

On 8th March, Mexico city witnessed an absence of all its women from the workforce. Around 80,000 women came out in the street protesting against gender violence and femicide. This outrage erupted when 25-year-old Ingrid Escamilla was murdered by her partner and her 7-year-old daughter was abducted and raped by him too. This case is the story of every Mexican girl and women who faced violence by her husband or partner.

Figures shows, at least 7.7% of the increase in crimes such as femicides in the first half of 2020, when compared with the same period last year, and shelters have reported a sharp rise in the number of women attempting to flee domestic violence.

Abhinav Kaushal, Associate Editor at The Kootneeti in an interview with **Olivia Soledad, Program Assistant at the Mexico Institute of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars**, discuss the issue on a broader perspective. Here are the excerpts:

Abhinav: First, we will want to know how this movement started. What were some of the turns of events which sparked this movement?

Olivia Soledad: The movement in Mexico that dedicates itself to eradicating femicide and all forms of gender-based violence is one that has been around for decades and has persistently organized, advocated, and demanded justice for victims and their families. Mexico has had prominent feminists since as early as the late nineteenth century. The [second wave](#) of feminism in the 1970s formed the first formal feminist groups in the country. These [collectives](#) challenged prevalent misogynistic notions in the country, advocating for access to higher education, equal pay, and the promotion of sexual and reproductive rights. During the 1990s, femicides in Ciudad Juárez attracted national and international attention as an alarming number of women were reported missing and later found dead. The mothers of the victims advocated for justice for their daughters and quickly [inspired](#) nation-wide efforts that centred on the issue of violence against women, utilizing the power of mass protests as activists continue to do so now.

In the last year, violence against women gained renewed attention as brutal murders gripped the country, with citizens echoing demands similar to those cried out by the mothers from Ciudad Juárez. Earlier this year, two brutal murders [in particular](#) fueled outrage that culminated in massive protests. The first was the murder of 25-year-old Isabel Escamilla who was skinned by her partner in Mexico City. The second was the case of seven-year-old Fátima who was abducted, sexually abused, and found dead in a plastic bag. Their stories symbolized the many victims of gender-based violence, the majority of whose

stories we will never know. They also confirmed that the threat of gender-based violence is one that continues to threaten the livelihood of women and girls in the country. Indeed, ten women are killed [every day](#) in Mexico, and the absence of a comprehensive strategy to address this problem has continued to frustrate feminist collectives.



Pairs of women's red shoes, put on display by Mexican visual artist Elina Chauvet to protest against gender violence and femicide, are pictured at Zocalo square in Mexico City, Mexico/ Image source: REUTERS/Gustavo Graf

Abhinav: The topic of femicide how much is it common in Mexico? Not just femicide but a few years back the killings of transgender reached the news headlines. Why do such killings persist in Mexico?

Olivia Soledad: It is very important to remember that gender-based violence does not just affect cis women and has greatly impacted members of the LGBTQI+ community, in particular transgender women. In 2019, 117 gay, lesbian, bi, and trans people were murdered in Mexico, making it the [deadliest year](#) on record for the LGBTI+ community.

These murders, similar to numerous femicides, are pronounced by vicious methods of murder with many victims being repeatedly stabbed and their bodies left on the street. Just [this week](#), a 34-year-old transgender woman and her mother were stabbed to death in Veracruz. Earlier this month, 18-year-old LGBT+ activist Jonathan Santos was [found](#) dead in the streets of Zapopan. These murders remind activists and citizens alike that the movement that fights to eradicate gender-based violence needs to encompass and prioritize the needs of the LGBTQI+ community. Previous studies have shown that LGBT groups are the social groups whose rights are [least respected](#) in the country and crimes committed against them are not closely monitored. An official registry for crimes committed against LGBTQI+ individuals does not exist in Mexico, which prompted activists to create their own [National Observatory](#) meant to improve accountability for these crimes.

The murders of LGBTQI+ individuals persist in part due to impunity in the country, which is a factor that explains the prevalence of most crimes committed in Mexico. Only one out of ten homicides in Mexico is resolved and in some states, more than 95 percent of homicides go [unpunished](#). When it comes to femicides, an estimated [97 percent](#) of cases go unpunished. The prevalence of impunity makes justice a far-fetched concept for victims and their families and makes the prospect of committing crimes relatively low-risk for potential aggressors. Despite legislation that is meant to protect Mexicans in the country no matter their [gender](#), the absence of proper implementation and accountability mechanisms perpetuates impunity. Offices tasked with assisting and defending women and vulnerable communities are frequently overworked, under-resourced, and lacking adequate training on gender perspectives, further [aggravating](#) the incidence of impunity. The issues that regularly threaten the LGBTQI+ community are rarely at the forefront of national discourse, and this agenda is one that civil society has to continue fiercely advocating for and one the Mexican government needs to take immediate and meaningful action on.



Image source: Euronews

Abhinav: The day when around 80,000 women came out on the streets protesting against gender violence and femicide which persists in the country. That day was marked as ‘a day without a woman’ (#UnDiaSinNosotras). So, after that day, was there any changes seen in the country or the situation is just like that?

Olivia Soledad: On March 8, 2020, tens of thousands of Mexican women all over the country spent International Women’s Day in the streets protesting the high rates of gender-based violence in their country, including femicide and domestic abuse. The following day, Mexican women [protested once again](#), this time through a national strike that became commonly known as *Un Día Sin Nosotras* or A Day Without Us. On this day, women remained at home and refrained from participating in any activities, including going to school and work, in order for the country to experience what the absence of women would feel like. Little did they know that in just a few weeks’ time, staying at home, unable to participate in outside activities, would become their reality.

Just as the issue of violence against women was nestling itself at the centre of national discourse, COVID-19 brought everything to a halt. The spread of COVID-19 in Mexico led to the implementation of social distancing directives that aimed to slow the spread of the virus.

These policies presented challenges for Mexicans, both financially and socially, and for many women, these policies exacerbated longstanding issues. Of the women who have reported experiencing violence at some point in their lives, [almost half](#) have experienced abuse from their spouse or partner. In a national survey completed during the months of March and April of 2019, 26.6 percent of women reported feeling [unsafe](#) in their home. For many women, these social distancing directives coupled with stay-at-home orders meant that they would be forced to stay at home with a potential aggressor with limited access to outside help and support. When these began in late March, many activists could see the looming threat of a shadow pandemic of violence, one that would take place right in women's homes. Since the start of the pandemic, domestic violence has grown by approximately [60 percent](#), calls by women to national emergency hotlines relating to sexual violence have [spiked](#), and approximately 10 women continue to be killed every day.

Abhinav: The president called this women's movement 'very important' and also supported them and if we look into the official figure that around 3,825 women met violent deaths in 2019, an average of more than 10 a day and a rise of 7 percent over the previous year. Since it's the official data many cases must have gone unreported. Homicides are increasing though the rate of growth has been diminishing. It is intriguing for me to know what is like to live in Mexico for an average Mexican woman/ girl (La Mexicana).

Olivia Soledad: Despite notable advances in women's access to reproductive health services, higher education, and entry to the labor market, disparities that impact women's autonomy and ability to succeed at an equal level as men [continue to exist](#). The threat of gender-based violence impacts women all over the country, [no matter](#) their race, location, or income. In March 2020, 78.6 percent of Mexican women [reported](#) feeling unsafe in their city and with reason: two out of three women in the country [experience](#) some form of violence in their life.

Women have long known the struggle of advocating for their safety as well as for demanding respect for their bodies and minds; it is an effort that they continue to fiercely advocate for, despite stagnant progress on an institutional level. President Andrés Manuel López Obrador has previously acknowledged the legitimacy of the feminist agenda and poises himself as an ally of women. However, the absence of institutional support coupled with the President's numerous [dismissals](#) of the insecurity of women in the country has made it plainly clear to Mexicans that his government has no intention of prioritizing violence against women, especially as they confront the COVID-19 crisis. Austerity measures intended to direct efforts towards combating the pandemic have diverted funds from organizations dedicated to protecting women. Notably, the National Institute for

Women in Mexico (Inmujeres) - the federal government agency tasked with ensuring the compliance of national policies relating to equality and the eradication of violence against women - confirmed a [75 percent cut](#) to their budget. Even prior to the pandemic, social programs with a focus on gender-related issues had their budgets [reduced](#) under his administration. These actions have left Mexicans, and in particular Mexican women, dismayed, fearful, and increasingly frustrated. Despite this growing disillusionment, women have continued to forge forward. Various civil society organizations have provided aid, support, and solidarity where they feel the government has failed to do so. Organizations across the country have [united](#) in their messaging, forming coalitions to demand change via online gatherings where they passionately signal government missteps and outline potential policy solutions.



Image source: FT

Abhinav: What are the government policies right now regarding women safety and after this revolution? How are they taking this issue?

Olivia Soledad: Femicide is typified as a separate crime from homicide in article 325 of Mexico's federal penal code. However, [several states](#) have yet to harmonize their state penal code to the federal one, such as the state of Chihuahua, home to Ciudad Juárez. Activists emphasize the need for harmonization between state and federal penal codes, as the resources and procedures required for suspected femicide differ from those contemplated for suspected homicide. Additionally, the crime of femicide carries a [harsher](#) penalty. However, the weight of these penalties is rendered meaningless if the majority of suspected femicides are not investigated as [femicides](#) or are not investigated at all. As for

current legislation, the 2007 General Law on Women's Access to a Life Free of Violence (LGAMVLV) aims to prevent gender-based violence at both the federal and state level by defining violence against women and reiterating women's constitutional right to a life with equality and justice. Critics, however, have cited the [minimal](#) impact of the law as states have failed to fully implement the main requirements of the law. As part of the General Law passed in 2007, Mexico launched the [Alert of Gender Violence](#) Against Women (AVGM). This is activated when a spike in violence against women is declared in a specific location and deploys emergency measures to coordinate resources aimed at addressing and eradicating the threat of violence against women in the respective entity. The efficiency of these alerts, and the willingness for governments to prioritize their operation, has been vastly [criticized](#). In March 2020, there were 19 active alerts across the country and many reported [increases](#) in femicide and complaints of rape and sexual violence while having an active alert in their entity. Regrettably, no [lasting](#) progress on diminishing violence against women has been witnessed as a result of this alert system. Recent cuts to the budget designated for these alerts has further [endangered](#) the potential of this process. Overall, the problem is more often the absence of efficient implementation of the law and policies that conform to the law, more than the lack of adequate laws themselves.

Abhinav: Recently, there was a similar incident that took place in Turkey and there were social media protests. So, what will be your message for all the women in Turkey and around the globe who are raising against gender violence and the message about their movements?

Olivia Soledad: Gender-based violence is a global issue and therefore the fight to eradicate gender-based violence and violence against women is one that requires advocacy and prompt action at the local, national, and international level. In [Turkey](#), 474 women were murdered in 2019, making it the deadliest year for women in the country. In July 2020, [news](#) of Pinar Gültekin's murder by her former partner incentivized activists in the country to create a movement advocating justice for Pinar and all women who have fallen victim to gender-based violence. Their effort consisted of [re-launching](#) the #ChallengeAccepted campaign, this time by encouraging women to post black and white photos of themselves that were aimed to mirror the photos of murdered Turkish women that appear in the news. This soon inspired a global movement on social media, generating over 5 million posts. Similar to the online mobilization of civil society in Mexico, Turkish activists utilized the tools available to them during the pandemic to call attention to a problem that is all too familiar to women and shows no signs of disappearing. It is difficult to ascertain the extent to which their passion and dedication will generate tangible progress; however, the power of their unity is indisputable.

Meaningful change does not arise from silence and complicity. Women have learned this lesson numerous times. Although we are a long way away from guaranteeing equal rights and protections for women across all spheres, momentous strides continue to be made in several countries, in large part due to the efforts of persistent and passionate women. The fight to end violence against women is an incredibly complex feat, one that demands accounting with internalized misogynistic attitudes that have pinned women as inferior and dispensable for centuries. Nonetheless, women have shown that despite all of the inequality, harassment, and lethal danger they are threatened with every day, merely because they are women, they will be not be stopped from demanding more and they shouldn't.



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