



# The Day Women Marched in Mexico

*On Women's Day 2020, tens of thousands of women risked their safety to protest femicide throughout Mexico.*

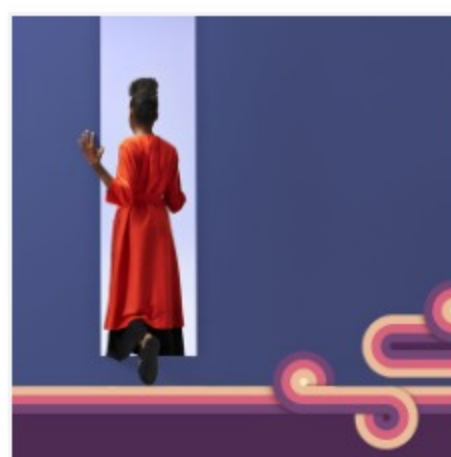
By Dawn Reiss APR 30, 2020

*At Shondaland, we're all about courage. Whether it's saving lives on the frontlines of wildfires or disease, or just peacing out from an uninspiring career or relationship, acts of courage can transform us. We're taking a look at how being bold and brave leads us not only toward growth but ultimately toward greatness.*

**C**overed in fake blood and clothed in purple, thousands of women marched into the streets of Mexico City with chants of "Not one more, not one more murder."

Though mostly strangers to one another, they were connected in solidarity. Through social media, the women had organized to protest femicide — murdering women on account of their gender, typically by men — on March 8, 2020, for International Women's Day. More than 80,000 women showed up.

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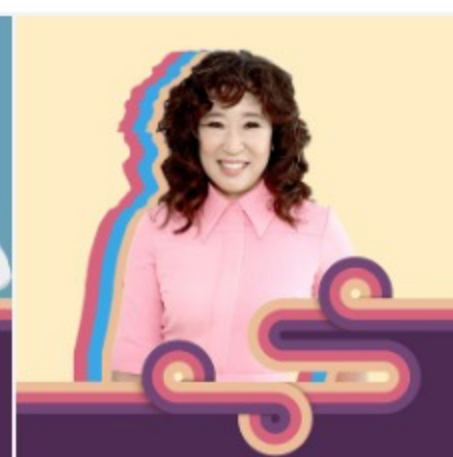
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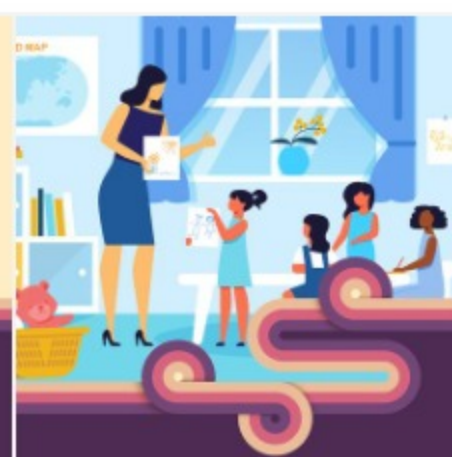
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Although femicide is a global problem, in Mexico, like much of Latin American, the murdering of women is exacerbated. A 2016 report published in Small Arms Survey, found that 14 of the 25 countries with the highest femicide rates are in Latin America.

In Mexico, more than 10 women are murdered on average every day, according to Mexico's Executive Secretariat of the National Public Security (SENSP). Those numbers are increasing in 2020. In the first quarter this year, nearly 1,000 women were killed — 720 women were murdered and 244 women were victims of femicide, according to SENSP. That's nearly 8% higher than the same period of time for 2019.

According to the numbers released on April 28 by the Executive Secretariat of the National Public Security System (SENSP), between January and March of this year 244 femicides and 720 intentional homicides against women were registered in Mexican territory, the highest since 2015.



A demonstrator at the protest in Mexico City on March 8, 2020  
PACIFIC PRESS / GETTY IMAGES

Femicide rates have doubled in the last five years in Mexico, according to Linnea Sandin, Associate Director and Associate Fellow at the Americas Program for Center for Strategic and International Studies, a global think tank in Washington, D.C.

According to Amnesty International, in Mexico, two-thirds of girls and women aged 15 or over have experienced gender-based violence at least once in their lives, and 77 percent of women in Mexico report feeling unsafe, according to a 2019 National Survey on Urban Security published by the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI).

And a Twitter search for #NiUnaMás, which means “not one more” in Spanish, or #FemicidioEmergenciaNacional, will pull up thousands of tweets.

### Risking their safety to take a stand

On March 8 of this year, Perla Georgina Oropeza, 60 of Mexico City, was among the protesters. More than a decade had passed since she last marched in protest of violence against women.

“It was thought with the new government would come legal and procedural changes that would fundamentally change the situation of violence against women,” Oropeza says in Spanish in an email. “Instead, the new regime closed daycare centers and took away resources from civil society organizations that dealt with problems of violence against women.”

“**There were rumors, Oropeza says, that some people were willing to attack and throw acid on anyone who participated.**”

Now she says the government stigmatizes and chastises working women, claiming their children who are not cared for by their mothers will become criminals.

The new regime, led by Mexican president Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who took office in December 2018, “considers the economic independence of women is part of the country's problems,” Oropeza says.

“Young women's fear of going out into the streets is growing, and domestic violence continues to spread,” Oropeza says.

The brutal murder of Ingrid Escamilla on February 9, 2020, helped spark the protests. The 23-year-old, who lived in Mexico City, was stabbed to death by her 46-year-old domestic partner, who later confessed to skinning her body and removing her organs.

Newspapers such as *Pásala* and *La Prensa* published photos of the Escamilla's disemboweled body with gruesome headlines like “It Was Cupid's Fault,” and “Skinny,” which provoked protests and a public apology from *La Prensa*.

To protest the grisly photos, women began flooding Instagram and Twitter with photos of flowers, sunsets, and landscapes alongside the hashtag #IngridEscamilla #JusticeForIngrid with hopes of honoring her memory with dignity and empowerment.

May your soul find peace and your memory find justice. #IngridEscamilla pic.twitter.com/16wNt2hrEG

— Emma (@Songbirdxx2) February 14, 2020

Over social media channels, using the hashtag #MediosMachos, female journalists protested the way their newsrooms covered femicide and gender violence stories, which they felt was sexist and demeaning.

“We protest against the #MediosMachos that revictimize women, publishing photographs of their broken bodies, instead of focusing on the perpetrators of violence and omission in the authorities,” Periodistas Unidas Mexicanas (PUM) said in a public statement.





A few days after Escamilla's murder, on February 15, seven-year-old Fátima Cecilia Aldriguett Antón's dead body was found wrapped in a plastic bag after being abducted and sexually assaulted in Mexico City. The brutal killing of the girl sparked outrage and a series of small protests that led to the countrywide protest on March 8.

In days leading up to the march, federal and state government authorities tried by all means to discourage participation in the protest, Oropeza says. For instance, announcements were made that public modes of transportation, the Mexico City Metro and Metrobús, would not be operating after 10:00 am. There were rumors, Oropeza says, that some people were willing to attack and throw acid on anyone who participated.

Despite attempts to stop the march, nothing worked, Oropeza says.

That morning of the march, she was able to get on the packed metro surrounded by women in purple, pink, or green scarves, colors that represent feminism in Mexico. Some of the younger women had their names, phone numbers, and blood type painted on their arms. Some began chanting: "Now that we are together, now that they do see us, down with the patriarchy, it is going to fall, it is going to fall!"

"We all looked like real friends, even though we could hardly breathe, pressed against each other," she says.

Looking around at other women, Oropeza knew she was going to make history that day. Femicidal violence does not discriminate between socio-economic status, age, or political party. This was evident that day from the women surrounding her. In one corner of the metro, an older woman sat in a wheelchair accompanied by a boy carrying a sign: "I can't go, but I accompany them from here!"

"We understood that we are all in the same boat and only together we will make a change," she says.

Thousands of protestors moved towards the Monument to the Revolution, a monument commemorating the Mexican Revolution in Plaza de la República in downtown Mexico City. By noon, they had filled the plaza and nearby demonstration sites.



Thousands of protestors marched toward the Mexican Revolution in Plaza de la República  
GETTY IMAGES

Oropeza marched from the intersection of Paseo de la Reforma and Avenida Bucareli, the main avenues that run through Mexico City, to Zócalo, the city's main square, once the ceremonial center and most sacred temple for the Aztecs' Tenochtitlan.

"In the midst of the machismo culture, women do not have intellectual merits, but physical attributes," Oropeza says. "Women are seen as objects, subject to guardianship."

Some shouted, "I bring medicine if you need! If you need water, tell me." On the sidelines of the march, groups of masked women graffitied and destroyed fences surrounding monuments. Some women with hammers smashed windshields and stores or burned doors of buildings, while others yelled "No violence."

"Damaging private property isn't the way to do it, but I understand why they were doing it," says Nadia Sanders, 42, a journalist who lives in Mexico City and also marched that day. "Many women ask, 'Why don't you have the same indignation when a woman is murdered [as you have toward the vandalism]? Why is a piece of wall or metal more important to you than the life of a woman or a five-year-old girl who was raped?'"



Demonstrators vandalize a vehicle during March 8 protests in Mexico.  
ROCIO VAZQUEZ



Five and half hours south in Oaxaca, Vera Rapsak, 29, was also marching.

Before Christmas in 2019, she had gone into the jungle to meet with the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, the militant-held portion of Chiapas, Mexico near the border of Guatemala. She'd heard of a meeting at a secret location for women who wanted a safe place to share their stories. Masked Zapatistas drove Rapsak with other women brought in by military trucks so she wouldn't know where she was going. Rapsak attended a four-day women's gathering with women from all over Mexico. There, they could publicly share their stories of gender violence, many sharing their traumas for the first time.

It was a life-altering moment says Rapsak, an Arizona transplant who moved to Mexico to run Cosa Buena, a company that offers workshops, retreats, and classes focused on artisan and cultural immersion experiences.

For days, mothers spoke about trying to find their missing daughters, women being kidnaped, raped for days, mutilated or other brutal atrocities, with dead bodies left in public spaces.

"Here in Mexico women are fighting just for the right to live," says Rapsak, who has a master's degree in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) from San Francisco State University.

That's why Rapsak decided to march with a sign "Todas Somos Ellas" — "We are all them" and protest the violence against women.



Vera Rapsak protesting in Oaxaca.  
VERA RAPCSAK

When she walked out of her front door on March 8, she saw a sea of women in purple shirts beginning to grow in Oaxaca. She met a friend at a church where women had gathered. Everyone sat in a circle as a woman led a grounding meditation, asking for protection over everyone who was going out that day to march. Women were crying, holding hands, and taking deep breaths.

"It put everything into perspective that this act of marching meant we could be putting ourselves in danger," Rapsak says. "There was solidarity among strangers between women of all different ages just for showing up."

For hours they marched through the city. Crammed into narrow streets, girls and women spray-painted buildings with graffiti, some covered their hands in fake blood, plastering bloody handprints on buildings.

Rapsak says that's led to a big debate about whether vandalism is correct or not.

"Many women feel like they've hit a wall, that they're not being heard and the government isn't doing anything to address the violence; that the safety and well-being of women in Mexico isn't a top priority," Rapsak says. "And this was a way for them to express the pain they feel and to leave a permanent mark to say 'We're here and you can't keep ignoring us.'"

### **There are rarely consequences for those who commit femicide**

"It's concerning the level of violence that has been shown against women," says Sanders. "The victims keep getting younger and the way the violence is occurring is becoming more extreme."

Sanders says she can't walk three blocks without feeling uncomfortable many times if she wants to wear a miniskirt or certain shirts, especially if she wants to take the subway.

"Why do I have to basically dress like a man in Mexico City?" she asks.

Since a majority of homicides in Mexico aren't investigated — an estimated 98 percent of cases are left unsolved — most perpetrators have neither been caught nor prosecuted by authorities.

That impunity, a lack of punishment for human rights crimes, is the biggest problem, say Sanders and Sandin — killers think they can brutally assault and murder women and get away with it.



Girls and women spray-painted buildings with graffiti during the demonstration.  
TOYA SARNO JORDAN

"A big issue is public trust," Sandin says. "Fewer than 10 percent of crimes in Mexico are reported or investigated. Imagine if you only called 911 once every 10 times there was an emergency?"

People that are killing other women, proliferating gender violence want to be anonymous. To create more accountability, María Salguero, 41, a Mexican a human rights activist and geophysical engineer, [created a map](#) to track femicides in Mexico in 2016. She now has more than 10,000 cases of murdered women on the map.

"It is important to name the victims and not forget them," she says.

Other women, like Mexican journalist and activist Frida Guerrero created a [blog](#) in 2016 and recently launched a website [Voces Perdidas](#) (Lost Voices) spotlighting the women who have been murdered with audio and videos of victims' families, in the hopes of bringing more justices to killings. [On Twitter](#), more than 58,000 people follow Guerrero, a self-proclaimed "femicide chronicler."

Even this type of work is dangerous. Carli Pierson, a human rights lawyer and freelance writer living in Mexico, says a day after she interviewed Guerrero for a [National Catholic Reporter](#) commentary published March 9, Guerrero had to go into hiding out of fear she might be killed.

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There are many reasons women are murdered because of their gender. Treating women as property, objects to be possessed is part of the problem. Several women interviewed for the story say organized crime, including cartels, have shifted towards kidnapping women and girls for the purpose of sexual exploitation and trafficking, murdering women for their sense of belonging or for being the partner of the rival criminal group in disputed territory.

The machismo culture of deep-rooted gender roles also plays a large factor, Salguero says. Oropeza echoes those sentiments. Both women say Mexican women are handcuffed by the inefficient justice system where there is a reluctance to punish crimes against women.

"It gives the message that women can be murdered and those responsible will not be punished," Salguero says.



## Moving toward solutions

There isn't a magic wand, a one-size-fits-all solution for solving femicide and gender violence, but since the March 8 protests, many people are continuing to call attention to femicide in the hopes of finding a solution to reduce the violence.

Sanders says the first solution is creating stronger public policies to protect women at all bureaucracy levels.

"People need to start by saying this is not normal," Sanders says. "This is not the way things should be. It is avoidable and we can stop this."

That means teachers, nurses, doctors, and neighbors need to become more involved, says Sanders.

"One out of four phone calls to emergency lines are from neighbors," Sanders says. "From people who see what's going on in that flat or the house next door and make the call. They know the whole story and can speak more freely so the person in that house receives help."



Protesters set fire at demonstration.

ALFREDO ESTRELLA

Dr. Lili Barsky, a fellow physician at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles and a staff physician with HealthCare Partners says healthcare providers, regardless of where they live, need to ask follow-up questions when patients come in with more generalized complaints such as headaches, trouble sleeping, or fatigue that may be the result of trauma and violence. Though she works with patients in America, the same guidelines can help medical providers in Mexico identify women who are at risk of abuse and femicide.

Signs of abuse can be subtle she says and getting someone to talk can be difficult. Each person's path to recovery or handling their abuse may be different.

Her approach: address a patient's mental health and stress levels by asking open-ended, noninvasive questions.

"How's life at home? What's your stress level like? What do you do for a living," she suggests. "I try to take a very thorough psychosocial history and perspective. Multiple times I've had people break into tears or say 'Well, life is hard' and then I can get more information from them, but it takes a lot of peeling back layers."

She says the scarier cases are ones where the patients are too ashamed to disclose anything out of fear of retaliation, legal issues, or repression.

"Those are the people I worry the most about," she says, adding that it's important to create a safe space and continue encouraging potential victims to talk.

It's why Dr. Anthony Oyogoa, CEO and Co-Founder of UrSafe, a voice-activated safety app says they've piloted a program in Latin America to help potential victims of violence.

Over a three-month period this spring, Oyogoa says more than 5,000 people beta tested their app in Palmira, Columbia, a city [FAM International security ranks eighth most dangerous](#) in the world.

"We saw an 18% reduction in homicides and 26% reduction in violent crimes," Oyogoa says. "This app can help bridge the gap, when your family members come faster than the police, especially if you don't trust the police."

He says the app works by setting up five different contacts, which can be added or deleted. Those contacts can then follow the app user wherever they are going.

## 66

**People need to start by saying this is not normal. This is not the way things should be. It is avoidable and we can stop this.**

"So if I'm a 17-year-old girl and I've finished work and getting off my bus, I can let my brother know, my mom knows that I'm walking home," Oyogoa says. "And they can see where I'm going and follow me."

When the SOS is activated, the phone can send a Google Map drop notification and automatically launch a video live stream that is stored on your contacts' phones. The idea: potentially scare off the attacker who might not want to be observed, or at least capture some evidence.

"So even if your phone is destroyed, you can show who was the perpetrator or people attacking you," Oyogoa says. "Even if it's the last thing you are able to do."

Regardless of the country, Oyogoa says passing laws that hold domestic violence abusers more accountable is important along with training police and adding task forces.

"We think those things will slowly start to lead to changing that machismo culture," Oyogoa says.

The sheer size of the March 8 protest helped bring international attention to Mexico's femicide problem. Though each woman who showed up put her safety on the line, the women had strength in numbers, their solidarity protecting them from retribution by disapproving locals and the police.

The massive protest put the new and very popular president, known to be a leftist, in the hot seat, and his approval ratings dropped as a result of his pushback to the demonstration. This, along with the protest's harrowing images — the vandalism, the fake blood, the cloaking — will hopefully nudge the Mexican government to take the problem more seriously, to hunt down perpetrators, bring them to justice, and create a countrywide culture that's less machismo, one that celebrates women and treats them as human beings who have the right to live.

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*Dawn Reiss is a veteran Chicago journalist who has written for more than 40 outlets including The New York Times, TIME, U.S. News & World Report, Chicago Tribune, The Atlantic, USA Today and Reuters, among others. She began her career at the Dallas Morning News and Tampa Bay Times. Follow her on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#).*

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