

Violent attacks against elected female leaders: Bolivian women battle against culture of harassment

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Bolivian women have been staging protests against the high levels of violence inflicted on women.

Two years after the murder of an outspoken female councillor ushered in new legislation outlawing political violence against women in Bolivia, campaigners say a culture of harassment remains, as Paula Dear reports from La Paz.

Juana Quispe's lifeless body was dumped near the Orkojahuirá River, in La Paz region. She had been strangled.

Her murder - one of a series of violent attacks against elected female leaders across Bolivia - sparked nationwide protests and led to the adoption of a long-delayed law to tackle the issue.

Two years on, no-one has been convicted of her killing and female political leaders report an enduring crisis of physical and verbal attacks, harassment and threats against them, which campaigners claim undermines Bolivia's democracy.

No isolated case

The violence experienced by Ms Quispe, who had been helping female colleagues file complaints of harassment, was not an isolated case.

"Every time I went to a meeting they'd try to force me to resign. They came to my house three times to get me to resign. My family were terrified"

Petronila Aliaga, Councillor in Colquencha

Three months after her death, Councillor Daguiar Rivera Ortiz - who had exposed local corruption - was shot dead in the city of Guyaramerin, in northern Beni region.

In the eight years to 2012 there were more than 4,000 complaints of violence and harassment from Bolivia's female politicians, according to the Association of Female Councillors of Bolivia (Acobol).

Despite the groundbreaking new law - which made political harassment a crime punishable by up to five years in prison, and physical, sexual or psychological aggression punishable by up to eight - activists say the problem is not being tackled adequately.

The charity Christian Aid says the number of reported cases it sees of violence and threats against women politicians has risen from 10 to 25 per month since the new law was passed in May 2012.

While campaigners acknowledge the figures have been affected by the increased reporting of

incidents brought about by the law, they say there is a lack of clarity over how victims can use the legislation to get justice.

“The authorities have to decide who is going to take responsibility for these cases,” says Christian Aid programme officer Cecilia Cordova.

Pressure to resign

Petronila Aliaga, a councillor in Colquencha, 80km (50 miles) south of La Paz, says: “I’ve been bullied to try to force me to resign.”

Over the past two years she has faced a barrage of attacks and intimidation, including a threat to kidnap her and set her on fire.

“Every time I went to a meeting they’d try to force me to resign. First I stayed quiet, then I stopped going. They came to my house three times to get me to resign. My family were terrified,” she recalls.

Harassment or violence is frequently aimed at forcing women councillors to sign documents or support decisions (41%), or at restricting or blocking the effective performance of their functions (30%), Acobol’s data suggests.

Campaigners say the reasons behind such violence are complex.

Women’s domestic, childcare and - in rural areas - agricultural responsibilities can make fulfilling their public roles difficult, discouraging them from challenging strong socio-cultural barriers that keep them from taking up representative positions.

The issue sits alongside a deep-rooted problem of domestic violence, with Bolivia experiencing the highest levels in South America, according to a 2013 Pan American Health Organisation (PAHO) study.

Pio Luguez Albertini, from the association of female councillors in La Paz, says: “Pressure comes from family and those closest, from social organisations and communities, as well as male colleagues.”

“Families often don’t accept women’s participation. There’s still a macho culture where men have more value.”

Equal representation

Despite the ongoing fight by Ms Aliaga and others, the intimidation is now “detering some women from participating” and undermining Bolivia’s democracy, says Acobol.

In such a hostile environment, only 9% of women leaders stand for office a second time.

Villazon councillor Ada Gutierrez say she is one of the few councillors to have been re-elected. “It’s common for [women] to be bullied by colleagues and pressured into resigning,” she explains.

The Bolivian authorities have made significant steps towards addressing gender discrimination.

Following the legislation on political violence, a further law was passed in 2013 that identified 15 specific types of violence against women and increased sentences, in some cases, from four to 30 years.

Such legislative moves came on the back of a new constitution providing for equal representation between men and women candidates at all levels.

'Not functioning'

But women's groups say the failure to properly implement new laws or take action against perpetrators poses a grave challenge to participation.

Mercedes Vargas, from indigenous rights organisation Fundacion Machaqa, agrees: "These women continue to suffer. We now have a law, but it's not functioning well."

Activists say there is a lack of access to justice and lack of protection for complainants, as well as delays in cases brought.

The recognition by the new constitution of practices and customs of indigenous communities - who do not accept women as heads of traditional authorities - is also said to contradict the law on the rights of women.

Acobol legal specialist Jesse Lopez, quoted in a UN Women report, said: "The patriarchal structure has been a limiting factor on [our] work - even though the political constitution of the state has included principles and rights to guarantee the participation of women in politics, attitudes and social structures are difficult to break."

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* BBC. 12 March 2014:

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