

ENTREVISTAS PBI MÉXICO

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Justice for the indigenous women of Mexico: Valentina Rosendo Cantú, case No. 12,579 before the Inter-American Court of Human Rights

On 16 February 2002, Valentina Rosendo Cantú, then aged 17, was victim of sexual assault, torture and deprivation of liberty, allegedly committed by Mexican soldiers. On 8 March 2002, she reported her case to the civil justice system, however it was transferred to the military justice system, where it was closed during the preliminary investigation period. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights accepted the case. In August 2009, the Commission referred the case to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, noting that Mexico had not “remedied the context of impunity, because of a lack of adequate investigation and access to justice, combined with the use of military tribunals in hearing this case”. The hearing date has yet to be announced. In February 2010, Valentina Rosendo Cantú was granted provisional measures by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights because of her current situation of serious and imminent risk.

PBI has provided accompaniment to Valentina Rosendo Cantú and her daughter as a result of the attacks and threats the two have suffered.

PBI: Why do you continue with this case despite the harassment you face?

Valentina Rosendo: Because for me it is very important to keep fighting, despite what has happened to me and the fact that it hasn't been easy. I'm asking that the people who have harmed me – the soldiers who abused me in Barranca Bejuco, where I lived – are brought to justice. Many women who have suffered the same thing never report their assault. From fear, they never raise their voices. They're tired, and don't dare to report the crime; they remain silent. I go on so that justice can be done, both for me and for all of the women who have been abused by the army. I do it for myself, for my family, and so that no other women will suffer what I have suffered.

What changes have there been in your life?

My life has changed in many ways. In the first place, I had to leave my community, my family, and come and live here – a strange city where I didn't know anybody. I had to learn to speak Spanish so I could demand justice; before I only spoke Me'phaa.

Here, far from my family, my husband left me because of what happened to me, and I was left with my daughter. She was three years old at the time. What I am doing, well, it's fighting; working so that she can have a life. One day I'll return to my community and live as I did before.

How has this affected the lives of your family and your community?

I had to leave my community, Barranca Bejuco (in Caxitepec, Municipality of Acatepec, Guerrero), in 2004. I didn't leave because I wanted to, but because the people there treated me as a “soldiers' woman”, as did my husband's family. They said, “Why doesn't he leave her? She isn't his woman anymore, she's been with other men.” Who knows what else they said? The town council in my community didn't support me when I reported the crime, and given the community's rejection and the humiliation that caused my husband's family, I left. The only people who have supported me are my mother and my family. They say that I have to keep going, that I can't stop. They're on my side. They missed me a lot when I left the community. My mother got sick and my father sought refuge in

alcohol, because I'm his eldest daughter. It has greatly affected my family.

I have also received support from many other people, and I have learned a lot. I have learned to value myself for the woman I am, for the indigenous person I am. Sometimes my father and mother come to visit me here, when they have the money. With the money they earn from the hibiscus crop, they come and visit. I've gone back to my community two or three times a year, to see my family.



Valentina Rosendo at a public speech during the visit of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to Mexico in 2008

And when you go back, do you still feel the community's rejection?

No, not anymore. When I returned to my community after being in Washington [for the 2007 audience with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights], the people who saw me said hello, and came to my house. They said, "How have you been?" and "How could a woman from here, an indigenous woman, go to Washington?". They told me their stories, that they had been raped and never reported it. They said, "Who helped you?", "How were you able to do this?", "You moved on and your husband left you." I told them how my life has been until now. I'd like to return and live there, because life in my community is very different to living here in the city. There is a lot of violence here. In the community, you don't buy water, you don't buy

fruit. You just live simply. That is what I had before. But I had to sell everything to be able come here.

What do you hope to achieve by taking your case to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights?

Well, I hope a lot of things. First of all, I hope there is justice for the women who don't speak Spanish well, and that those who are guilty of abusing those women are punished. In my community, I want there to be a school, or a centre that defends women – a place women can go to seek help if something like this happens to them. For me it was really hard to start seeking justice. When this happened to me, I went to Caxitepec to get treatment at a healthcare centre. The doctor said, "Well, you know what? I can't treat you because I don't want any problems with the government. You should go down to Ayutla, because I don't have the right equipment to treat you here." I found it all very difficult. I want to do lots of things for my community but I'm not sure I know how. One of these days, my dream will come true. I have hope.

Because of everything that has happened to me, sometimes I'm afraid and I just want to drop it all and have a peaceful life. But what's the point of leaving it all now, after so many years? I also want the government to listen to me. Here in Mexico the government doesn't do anything, that's why I had to seek justice abroad. Lately, the government has had me under surveillance. A year ago they killed colleagues who defended human rights in Ayutla (Raúl and Manuel), and that makes me afraid. But I keep fighting for my dead companions and those who are still alive.

I thank all of the people who have helped me, and shown me affection – like you, and like other people from abroad. I thank the people from Tlachinollan who have given me so much support, and who have been with me at the most difficult and complicated times of my life. That gives me more strength, so I can go on. I'm going to keep going for them, for so many women, for myself, for my family.

Valentina Rosendo Cantú alleges that on 16 February 2002 she was washing clothes in a creek about 200 metres from her home in Barranca Bejuco. Soldiers approached her, accompanied by a civilian they had tied up. Two of the soldiers came to her and asked where the masked men were. She answered that she knew no masked men. The soldiers showed her photographs of individuals, asking her to identify them. They beat her, and two of the soldiers raped her. Once she was able to return home, Ms Rosendo informed her family of the incident. She decided to report the soldiers to the community authorities.

For a detailed description of the legal actions see the following documents (in Spanish):
Report No. 93/06, dated 21 October 2006 (in which the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights agrees to hear Valentina Rosendo's case)
Report dated 2 August 2009, in which the Commission refers the Valentina Rosendo Cantú case against the United States of Mexico, No. 12,579, to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights.

For more information, see also the PBI Mexico publication *Silenced: Violence Against Human Rights Defenders in the South of Mexico*, available at www.pbi-mexico.org.