

NI UNA MÁS

Feminists against femicides

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We barely arrived at the Dam square in Amsterdam on time. From further away we could hear the people talking until suddenly the drums provide a rhythm to which the entire crowd starts moving. It is the 8th of May, 2020, International Women's Day, as my friends and I walk near the end of the line where the Latin community has gathered with well-prepared signs and lyric booklets, all chanting at the same time in Spanish. It almost sounds like music, the rapid rolling of r's and the melodic tones in their words. But today these women are singing songs of grief, anger, and courage. "We don't want to be brave, we want to be free", a sign says. And in a way we are free, all of us walking there are calling out for other women, for those who are brave but not free.

On this day women all over the world march for different reasons, Latin America simply marches for one thing: Ni Una Más. Not one more woman killed. This movement aims to raise awareness to the gendered violence against women and to decrease femicide.

Because of the 25 countries with the highest femicide rates worldwide, 14 are located in Latin America. In this region on average 12 women are murdered every day.

Many people believe the solution and responsibility lies at governmental level. Laws addressing femicide have already been passed in 18 Latin countries, but they seem to be ineffective since femicide rates continue to rise. Although, laws are necessary they cannot address the underlying reasons for violence against women and are simply a surface level solution. Which can best be seen in the 98% of femicide cases that go unprosecuted in this region.

"The impunity with which state institutions have reacted to the [abuse, rape and] killings of women serves to normalize violence and it sends a message that the lives of women are expendable" (Menjívar, 2011)

The implementation of laws depends heavily on the social context in which these laws are placed. Different interpretations cause different implementations, already seen in the lack of consensus on the definition of femicide within the law. 'Femicide' or 'feminicide' are terms for the concept of gender related killings of women. The terms aim to raise awareness on women who are murdered because they are women. However, some definitions of femicide simply state the murder of women and girls without addressing the gendered motive. The controversy causes difficulty in implementing legislations to protect women.

Some Latin American countries have developed a specific penal for femicide in their laws. In Argentina and Venezuela femicide is categorized as aggravated homicide, while Chile and Costa Rica only count femicides perpetrated by current or former intimate partners. Not only the widespread definition is a challenge, but also the identification of gender-related motives of a crime. Often femicide crimes receive heavier punishment than homicide crimes so it is necessary to have a clear distinction between the two as well as a way to measure this. Most femicide cases are different from homicides because they are often committed by current or former intimate partners or family members. Femicides are also characterized by ongoing abuse or threats, sexual violence, and unequal power relations. Despite the passings of these laws women continue to be killed, which requires us to look deeper into the origins of violence against women.

MACHISMO

To be able to diminish violence it is not enough to only be in a reactive state when it comes to solutions. The government certainly carries a responsibility to react in order to combat the problem against further escalation. They need clear universal definitions and reliable indicators, but mostly they need to bring justice for those too late to save. Show that these actions are not normalized in a society. However, just as important is to prevent, to look into the underlying causes, the cultural dimensions of violence. Like the march on International Women's Day, street demonstrations are an effective and common way in Latin America to bring change.

Femicides occur in many different ways, often depending on social, cultural, and political norms. The killings of women range from dowry-related murders mainly happening in India to the murder of women due to sex work, accusations of witchcraft, sexual orientation or gender-based indigenous and aboriginal killings. In some Latin countries the high femicide rates occur mainly due to criminal violence. However, in the majority of Latin countries and worldwide the most prevalent form of femicide is domestic or intimate partner. Contradictory to the general belief that women are in more danger away from home, especially in the dark or with strangers, it seems most violence happens at home. Despite females making up just 20% of total homicides, female victims are far more likely to be killed by someone they know.

"There is a powerful cultural component, a patriarchal common sense of men's possession of women's bodies. And it is important to work with them, without neglecting the victim. Otherwise, this violence is not going to stop," - Gladys Acosta Vargas, vice chairperson at CEDAW.

In Latin America this cultural component is the culture of machismo. This culture of violence has been in Latin America since colonial times and is so embedded in the culture that it has become invisible to those reinforcing it. There are various forms of violence that can be normalized in a society such as structural, political, everyday, symbolic, gender and gendered violence.

Guatemalan sociologist Edelberto Torres-Rivas says structural violence 'is rooted in the uncertainty of everyday life caused by the insecurity of wages or income, a chronic deficit in food, dress, housing, and health care, and uncertainty about the future which is translated into hunger and delinquency, and a barely conscious feeling of failure'. When women live their everyday lives in gender inequalities and are dependent on their partner for basic needs they are in a more vulnerable position. And when men live in a society that claims pride and power upon its men there evolves a pressure for them to establish those norms at home.

The documentary Breaking Silence – Femicide in Latin America tells the stories of women with close experiences to femicide. One is that of a girl named Ruth Sayas, a 19 year old girl who lived in Peru. After a new reality television show launched Ruth decided to participate. On the show she had to answer questions attached to a lie detector in front of her parents and her boyfriend. They asked her if she had ever had sex in return for money and the answer was yes. To her boyfriend that answer was a public undermining of his masculinity and harming his pride. Her truth was worth a lot of money, but it ended up costing her life at the hands of her partner.

What this story tells us is how the public revelation of an action going against normalized beliefs puts enough pressure on someone to kill the woman he loves. Of course no one can ever know the entire story from all perspectives, even the people in the story. However, it represents something bigger than femicides in Latin America can only decrease and diminish by addressing the notion of patriarchy on all levels of society. Research shows when men strongly associate with gender roles and masculinity, such as believing that men should dominate women, are more likely to use violence against their partner. Things that play a role in adapting to such beliefs include limited education, exposure to domestic violence and a history of childhood abuse, as well as societal factors like national health systems, number of women elected in government and gender inequality.

INTERVENTIONS

Already, many initiatives are rising up to the occasion to address machismo in the region, country, and continent. Overall, there are three types of interventions that when implemented together can effectively change the notion of patriarchy in Latin America.

First off are legal changes. As we discussed earlier it is necessary to have a clear definition of femicide in combination with indicators to better implement laws. These laws already exist in many countries but differ in their ways to identify and punish femicides. When femicide laws are implemented strictly, legal changes may still be necessary. For example, strengthening gun laws and reducing ownership could benefit since women are three times more likely to be killed when there is a gun in the house.

Secondly, early interventions are needed to address the root of the problem. Interventions may include trainee programmes for health staff, police and justice officials as well as awareness campaigns to educate the public. The Mexican organisation GENDES is a great example of how to practically reconstruct beliefs on gender and masculinity. They hold safe and open discussion groups for men where they are educated on non-violent conflict resolutions and learn how to identify and reflect on gender perspectives.

Lastly, there are multi-agency efforts to assist directly in cases of violence. These actions take form in many ways like 24/7 phone counselling, intervention guides for police staff, enabling emergency restraining orders and protection for victims of domestic violence.

The European Union and United Nations have also started the Spotlight Initiative to combat femicides and enforce Sustainable Development Goals 5 (gender equality) and 16 (peace and justice for all). The initiative runs in Argentina, Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. The initiative uses all three types of intervention (legal changes, early interventions, and multi-agency efforts) to improve violence prevention, support victims and develop new legal frameworks.

This year for International Women's Day on the Mexican website of Un Dia Sin Mujeres they published a document with 9 questions to reflect on masculinity. Their final question was this:

¿Qué características consideras que debe tener una masculinidad sana y positiva?

What characteristics do you consider a healthy and positive masculinity should have?

To me the question represents a form of hope. It allows us to think of a balance between masculine and feminine energies, as opposed to the competition it seems to have been in for a long time. This can only be achieved through a holistic effort to educate people, spread awareness, take legal forms of action and pursue legal changes where necessary. With the help of multi-agency projects where different stakeholders collaboratively combat femicide and machismo.

The future of this issue is extremely uncertain, as is the case with any complex problem. However, from the knowledge we have and the examples of initiatives show that the task is not impossible. Then again, what really is?