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Efforts to End Violence Against Women Grow in Peru

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Violence against women in Peru, a country ranking second in Latin America for the number of incidents of sexual violence with 10 femicides a month, has been given a central spot on the public agenda (NotiSur March 1, 2013; SourceMex, May 11, 2016; and NotiCen, Feb.28, 2013).

Credit goes to “Ni Una Menos” (Not One Less), a civic movement rising to reject two recent judicial decisions that gave suspended sentences to two men who violently threatened their partners. The entire country saw a 2015 video on national television that showed how a naked Adriano Pozo dragged Arlette Contreras by her hair through a hostel reception area in Ayacucho. Considering this an aggressive act that resulted in only light wounds, judges recently gave Pozo a one-year suspended sentence. In 2012, Ronny García beat his former girlfriend, Lady Guillén, to the point of disfigurement; he received a four-year prison sentence that was also suspended.

These cases offended many Peruvians, women and men, and a social media page called Ni Una Menos was created, calling for a march with the same name on Aug. 13. Immediately, hundreds of women began to post harrowing testimonies on the page. Each testimony encouraged others to break their silence about acts that have long occurred in Peru’s patriarchal, machista society. (The movement echoes similar civic action taken under the slogan Ni Una Menos in Mexico, Bolivia, Colombia, Argentina and Brazil in the last 12 months.)

“Violence against women in Peru is a structural, epidemic problem that tragically is the norm,” Ni Una Menos spokesperson Jimena Ledgard wrote in a column published Aug. 11 in La República. “In the last few weeks, Ni Una Menos, a march that civil society spontaneously and simultaneously created in various locations, has been able to bring the matter of violence against women to the center of the national debate.”

In their testimonies, women said they had been victims of beatings, sexual abuse, rape, and murder attempts, indicating, in most cases, that they had not received justice when they denounced such aggressions. The impunity enjoyed by the aggressors constitutes a very serious situation if one considers, according to information from the country’s human rights ombudsman, that most victims of femicide in recent years had, before they were killed, reported they were victims of abuse and had not received any help from authorities.

The public vigorously repudiated and criticized radio statements made by Peru’s most senior Catholic cleric, Cardinal Juan Luis Cipriani, during one of his recent Saturday programs. Cipriani said, “Statistics tell us that girls get abortions, but it is not because these girls were violated, but because, often, the woman sets herself in a showcase in provocative display.” Ana María Romero-Lozada, Peru’s minister of women affairs, rejected his statements, noting that every day four minors between the ages of 11 and 14 become mothers. “The only showcase these four young mothers know is the showcase of humiliation of the shame and rape that occurs under the same roof,” she said.

A survey conducted by the opinion firm Ipsos for the daily El Comercio that was published Aug. 13 (the same day as the march) indicated that 95% of Lima’s citizens supported the march and that 70% believed it would help reduce violence against women.
Support for the march consolidated under the slogan “Si tocas a una, tocas a todas” (If you touch one, you touch all). About 200,000 people in Lima participated in the mobilization, leading many to call this the biggest march in Peru’s history.

“The Ni Una Menos march has been a process, a historic concentration in our political evolution,” historian Antonio Zapata wrote in his La República column. “It has outdone all kinds of electoral demonstrations, even the ‘pro-life’ and traditional family defense marches that anti-abortion groups regularly organize. In this sense, it is a success of the organizations and projects the topic of women to new heights, something unexpected only a few weeks ago.”

Ni Una Menos marches took place in other Peruvian cities on Aug. 13, and Peruvians abroad also made the cause their own in cities where they live.

Survivors of gender violence and family members of femicide victims led the march in Lima. Also participating were women who were forcibly sterilized during Alberto Fujimori’s government (1990-2000) and who now face new challenges in their long fight for justice. On July 27, Prosecuting Attorney Marcelita Gutiérrez decided not to proceed with the complaint of crimes against humanity against Fujimori and three former health ministers, stating that it involved individual cases (NotiSur, July 29, 2016).

The bloc that closed the march was made up of members of political parties like Acción Popular, Frente Amplio, Fuerza Popular, and Partido Aprista that, despite political differences, find commonality on this issue.

**President and first lady march in solidarity**

President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski, who in his first address to the nation after taking power July 28 showed his support of gender equality, participated in the march along with some of his Cabinet ministers, including Romero-Lozada, Prime Minister Fernando Zavala, Foreign Minister Ricardo Luna, and Minister of the Interior Carlos Basombrío as well as first lady Nancy Lange and their daughter, Susan Kuczynski.

Speaking to the press a few days before the historic march, Romero-Lozada had said she would participate to “generate a national current to eradicate violence against women of all ages. We have to raise our voices as women.”

**Demonstrators demand protection**

The Ni Una Menos group has made its demands known to the government. They include guarantees for women who face judicial processes because of violence, the creation of specialized agencies that take cases of attempted femicides, and earmarking part of the national budget for the attention and prevention of violence.

In addition, the groups demanded the creation of a program that would fight against gender violence and the implementation of specialized courses to train magistrates in this issue to help them in decisions and sentencing. They also called for the incorporation of a gender focus in the vetting of candidates to the Supreme Court.

Ombudsman Eduardo Vega Luna backed the Ni Una Menos demands by calling for the Academia de Magistratura—Peru’s training academy for the judiciary and the Public Ministry—to guarantee the training of judges in gender issues and access to justice.
Before the march, Vega Luna told the press, “It is unfortunate that in the recent sentencing of cases of violence against women, the lack of training and specialization in the issue of gender violence is evident, highlighting gender prejudices and stereotypes such as the judging of the prior sexual and social behavior of the victims.”

Vega Luna said that the regulatory advances established in Law No. 30364 to prevent, punish, and eradicate violence against women and family members, as well as the National Program Against Gender Violence 2016-2021, approved two days before the Ollanta Humala (2011-2016) administration ended, reaffirms the necessity to strengthen gender and access to justice training for those in charge of the justice system.

The Kuczynski government has already announced the first measures designed to put an end to gender violence, to be implemented within its first 100 days. They include a “special emphasis on improving quality, opportunity, and efficiency of the police officers in charge of handling cases of gender and domestic violence.”

On Aug. 12, the Ministry of Women and Vulnerable Populations (Ministerio de la Mujer y Poblaciones Vulnerables, MIMP) presented what it called the Women’s Protection Circle, which includes a series of measures to prevent and stop cases of violence against women.

For now, the Women’s Emergency Centers (Centro de Emergencia Mujer, CEM) that receive the most complaints—Lima, the Villa El Salvador district, El Callao, El Porvenir in the province of Trujillo, and Miraflores in Arequipa—are open every day, 24 hours a day including holidays. Lima’s center received 751 reports of gender violence in the first six months of the year. Between January and June, the CEMs have registered 32,588 cases of family and sexual violence, in which 86% of the victims are women and 14% are men. In addition, 54 femicides and 188 cases of attempted femicides have been reported, with the husband being the aggressor in 16.3% of the cases and the live-in partner in 37.8%.

The toll-free line that offers guidance in cases of domestic and sexual violence will have more employees in order to attend to more phone calls. The lack of operators has resulted in 40% of the calls being lost, according to the MIMP.

“We are going to promote employability for mothers who are victims of aggression. We are going to support them through agreements with the Ministry of Labor,” said Romero-Lozada, who added that victims also would be mentored and trained. She also said that a Women’s Protection Circle would include temporary shelters for women whose lives could be at risk.

Marisol Pérez Tello, Perú’s justice minister, and Romero-Lozada have indicated that they are coordinating meetings with the judiciary and the Public Ministry to evaluate the penal code treatment of cases of violence against women in a way to make it stop generating situations of impunity.

The success of the march, and the fact that despite the it, complaints of femicide attempts have not ended, has transformed the Aug. 13 initiative into a new national campaign. The march has become a milestone for Peruvian society. Those women who are victims of gender violence now know that they are not alone; they know there are thousands of Peruvian women and men intent on breaking the indifference of an indolent judiciary.