

Prevention rather than punishment: A LIFE FREE OF VIOLENCE FOR THE WOMEN OF BOLIVIA



Ni Una Menos (Not one woman less) march in La Paz, Bolivia, October 2016. Photographer: Juan Espinoza del Villar

Rallies and protest marches against femicide are taking place all over Bolivia. Activists fighting for women's rights carry placards, cardboard coffins, crosses, wreaths and bouquets of flowers through the streets to draw the attention of the public and the authorities. In this part of Latin America violence against women – both in and outside the home – is an endemic problem. The SDC provides support through its NGO partner *Solidar Suiza*, which has introduced a series of initiatives promoted by civil society and government authorities, especially at the local level. It has set itself the ambitious goal of ensuring that every woman is able to exercise her right to a life without violence in which she is respected as a human being.

"They're all saints in Cotoca," the local saying goes. The municipality in the lowlands of Bolivia (Amazonía), twenty kilometres from Santa Cruz de la Sierra, attracts hundreds of thousands of pilgrims every year. It is famous for being the home of the shrine to the Virgin of Cotoca, otherwise known as the 'mamita' – the patron saint of eastern Bolivia. One day in 2013 the peace in the town was shattered. Cotoca was all over the news and social media, this time not because of the famous virgin but because of a horrific crime: a young student from the town



Roxana Oca, Integrated Municipal Legal Services (SLIM) of Cotoca: “The prevalence of macho culture is the reason why violence against women exists.”

was brutally murdered. She was robbed, raped and stabbed 40 times.

“The extreme cruelty displayed by her killers was due to the fact that the victim was a woman. This hatred of the opposite sex is typical in cases of femicide,” says Roxana Oca, psychologist and head of the municipal legal office in Cotoca, which provides support for women who have suffered violence of any kind. “The murder hit the whole town very hard,” she continues. “There was a public outcry that nothing like that should ever be allowed to happen again.” As a result, the entire municipality with its 50,000 inhabitants came together in response to a phenomenon often kept behind closed doors in Bolivian society: violence against women.

ALARMING RISE IN VIOLENCE

The femicide in Cotoca was not an isolated case. Experts point to the high frequency with which women are subject to acts of violence in Bolivia. Seven out of ten women are victims of some kind of violence in the home. In Latin America, according to data from the UN, the country ranks first in violence against women within the family and third in terms of sexual violence. In 2016, 104 femicides were registered nationally. Femicide is only the most extreme form of violence

a woman can suffer, however. Statistics show – in order of frequency – cases of psychological, physical, economic and sexual violence. One third of the victims assaulted in Bolivia are young or teenage girls. In addition, there is now an alarming rise in the number of women in public positions suffering political harassment.

In Bolivia it is not possible to speak about the protection of women against acts of violence without referring to Act 348, a piece of legislation which was enacted in 2013. The Act is largely an achievement of the feminist movement, activists, non-governmental organisations and parliamentarians. It came about as a result of the case of Analí Huaycho – a journalist murdered by her partner – and marked a watershed in the promotion of women’s rights. It provides a powerful tool against deeply rooted macho culture, covering measures to protect and care for women who suffer violence and also the punishment of the perpetrators of the crimes. Act 348 is a groundbreaking law in Latin America, introducing among other things the crime of femicide, punishable with 30 years’ imprisonment without right to pardon. Cotoca was one of the first municipalities to implement the provisions of the Act to the letter in order to guarantee women a life free of violence.

MUNICIPAL SERVICES IN COTOCA

In his first term as mayor of Cotoca, Wilfredo Añez experienced first hand the anxiety and the fears of the local community after the femicide which resonated so widely throughout society. It was the municipality that organised – together with state institutions and civil society organisations – a network to promote the protection of women. Añez, reelected to the mayor’s office, is now putting an emphasis on prevention: “Women are being beaten and abused and we cannot just wait for them to come to the police or the municipal offices. We need to take prevention out to more places.” He is a man of conviction: “A peaceful society is fundamental to progress. When women are beaten this means there are family problems and disintegration, and that affects the whole community.”

The municipality has a novel tool to prevent and deal with cases of violence against women. In accordance with Act 348, within the public administration operates the office of Integrated Municipal Legal Services, better known by its Spanish acronym: SLIM. The service, which is there to assist the women and their relatives, is located in a modest compound



Wilfredo Añez, mayor of Cotoca: “We have to leave the confines of our offices and get out there in the barrios to combat violence.”

just a few blocks from the Plaza del Santuario in Cotoca and comprises a psychologist, a legal adviser and a social worker: “Of the three colleagues here, two of us are from the municipality, we live in this town and that inspired in us the commitment we have,” says Oca. According to the psychologist, who has been directing Cotoca’s SLIM for three years, violence against women stems from macho culture, which is deeply rooted in Bolivian society. Alcohol and family disintegration

act as aggravating factors when work is in short supply and the economy is unstable. All this makes for an explosive mix.

The SLIM professionals, who are all paid by the municipality, have a dual role. In their daily work they practise an open-door policy, taking care of and following up cases of victims of abuse who are in need of support. At the same time, they are the driving force behind the 'Inter-institutional network against violence' of the municipality, coordinating and providing their services as facilitators and coaches. The work within the network is multifaceted. Key tasks include publicising the rights of individuals, disseminating the content of the complex Act 348 and training officials and volunteers. Together with the SLIM, the main actors involved are the police, through the Special Force to Combat Violence, the Office of the Ombudsman for Children and Adolescents, and the state health and justice sectors. These bodies are responsible for addressing directly cases where violence has been committed or where warning signs exist of critical situations.

ACCESS TO JUSTICE

It is more and more often the case that SLIM cases are referred to the courts. Nationwide, the number of cases handled increased from 4,400 in 2013 to about 23,000 in 2016. Sentences are still rarely handed down, however, with only 4% of cases ending in conviction or acquittal of the accused. According to experts, the increase in complaints is due to the efforts to raise awareness of the scope of the new Act and the gradual implementation of SLIMs. "Women who have suffered abuse have easier access to justice thanks to the personal attention they get from the SLIMs. But when it comes to instigat-



Iblin Velasquez, Promotora from Patuju (Cotoca): "I like to help and advise the boys and girls in my neighbourhood."

ing legal proceedings, many women give in to pressure from their relatives and do not pursue the case in court," says Ocza. A sample survey of 15 municipalities shows the most important reasons why a high proportion of cases are dropped: the lack of guarantees for the plaintiffs, the cost of proceedings, the delay in justice, the distances to the courts and the slow and painful investigations.

BROAD-BASED COOPERATION

Not only public bodies are lending their services to fight against violence in the municipalities: the inter-institutional network also includes schools, universities, higher education establishments, community-based and religious organisations, NGOs and the few shelters or temporary shelters that exist for victims. Neighbourhood advocates – known as *promotoras* – living in the community have an important role to play. Iblin Velásquez, an elderly lady, works as a volunteer in the Patuju neighbourhood of Cotoca. As a trusted member of the community, she was elected 'social control' representative of her neighbourhood. She has many years of experience supporting local women. Speaking emphatically, she describes how she intervenes when she is alerted to a case of rape: "The neighbours come to get me, I give them guidance, I call the police and I accompany the women to the SLIM so they can lodge a complaint and receive psychological help."

María Lourdes Regier, 44, is a woman to be reckoned with. She is a prominent member of the network against violence in Cotoca and promotes the exchange of experiences: "I always say that the people who can best give advice are those who have lived through the problems and have managed to overcome them," explains Regier. As leader of the Federation of Motorcycle Taxi Drivers in Cotoca, she has fought to combat violence against female passengers. A decisive step, promoted by Lourdes, was the registration of motorcycle taxi drivers. It was a matter of being able to identify who was who: "Since we introduced the ID cards we no longer hear 'it was some moto-taxi driver that robbed that woman' or 'it was some moto-taxi driver who stole that parcel', because now we know exactly who they are and where they live." Regier works



María Lourdes Regier, leader of the Federation of Motorcycle Taxi Drivers in Cotoca: "I would like to be able to get out there and talk more with people, because sometimes they are very reluctant to talk about these issues of machismo and violence."

to raise awareness through a radio programme and, at meetings of the association, talks about violence and how to treat female passengers. She is convinced that authorities such as the SLIM and the Human Rights Ombudsman have alleviated the situation of women in Cotoca."

ACTION IN FAVOUR OF WOMEN

Improving the provision of services at the municipal level is part of Switzerland's co-operation strategy in Bolivia. For example: "At the heart of the municipal development project (2013–16) was the effective decentralisation of tasks carried out by the state and support for the implementation of Act 348 in the municipalities," says Martín Pérez, coordinator of *Solidar Suiza*, formerly known as *Ayuda Obrera Suiza*. The project reached 80 municipalities, almost a quarter of a total of 339 in Bolivia. Pérez notes that the funds made available by the SDC were not spent on equipment, running costs or salaries of SLIM staff: "The municipalities have to cover these expenses within their regular budget; it is their legal obligation." Some things are however a cause for concern: How to guarantee the functioning of the SLIMs and associated networks in spite of the changes in the authorities and the budget cuts suffered by the public administration? "The SLIMs will only survive if we can get the people in the communities actively involved at grass-roots level to fight for women's rights," says Pérez.

COMMUNICATION FOR PARTICIPATION

A series of networks formed the backbone of the municipal development project. Still going strong, they enable the systematic passing on of best practice and innovative ideas. The networks provide educational material for prevention purposes, including games, song books, group dynamics, videos and radio programmes. The Network of Local Communicators is particularly well established, promoted for many years by the democracy support programme PADEM, with support from the SDC. Communicators support municipal authorities and civil society organisations in various areas of social care such as health, education and combating violence. Over the years, the SDC has developed a series of practical tools and communication techniques to support municipalities in their daily work and increase citizen participation at the local level.



Carmen Rodríguez, member of the municipal council in Cotoca: “In the municipality we don’t just have a SLIM office: we also have a shelter for women. We take in women who have been victims of abuse, along with their children, and provide them with psychological support.”

“LIFE WITHOUT VIOLENCE” PROJECT

All of the above experience, accumulated mainly at the municipality level, has provided the basis for continuing with a new project called Life without violence (current phase 2016–20), supported by the SDC in partnership with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), UN Women and Solidar Suiza, all working together to ensure that the police, public prosecutors’ offices, the judiciary and the health services fulfil their roles in an increasingly effective manner, both in prevention work and in the delivery of services at the local level. Particular recognition is given to all of the international, public and private institutions that constitute the links in the chain providing the support necessary for women to escape from the circle of violence.



Lt. Col. Rody Gonzales, chief of police in Cotoca: “We apply the community policing model and assign one police officer to each neighbourhood and each education establishment. They identify the local promotoras to advocate against violence. We have to coordinate between all the institutions, otherwise we can’t accomplish our mission.”

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