

Gender Violence and Inequity in Bolivia

By Ishrat Pabla

APA Division 35: Violence Against Women Committee

Bolivia, or the Republic of Bolivia, is a country located in South America. As a largely patriarchal society, Bolivia has been infamously known for gender inequality and violence against women (Justiniano, 2021). Currently, women in politics are facing continuous harassment and assault due to their fight for parity and equality. Importantly, half of the Bolivian population is indigenous in nature, and indigenous women have been at the forefront of the endeavour to secure rights for their community members. Indigenous women have been involved in movements for equality for the longest time, despite their encounters with racial and gender inequality at institutional and societal levels (Buice).

History of Activism

Women's activism in Bolivia originally started with their active political participation in the Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario (MNR), a party that led the 1952 leftist revolution. However, the party soon faced bouts of conservatism that led to widespread protests by the Bolivian miners for better working conditions. This conflict led to the emergence of the 'Housewives Committees', a group of women activists that organized hunger strikes to demand the release of their husbands who had been jailed or exiled for protesting (Arditti & Disch, 1984). The Housewives Committees then began the tireless pursuit for the betterment of workers and their families and the improvement of schools, housing, health, and water among other causes. The restoration of democracy in 1982 after years of military rule can also be largely attributed to the activism of these women. However, irrespective of their efforts, women's equity issues were still not openly discussed. Additionally, these women involved in the campaigns continued to work long hours of unpaid labour, were abused by husbands who did not indulge in housework and were restricted from promoting issues which may divide the more general movement of worker's liberation (Arditti & Disch, 1984).

Indigenous women's leadership in the nationalization of natural resources (gas and water) that took place during prolonged bloody struggles in the early 2000s remains one of their most internationally publicized efforts. Another publicized effort included their mobilization for the presidential campaign of Evo Morales, which changed the direction of politics in the country (Buice). Morales' political movement brought emancipation for the indigenous population by promoting the indigenous history, music and culture, creating the constituent assembly of indigenous people to form a new constitution, and via several other measures (Stewart, 2020). Lastly, women also mobilized for more gender-equitable agricultural reforms and achieved remarkable success (Buice). For instance, in 2012, women leaders got Bolivia's legislature to pass a proposal that would amend the land tenure law so as to recognize women's land rights and legally recognize them as landowners (URBANET, 2017).

Violence Against Women and Women Activists

Bolivia has long grappled with numerous challenges concerning the safety and autonomy of women. Over half (50.3% percent) of the women population has reported experiencing physical violence from their partners, and 69.3% have experienced psychological violence. Around 61% of women have suffered some form of violence at work, and 64.7% at school or while in education. Bolivia also accounts for alarmingly high rates of femicides, which is defined by Oxford dictionary as ‘the killing of a woman or girl, in particular by a man and on account of her gender’ (The World Bank, 2018). In 2017, Bolivia recorded one of the highest rates of femicides per capita in the world (1.9 per every 100,000 women) (IHRC, 2019).

Moreover, women in the political sphere fighting for their rights have been subjected to extreme manifestations of violence. Men politicians have constantly resisted the rise of women politicians and have attempted to threaten them. Mary de la Cruz, a councilwoman from a town near La Paz, claimed in May 2018 that she had been physically and verbally assaulted by the town's mayor, Damaso Ninaja, because of her investigations into discrepancies in Ninaja's public work contracts. Ninaja, however, was acquitted (Clontz, 2020). A report by UN Women claimed that women's rising profile in the political sphere “has also led to problems related to discrimination, manipulation and violence” (Flores, 2018). Jessy Lopez, the director of Association of Female Councilors of Bolivia (ACOBOL) commented on the intimidation that women councillors face, which often results in their giving up their positions sooner than required. To force resignation, their houses are set on fire, their husbands fired, their children assaulted, and they themselves are physically attacked. Adding on to the miseries of the women, the legal system of Bolivia is male-dominated and shows little interest in the concerns of women, which leads to women ultimately dropping their complaints. Not surprisingly, some courts have also been particularly zealous about prosecuting dissenting women (Farthing, 2016).

Furthermore, indigenous women who defend human and environmental rights are subject to additional discrimination by virtue of their gender and identity. Amparo Carvajal, a human rights defender, also named as the 2018 person of the year by a leading newspaper in Bolivia, had her reputation threatened by officials at the highest level of government because she condemned the illegal arrest and unnecessary use of force against agricultural workers by state security forces. The Government Minister Carlos Romero called her “an irresponsible person” and a “sponsor of criminal organisations”. These unsubstantiated allegations represent a crude and explicit effort to undermine the widely respected work of Carvajal and avoid oversight of the duty of the state for violations of human rights (Guevara-Rosas, 2019).

Another instance of demonstrated violence against women revolves around the situation in Isiboro Secure National Park and Indigenous Territory, known as TIPNIS, where the building of a 182-mile highway would partially run through this protected, highly biodiverse indigenous territory in the Amazon. To protest the building of the road, a peaceful 375-mile march was initiated and attended by a large number of women, including, pregnant women, mothers, elderly people, and youth. The march broke no laws and not a single road was blocked. Despite that, the government blocked access to communication, beat participants, tear gassed children, and arrested the marchers in large numbers. Food and supplies from the city were blocked and radical attempts were made to satiate the leaders of their enthusiasm (Dallavale, 2015). While men and women are often prosecuted for defending the environment, it is often women who are at the receiving end of the acts of violence. For the simple act of peacefully protecting their lands and territories, many women environmental

defenders are being branded as 'terrorists.' The trend is a global shift toward authoritarianism, and women, especially indigenous women, are at the other end of this continuum of power (Ervin, 2018).

Ensuring Rights of Activists

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) released an article recommending a series of measures to ensure that the rights of activists are defended. One of their most salient suggestions is to increase the global news coverage of the threats and injustices that the environmental defenders encounter (Ervin, 2018). Shedding light on the atrocities that women activists in general, and indigenous women activists in particular, face is of utmost importance in raising awareness about their trials and tribulations.

Multiple international organizations have been actively working in granting funds to women human rights activists around the globe, raising awareness about the various issues and movements in which women activists are indulging and connecting women from around the world to develop a community that strengthens and uplifts each other. Most of these organizations have previously been involved with activism concerns in Latin America, including Bolivia. At an individual level, one can either donate to these organizations or become involved in other capacities to facilitate change. Some of these funds are:

1. Urgent Action Fund

The Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights (Urgent Action Fund) funds women human rights defenders (WHRDs) and transgender human rights defenders (THRDs) who aim to develop a community of justice, equality and peace. The Urgent Action Fund offers quick response grants to WHRDs and THRDs around the world in cooperation with its sister funds, Urgent Action Fund-Africa and Urgent Action Fund-Latin America. It responds to all requests within 72 hours, which enable “improved security when defenders face threats and enable strategic action during windows of opportunity to change laws, policies and public opinion.”

<https://urgentactionfund.org/>

2. Global Fund for Women

Global Fund for Women “offers flexible support to a diverse group of activist partners to create meaningful change that will last beyond their lifetimes.” It has funded women rights group in more than 175 countries.

<https://www.globalfundforwomen.org/>

3. World Pulse

World Pulse is an “independent, women-led social network for social change.” Using the power of technology, they wish to accelerate women's leadership, amplify women’s voices and link movements across the globe so as to facilitate collaboration.

<https://impact.worldpulse.com/>

4. Association for Women's Right in Development

AWID is an international, feminist, membership, movement support organization. It seeks to advance universal rights and justice, build feminist economies, resource feminist movements and co-create feminist realities. They wish to advance their agendas by advocating and campaigning, convening and connecting members and allies, mobilizing members and movements and adopting cultural and creative strategies.

<https://www.awid.org/>

Across the world, violence against activist women has been on the rise. The Guardian reported that approximately half of all women activists have been killed for defending their land and environmental rights (Sekyiamah & Ford, 2020). In Honduras, Berta Caceres was murdered in 2016 for defending her community rights against the construction of a hydroelectric dam. In Guatemala, Laura Leonor Vásquez Pineda was also murdered for defending her land against mining interests. Emilsen Manyoma of Colombia, defending her community's land rights from abusive mining and other projects, also met with the same fate. Additionally, female environmental defenders are faced with threats, intimidation, rape, torture and/or imprisonment every year. An indigenous Kichwa activist, Patricia Gualinga Montalvo, is faced with regular death threats for defending her community's rights in Amazon Rainforest (Ervin, 2018). It is crucial for international associations as well as individuals with the capacity to influence change to involve themselves in the politics of such countries, and support movements led by these women, that would benefit generations to come.

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