



(Women marching in Costa Rica in 2020. Source: © Twitter @h24news_cr, 2020)

Gender based violence in Costa Rica and the case of Allison Bonilla Vásquez

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There is a gap between the written laws found in books and the legislations and their enforcement, meaning how these laws work in practice, practically in all the legal systems around the world. When law addresses security issues, such as violence against women, a lack of execution can result in slow or ineffective police responses to domestic violence calls. However, in more extreme situations, it can entail an increased vulnerability to become a murder victim when the legal system fails to protect victims or reprimand aggressors consistently. For example, in many Latin American countries, male attackers continue to face exemptions in the courts, even when comprehensive laws are in place, they are frequently ignored, misapplied, or even undermined¹.

Costa Rica does not have the high murder rates as its Central American neighbours or other Latin American countries do². However, murders of women continue to be persistent in Costa Rica, and killing an intimate partner is still referred as a "crime of passion" by some, implying that a man's emotional condition is still considered a sufficient explanation or motive for murdering women³.

Although femicides are not novel, they had received increased national media attention in Costa Rica since March 2018, when then-President Luis Guillermo Sols expressed concern about a "wave of femicides" in the month when three women were murdered, President Carlos Alvarado's administration proclaimed violence against women as a national emergency in May 2018⁴. Femicides continue to garner media attention, as evidenced by a high-profile case from March 8, 2019, in which a man in the San José suburb of Desamparados stabbed his wife, Gladys Maria Garcia Pereira, multiple times in front of their children before being beaten and killed by a mob of neighbours, also received a lot of media attention⁵. Garcia Pereira and six other women were murdered in the first four months of 2019.

1. Adamson, E., Menjivar, C., & Walsh, S. D. (2020). The Impact of Adjacent Laws on Implementing Violence Against Women Laws: Legal Violence in the Lives of Costa Rican Women. *Law & Social Inquiry*, 45(2), 432–459. <https://doi.org/10.1017/lsi.2019.58>
2. Villarreal, R. (2014, January 8). Unravelling Sexual Violence in Costa Rica and Throughout Latin America. *PassBlue*. <https://www.passblue.com/2014/01/08/unraveling-sexual-violence-in-costa-rica-and-throughout-latin-america/>
3. Several Femicides In the Past Few Weeks Put Authorities in Costa Rica on Alert. (2018, March 17). *Costa Rica Star News*. <https://news.co.cr/several-femicides-in-the-past->
4. President sounds alarm over the murder of women in Costa Rica. (2018, March 13). *The Tico Times | Costa Rica News | Travel | Real Estate*. <https://ticotimes.net/2018/03/13/president-sounds-alarm-over-the-murder-of-women-in-costa-rica>
5. Turba mata a hombre que asesinó a su esposa a puñaladas en Desamparados. (n.d.). *La Nación*. Retrieved March 7, 2022, from <https://www.nacion.com/sucesos/crimenes/turba-mata-a-hombre-que-degollo-esposa-en/U7IJEFDRYFG2ZGZFBK7TIUTNQM/story/>

The case of Allison Bonilla Vásquez



(Woman marches to demand a stop to gender violence. Source: © Ezequiel BECERRA / AFP, Tico Times, 2019)

Women's day in 2020 found thousands of women marching around Costa Rica demanding justice for Allison Bonilla's femicide and for all women who face gender-based violence⁶. They marched under the slogan "No More Impunity" to demand strict law enforcement against individuals who beat, rape, and kill women⁷.

Citizens of San Jose, Cartago, and Puntarenas also shared the message, "I was born to be free, not slaughtered." "We want to make femicide visible in a country where aggressors go unpunished and thanks to the authorities' negligence," claimed the Brujas Feministas organisation⁸. Families of femicide victims "are not alone, neither are women suffering from domestic violence in times of pandemic," according to Brujas Feministas⁹.

6. Women March Against Gender-Based Violence in Costa Rica. (n.d.). [www.telesurenglish.net](https://www.telesurenglish.net/news/Women-March-Against-Gender-Based-Violence-in-Costa-Rica-20200908-0008.html). Retrieved March 7, 2022, from <https://www.telesurenglish.net/news/Women-March-Against-Gender-Based-Violence-in-Costa-Rica-20200908-0008.html>

7. Ibid.

8. Women March Against Gender-Based Violence in Costa Rica. (n.d.). [www.telesurenglish.net](https://www.telesurenglish.net/news/Women-March-Against-Gender-Based-Violence-in-Costa-Rica-20200908-0008.html). Retrieved March 7, 2022, from <https://www.telesurenglish.net/news/Women-March-Against-Gender-Based-Violence-in-Costa-Rica-20200908-0008.html>

9. Ibid.

Citizens paid tribute to Allison Bonilla Vásquez, an 18 year old girl whose remains were found in a clandestine dump in 2020 following the confession of a 28 year old man. On her way home, she was abducted, sexually abused, killed, and her body was dumped in Cachí, in Paraíso de Cartago¹⁰. She is just one of the many victims that fall prey to gender-based violence every year. "We are here to demand justice and to raise our voice on behalf of our sisters who are not with us today," the demonstrators stated¹¹.

10. Allison Bonilla case: Remains found in clandestine dump are Allison's, confirms OJ. (2020, October 6). Q COSTA RICA. <https://qcostarica.com/allison-bonilla-case-remains-found-in-clandestine-dump-are-allisons-confirms-oj/>

11. Ibid.

Gender based legislation in Costa Rica

Compared with other Latin American countries, Costa Rica represents a 'best case scenario', with significant potential for bridging the gap between how the law should work in theory and making it work in practice¹². Costa Rica stands out in Central America for its comparatively high levels of human development, lengthy history of democratic leadership, and the abolition of its military in 1948. The country also ranks highly in numerous worldwide gender equality indicators, because it has established more robust structures to prevent violence against women than other Latin American countries¹³. However, this advantageous context may be changing. Weldon discovered that, by 1994, Costa Rica was the fourth most responsive state in a comparative analysis of state responses to the problem of VAW in 36 democratic countries¹⁴. On the other hand, a more recent assessment made by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), gave Costa Rica a relatively low score on laws against violence against women, noting that they only protected women from some but not all forms of assault¹⁵.

Costa Rica has advanced the application of domestic violence laws by establishing a national police force with gender violence training, and by all accounts, such violence is taken seriously¹⁶. The National Institute of Women offers a helpline for gender-based violence and provides lawyers and psychiatrists who collaborate with the judiciary. Women are involved in the state, with male and female judges nearly equal¹⁷. In 2018, the proportion of women throughout the legislature climbed by ten percent to 45.6 percent, compared to 31.2 percent in Latin America and the Caribbean.¹⁸ Women are also active in civil society organisations that advocate for strict enforcement of protective laws and preventative school initiatives¹⁹. Decades of social investments have resulted in a relatively solid education, health, and law enforcement system.

12. Adamson, E., Menjivar, C., & Walsh, S. D. (2020). The Impact of Adjacent Laws on Implementing Violence Against Women Laws: Legal Violence in the Lives of Costa Rican Women. *Law & Social Inquiry*, 45(2), 432–459. <https://doi.org/10.1017/lsi.2019.58>

13. Closing the Gender Gap Accelerator Costa Rica. (n.d.). World Economic Forum. Retrieved March 7, 2022, from <https://www.weforum.org/platforms/centre-for-the-new-economy-and-society/projects/closing-the-gender-gap-accelerator-costa-rica>

14. Weldon, S. Laurel. *Protest, Policy and the Problem of Violence against Women: A Cross-National Comparison*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002.

15. Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). *OECD Development Centre Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI)*. 2019. <https://www.genderindex.org/countries>.

16. Adamson, E., Menjivar, C., & Walsh, S. D. (2020). The Impact of Adjacent Laws on Implementing Violence Against Women Laws: Legal Violence in the Lives of Costa Rican Women. *Law & Social Inquiry*, 45(2), 432–459. <https://doi.org/10.1017/lsi.2019.58>

17. World Economic Forum. *The Global Gender Gap Report 2018*. 2018. ISBN-13: 978-2-940631-00-1. www.weforum.org.

18. Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). *OECD Development Centre Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI)*. 2019. <https://www.genderindex.org/countries>.

19. *Ibid*



(Woman marches to demand a stop to gender violence. Source: © Alberto Font/The Tico Times, 2016)

Ten years after the Criminalization of Domestic Violence Law was passed in 2007, and more than twenty years after the first laws addressing women's rights were passed in 1990, a wave of femicides began in 2018, which former President Luis Guillermo Solís publicly condemned ("President Expresses Alarm" 2018)²⁰. These allegations caused the Supreme Court to step up its efforts to eradicate violence against women. Despite these institutional advancements, laws have been and continue to be used to prevent women from initiating lawsuits against their abusers before homicides occur.

20. President sounds alarm over the murder of women in Costa Rica. (2018, March 13). The Tico Times | Costa Rica News | Travel | Real Estate. <https://ticotimes.net/2018/03/13/president-sounds-alarm-over-the-murder-of-women-in-costa-rica>

Conclusion

State responsiveness, as in other countries around the world, is not always efficient in reducing gender-based violence. Despite institutional advances in Costa Rica, 88 percent of cases of violence against women filed under criminal law are still not prosecuted.

Costa Rica's social context includes a variety of forms of violence that coexist and reinforce one another. Addressing "normal" forms of violence in society would help denaturalize forms of violence in general. The introduction of laws prohibiting violence against women remains a crucial step in the fight to end violence against women, but it is not sufficient in and of itself. Once laws to protect women are in place, more work is required to eliminate various legal obstacles to their application, and other types of multi-sided violence that continue to leave women vulnerable to violence.

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