

Despite Legal Protections, Violence Against Women Is Spiking in Bolivia

Linda Farthing | Friday, Dec. 16, 2016

Ninety-three women have been murdered in Bolivia this year by their partners or spouses, 32 more than last year. That spike drove thousands of Bolivians into the streets of six cities late last month, on Nov. 25, the United Nations' International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women. Marchers demanded that the government declare the situation a national emergency, under the terms of an anti-violence law that hasn't fulfilled its promise to protect women.

In the largely indigenous city of El Alto, demonstrations took on a festive air with balloons and free paper hats denouncing violence. It was organized by the city government with the participation of hundreds of secondary school students and dozens of nonprofit organizations. "I'm here because this demonstration helps to value women," 16-year-old Mayte Viscano said. "The violence must stop."

According to the World Health Organization, Bolivia ranks as the most violent country for women in Latin America, a region where 14 nations are among the world's 25 worst for the mistreatment of women. U.N. Women reports that 70 percent of Bolivian women have suffered physical or sexual violence during their lives, with aggression against women the most reported crime in the country.

One of the latest victims died two days before the countrywide marches. The 26-year-old woman, known only as Norma C., lived in rural Bolivia. Her partner admitted to beating her to death with a wrench after a dispute over the custody of their two young children.

An Oxfam investigation

(https://www.academia.edu/27222103/Violencia_contras_las_mujeres_Entre_avances_y_resistencias_Estudio_en_3_ciudades.pdf) In October attributed the violence in Bolivia to three factors. First is the country's deeply rooted culture of machismo, which validates men's right to beat their wives. "When my father went to ask for my mother's hand in marriage," says 28-year-old shop assistant Rebecca Mamani, "my grandfather implored him not to beat her too much. The assumption was that he would have to beat her some."



Aymara women and activists during a march against gender violence, La Paz, Bolivia, Oct. 19, 2016 (AP photo by Juan Karita).

Oxfam also found that Bolivia's broken justice system provides women little legal recourse. This merges with the third factor the study identified: The government's lack of institutional capacity to enforce a law designed to protect women, as is the case with so many other of the laws in South America's poorest country.

With a strong commitment to women's equality, in 2012, President Evo Morales' government passed Law 348, one of Latin America's most progressive anti-violence laws. The legislation encompassed crimes such as sexual assault, domestic violence, femicide and forced sterilization. It made femicide punishable by 30 years in prison, the maximum sentence in Bolivia's justice system. However, since the law's passage, only 20 percent of the settled cases have resulted in prison sentences, according to the national newspaper, La Razon. The prosecutors who handle crimes against women find themselves with as many as 600 cases at a time.

An anti-violence law hasn't fulfilled its promise to protect women.

This does not mean that Law 348 has had no impact. As Madovia Callisaya, who works in the German-funded anti-violence project OMAK, explains, "Law 348 means men are more nervous about routinely striking women. Now we can divorce; before we just put up with getting hit."

Yet many women still fear leaving abusive relationships because of their economic dependence on their partners. Almost all women interviewed in a German-financed study (<http://www.bivica.org/upload/violencia-politica-acoso.pdf>) believed they should report the violence they suffer, but most don't because they fear separation from their children, or because they believe they brought the abuse upon themselves. "My husband attacked me, but I stayed silent because of the children," Madovia Callisaya, who is from the rural town of Achacachi, recalls.

"The moment you mistreat a woman, you cease to be a man," declares one of the many radio ads financed by the Ministry of Communication as part of a campaign begun in 2014 (<http://www.telesurtv.net/news/Bolivia-inicia-campana-contra-la-violencia-de-genero-20141114-0055.html>) to rein in the violence. In rural Tiwanaku, home of one of the Andes' oldest cultures, municipal authorities, almost all male, have undertaken an education campaign (<http://www.doctoraedicilia.com/experiencias/experiencias.php?recordID=9>) to bring "this evil" to an end.

The violence is in stark contrast to women's position in Bolivia's legislature, where they hold nearly half

the current seats. That puts Bolivia second in the world (<http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>) after Rwanda for female representation in parliaments. The achievement reflects the efforts of both working-class and middle-class women's organizations in the rewriting of the Bolivian constitution in 2009. Bolivian women only won the vote in 1953, making the number of women in the current legislature even more remarkable.

Women's representation has also skyrocketed locally. By 2015, women held 44.5 percent of municipal council seats, up from 19 percent in 2004. But violence against female politicians has grown, as well. Over 80 percent of women councilors report at least one case of violence or political intimidation while in office, most often carried out by other municipal authorities.

The problem is exacerbated by Bolivia's rural system of shared office. Drawing on indigenous traditions, holding political office is an obligation rotated among community members. Women are often pressured to give up their positions sooner than required. "Councilors have had their house set on fire, their husbands fired, their children assaulted, and been physically attacked, all so that they'll resign early," according to Jessy Lopez, the director of Association of Female Councilors of Bolivia, or ACOBOL (<http://www.acobol.org.bo/site/>). This intimidation has led to the murder of two municipal councilors since 2012.

Under Law 343, local governments were mandated to fund shelters for abused women, along with strengthening related psychological, legal and police resources. Getting these in place has been slow, though. Four years since the law passed, six out of a required nine shelters have opened their doors. In Bolivia's largest city, Santa Cruz, the shelter that opened a year ago only had space for 22 women, even though 40 complaints of violence against women are filed with the local police there every day.

Law 348 authorized the government to declare an emergency in the face of high indices of violence against women. The recent call by women's organizations to declare a state of emergency, backed by the United Nations (<http://www.unwomen.org/en>), is not their first; they made the same demand in 2014. To date, no one in the Bolivian government has responded. With Bolivia in the midst of its worst drought in 25 years, the government's current focus is elsewhere. But women's and human rights' organizations are determined to keep up the pressure until the violence drops.

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(<http://utpress.utexas.edu/index.php/books/farevo>)"