

Anger at violence against women in Peru spills over into protest - “Ni una mujer menos, ni una muerte más”

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Organisers get ready for a rally in Lima on August 13. ‘Ni Una Menos, Villa El Salvador, Lima

For many women in Peru, violence is a part of life [1]. Daily harassment on the streets, sexual abuse of minors, trafficking of women and girls, and the sexual, physical, emotional, and economic abuse of women in their own homes are all prevalent, but have been largely ignored by authorities and society alike. Now, in the wake of two high profile cases in July 2016 when men who attacked women received light sentences [2], civil society is rising up against the violence that permeates women’s lives. On August 13, a demonstration is scheduled in downtown Lima to oppose violence against women [3].

The Peruvian mobilisation is the latest chapter of a movement that has spread across Central and South America. It was sparked by the murder of Mexican poet and activist Susana Chávez Castillo in 2011 [4]. Castillo had coined the phrase *Ni una mujer menos, ni una muerte más* (“not another death, not a woman less”) in the 1990s in protest to a unprecedented spate of unsolved murders of women in Juarez, Mexico.

Four years after Castillo was tortured and killed in the same city, activists in Uruguay, Mexico, Chile and Argentina began organising campaigns and demonstrations to protest against femicide and violence against women more generally, using her slogan *Ni una menos* [5]. In May 2016, after the shocking gang rape of a girl in Rio de Janeiro was filmed and posted on the internet, Brazilian activists organised demonstrations in a similar fashion. Now it is Peru’s turn.

Two cases spark protest

In both of the cases that have sparked the Peruvian movement, the attacks were horrific, but the courts decided to give the men suspended sentences because the forensic evidence suggested the harm done was “minor”.

In the first case, in the highland city of Ayacucho, a woman called Cindy Contreras was assaulted by her boyfriend, who beat her up when she tried to flee the hotel where he had taken her. Harrowing footage from security cameras shows Adriano Pozo, naked, dragging her by her hair through the reception area in a video that was circulated widely on the internet. Contreras reported the assault and the man was captured and tried. But, in July 2016 a judge gave Pozo a suspended sentence [6], arguing that the nature of Contreras's wounds suggested that he had not intended to rape or kill her.

The second case was that of Lady Guillen, who endured assaults by her boyfriend for a year before reporting the violence when she felt her life was in danger. Pictures of her disfigured face, with stitches around her eyes, were published in the newspapers and circulated widely in Peru. Again, the judge considered Guillen's wounds minor, and decided, also in July this year, that her life was not in danger [7]. The aggressor, Ronny García, was released after four years in pre-trial imprisonment.

Both carry their physical and psychological wounds on their bodies and now live under the constant threat of retaliation from these men. The national mobilisation around their cases protects them somewhat, as now, for once, the perpetrators are in the spotlight. But they are not the only ones. According to national surveys, almost 40% of Peruvian women experience physical and sexual violence in their lives [8]. If psychological and verbal abuse is included, the number increases to 70% in both rural and urban areas, and in all social strata [9]. If we count all the "common" daily aggressions such as sexist jokes in the media and in politics, catcalling or harassment in public transport, then all Peruvian women experience such violence.

Peru has had enough

On a Sunday morning in July 2016, Jimena Ledgard, Elizabeth Vallejos and Natalia Iguíñiz set up a Facebook page [10] with the aim to organise a national demonstration similar to those that had been held elsewhere in Latin America, emblematically called *Ni una menos*. The site gained more than 45,000 members in five days, and by now almost 60,000. The page quickly evolved from an organisational platform into a place where women could share experiences. New testimonies about the most intimate experiences of violence and historic child abuse are added every other minute. It is a shocking read.

Femicide occurs throughout Central and South America. In Guatemala, estimates suggest that 700 women are killed each year [11], out of a population of 15.5m. Honduras and El Salvador have similarly high levels of femicide. In Peru, estimates range from 100 to 150 women killed every year [12].

As elsewhere in Latin America, Peruvians are starting to say no to one of the most persistent and devastating forms of violence and inequality in the world. The mobilisation has important parts of the media and private sector on its side, adding pressure on the state and society alike. It is already working: the judiciary has promised a special prosecutor for cases of femicide [13] and is investigating the sentences in the Contreras and Guillen cases [14]. In the end, a general shift in public opinion and societal norms around the legitimacy of all forms of violence against women and girls needs to take place for policies and programmes to be effective. These mass mobilisations are an important step in that ongoing process.

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P.S.

* The Conversation. 10 août 2016, 16:20 CEST:

<https://theconversation.com/anger-at-violence-against-women-in-peru-spills-over-into-protest-63087>

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Footnotes

[1] <http://www.palgrave.com/br/book/9781137383440>

[2] <http://peru21.pe/actualidad/tres-casos-agresion-sexual-contra-mujeres-que-nos-dicen-mucho-sobre-justicia-peru-2252427>

[3] <https://www.facebook.com/PeruNiUnaMenos/?pnref=story>

[4] <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-12177543>

[5] <http://niunamenos.com.ar>

[6] <http://larepublica.pe/impresasociedad/785994-siento-miedo-ahora-yo-soy-la-prisionera-dice-cindy-arlette-contreras>

[7] <http://www.peruthisweek.com/news-lady-guillen-110009>

[8] <https://www.inei.gob.pe/estadisticas/indice-tematico/violencia-de-genero-7921/>

[9] <https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FR299/FR299.pdf>

[10] <https://www.facebook.com/PeruNiUnaMenos/?pnref=story>

[11] <http://mujerguatemala.org/?portfolio=femicide-feminicide>

[12] <http://www.limacomovamos.org/cm/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/NiUnaMenos.pdf>

[13] <http://peru21.pe/politica/crearan-fiscalias-especializadas-delitos-feminicidio-anuncio-fiscal-nacion-2254173>

[14] <http://www.peruthisweek.com/news-ocma-investigates-judges-in-lady-guillan-and-contreras-case-110023>