista* attitude.

“This government doesn't understand that in order to combat violence it needs to attack gender violence,” said Pignato.

Combatting gender violence, said Pignato, starts at home. Her personal starting point? Teaching her 8-year-old son to cook, an activity generally reserved for women.

Pignato was engaging and excitable with the staff but admitted that the last two years had been exhausting, not least as she is still recovering from her treatment. (She was briefly hospitalized a week earlier after fainting during a visit to a center.) Her personal life became tabloid fodder when her husband, former president

Mauricio Funes, had a very public affair with another woman during his last year in office. At the time, she stayed with Funes until his term ended because, she said, leaving him would have destabilized the electoral process and possibly led to the defeat of his left-wing party. But now that she has separated from him, she tirelessly devotes herself to women's rights.



Vanda Pignato *Karla Zabudovksy / BuzzFeed News*

Idalia doesn't live far from the Ciudad Mujer site in Usulután, but getting there is a tedious process: She weaves her way around the stalls in a nearby market, curling her back to make herself a few inches shorter, all the while looking over her

shoulder. It's a precautionary measure in case her former husband has hired someone to report on her whereabouts.

It's a valid concern: Late last year, after she had begun visiting Ciudad Mujer, Idalia received a call from him. By then, he had taken all of her savings, kicked her out of the family business, and moved his new girlfriend into their home.

Her husband's viperous voice floated through the receiver. "In this life, the smartest one wins. And you are a fool."

While women are safe inside Ciudad Mujer, getting there is unnerving for many. The merest suspicion that a woman is going to snitch on a gang member is enough to put her life at risk.

And despite the good intentions, women remain vulnerable. "The state, once again, arrived too late," said Juárez, from ORMUSA.

Impunity reigns, too. Less than 10% of homicide cases in 2015 ever saw the inside of a courtroom, according to [El Faro](#), an online investigative newspaper. In cases involving women, this trend is often exacerbated. "The justice system is still very saturated with a paternal vision where the man has hierarchy over the bodies and lives of women," said Cortez.

But Ciudad Mujer is constantly evolving. Several of its locations have begun offering services tailored for minors, who bear the brunt of intra-family violence, including rape. But it has plenty of room for improvement, activists say.

One pressing thing is to keep the centers open at night, on weekends, and during holidays, when women are more likely to get attacked. As of now, they close at 3 p.m. during the week (although a police officer stays on the grounds and can

respond to a call, but victims cannot get medical or legal support). Another step would be to start keeping comprehensive records of how many women visit Ciudad Mujer because they have been abused or attacked, so that the state can make informed public policies.

For now, Ciudad Mujer is virtually the only hope for thousands of women whose homes have become a minefield.

Last month, for the first time in Ciudad Mujer's history, a baby was born on one of the six locations. With the child's first cries still ringing in the air, a shocked-looking Pignato walked into the Sexual Health building — past the rape victims' waiting room — just as the nurse was placing the newborn in her mother's arms.

As Pignato made her way back through the center, she looked pensive: “On one side, the happiness of a baby, on the other, the sadness of a violation.”

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