

Women's Rights in Latin America: Ni Una Menos Stares Down Conservative Reaction

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As an unprecedented wave of feminist campaigns gains ground across Latin America, a dangerous backlash is afoot on various fronts.

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Well before outrage over Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein gave rise to the #MeToo movement in October 2017, feminists throughout Latin America had been using social media to organize large-scale nation-wide protests against gender violence. Between 2015 and 2016, mass demonstrations shook Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Ecuador, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela, each triggered by local events: in Argentina it was the murder of a young woman later found dumped in a garbage bag in March 2015; in Brazil, it was the May 2016 gang rape of a 16-year-old girl, filmed and posted on YouTube; in Peru, it was impunity surrounding a man who violently dragged his girlfriend through a hotel lobby, recorded and uploaded for the world to see. Though sparked in each instance by different cases, all protests converged around a shared slogan-‘Ni Una Menos’ (Not One [woman] Less)-and one demand: an end to violence against women.

These protests happen amid staggering levels of violence against women. At least 75% of Peruvian women report facing some form of violence from their partners or ex-partners during their lifetime. Femicide-the murder of women-ranges from an estimated ten a month in Peru to seven a day in Mexico. Meanwhile as more women enter politics on their own terms, they are increasingly subject to political violence, as the recent assassination of Rio de Janeiro city councillor Marielle Franco chillingly exposed. And though no solid figures on sexual violence against minors exist, reliable estimates based on available data suggest at least one in five girls experiences sexual violence before they turn 15. It is plausible, then, to assume that many and perhaps most teenage pregnancies-so charged an issue in Catholic Latin America-result from rape. In turn, these shocking figures have spurred new debates around legalizing abortion, at least in cases of rape.

Still, numbers only scratch the surface of what, in each instance, is a deeply disturbing personal story. What Ni Una Menos has accomplished is to make abstract figures tangible, imaginable. Relegated to reports and statistics, numbers can be dismissed. But testimony-long a feature of Latin American social justice movements-is a powerful tool. Peru's Ni Una Menos campaign began on a Sunday morning in July 2016 when Natalia Iguíñiz, Jimena Ledgard and Elizabeth Vallejos set up a Facebook page, aiming to organize a march similar to those held earlier in Brazil and Argentina. Within 24 hours, women of all ages and backgrounds had posted their stories. They told of childhood abuse never before shared, of sexual coercion as adolescents, of physical and emotional abuse by partners and ex-partners, of the impunity that followed, of lack of support from relatives. Suddenly,

abstract figures came alive.

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To be sure, feminist consciousness-raising campaigns are far from novel. What is new is the potential audience for these traumatic experiences, now reaching tens of thousands instead of ten. Though resembling #MeToo in scale, the level of detail relayed in Ni Una Menos testimonies far exceeds that found in #MeToo. Inclusion and diversity are also hallmarks: though in Peru three well educated urban middle-class women created the platform, women from many other backgrounds and geographies quickly joined the movement. Now tangible, the multiple violences women of many social classes experienced, identified with, and shared generated enormous energy among group members and drew in family and friends. In turn, this energy grew into powerful political mobilization, including alliances with the private sector and state institutions that sponsored and participated in nation-wide marches held on August 13, 2016. By some estimates, as many as half a million people took to the streets in support.

A Conservative Backlash

Unsurprisingly, as Peruvian feminists have notched impressive successes, they have also increasingly met with conservative reaction. Cardinal Juan Luis Cipriani, the Catholic Church's highest authority in Peru, hit back fiercely. In response to calls for legalizing abortion in cases of child rape, Cipriani said on national radio in late July 2016 that "[They tell us] there are many abortions among young girls, but nobody has abused these girls. Often it is women who put themselves on display, provoking men.' By suggesting that girls-minors-provoke sexual harassment, Cipriani denies them even a public debate about abortion, or indeed, sexual violence. After the Ni Una Menos protests in August 2016, Cipriani supported counter-mobilizations opposing compulsory sex education in schools, based on the notion that "gender ideology" harms biologically given roles and turns children into homosexuals. In early May 2018, the Archbishop organized a pro-life demonstration that showed forceful mobilization of schoolteachers and children and aggressive anti-feminist sloganeering.

Peru's conservative backlash is far from unique. In November 2017, evangelical activists in Brazil staged mass demonstrations against feminist critical theorist Judith Butler as she participated in a conference in São Paulo. Protesters greeted Butler with screams at the airport and picketed in front of the venue where she was due to speak. Online, a widely-distributed petition against Butler's alleged promotion of 'gender ideology' in Brazil gathered as many as 370,000 signatures [\[1\]](#).

Driving these protests is fear of the increasingly changing nature of gender relations that question heteronormative family values, as women's autonomy grows more visible, acceptable, and even legislated. As some Latin American women make political history-witness the ground-breaking presidencies of Michelle Bachelet in Chile (2006-2010, 2014-2018), Cristina Kirchner in Argentina (2007-2015), and Dilma Rousseff in Brazil (2011-2016)-other highly skilled and educated professional women enter the labor market, reshaping the economy. And while Afro and indigenous groups do far worse than their white and mestiza counterparts in terms of education and political participation, and remain among the poorest throughout the Americas, increasingly they too break with that trend. Women are central to World Bank-supported innovation in social protection for the poorest, with cash transfers largely directed toward mothers.

These advances in women's emancipation are not without controversy, contestation, or ambiguity. A long tradition of mobilizing women from a maternalist perspective suggests that women's rights are

not necessarily central to a politics of emancipation. In part, the mass scale of demonstrations against gender violence in 2016 was possible because openly approving of gender violence, even for conservative religious sectors, is difficult to justify. That Ni Una Menos garnered cross cutting support—in terms of class, race, even religion—reflected its focus on violence, not on feminism as a political identity. At least in Peru, Ni Una Menos did not stake a united position on issues such as abortion or LGBTQI rights, precisely the issues conservative sectors call upon to oppose any social, cultural, or legal change in gender relations.

But one cannot oppose violence against women without also supporting women's rights more broadly—the lack of rights and autonomy is what makes violence possible and pervasive. That must include reproductive and sexual rights for both men and women. But conservative religious sectors view abortion as an evil tied to the transgression of women and girls' sexuality. Likewise, they often frame sex and gender education that might help foment mutual respect, less sexual violence, and hence, fewer forced pregnancies, as sinful. In the process, conservative sectors ultimately help justify continued violence against women and girls.

Reaction Turns Deadly

The backlash against women's rights in the wake of Ni Una Menos is more than talk. In March this year Marielle Franco, Afro-Brazilian city councillor, lesbian feminist activist, and human rights defender for Rio de Janeiro's favelas, was shot dead alongside her driver, Anderson Pedro Gomes, on her way home after a meeting with women's organizations. Days earlier, she had condemned President Michel Temer's militarization of Rio's favelas. Her death, alongside those of environmental activist Berta Cáceres in Honduras in 2016 [2], and women human rights activists in the Peruvian Amazon and in Mexico, expose just how powerful a challenge women's participation in public life other than on maternalist grounds poses to the status quo.

These deaths must be seen in a context of gender-based violence. Many of these women upheld a feminist politics, denouncing the violence of individual men as well of the state and its institutions. Often, too, impunity is framed in a gendered narrative of victim-blaming: she must have done something to provoke the violence. For instance, the brutal murder of Mexican poet and activist Susana Chávez Castillo [3] on the streets of Ciudad Juárez, Mexico in 2011 was dismissed as a quarrel with street "three teenagers high on drugs." The problem, then, was Castillo being on the streets at night, not those who killed her for her activism. In fact the phrase Ni Una Menos, now a powerful reference throughout Latin America, originates in one of Chávez's poems—Ni una mujer menos, ni una muerte más ("not one woman less, not one more death")—published in the mid-1990s in protest over an unprecedented spate of femicides in Juárez.

Resistance to these multiple violences is not ceasing. On the contrary: social media as a tool for mass feminist consciousness raising, for debate and mobilization, and for denouncing violent incidents and their perpetrators in the absence of criminal accountability and justice, provides women a powerful pressure mechanism. Sharing stories on social media draws in allies who might not immediately identify with feminist activism—especially men and family members—thereby expanding support.

Social media also allows for ferocious public debates between those who feel the need to protect male privilege and those with the energy to contest. In these debates, male fear of mob justice is real, as many men do not see or understand how their own harmful behavior—normalized harassment—rests on the same power structures as physical violence, child abuse, and femicide. Yet all available information on gender violence powerfully shows that it is far more likely for women to

be harassed than for men to be accused of harassment, let alone falsely. So while these fears may be real, they are unfounded.

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Peruvian novelist and Nobel Prize winner Mario Vargas Llosa, writing in the Spanish newspaper *El País* [4], recently argued that “feminism is literature’s worst enemy,” as feminist critics unpack and debate the many machismos of the male-dominated twentieth century literary canon. Vargas Llosa’s comments not only defend his own work and literature as defined by male writers, but forcefully reject the power of critique and social change. Along with other icons of Latin American literature—Pablo Neruda and Gabriel García Márquez, especially—Vargas Llosa is now rightfully being read in the appropriate context of a violent and misogynist century. Their novels are being debated in universities alongside female writers who give their perspective upon the twentieth century.

Resisting Reaction

The recently discovered and published epistolary novel by Colombian artist Emma Reyes may yet become part of this new canon. Reyes (1919-2003) was a quintessential twentieth-century Latin American nomad. She travelled through Colombia before moving to Paris, where she worked with many in the mid-century Latin American intellectual diaspora before dying as a largely unknown artist in Bordeaux. A small and dedicated Colombian press, Laguna, published her only literary work for the first time in 2012. The memoir consists of 23 letters Reyes wrote to her friend, Colombian journalist and historian Germán Arciniegas. Recognizing their quality, in the 1970s Arciniegas showed the letters to Gabriel García Márquez, intending to edit, publish, and spread Reyes’s work. But Reyes felt betrayed as she had not given Arciniegas permission to share her personal correspondence. She would not write again for twenty years, after which she penned a final letter in 1997.

Reyes’s letters tell a personal story of growing up in extreme poverty, collecting garbage, being locked in dirty rooms and abandoned houses, unloved and unrecognized. The narrative takes Reyes and her sister from Bogotá to the Colombian provinces and back. ‘Maria,’ as Reyes calls her mother, lives off the men who make her pregnant before abandoning her, and she resolves to abandon her children instead. One brother is returned to his absent father. Another baby is abandoned. Reyes suggests her mother’s men come from high standing; they have money and families, houses and political fiefdoms; they are the local bosses of the time. At the age of six or seven, Maria leaves Emma and her younger sister behind at a railway station. They eventually end up in a convent where life is cruel to both girls and nuns, a rigid and joyless existence of nothingness behind heavily barred doors.

Emma Reyes’ story tells the other side of growing up in twentieth-century Latin America, as did others before her, with great contrast to Vargas Llosa’s machismo and García Márquez’ magical realism. She offers a different perspective upon this world in which autocrats often ruled houses, communities, and countries, in which a conservative Catholicism set the law and turned women into eternal sinners, to be abused, abandoned and disciplined at will, where poverty could be absolute, and race an organizing principle. The Book of Emma Reyes, published in Spanish in 2012 and just last year in English, could not have been more timely considering Latin America’s feminist revival. Insofar as men dominated twentieth century literature, it was not because women did not write, or

did not write well, but because they were not encouraged or published nearly as much as men. The violent misogyny of the twentieth century reverberates in the twenty-first, but now there is mass opposition—in literature and the arts, in politics, on social media, and on the streets. And while Nobel Prize winners, archbishops, and thugs may challenge it, Latin American feminist resistance is here to stay.

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P.S.

* NACLA. May 8, 2018:

<https://nacla.org/news/2018/05/08/ni-una-menos-stares-down-conservative-reaction>

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Footnotes

[1] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/11/13/judith-butler-discusses-being-burned-effigy-and-protested-brazil>

[2] <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/28/world/americas/honduras-berta-caceres-des.html>

[3] http://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2011/01/110112_mexico_juarez_susana_chavez_an

[4] https://elpais.com/elpais/2018/03/16/opinion/1521215265_029385.html