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Mass Condemnation of Gender Violence Leads to Regional Protests on Unprecedented Scale

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Hundreds of thousands of women, men, and children from at least 10 countries in Latin America took to the streets on Oct. 19 to demand an end to violence against women and girls. Under the slogan “Ni una menos” (Not one less) and “Nos queremos vivas” (We want ourselves alive), the peaceful protesters dressed in black and marched through city centers to mourn the deaths of recent victims and to demand the right to live without fear of violence in homes and public spaces.

The regional movement was the result of a mobilization on social media coordinated within a matter of days by the Argentine NGO Ni Una Menos and supported by hundreds of other organizations. Triggered by the brutal rape and killing of 16-year-old Lucía Pérez on Oct. 8 in Argentina and the killing of 10-year-old Florencia Aguirre on Oct. 14 in Chile, public outrage overflowed onto social networks and across national borders, resulting in plans for marches in hundreds of cities. In Argentina and Mexico, women were urged to stop all activities for one hour on Oct. 19 before mass marches through city centers began at 5 p.m. In multiple cities in Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay, among others, marches also took place the same evening.

The movement was publicly supported by President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski of Peru, President Michelle Bachelet of Chile, President Evo Morales of Bolivia, President Mauricio Macri of Argentina, and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, the former president of Argentina (2007-2015), among others.

The demands of the mobilization were an end to machista violence in all its forms. Ni Una Menos defines machista violence as any form of violence carried out within an unequal relationship of power and against a woman. The most extreme form of this is femicide, defined by the UN as a crime involving the violent and deliberate killing of a woman because of her gender.

Gender violence increases in Latin America

The deaths of Pérez and Aguirre were the tip of the iceberg in a region seeing a steady increase in violence against women and femicides. Seventeen of the 32 countries worldwide with the highest femicide rates are in Latin America, with the worst seen in El Salvador, Colombia, and Guatemala, where the rates are 8.9, 6.3, and 6.2 out of every 100,000 inhabitants respectively. Brazil and Mexico rank highest in the region for absolute numbers of femicide victims, however, with many thousands per year. Femicide rates in Mexico are estimated to have risen by 45% since 2009; in Brazil, they have increased by 21% since 2003. One in three women will be victims of some kind of gender violence during their lifetimes.

In Argentina, where the October movement began, estimates are that a woman is murdered every 36 hours, with an increase of 78% in this type of crime between 2008 and 2015, according to Supreme Court figures ([NotiCen, Feb. 28, 2013](#), [Jan. 9, 2014](#), and [SourceMex, March 5, 2014](#)).

If numbers have been rising for years, what provoked such a strong public reaction in Argentina in October? Between Oct. 8 and 10, 70,000 people attended the 31st National Women’s Conference

(Encuentro Nacional de Mujeres) in Rosario, Argentina, which focused on gender and institutional violence. In the week immediately following this event, the press reported the violent murders of Silvia Ruiz, 55; Vanesa Moreno, 38; Marilyn Méndez, 28 and three months pregnant; and Natalia Padilla, 41. The murders took place in various parts of the country, mostly at the hands of ex-partners. The femicide rate in Argentina rose to one per day in October. Public anger gathered force in light of these murders, but it was the brutality of the drugging, rape, and death of schoolgirl Lucía Pérez that made this anger boil over. It provoked the mass rejection of violence against women in Argentina and across the whole region, and Pérez's image was at the forefront of the movement.

When during the same week, the burned remains of Florencia Aguirre were found at her stepfather's house in Coyhaique, Chile, and two other women were murdered in Punta Arenas, Chile was quick to join the movement, and its spread across Latin America began.

Beyond traditional feminism

The most interesting phenomena behind the October women's movement were the way it spread beyond traditional feminist organizations to attract the support of ordinary women, men, and children, and the way it transcended national borders. There are a number of reasons for this.

First, the role of social media in channeling public anger was unprecedented. Thousands of women used the "Ni Una Menos" logo in each country to show their support for the cause, and plans for the Oct. 19 demonstration spread instantly and organically. Many women joined the various marches that day without any previous history of feminist activism, in order that their daughters should not live in fear simply for being women.

Second, it was the first time that a demonstration for women's rights had occurred simultaneously in so many countries in the region. This was partly due to the ease of communication and the brutality of the recent cases, as already mentioned. However, there are other cultural and social elements that facilitated it and struck a chord with women from Buenos Aires to Mexico City. Importantly, Spanish-speaking Latin America has no language barriers, allowing rapid access to information on crimes and the communication of emotive messages across borders. In addition, machismo—the Spanish term for male power and domination—is rooted in Latin American societies, albeit to varying degrees. The objectification of women, economic discrimination, and inequality in the workplace are things that all women encounter on a daily basis and in previous generations were accepted and justified. The significance of the Oct. 19 movement was that it drew a line in the sand, with women and men collectively and publicly rejecting the prevalence of machismo in mainstream society on a far wider scale than before.

Looking ahead

In Argentina, Ni Una Menos and associated organizations are asking for an end to machista violence in all its forms, which they categorize as physical, sexual, economic, psychological, and symbolic. In order to achieve this, their five main demands are: the full implementation of Law No. 26,485 for the prevention and eradication of violence against women; guaranteed access to the justice system for victims; the publication of official statistics on gender violence on which to base public policy; guaranteed integral sexual education at all levels to promote equality; and guaranteed protection for the victims of violence.

Various legal initiatives across Latin America have addressed gender violence in recent years. According to the Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe (Economic Commission for

Latin America and the Caribbean, CELAC/ECLAC), 16 countries passed legislation on femicide between 2008 and 2015 ([NotiSur, March 1, 2013](#)). For example, Argentina passed a law for the protection of women in 2009 and allowed for harsher sentences for gender-based killings in 2012, while in Mexico the penal code has been amended to criminalize femicide. In El Salvador, a law directed at violence against women came into effect in 2012 ([NotiCen, Aug. 22, 2013](#)), and Guatemala has created specialized prosecutor units and tribunals to deal with this type of crime ([NotiCen, July 19, 2012](#)). At a regional level, UN Women and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights are working with other international institutions for the adoption of a regional protocol to improve the way gender-related deaths are investigated and to guarantee victims' access to the justice system.

However, the main problems with reducing femicide and gender violence are that most are committed by people close to the victim, and the high levels of impunity associated with these types of crime, in which only a small percentage of perpetrators are sentenced. In many countries, the sentences given are also perceived to be too light: In Peru 50,000 people participated in a march organized by Ni Una Menos on Aug. 13 to protest against the four- and one-year jail sentences handed down to those found guilty of murdering Lady Guillén and Cindy Contreras respectively, arguing that sentences should be harsher to act as a deterrent for others ([NotiSur, Aug. 26, 2016](#)).

While the deficiencies in many justice systems in Latin America are apparent and conducive to a weak state response to gender violence, the fact that the vast majority are intrafamilial crimes indicates that tackling the problem must involve both a shift in the implicit cultural acceptance of machismo in Latin American society and improved education for children and adults, as well as the strengthening of judicial frameworks to penalize and disincentivize these crimes appropriately. The mass adoption of "Ni una menos" as a movement across the region has been an important step in this shift of consciousness.

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