

Femicides in Peru reveal crisis of violence

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Lima, April 24 (RHC)-- Last month, 18-year-old Katherine Gómez finally decided to end her brief relationship with her boyfriend, Sergio Tarache. It was a Saturday evening, and despite having planned a night out with friends, she acquiesced to meet him one last time in a crowded plaza in central Lima.

The couple began to argue and Tarache abruptly left, according to witnesses. Moments later, surveillance footage revealed him buying gasoline at a nearby station. He returned, doused Gómez and set her aflame with a lighter, fleeing the scene as she burned alive.

Nearly six days passed before a superior court judge in Lima issued an arrest warrant. Tarache, 21, had already fled the country. Meanwhile, Gómez, suffering severe burns to her chest and face, died of respiratory failure in an induced coma.

Nine days after the attack, on March 27, an 11-year-old Indigenous girl was found on the cusp of death in the Amazon region of Ucayali. Two nails were lodged into her skull after her 25-year-old stepbrother attempted to rape her.

And two days after that, on March 29, a 32-year-old nurse was discovered naked and covered in blood after a night out with two male coworkers in the southern department of Puno. She was rushed to the hospital where she was treated for head trauma and mutilated genitalia. But following an infection that necessitated a leg amputation, the mother of three died after 12 days in a coma. Her co-workers were subsequently arrested and await charges.

The brutality of these cases has shocked Peruvians in recent weeks, laying bare what many are calling a systemic “crisis” of gender-based violence. In this country of 33 million, six out of 10 women have experienced some form of physical or sexual violence, and rates of femicide — broadly defined as the intentional, gender-motivated murder of women — are soaring.

Since January, there have been 51 reported femicides in Peru, a figure likely to outpace the 137 recorded last year, according to public officials. This dark inventory does not account for disappearances. In 2022, there were 11,524 reports of missing women. Only 48 percent of them were found by authorities, according to Peru’s ombudsman.

Describing what many consider an “emergency” to Al Jazeera, government officials, women’s rights organisations and family members faulted entrenched misogyny, mistrust in the justice system and ultra-conservative legislation as contributing to the increasingly violent attacks against women. “It’s a vicious circle,” said Diana Portal of the ombudsman’s office. “Cases continue to occur, and a negligent state response sends an unfortunate message that in Peru you can rape, disappear or kill a woman without consequence.”

Between January and February of this year, there were 21,194 reported cases of violence against women and girls. Sixteen percent were girls between the ages of 12 and 17, according to data from the Ministry of Women and Vulnerable Populations.

Underscoring the deep mistrust in Peru’s judicial system, a national poll revealed that less than 30 percent of women report incidents of violence to authorities, meaning the vast majority of cases go undocumented. “It’s a system that fails to comply with due diligence and does not take reports seriously, which aggravates a situation of daily violence,” said Portal.

One week after her daughter’s death, Gómez’s mother, Cinthia Machare, clutched a banner with the teenager’s portrait as she marched through downtown Lima, protesting the state’s response to the wave of recent femicides. “I’m living a nightmare. I enter her room and it’s empty,” said Machare. “There’s a silence in my house because she was the one who brought all the joy to our home.”

Following an international manhunt, Tarache was apprehended on April 11 in Bogota, Colombia, and is awaiting extradition. But critics said the procedural delays that allowed him time to flee reveal a crisis of impunity. “It is clear that we have work to do in order to recover the confidence of the population in the justice system,” said Patricia Milagros, a representative for the Ministry of Women’s Aurora Program, which provides emergency aid to victims.

Approximately 245 national emergency centres — along with preventive psychological and legal services — offer assistance to victims of sexual violence, according to Milagros.

But gender-rights activists said a lack of state funding for such programmes has resulted in delayed aid to victims, who often abandon their cases. They also called for stronger prevention measures, harsher sentencing for aggressors and meaningful education reforms to address the violence.

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