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Women March in 27 States Demanding Action to End Domestic Violence, Femicides

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On a Sunday in late April, tens of thousands of women in 27 states marched through the streets of major Mexican cities to demand an end to domestic violence, harassment of women, and femicides. Organizers dubbed the campaign Primavera Violeta (Violet Spring), an effort to bring attention to the many ways in which women are accosted in Mexico. According to the online news agency Comunicación e Información de la Mujer AC, (CIMAC), the series of marches on April 24, represented the first coordinated effort by civil society to demand justice and call for an end to impunity for sexual violation, harassment, murder, and kidnapping of women.

“In Sinaloa, Veracruz, Jalisco, Chiapas, Querétaro, Oaxaca, Guanajuato, Zacatecas, Puebla, and Colima, just to mention a few states, the voices of women became one during this campaign,” said CIMACNoticias, which noted the effort was organized on social media, where it was labeled via the hashtag #24A. Two other hashtags were used to mark the occasion, #VivasNosQueremos and #NoTeCalles.

Organizers credited social media for helping raise awareness about violence against women. “The difference between the past and the current era is that we can quickly denounce and publicly expose acts that were once anonymous and unpunished,” Teresa Ulloa Ziáurriz wrote in a guest column in CIMACNoticias.

The Primavera Violeta marches around the country achieved the goal of bringing awareness to the issue of violence against women. “The gathering attracted a strong response, with the majority of media outlets writing editorials and publishing the results of polls that would make almost anyone tremble,” wrote Ulloa, who is director of a regional coalition against trafficking of women and children in the Americas and the Caribbean.

One of the major newspapers covering the event was the daily Excélsior, which reported that a large crowd of participants in the march in Mexico City had gathered at the famed Monumento a la Revolución “with signs and slogans, costumes, and messages painted on their bodies.”

The demonstrations were especially symbolic in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua City, where participants remembered the unsolved murders of more than 300 women over a period of more than a decade in the 1990s and the 2000s (SourceMex, July 30, 2003, Feb. 9, 2005, and Nov. 15, 2006).

“In Ciudad Juárez, there was a congregation of the relatives of the women who disappeared and the workers that recently organized a strike against the Lexmark maquiladora plant to demand better working conditions and higher pay,” the weekly news magazine Proceso reported.

Women murders prevalent
According to government statistics and reports from private organizations, violence against women is widespread in Mexico. “In just the first three months of 2016, almost 250 women have
been murdered. Many were raped. Others were pregnant [when they were killed]. Others were massacred by their partners,” columnist Martín Moreno wrote in SinEmbargo.mx at the end of March. “The majority of the cases were not investigated. They remain unpunished.”

Moreno said the total number of deaths averages to about 80 murders of women per month, 20 per week, three per day. “This is a national shame. The authorities give little importance to the problem of femicides. No one commits to investigate these cases and punish the perpetrators,” said the columnist, criticizing the silence from President Enrique Peña Nieto and from governors of states where the murders are most prevalent, including Rafael Moreno Valle of Puebla, Eruviel Ávila of México state, Javier Duarte of Veracruz, Gabino Cué of Oaxaca, and Graco Ramírez of Morelos.

“The women who were murdered had a name, a face, children, a family, a history,” Moreno added.

Four months before Moreno’s piece appeared in Sinembargo.mx, the national statistics institute (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, INEGI) issued a report with similar figures for 2013 and 2014. The INEGI report, released on Nov. 25, 2015, on the annual International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, said an average of seven women were killed daily during the two-year period. However, the report said 2013 was the worst of the two years, with the number of deaths of women ranging between six and 13 per day in the states of Guerrero, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Zacatecas, Morelos, and Durango. Colima, Nuevo León, Tamaulipas, Sinaloa, Baja California, and México also recorded high rates of femicides in the last two years, according to INEGI.

The criticisms of the federal government prompted a response from the Peña Nieto administration. On the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, Interior Secretary Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong reiterated the federal government’s pledge to support the victims of domestic violence and to work to eradicate the problem. “Gender violence does not only violate the rights of women, but it affects the social fabric and the harmony of entire communities,” Osorio Chong said in a speech. “That is why the federal government is working to eradicate this problem via structural changes in every form and in every location.”

Osorio Chong said part of the administration’s commitment to address the issue includes the construction of 26 centers in 19 states to support victims of domestic violence. He said two of these facilities were inaugurated in Morelos and Coahuila at the end of 2015, and two others—in Aguascalientes and Guerrero—were scheduled to open in the first quarter of 2016.

In addition to offering protection to women who have been abused or at risk of physical harm, the centers offer professional legal and psychological support, a program to achieve economic independence, and eventually assistance in finding alternative lodging.

However, Osorio Chong was chided for suggesting in later comments that the number of femicides in Mexico had declined by 25%. The statement drew a strong rebuke from the Observatorio Nacional Ciudadano (ONC), which noted that Osorio Chong was using misleading data.

“This information came from agencies in charge of procuring justice, and they involve only those cases that were addressed and recognized as femicides,” the ONC said in a letter to Osorio Chong. The organization noted that data from state and federal health agencies showed a much higher level of women murders.
No deterrents

According to the ONC, the lack of adequate punishment has encouraged the continuation of domestic violence, even though Congress approved a forward-looking law in 2007 to protect women. “We have a macho culture in Mexico, but the problem is also the absence of punishment that could help regulate behavior,” ONC director Francisco Rivas said in an interview with the Spain-based newswire EFE.

The 2007 law includes a unique mechanism to prevent femicide called the Declaración de Alerta de Violencia de Género, or gender-violence alert. Women deputies in Congress drew up the proposal for gender-violence alerts "to prevent a repetition of what happened in Chihuahua." The alert was designed to set in motion a series of actions to make an environment safer and prevent violence against women (SourceMex, March 5, 2014).

In 2009, Congress published federal regulations establishing how municipal, state, and federal governments would work together under such alerts in areas where violence against women was a problem. Similar regulations must also be enacted at the state level.

Even with the law on the books, the legislation has failed to deter femicides, which are often the result of domestic violence (SourceMex, March 5, 2014).

“This public policy was approved with much pomp and circumstance, and yet the denigration, the harassment, and even the murder of women at the hands of men remains a staple of daily life in Mexico,” said EFE, pointing out that this occurs at all levels of society.

A ‘macho’ society

According to the ONC, one of the most worrisome trends is that any victim of domestic violence who dares make a legal complaint is criticized by the rest of society. As an example, Rivas pointed to a case where the host of a television program in Ciudad Juárez accosted his co-host in a live transmission, prompting her to walk off the set. “What is most surprising and worrisome are the comments that suggested that the co-host brought the attack upon herself,” said the ONC director. “Society continues to re-victimize the victims.”

Other high-profile cases have been documented recently, including a video showing Hilario Ramírez, mayor of the town of San Blas in Nayarit state, lifting the skirt of a woman in public. “When [TV reporter] Jorge Ramos interviewed the mayor, he shrugged it off and laughed,” columnist Emilio Lezama wrote in the daily newspaper El Universal. “When Ramos asked Ramírez how he would respond if someone did the same to his mother, he replied in a threatening tone with the comment, ‘No one messes with my mother.’ The mayor’s comments reflect the double standard that persists in our society. The attitude of machismo, which results in harassment and aggression, appears comical or irrelevant to us until one of our relatives is affected.”

Another recent incident involves the case of Daphne Fernández, a young woman who was sexually assaulted in the city of Boca del Río in Veracruz state in 2015 by four young men from affluent families. One of the four men was Enrique Capitaine, son of former Nautla Mayor Felipe Capitaine Rivera. The others were Jorge Cotaíta Cabrales, Gerardo Rodríguez Acosta, and Diego Cruz Alonso, all children of prominent entrepreneurs in Veracruz. The young men called their group, “Porkys de Costa de Oro.”
Uncertain that the legal system would favor his daughter, Javier Fernández, the victim’s father, at first only demanded a public apology from the four young men and a promise that they would stay away from his daughter. In April 2015, a few weeks after the incident, Fernández met with three of the young men and their fathers and recorded a video. “Why did you do it, you prick?” he asks of each one. Cotaita, Cruz, and Rodríguez asked for forgiveness. “I regret what happened,” Cotaita says on the video. “I did great harm.” Diego Cruz then says, “I don’t doubt it happened and we made a mistake. We were wrong.” Rodríguez follows suit: “We were stupid. There’s no other explanation.”

In May 2015, Fernández filed a formal complaint against the perpetrators with the Veracruz attorney general’s office (Procuraduría General de Justicia del Estado de Veracruz). Authorities listened but did not take action.

Frustrated by the lack of action over the course of several months, Fernández released the video in March 2016. The publicity surrounding the release helped create a groundswell among human rights and women’s rights organizations, which demanded action from Gov. Duarte’s administration and the federal government. The Duarte government failed to take action, leading to charges that the governor was protecting the affluent families.

“Even though there have been legal complaints filed against each of the perpetrators—and a video is circulating where they admit their responsibility and ask for forgiveness—prosecutors in Veracruz have failed to launch a serious investigation,” columnist José Gil Olmos wrote in Proceso on March 30, 2016. “This demonstrates the political cover that the state government is giving the Porkys de la Costa de Oro.”

The attack on Daphne Fernández became one of the unresolved issues of violence against women that organizers raised in the Primavera Violeta marches in Veracruz and Mexico City. “We demand that Gov. Javier Duarte put an end to violence against women. We do not want any more impunity,” said Monserrat Díaz, a leader from Colectivo Feminista and a lead organizer of the Veracruz march. “We demand that all the crimes against women and the femicides be resolved.”

The release of the video, in the meantime, has reportedly led the parents of the four members of the Porkys to send their sons abroad to avoid contact with news outlets and possible prosecution. According to reports, Capitaine and Cotaita were last seen traveling to the US, while Cruz Alonso supposedly headed to Spain.

The federal attorney general’s office (Procuraduría General de la República, PGR) has reportedly requested a Red Notice from the Interpol to help find the suspects overseas. As of early May 2016, there were no updates on the location of the individuals.