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# The grisly deaths of a woman and a girl shock Mexico and test its president

*The murders of Ingrid Escamilla, 25, and Fátima Aldrighett, 7, are forcing a reckoning in a country that has wrestled with violence against women. The president's response has been harshly criticized.*

By Kirk Semple and Paulina Villegas

The New York Times (19.02.2020) – <https://nyti.ms/32qYqgu> – The gruesome murders this month of a woman and a girl in

Mexico have shocked the nation, triggering a groundswell of outrage punctuated by near-daily street protests, unbridled fury on social media and growing demands for incisive government action against gender-based violence.

The woman, Ingrid Escamilla, 25, was stabbed, skinned and disemboweled, and the girl, Fátima Cecilia Aldrighett, 7, was abducted from school, her body later found wrapped in a plastic bag. The outcry over their deaths is forcing a reckoning in a country that has long wrestled with violence against women, analysts and activists say.

It is also amounting to a major leadership test for President Andrés Manuel López Obrador – and critics, who have called his response at turns anemic, insensitive and condescending, say he is falling far short.

Xóchitl Rodríguez, a member of Feminasty, a feminist activist collective, said she has been deeply disappointed by the response of Mr. López Obrador, who campaigned as a transformative figure who would defend marginalized populations.

“He was supposed to represent a change and it turns out that he is not,” she said. “The fact that you wake up in the morning and your president cannot reassure you on what specific actions he is taking to deal with the issue, is outrageous.”

In 2019, the Mexican government recorded 1,006 incidents of

femicide, the crime of killing women or girls because of their gender – a 10 percent increase from 2018. The overall number of women who die violently in Mexico has also increased, rising to 10 killings per day in 2019 from seven per day in 2017, according to the Mexico office of U.N. Women.

“Women are demanding a shift of paradigm and nothing less,” said Estefanía Vela, executive director of Intersecta, a Mexico City-based group that promotes gender equality. “These are not only hashtags. These are students protesting at the universities, and mothers demanding justice for their daughters.”

But Mr. López Obrador has seemed to struggle with how to respond to the issue.

Speaking at one of his regular morning news conference last week, the president bristled at journalists’ questions about femicide, and tried to bring the conversation back to his announcement that the government had recovered more than \$100 million in criminal assets and would be channeling it into poor communities.

“Look, I don’t want the topic to be only femicide,” he said. “This issue has been manipulated a lot in the media.”

And on Monday, when asked about Fátima’s death, he sought to blame femicides on what he called the “neoliberal policies” of his predecessors.

Mexican society, he said, “fell into a decline, it was a process of progressive degradation that had to do with the neoliberal model.”

Amid the escalating violence and facing a lack of what they consider effective government response, a feminist protest movement has gained momentum in the past year and become more violent, with some protesters smashing windows of police stations and spraying graffiti on monuments.

The deaths of Fátima and Ms. Escamilla, both in the past two weeks, have injected even greater urgency into the debate surrounding gender violence and machismo and have intensified the demands for a more effective government response.

The killing of Ms. Escamilla, whose body was found on Feb. 9, was so ghoulish it managed to transcend the daily drumbeat of bloodshed and shock the nation. A man, found covered in blood and said to be her domestic partner, was arrested and confessed to the crime, the authorities said.

Adding to the outrage was the fact that photos of Ms. Escamilla’s mutilated body were leaked to tabloids, which published the images on their front pages.

On Feb. 11, Fátima went missing after she was led away from her primary school by an unidentified woman – an abduction that was captured by security cameras. The discovery of the

girl's body over the weekend, wrapped in a plastic bag and dumped next to a construction site on the outskirts of the capital, added to the rising anger.

Last Friday, protesters, most of them women, spray-painted "Femicide State" and "Not One More" on the facade and main doorway of the National Palace in Mexico.

Claudia Sheinbaum, the mayor of Mexico City, said Wednesday night on Twitter that suspects in the killing of Fátima had been detained in the State of Mexico. Several days ago, the mayor said prosecutors would seek the maximum sentence against Ms. Escamilla's killer and called femicide "an absolutely condemnable crime."

"Justice must be done," Ms. Sheinbaum said.

In the lower house of the Mexican Congress on Tuesday, lawmakers approved a reform to the penal code that would increase the maximum prison sentence for a femicide conviction to 65 years from 60 years. The measure has been sent to the Senate for a vote.

Also on Tuesday, a coalition of representatives from several political parties issued a declaration condemning gender-based violence and demanding that all levels of government strengthen the fight against it.

"This is a national crisis," Ana Patricia Peralta, a

representative from Morena, Mr. López Obrador's party, said in a speech on Tuesday. "What else needs to happen for us to accept that violence against women in our country is an epidemic that has extended to all social strata?"

A senator from the National Action Party, Josefina Vázquez Mota, filed a proposal in the Senate to create a special commission that would monitor the prosecution of femicides against minors.

But Mr. López Obrador has been seen as dismissive. To the women who spray-painted calls for change on the National Palace, for example, he said "I ask feminists, with all due respect, not to paint the doors, the walls. We are working so that there are no femicides."

His attitude was met with scorn by critics, particularly women's rights activists.

"If trashing monuments makes authorities look at us and listen to our demands, then we will continue to do so," said Beatriz Belmont, a student in economics and international relations at ITAM, a Mexico City university, and a member of the Fourth Wave, a feminist student collective.

She called the president's responses to the crisis "unacceptable and unfitting for someone who should be acting as a national leader."

“It seems like he is closing his eyes before a reality that is not only sitting in front of him but is slapping him in the face,” Ms. Belmont said.

On Wednesday morning, however, Mr. López Obrador seemed more receptive to the protesters’ demands, applauding the congressional vote in favor of harsher prison terms and attributing it in part to societal pressure. He even drew a parallel between the protesters and leaders of the Mexican Revolution.

“That is why the participation of citizens is important,” he said. “If there hadn’t been a Revolution, we wouldn’t have the 1917 Constitution.”

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