

Culture of domestic abuse: Bolivia struggles with gender-based violence

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The death of María Isabel Pillco illustrates how far the country has to go in changing a culture of domestic abuse.

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LA PAZ, Bolivia — María Isabel Pillco's body lay on a table in the city morgue. A doctor was conducting an autopsy on it, peeling back layers of skin and tissue. It was early November, and the sun blazed overhead as dozens of people milled around in a dusty parking lot outside. The Pillco family was among them, waiting for her body to be released for the funeral the following day. The dead woman's partner, the father of their 2-year-old child, was not in the crowd; he was sitting in a police cell halfway across the city — held as a suspect in her death.

"I want justice for my daughter," Pillco's mother, Elvira Gavincha, cried as she leaned against a concrete wall that cast a small strip of shadow on the dry ground.

Inside the building, dozens of bodies were piled on the floor, some wrapped in trash bags or blankets, others only in the clothes they were wearing when they died. There is no refrigeration or storage space in the morgue; it's simply a warehouse full of anonymous dead. María Isabel Pillco, however, was an exception. She was separated from the rest and surrounded by hospital staff. Her naked body was covered with black bruises, except for a delicate, open hand that dangled off the table. The doctor later concluded that she had died of internal bleeding.

Even in the midst of their grief, the Pillco family had another concern. They were afraid that her partner, David Viscarra, who they believe beat her and caused the injuries that led to her death, would go free. As Pillco's mother wailed outside the morgue, the rest of the family gathered hospital reports and the domestic-violence complaint that Pillco had filed just a few days earlier. These are the documents they hoped would help send Viscarra to prison.

Domestic abuse is pervasive in Bolivia. In a report that surveyed 12 Latin American and Caribbean countries between 2003 and 2009, Bolivia was found to have the highest rate of intimate-partner violence against women [1]. Fifty-three percent of Bolivian women reported experiencing physical or sexual violence at the hands of a partner, as compared with 26 percent in El Salvador and 40 percent in Colombia.

Experts attribute Bolivia's high rate of domestic violence to a constellation of causes, including a culture of machismo, in which men have a proprietary sense of control over their families, and a long-standing acceptance of aggressive behavior. They also cite financial dependence as a major

reason why women stay in abusive relationships.

“Many times we see women [who] are afraid to report their partners because of the economic factor,” says Pamela Limache Galindo, who works as legal coordinator for a shelter for abused women in the central Bolivian city of Cochabamba. “It’s a big issue, and because they’re afraid of not being able to support their family they endure a lot in their homes.”

Historically, violence against women in Bolivia has stayed hidden — but many see a shift happening.

Cecilia Chacón, a Bolivian politician and investigator who has examined media coverage of violence against women, believes that while domestic violence used to be a private matter, it’s now being positioned “as a problem that deserves attention and answers from state authority.” As extensive press coverage and new laws have made it a public issue, reports of domestic violence across the country have risen [2]. “It’s not that there’s been a change or an increase in acts of violence, but a change in the way society and the press look at violence,” Chacón said.

In 2013, the Bolivian government began taking steps to address the problem and passed Law 348 [3], which is designed to prevent intimate-partner violence and punish abusers. The law, now being put into effect, focuses on women’s right to a life free of violence, and it makes femicide a crime punishable by 30 years in prison.

Law 348 resulted from the most concerted effort ever by the Bolivian government to tackle the issue of domestic violence. Implementing its myriad requirements, however, promises to be a long and complicated task.

Behind Closed Doors

David Viscarra and María Isabel Pillco, known as Isa to her friends and family, began their relationship in 2011 and moved in together not long after. In the beginning they were a happy young couple, but arguments crept in, and Pillco left a year later. They stayed apart until September 2014, when Pillco returned, hoping things had changed and that she and Viscarra could raise their child together. She died less than two months later, at the age of 28.

Pillco’s own words, recorded in a statement she made to authorities days before she died, tell part of the story of those final weeks. In the statement she recounts an attack in September and a second beating in late October.

“He pushed me hard onto the floor. I asked him to stop, saying he was drunk and I was not, and our daughter was watching,” Pillco stated. “Then he punched me in the nose, which began to bleed right away, and he grabbed my neck and squeezed hard. The only thing I could do was cover my face, and he took advantage of that to kick me all over my body.”

She died in a La Paz hospital on Nov. 3. Two days later, Viscarra appeared in court.

The day of Viscarra’s hearing, dozens of people who were at the city morgue the previous afternoon gathered on a street in downtown La Paz, hoisting homemade signs and chanting, “Murderer, murderer. What do we want? Justice!” They were awaiting a hearing that would determine whether Viscarra would be held in prison while lawyers and police investigated his possible role in Pillco’s death. (In the Bolivian legal system, suspects are often detained prior to being formally charged if a judge determines that there is sufficient reason.) Slight, his head bowed, wrists handcuffed and a hooded sweatshirt pulled up around his face, he did not look at the press as he spoke.

Viscarra said that the couple argued about buying a house and that Pillco had moved back in with her family in late October. The day after she left, Viscarra said, he saw her running errands with her sister. “I saw her at 8 in the morning going to buy gas with her sister,” he told reporters. “How could a seriously injured person go out to buy gas?” Later in the week he was told that Pillco was very ill and went to see her. “I was shocked when I saw her. Her skin and all her body was purple. ... She was all beaten, but I didn’t do it,” Viscarra said. “There was never abuse or hitting between us — just arguments.”

One of the issues complicating Pillco’s case is that she died more than a week after her last contact with Viscarra. It is possible for internal injuries to worsen over time and prove fatal, but there is not a clear link between Viscarra and her death. This means prosecutors and police must resolve other questions, like whether Pillco had underlying health issues or if someone else may have caused her injuries.

Elusive Justice

The vast majority of domestic-violence complaints never reach trial in Bolivia, and of those that do, most never result in a sentence. The national newspaper La Razón reported last November that since Law 348 was passed there have been 206 cases of femicide, but only eight sentences — a conviction rate of just 4 percent [4]. It’s difficult to find concrete statistics about how most cases play out, but attorney Teresa Torrico, who works with the legal-aid organization Women’s House in the Amazonian city of Santa Cruz, says that the overtaxed justice system leads many women to give up on their cases. This is in part a resource problem — there are only about 50 prosecutors in Bolivia who take on cases of violence against women, and they also work on human trafficking and child abuse. With so few prosecutors to go around, the burden of moving a case forward falls on victims and their families, requiring them to take time off work and spend money on transportation. Many people simply aren’t able to do either. “There is a very high percentage of cases that are just abandoned,” Torrico says.

Karina Cuba, the prosecutor assigned to Pillco’s case, typically arrives at her office around 7:30 in the morning and gets to work immediately. Her days are long, and at any given time she handles more than 600 cases, half of which are active. “With the caseload we carry, sometimes we don’t have all the time that a victim needs,” Cuba says.

It’s a situation that is common across the justice system.

Frida Choque, Cuba’s colleague who works on human trafficking and domestic violence cases, agrees that the pressure on prosecutors is tremendous. To illustrate it, she draws an inverted pyramid balanced on the head of a stick figure. “Here is Law 348, here are the protocols, here is the social pressure, here is institutional pressure, and here is the prosecutor bearing all this weight,” she says. “We’ve learned we need to work with what we have and do the best that we can.”

Compounding these problems is a legacy of neglect. According to Betty Pinto, director of special programs with the country’s human-rights office, the Bolivian judicial system has historically offered little justice to victims of violence. This, she says, created a culture of silence that persists to this day. “We are sure there is underreporting, that a long history of impunity discourages people from reporting,” she says. Moreover, many Bolivians avoid the legal system because they believe it to be corrupt. Recent scandals involving public prosecutors and police officers (not ones who work on gender-based violence) have reinforced that impression [5].

New measures associated with the anti-violence legislation, however, may make a difference. Local

and regional governments are now required to use part of the funding they receive from hydrocarbons taxes to create shelters for abused women, improve legal and psychological resources, and fund police units responsible for handling violence against women. These efforts will go into effect this year, but change is not fast enough for the hundreds of women who face violence every day. It seems unlikely that the prosecutors and investigators who work on domestic violence in Bolivia will see their workloads significantly diminish any time soon.

A Life Cut Short

La Paz's main cemetery is a mazelike necropolis set in a neighborhood full of markets frantic with commerce. On Nov. 6, hundreds of people crowded near the cemetery gate, blocking the street around Pillco's coffin. The local press was out in force, and family and friends shouted for justice under the blazing sky. The mass was simple and brief, and as Pillco's body was interred in an alcove among hundreds of others, a young boy hired to pray for her chanted a simple song. Her parents, Victor and Elvira, stood with stunned faces as mourners filed past, squeezing the couple's hands and kissing them on the cheeks.

Nearly six months later, the investigation into the death goes on. María Isabel's daughter is approaching her third birthday, the press has vanished from the family's life, and every week there are more headlines across the country about women being beaten, shot or set on fire. The Pillco family still hopes the police will reach conclusions about their daughter's death — though that hope is dwindling, especially since the investigator handling the case was reassigned, and they are now beginning again with a new officer.

Victor Pillco is a soft-spoken man who works as an ambulance driver. He carries a folder filled with neatly organized papers, including the domestic complaint his daughter made against David and the doctor's notes from her hospital stay.

"My daughter was a happy person — here, I'll show you a picture." He pulls a picture out of his wallet of a tall, slender girl with long, wavy dark hair holding a red rose. "She didn't like to drink, but she liked to go out to dance at birthday parties." Victor describes a woman with many friends, who continue to stop by the Pillcos' house to ask how the case is going.

Whatever happens with the investigation, it cannot bring María Isabel Pillco back. Her mother cries uncontrollably when she thinks of her daughter bleeding from her nose and ears in a hospital bed. Victor doesn't cry, but he suffers. "I feel an empty space inside me," he says. "She deserved to live."

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P.S.

* April 30, 2015 5:00AM ET:

<http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/4/30/bolivia-struggles-with-gender-based-violence.html>

Footnotes

[1] http://www.paho.org/hq/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=8175:violence-against-women-latin-america-caribbean-comparative-analysis-population-data-from-12-countries&Itemid=1519&lang=en

[2] ESSF (article 40540), [Violent attacks against elected female leaders: Bolivian women battle against culture of harassment](#).

[3] <http://www.coordinadoradelamujer.org.bo/observatorio/index.php/marco/mostrar/boton/1/sub/19/id/245/idps/25/tem/1>

[4] http://www.la-razon.com/index.php?_url=/ciudades/Hechos-feminicidios-Bolivia-solo-sentencias_0_2161583841.html

[5] <http://www.defensoria.gob.bo/archivos/Feminicidio%20en%20Bolivia.pdf>