

Latin America - Brazil and Argentina unite in protest against culture of sexual violence

Thursday 27 October 2016, by [GOÑI Uki](#), [WATTS Jonathan](#) (Date first published: 22 August 2016).

Two different protests, two different countries, but the same continent and the same cause: violence against women in “macho” Latin America.

Demonstrators in Brazil and Argentina will join rallies on Friday that highlight both the persistence of gender violence and a growing campaign to stop it.

Coincidental rather than coordinated, the protests have been sparked by separate outrages: the alleged gang rape of a 16-year-old in Rio de Janeiro last week [1] and the murder of a pregnant 14-year-old girl in Argentina’s Santa Fe province last year [2].

These and other high-profile cases have helped to stir a debate about femicide, rape, domestic violence and other forms of abuse in a region where such maltreatment has long been swept under the carpet.

While gender violence occurs worldwide, the problem has come to the fore in several countries in Latin America through the work of prominent feminist groups, many of which argue their region is particularly plagued by social insecurity and male-dominated traditions.

In the past 12 months, there have been protests in Mexico, Bolivia, Colombia, Argentina and Brazil.

Rio has had two in the past week, with another scheduled on Friday. The rallies were prompted by the alleged rape of a girl by more than 30 men, at least two of whom posted images of the assault and its aftermath on social networks.

The case has dominated headlines and divided opinion. Hundreds of people “liked” the video of the semi-conscious victim before it was removed from Twitter. Many commentators insinuated the girl was to blame because of her clothing, because she has used drugs, because she had a child at the age of 14, and because her boyfriend is reportedly a gang member who lives in a favela.

The girl’s family say she was gang-raped as a punishment because her boyfriend suspected she had cheated on him. With her life now threatened by the gang in the Morro do Barão, Jacarepaguá, she has had to flee to another neighbourhood and is attempting to change her identity.

In an interview with local media, she said the policeman who initially heard her testimony was hostile and critical. Other officers posted mocking comments and pictures on their Facebook and Instagram pages.

But amid a growing outcry at her treatment, the authorities have promised action. A female officer, Cristiana Bento, has been put in charge of the investigation and gone on record to state the video alone proved there was a rape. Several of the alleged perpetrators have been arrested.

Extra, the newspaper that first broke the news, has published a letter to its readers to explain why the case should be considered a rape. Michel Temer, the acting president, has condemned the attack and said he will establish a special task force in the federal police to handle cases of violence against women.

Campaigners say the case has raised awareness and shown that women need not be silent in the face of physical and psychological abuse.

Studies suggest between 7.5% and 10% of Brazilian women report cases of sexual violence. Patrícia Nogueira, coordinator of the Brazilian Forum of Public Security, said there has been little change in the number of cases of sexual violence, but there is much more awareness of the crime than in the past.

“What we see is that people are mobilising around this theme. People are discussing it and I think this is a positive point,” she said. “These cases reveal thoughts and a part of our culture that has been around for a long time and wasn’t being made explicit. There is a cultural aspect that is similar in other Latin American countries. We live under a similar matrix that is patriarchal and machista.”

Andrea Machado, who organised a protest on Wednesday in the centre of Rio, said the online abuse of the girl “shows how deep-rooted machismo is in our society”.

“I think we have two options: we can either fear or fight. And I’m happy to see that the great majority chose to fight,” she said. “Women are starting to discover that we’re not alone, so have more courage to report, to say ‘Enough’, to ask for help. But it’s still just a start.”

She said more women are now asking for assistance as a result of online forums, greater information and the growth of support groups and helplines. But there are still an alarming number of women who suffer in silence.

The issue is complicated by inequality and race. Lizandra Córdova Vieira, who is organising Friday’s protest in Nova Iguaçu, said the problem of sexual violence in poor communities was hugely under-reported, partly because of the generally high levels of crime. She said a friend committed suicide last week because she could no longer bear the abuse she was suffering. In January, the mother of another acquaintance was killed by her ex-husband while she was having her nails done at a beauty salon.

“We always find out about these case through social media. They are never published,” she said. “The objective of our protest is to give more visibility to what is happening here, so that we stop being silenced and ignored. Women on the periphery die all the time and no one cares.”

Brazil has the fifth highest rate of femicide in the world, according to a recent study that found seven of the worst nations are in Latin America [3]. Insight Crime attributes this to generally high levels of violence in the region, as well as organised crime, human trafficking and domestic abuse. “Women seldom occupy higher positions in a [criminal] organisation, and are rather used for menial, but often dangerous tasks,” it notes.

Another factor is that justice systems often fail to penalise men who kill women. Societies – both at a national and neighbourhood level – are reluctant to intervene in cases of domestic abuse.

'Not one less'

This is one of the reasons for Friday's demonstration in Argentina, which will be the second mass protest against gender violence, following rallies in several cities last year [4].

According to the supreme court's domestic violence office, 286 women were murdered in Argentina as a result of gender violence in 2015. The attacker was the woman's ex-partner in 49% of cases and current partner in 30%.

Almost as alarmingly, of the 57,000 reports of domestic violence received by the office in the past six years, only 22 came from neighbours. "It's a social mandate, people don't get involved," says Genoveva Cardinali, a Buenos Aires prosecutor specialising in gender violence.

The initial demonstration by hundreds of thousands of women on 3 June last year was led by nine female journalists who demanded government action and greater public awareness of the endemic problem.

"My job included rushing to interview the families of victims of gender violence," says one of them, Marcela Ojeda.

The murder of a 14-year-old pregnant schoolgirl, Chiara Paez, who was found buried in her boyfriend's garden three days after being reported missing in the town of Rufino in central Santa Fe province, shocked Ojeda to the core.

"They're killing us," she tweeted last year, a cry of despair that women across Argentina immediately understood. Ojeda's tweet spread like wildfire, accompanied by the hashtag #niunamenos ("not one less"), meaning no more women's lives lost to gender violence.

A year on, there is still a long way to go in terms of government action and public awareness.

"There's been no drop-off in the number of cases," says Ojeda, "and the government has still to respond to most of our demands."

Among those marching will be Jorge Taddei and Beatriz Regal, whose daughter, Wanda, was among the most high-profile victims.

Her husband was Eduardo Vázquez, the drummer of Callejeros, one of the most famous rock acts in Argentina. The marriage was far from idyllic. Vázquez physically abused his wife on repeated occasions. Finally, in the middle of a heated discussion, Vázquez threw alcohol at Taddei, grabbed a lighter and set her on fire. Taddei died from the burns caused by his attack 11 days later, unable to relate what had happened to her.

"It's only going to change when the paradigm of this macho, patriarchal society shifts"
Jorge Taddei

It was hoped that Taddei's horrific death, in the early hours of 10 February 2010, would be a turning point. Gender violence remained an open secret until the judges in the Taddei case reduced Vázquez's sentence, ruling that his crime had been committed in a fit of passion. Although a higher court later sentenced Vázquez to life imprisonment, the public outcry was so loud that Congress changed the law to exclude "violent emotion" as an attenuating circumstance in crimes against women.

But the public clamour and the changing of the law had no immediate effect on the number of

gender crimes. On the contrary: in the three years after Taddei's death, 132 women were set on fire by men, half of them dying as a result of the attacks, in what came to be known as the "Wanda Taddei" effect. In the two years before Taddei's death, there had been only nine reported cases.

Those marching on Friday are well aware that progress in Argentina's macho-dominated society is glacially slow. "Nothing changed since last year," Taddei's father said in an interview published by the Buenos Aires daily *La Nación* this week [5]. "And it's not going to change in one year, or two, or 10 or 20. It's only going to change when the paradigm of this macho, patriarchal society shifts."

Meanwhile, Ojeda and her group of female journalists are launching a survey of gender violence in Argentina to coincide with Friday's march [6].

"It will be an anonymous, web-based survey, where women will be able to answer multiple-choice questions regarding not only physical violence, but also psychological violence, discrimination and the quality of natal care at public hospitals, which is an enormous problem that poorer women face in the provinces of 'deep Argentina', where pregnant women are often treated like cattle," says Ojeda. "We need this survey because killings are just the last step in a long crescendo that includes discrimination and psychological abuse."

Uki Goñi in Buenos Aires and **Jonathan Watts** in Rio de Janeiro

• *Additional reporting by Shanna Hanbury*

P.S.

* The Guardian. Friday 3 June 2016 13.48 BST Last modified on Monday 22 August 2016 14.54 BST: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2016/jun/03/brazil-argentina-unite-protest-sexual-violence-gender>

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/27/gang-rape-brazil-twitter-shock>

[2] <http://in.reuters.com/article/argentina-womensrights-femicide-idINKBN0061UK20150521>

[3] http://www.mapadaviolencia.org.br/pdf2015/MapaViolencia_2015_mulheres.pdf

[4] ESSF (article 39345), [#NiUnaMenos: How Argentina rose up against the murder of women](#).

[5] http://www.lanacion.com.ar/1904770-niunamenos-el-conmovedor-testimonio-de-los-padres-de-wanda-taddei?utm_campaign=Echobox&utm_medium=Echobox&utm_source=Twitter#link_time=1464825122

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