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An Unstoppable Tide of Femicides in Dominican Republic

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Santiago Figueroa Alcántara, a local carpenter from the capital city of Santo Domingo, received a 30-year prison sentence for murdering his wife, Luisa María Guzmán Linares, reported the local press in September 2013. Figueroa Alcántara murdered her because she had supposedly been unfaithful.

In the northwestern province of Montecristi, Edwin Manuel Almonte Cabreja was also given a 20-year prison sentence for murdering his wife, Carmen Vanesa Vásquez Balbuena, on June 27, 2011. Another recent case was that of Wilmo Francisco Castro Lajara, who was given a 15-year prison sentence and a US$2,350 fine for sexually assaulting an underage victim and causing her boyfriend grievous bodily harm.

Despite these sentences, various sources have pointed out that femicide is a serious problem in the country that the authorities have failed to address. Recent reports have highlighted that the Dominican Republic has the third-highest femicide rate in Latin America.

In 2011, 230 femicides were recorded, according to the Procuraduría General de la República (PGR), which compiles statistics from the police as well as the Instituto Nacional de Ciencias Forenses (INACIF). In 2012, 103 femicides were reported, and, during the first half of 2013, 140 Dominican women died as a result of acts of violence, a figure that includes 69 cases recorded as femicides.

Added to this, from January to November 2013, 68,000 cases of gender-based violence were reported to the Ministerio Público. By June 2013, 24,265 formal complaints had been made and 30,763 restraining orders had been "filed," which means that no further legal action was taken. Abandoning many of these cases at this stage contributes to the climate of impunity surrounding these crimes.

**A continental pandemic?**

A BBC report on the issue recently stated that femicide is "a pandemic that is killing Latin American women." The Dominican Republic is among the countries where the tide of murders is on the increase, as rape victims, women suspected of engaging in premarital sex, and women accused of adultery are murdered by relatives who believe that "unchaste" women have "tarnished the family’s honor."

The UN Population Fund (UNFPA) estimates that as many as 5,000 "honor killings" are committed worldwide every year (NotiCen, July 19, 2012, Feb. 28, 2013, and Aug. 22, 2013).

"A number of studies carried out in different parts of the world show that a man kills his partner or former partner for the following reasons: when she is unfaithful (or he assumes she is unfaithful); when she decides to terminate the relationship; or when she decides to find employment and secure herself an income," writes researcher Lily Muñoz in a recent article.

Muñoz says men consider any of those reasons to be an attack on their masculinity as they feel that "she is their property," that she is defying their power and trying to escape from their control.
"Murdering a partner or former partner is the clearest example of patriarchal violence against women in the domestic sphere," says Muñoz.

"We are very alarmed and concerned because we believe that femicide has become a nationwide tragedy," Sergia Galván, director of Colectiva Mujer y Salud, a local nongovernmental organization (NGO), told the international media.

Galván said the state’s response has been "inadequate" considering the scale of the problem. She also points out that there is a shortage of refuges for women who suffer gender-based violence and their children, especially given that in the Dominican Republic the number of deaths resulting from domestic violence is higher than the death toll from illnesses under epidemiological control.

Galván adds that it all comes down to political will and that the government has been indifferent to the victims’ plight. "It’s all in the hands of the state, which has the power to assign the necessary budget to address these issues, design public policies, and demonstrate the necessary political will," she said. "Domestic violence is not a private matter. It is an issue that should be addressed through public policy."

Muñoz points out that femicides are not only committed in the domestic sphere, they also frequently occur in public places. "During the past few years, it has been common to find the bodies of women who have been raped, beaten, and even hacked to pieces, dumped in the streets, in vacant lots, and in ravines, with no clue as to who murdered them. These are also femicides, as the bodies clearly show that the victims were subjected to sexual violence and were slaughtered with great cruelty. We can clearly state that these are acts of femicide regardless of whether the perpetrators knew the victim or not," says Muñoz.

A regionwide scourge

The impact of violence in the domestic sphere also affects the children who are orphaned and the fathers and breadwinners who end up in prison. The Fundación Vida sin Violencia, a local NGO, says almost 800 children become orphans every year in the Dominican Republic.

Last September, Moni Pizani, the regional director of UN Women for Latin America and the Caribbean, told the Panamanian press that acts of violence against women and girls committed purely as a result of misogyny has reached a "scandalous" degree of impunity, as Latin American states have failed to address the issue.

Pizani said that the region is working on a Latin American protocol to investigate the murder of women as a result of gender-based violence, written by the UN’s Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and UN Women.

Pizani said a great deal of impunity surrounds these crimes, meaning that in some countries 98% of the crimes go unpunished and that less than 10% of the perpetrators are sentenced. In some countries, a mere 1% of the perpetrators are punished.

Furthermore, in many countries the data available is unreliable or nonexistent, as many deaths are not recorded as femicides and the indicators used to record the number of cases varies widely from one country to another.

For now, many civil-society organizations in the Dominican Republic have raised their voices through campaigns and mass demonstrations, which have managed to grab the authorities’
attention. However, although the country has specific laws addressing violence against women and a number of legislative amendments to make the current legal framework more stringent are currently in process, the problem is far from resolved.

Attorney General Francisco Domínguez Brito has said that he will establish a system that will process the cases reported by victims and will improve coordination between his staff and all the different institutions involved in fighting against gender-based violence. He has also publicly pledged to improve the mechanism that currently protects victims of domestic violence and to implement an electronic tagging system to keep track of offenders’ whereabouts.

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