

## How women in Mexico used a whistle to catch a serial rapist

by Isabella Cota

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**They caught their rapist in 2016. Now, Guardia Ciudadana continue to protect, develop their northeast Mexico community.**



**Monterrey, Mexico** - One whistle means an outsider has been spotted; two means be on the lookout for suspicious activity; and three, danger, get the equipment and join the group in the nearby meeting point.

On the night a man, who has confessed to 10 rapes and is suspected of sexually assaulting dozens of others in the town of Juarez, [Mexico](#), was caught, a woman blew the whistle three times.

A group of dozens of residents from the community had been on the search since one of their neighbours, Lucero, a single mother, ended up in the hospital after being sexually assaulted, stabbed and had parts of her genitals cut with a knife in March 2015. After Lucero described the assault, other women came forward and said they too had been raped by a man wearing a baseball cap and carrying a knife. Very few reported it to the police due to the shame they felt, and none expected that the rapist would be caught.

Instead, they formed the Guardia Ciudadana, or citizen's guard, to patrol the twin neighbourhoods of Vistas del Rio and Terranova and look for the suspected serial rapist.

"That day was the day people stopped being afraid," says Sergio Rey, a 50-year-old salesman who became Guardia Ciudadana's leader and spokesman.

Guardia Ciudadana started with 60 people, including some as young as 12 years old, and grew to have 130 members. Because many of the men in the neighbourhood work night shift at nearby factories, the group was mostly comprised of women who would surveil a few blocks each throughout the night. They sharpened their husbands' machetes, picked up baseball bats, flashlights and even created the communication system based on whistles to alert each other of any suspicious presence.

More than a year later, in September 2016, one of Guardia Ciudadana's members spotted a man jumping from a roof of a house and then hid behind a taco stand. She blew the whistle three times, sending other members of the group to the spot where he was caught. Lucero was the first to identify him, members of the group say, which was enough to take him to the local police station. At least 18 women also identified him. He confessed to 10 crimes, local media reported. The legal proceedings are ongoing. Municipal police and the state security ministry did not respond to Al Jazeera's request for comment.



Indira Penne and her husband Sergio Rey keep letters and documents they've sent the authorities asking for resources and support to contain violence against women in their neighbourhood [Isabella Cota/Al Jazeera]

Once the search was over, Guardia Ciudadana evolved into a group of about 25 people. Its members no longer conduct nightly patrols, but they continue to be organised into "on call" shifts. If someone sees or hears something strange in the middle of the night, they will blow a whistle, and those "on call" will respond.

"We initially used the whistles strictly to catch the rapist, it was the only tool we, the women, had because this happened before we had internet or smartphones," says Sandra Briones, 51, one of the founding members who for over a year had the midnight to 2am shift. "Even now ... we still use the whistles," she tells Al Jazeera.

They also opened a private Facebook group where hundreds of neighbours post about everything from missing pets and home burglaries to much more serious requests, such as missing persons announcements.

The group also successfully lobbied the authorities to open a support centre for women, which they expect will provide psychological therapy to survivors of abuse or domestic violence.

### Impunity and the re-victimisation of women

Their work is needed. Located in the east of Monterrey, Mexico's third-largest city and an industrial hub of 4.7 million people, Juarez has seen factory jobs fuel a demographic explosion. With this urban expansion has come a rise in violence and organised crime. The most recent official figures for the state show that January was the most violent month on record, with 93 violent murders registered.

It has been particularly bad for women. The state of Nuevo Leon, which borders Texas and where Monterrey is located, has the third highest number of femicides in the country - half of them have been [linked to organised drug cartels](#), according to local media. Juarez is one of five municipalities where the alarming number of women murdered earned them a "gender alert", a type of federal emergency mechanism meant to ensure local authorities treat the issue as a priority.

The group operates in the neighbourhoods of Vistas del Rio and Terranova [Isabella Cota/Al Jazeera]
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Impunity is also a major challenge, says Estefania Medina, a lawyer at independent advocacy group Tojil, which works to strengthen the country's justice system. Due to normalised discrimination against women, most rape survivors prefer not to report their rape and, of the few cases that are reported, many are not investigated.

"We've detected issues from the very moment a woman approaches the police to report her rape," Medina tells Al Jazeera. "It's most common that authorities fall into gender stereotypes and 'revictimise' the woman, suggesting it was her fault for having worn the wrong thing or asking questions about what kind of relationship the victim had with the rapist."

Last month, Medina's organisation published a handbook for police stations to follow when a woman reports a rape. The recommendations are meant to hold officers accountable for their behaviour.

States and municipalities in Mexico offer little to no data on the number of investigations into sexual abuse or on the number of convictions that resulted from these investigations, making it more difficult to hold authorities accountable, Medina says.

Responding to the challenges, Guardia Ciudadana remains defiant in protecting and helping their neighbourhoods. Aside from their "on call" shifts, they are working to get donations to replant grass in the neighbourhood football field - their only green area. In recent weeks, they organised to join protests around the city demanding better public transportation.

"We are taking care of each other," says Guadalupe Juarez, 32, who survived an attack. "It was much easier to cope with their support, with the whistles, with the communication. We were and are taking care of each other and I feel protected."

Guadalupe Juarez, 32, survived an attack by the serial rapist and joined the unarmed group. She says the citizen's guard made her feel protected [Isabella Cota/Al Jazeera]