

RESEARCH ARTICLE

When Resisting Is Not Enough: The killing of Latin American Feminist Activists (2015–23)

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ABSTRACT

The article analyses an original database of 177 Latin American women activists killed that had some connection with feminist social movements from 2015 to 2023. A growing body of literature has focused on the killings of socio-environmental activists in Latin America and where they occurred. However, their activism is under-researched, precisely because feminist social movements and activists have frequently been killed while advocating for women's rights in the subcontinent. This article focuses on the circumstances, a few reasons portrayed in newspaper events, and the perpetrators of such violence. Based on a literature review, I argue that taking into account the recent *narcodynamics* of the region, it is possible to understand such violence within the context of drug-related violence, but also—and more likely—to consider those killings as political feminicides. Political feminicides are then examined largely through transfeminicides and peasant/communitarian activists.

Keywords: Feminism; violence; Latin America; political feminicides

In the last decade, several feminist activists have been murdered in Latin America, including Nadia Vera in Mexico City and Francela Méndez in Sonsonate, El Salvador. Their deaths exemplify the broader issue of violence, targeting grassroots figures calling for change in the region. Whether advocating for women in the student democracy movement in Mexico or for trans rights in Central America, Nadia and Francela made and impact on their communities. Even internationally recognized activist figures are not immune. In 2019, socio-environmental and human rights defender Francia Márquez survived an assassination attempt in Colombia, three years after Honduran Berta Cáceres was shot dead. Both received the Goldman Prize, the most prestigious prize for environmental defenders. The pervasive violence in the lives of women human rights defenders (hence HRD) in Latin America renders their work and very existence fundamentally different from that of their counterparts in the Global North, thus raising challenges to the approaches to social contention and gender issues developed in those safer contexts.

Latin America presents a compelling case for reflection on these themes as the most dangerous continent in the world to defend environmental, land, and human rights, with Brazil, Colombia, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico ranked worst (Global Witness 2023). A vast array of literature, encompassing mass media human rights reports (Frontline Defenders 2015, 2016, 2020, 2021; Global Witness 2020, 2021), and academic research (Scheidel et al. 2020; Ruggiero 2020; Toledo et al. 2021; Billon and Menton 2021; Bombardi and Almeida, 2021; Garvey et al. 2022) has extensively documented the perils of environmental activism in the region. Additionally,

Esguerra-Muelle et al. (2019) broaden this discourse to encompass a diverse range of activism forms, emphasizing the pervasive violence experienced by Latin American activists.

In this article, I propose to further this discussion by shedding light on the attacks made on feminists. Nonetheless, a disclaimer is that I address feminism as an external category. Feminism as a category is essential, although not always vindicated by the murdered women themselves, as it is transversal in social movements in Latin America, deeply marked by the presence of women in claim-making that revolves around their gender. I examine this notion through political feminicides, used to address the killing of women pursuing a feminist agenda. This article categorizes women's activism into five primary themes: LGBTQIA+ rights, missing persons, socio-environmental concerns, victims of violence, communitarian/peasant issues, and women's rights. The convergence of women working within those themes fosters solidarity across various agendas amid an escalating number of deaths among female and feminized individuals in the region. Those are linked to articulating this comprehensive understanding of feminism (Souza and Selis 2022).

Although vibrant, especially since the 1980s, feminist movements have not met easy conditions in Latin America. The context has deeply deteriorated with the election of far-right presidents such as Jair Bolsonaro 2018, who remarked, still campaigning, that he would "end all activism in Brazil." Although overall activism has not ended, several feminists were murdered in the country during his presidency (2019–2022). In Brazil, the murder of black feminist Julya Madsan, a transgender LGBTQIA+ woman from Mato Grosso do Sul and an activist in the Black movement and the youth section of PT (Worker's Party) in 2021 illustrates some specific ways in which those women are usually attacked. Julya was stabbed to death, and her body was found in a swamp.

In recent years, Latin America has seen violence directed towards feminists and women HRD at unacceptably high levels. For example, murders, kidnappings, and other outbreaks of violence have been reported in Bolivia, Colombia, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. In many cases, activists have faced threats and violence due to their advocacy for legal and social reforms, including abortion and LGBTQIA+ rights (Zarembert et al. 2021).

By drawing on original survey data and an extensive literature review, this article aims to understand the patterns in the killing of feminists in the region emphasizing the role of both criminal and para-state violence. The article is divided into six sections. First, it presents the data and methods used to examine the diverse interpretations of feminism in Latin America and how its agenda differs from Global North women's movements. The article continues, with the use of the category political feminicides in Latin America, analyzing both the effects of narcoviolence and violence against women (VAW). Subsequently, it quarries the details of LGBTQIA+ rights and transfeminist activists; later, it discusses the spatial targeting of socio-environmental and communitarian/peasant activists, and, finally, it provides an overview of the discussions on resistance and fear, using the examples of missing persons, victims of violence, and women's rights activists.

Data and Methods

The article is based on a mixed-method approach with quantitative and qualitative elements. Through a qualitative lens, the article engages in a theoretical discussion, grounded in a conceptual reorientation of feminist activism and its contextual frameworks, where state violence is complemented by attacks perpetrated by other groups. These reflections are complemented by insights from a quantitative dataset with 177 cases compiled from documented cases of feminists killed in Latin America between January 2015 and December 2023. I collected data in this timeframe, with the end of the "Pink Tide" in Latin America as the starting point for case selection. This period marks a consistent shift in governments' political orientation, with right-

wing governments implementing neoliberal policies, the reprimarization of economies, and an increase in the persecution of human rights activists (Biroli and Caminotti 2020).

The process of compiling cases for the dataset began with a broad-scale review of various documents that catalogue assassinations of activists on a global and Latin American scale, particularly women with women's rights issues and feminist engagements. I searched NGO reports, reviewing documents related to HRD, datasets from other universities and civil society, journal articles, and news in major newspapers in Latin America. I started by collecting information on the Women's HRD list published by AWID—a women's rights international organization, and then in the annual reports by Front Line Defenders and Global Witness to account for environmental defenders, selecting the women killed and searching for their previous feminist engagements. Then, I looked into Colombian datasets and human rights reports,¹ particularly the reports produced by IM-DEFENSORAS,² which covered Central American and Mexican female activists.

Recent initiatives of knowledge production are significant in this context. Several Latin American countries and states within those countries have developed databases on feminicides in the last few years. However, no distinction is made if women activists had any engagement, in particular, within feminist collectives. I consulted local state initiatives, such as Yucatán state in Mexico, with its observatory on feminicides. I checked a dataset on distinct violence activists have faced worldwide since 2016 and double-checked the information I gathered.³ Also, I looked into international data on worldwide femicide collected in the last few years by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).⁴

With a list of cases established through a review of this literature, I constructed the dataset with 177 names that included lesser-known and paradigmatic cases of Latin American activists with some connection to feminism movements and causes, for instance, Berta Cáceres in Honduras and Marielle Franco in Brazil. While Bolivia, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Uruguay had no documented cases of feminists killed, 14 other countries did: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, El Salvador, Ecuador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Peru, and Venezuela. The list of individuals was further discussed with activists from different countries to identify possible gaps. I halted the search for additional cases when saturation was reached. While the possibility exists that some deaths of less prominent activists may have been missed, the breadth of the collected sample encompasses numerous such cases. This should allow for the derivation of relatively robust inferences regarding the overall heterogeneity observed in the patterns of victimization.

Taking all those reports as my starting point, I consulted a myriad of official and unofficial documents (UN General and Assembly warnings, human rights reports, and newspaper articles), which gave me more information on the activists' profiles and the circumstances of their deaths. I collected data on 177 cases, analyzing 67 human rights reports. The information has been gathered for 18 variables related to these women. These categorical variables are (Table 1):

¹Since 2018, the organization Somos Defensores has released annual reports on the killings of human rights defenders in the country. For more, see <https://somosdefensores.org/informes-anuales/>.

²For more, see <https://im-defensoras.org/es/?#>.

³Dataset gathered by ProtectDefenders.eu, a monitoring tool that maps violations committed towards human rights defenders to illustrate the scale of the crackdown and pressure that they face worldwide. For more information, see <https://protectdefenders.eu/raising-awareness/#index>.

⁴MIT has an international knowledge production on femicide in the last few years that supports grassroots data activists in Latin America counting feminicides. Through the laboratory Data + Feminism Lab, the initiative has helped organizations in Latin America such as Femicidio Uruguay, Observatorio Nacional MuMaLá, Mujeres de Negro Rosario, Néias—Observatório de Femicídios Londrina, Fórum Cearense de Mulheres—FCM, Lupa Feminista contra o Femicídio—Coletivo Feminino Plural, Laboratório de Estudos de Femicídios—LESFEM and Grupo de Trabalho sobre Femicídio na Bahia—GT FEM.

Table 1. Dataset Variables

<p>Activists' Profile:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Race - Age - Urban or Rural Activism - Country
<p>Role within Activism and Social Movements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Awards Won - Field of Activity (civil society/government/both) - Role in the Organization - Focus of Feminist Activism
<p>Circumstances Surrounding the Assassination:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Year of Death - Transfemicide (yes/no) - Previous Threats (yes/no) - Method of Murder - Alleged Perpetrator - Solved Murder (yes/no)
<p>National Context:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Presidency's Political Orientation - Abortion Laws (measure of reproductive rights comprehensiveness) - Proportion of Women in Parliament (measure of political inclusiveness of women) - Femicide Rate (measure of the general extent of violence against women)

The task of finding sensible information, such as the circumstances of the killings, as well as information on the—intellectual and material—murderers and judicial follow-up on the cases, was not always easy, making this dataset a laborious manual task. The characteristics of armed groups, frequently acting *in tandem*, also pose a challenge to the categorization.

A Southern Kaleidoscope Identity: Towards A More Comprehensive Understanding of Feminist Activism

The feminist movement is characterized by its diversity and plurality, as indicated by scholars' use of the plural form “feminisms.” Within this multifaceted landscape, women engage with various currents and adopt diverse strategies, from self-identified feminists to grassroots or unionized activists taking to the streets. While many documented women identify as feminists and actively participate in social movements, there are instances where this is not the case. In this article, feminism is approached as an analytical concept and an intrinsic aspect of many women's lives. The distinction lies in whether feminism serves as a defining feature in the motivations behind their assassinations. From this perspective, a restrictive understanding of feminism may inadvertently hinder the struggles faced by feminists in incidents of violence against women (VAW).

While not all the women studied explicitly identified as feminists, their activism frequently intersected with gender-related issues. A notable example is found in the *madres buscadoras* (searching mothers) in Mexico, who organize themselves into collectives to search for the remains of their missing relatives. This example is particularly significant given the rising visibility of *buscadoras*, who, many times despite the Mexican legal system, have successfully located their relative's bodies. For instance, *buscadora* Blanca Esmeralda Gallardo, was killed in October 2022. She died in the same place where her daughter had disappeared a few years before. The struggle of these individuals holds significant relevance within the framework of my argument. The fact that predominantly women are in those collectives is no coincidence (Castillo 2019). Their activism differs from liberal feminism, which focuses on individual citizen rights for women. The

heterogeneity of experiences that mark women's lives in Latin America, including ethnic-racial and class hierarchies, even constitute ways they imagine justice. As with the *Grupo de Apoyo Mutuo* (Mutual Support Group) in Guatemala, mobilizations are led mainly by mothers, politicizing their maternal identities to turn the disappeared into their sons and daughters.

Although many *buscadoras* do not claim an explicitly feminist agenda, their collective activities have implied negotiating things in the domestic sphere that destabilize gender roles (Hernandez Castillo 2019). The lack of state capabilities to locate the disappeared facilitates civic transformations by which those women become activists (Schwartz-Marin and Cruz-Santiago 2016). Formal aspects of social movements, like organizational forms, cycles of mobilization, and identity, serve to classify activists and, many times, leave aside poor women in movements, even though they play an essential role as a force of social change, in a capillary form. Although not institutionalized or stable, informal organizations can provoke social change (Zibechi 2012).

In the region, women have redefined the content of citizenship to achieve representation of their rights and interests (Richards 2003). That implied various struggles: protesting dictatorships, pressing for respect for human rights, and demanding guarantees for socioeconomic rights. Poor women's organizations throughout Latin America are at the forefront of struggles to access infrastructural services, such as water, electricity, housing, and social services (Sternbach et al. 1992). It is a broad understanding of feminism that enables us to grasp activism marked by addressing authoritarian rule, poverty, and violence against women within a broader anti-systemic framework.

Feminist collectives in Latin America raise questions not only on the role of self-identified feminists but also of other organizations and institutions (Conway and Lebon 2021). For instance, feminist groups in Peru have *Mujeres por la Democracia* (Women for Democracy) as a leading force in the country. This movement has mobilized women from diverse sectors since the final years of the Fujimori regime (1990–2000) to challenge its authoritarianism. Women's movements were among the earliest to resist military dictatorships, and their support facilitated the restoration of democracy. The uniqueness of these movements is also attributed to their vulnerability to the impacts of neoliberal development models and their ramifications for the state's role in delivering social welfare (Rousseau 2006).

In the 1960s, women in Latin America started survival networks, contending with economic crises under authoritarian regimes, especially in the Southern Cone. In Argentina, before the military coup in the 1970s, women recounted instances of solidarity being disrupted amid escalating state repression. Moreover, many activists were compelled to forsake their studies, employment, and residences to seek refuge as the threat of violence loomed large, with people close to them being targeted for murder or disappearance (Sutton 2018).

However, some people continued to mobilize. In the 1980s, Latin America saw initiatives within *Feminismo Popular* (Popular Feminism), led by women in the popular sectors, highlighting the gendered character of the struggles for survival and against dictatorship. They signaled their significance for feminism imbricated with the left in mass-based struggles for economic justice and broader social transformation. In a region marked by social and economic inequalities, women engaged in the "general struggle" for social justice and against capitalist models that military and civilian political elites implanted in the 1960s and 1970s. The result was the refusal of the conventional political arena, as they joined leftist guerrillas, community women's groups, grassroots survival struggles, and trade unions and worked closely with women from the popular sectors (Alvarez 2018).

In this period, neoliberal policies deeply impacted the political economy of Latin America. The debt crisis of the 1980s compelled countries to yield to international pressures from financial lenders. They were coerced into structural adjustment policies, leading to reductions in social expenditures, cuts to essential services, and the privatization of public enterprises. These measures disproportionately affected the lower socioeconomic classes, escalating living costs, exacerbating poverty, and eroding safety nets, thereby diminishing avenues for mobilization. However, in the

1990s, a first wave of protests emerged, primarily targeting the privatization of essential services, drawing participation from peasants and women (Somma 2021).

Feminists then were concerned with gender justice, as well as the broader struggle for material and cultural survival against phenomena such as racist violence, land dispossession, environmental degradation, and economic marginalization. One notable example is the Consejo Cívico de Organizaciones Populares y Indígenas de Honduras (Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras), or COPINH, whose founder, Berta Cáceres, was tragically assassinated in 2016. Recently, COPINH activists participated in an International Feminist Organizing School, bringing together 200 grassroots feminists from across the globe, thereby illustrating the intersectionality of grassroots feminism and anti-neoliberal movements. The diverse array of women's experiences throughout Latin America highlights their precariousness concerning bodily autonomy. In response, feminist movements across the region engage in active resistance against these vulnerabilities. This convergence fosters solidarity across various agendas amidst an escalating number of deaths among female and feminized individuals in the area, linked to the articulation of this comprehensive understanding of feminism (Souza and Selis 2022).

Gender and feminist disputes in Latin America are characterized by entangled inequalities (Costa 2018), which differ from those observed in corresponding movements in the Global North. Nonetheless, the debates on making feminism more inclusive have been a pivotal issue within the movement since the 1980s (Ballestrin 2022). This has brought to light the distinctions between movements originating from the Global North and those from the Global South while also shedding light on the unique challenges faced by women in the latter. In these regions, political action is often hindered by the presence of both state and paramilitaries, including militias, street gangs, guerrillas, and death squads.

In the Global North, feminists tend to prioritize a post-material agenda shaped by their comparatively affluent economic status, focusing on political representation, the gender wage gap, and cultural representations of women (Garretón and Selamé 2023; Switzer 2013). Conversely, in Latin America, many feminists advocate for a material agenda, addressing economic inequality and the criminalization of abortions. In regions where state and paramilitary repression are pervasive and human rights violations are commonplace, feminists operate within a context of heightened risk, facing threats from multiple coercive actors that endanger their lives. Consequently, propositional political agendas are less prevalent than in wealthier regions, while responding to adverse conditions is the primary driver of activism.

While the five primary themes in this article, LGBTQIA+ rights, missing persons, socio-environmental concerns, victims of violence, communitarian/peasant issues, and women's rights, do not encompass all activism areas, they provide a clearer understanding of the diverse activities undertaken by women. These categories are contextualized within the countries where they are most prevalent, as presented in Figure 1. Brazil, Colombia, Honduras, and Mexico are characterized by consistently high homicide rates, recording the highest number of cases of feminist assassinations. Activisms related to LGBTQIA+ rights experience the highest incidence of feminist killings, including transfemicides, followed by communitarian and peasant feminisms and missing persons activism. Regional disparities are evident, with Mexico having the highest number of activists murdered in missing persons activism, while Colombia and Brazil lead in communitarian and peasant activism.

Political Femicides in Latin America: Narcoviolence and Violence Against Women (VAW)

In this article, I join scholars (Ley 2022; Stallone and Zulver 2023) in their efforts to fill the gap in contentious politics literature on how violence in territories governed by armed groups affects

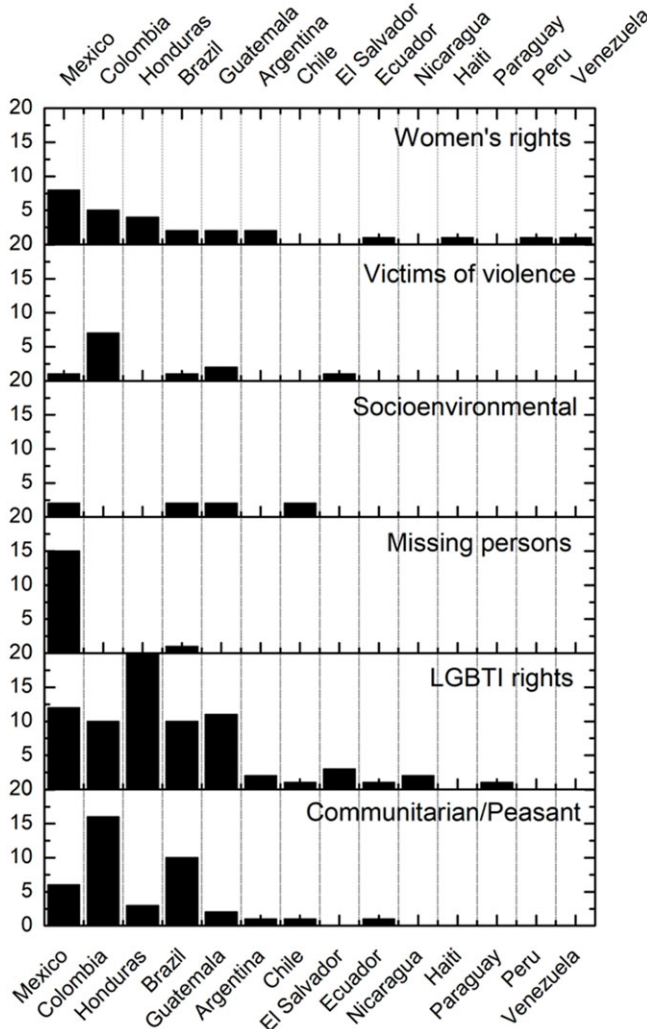


Figure 1. Feminist Causes and Countries in Latin America
 Source: Author’s own elaboration.

activists. To this end, I engage with two bodies of literature. The first examines the repercussions of narco-violence on activists’ routines, particularly its disproportionate effects on Latin American countries. The second delves into the challenges feminists face in contending with various forms of violence that hinder or obstruct their work. Building upon this discussion, I highlight the premise of political feminicides, namely killing women on account of a tenuous association between their political activism or simply because of who they are.

How does narcotrafficking intersect with political feminicides (Souza 2020)? While feminicides inherently possess a political character—regardless of the victim’s political engagement—I concentrate on a specific subset of victims: women actively engaged in feminist social change. Hereby, I adopt Souza’s (2020, 119) proposition that “political feminicide” should be employed to “characterize, categorize, name, and classify” the murder of feminist political leaders. To accentuate the political character of those killings, it is no coincidence that many leaders and founders of movements are targeted. Their targeting occurs amidst a rising securitization of politics in Latin America. The militarization of public security and collusion between state agents

and organized crime, prevalent in Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico, exacerbates the sense of insecurity experienced by activists. Nah (2020) interviewees express concerns about hostilities between armed actors and paramilitary groups in their territories and the activities of drug cartels and criminal gangs. Both the threatening and murdering of activists are used to teach others not to transgress the militarized social order they seek to impose, particularly in areas where the terrain is contested, and armed groups compete for dominance (Stallone and Zulver 2023).

These hostilities unfold in contexts where identifying actors becomes progressively challenging. *Narcoviolence* is paralleled with more familiar or quotidian violence, as the notion of “routine violence” (Gomes 2016, 2024) illustrates. Scheper-Hughes (1992, 483) refers to the “routinization of everyday violence,” encompassing a myriad of violence perpetuated by various actors in urban peripheries, contributing to residents’ persistent sense of insecurity. In the Colombian case, non-state armed groups (NSAGs) exert some degree of violence and territorial control, including guerrilla and neo-paramilitary groups, as well as more “clearly” criminal organizations (Albarracín et al. 2023). In these spaces, paramilitaries offer protection in exchange for fees from traders and residents, effectively outsourcing state repression. The routinization of violence allows us to comprehend how violence is mutually constitutive, wherein structural and gendered forms contribute to contexts fostering suffering in women’s lives. Ideologies surrounding gender issues normalize expressions of violence and justify “punishments” for deviations from normative gender role expectations. Recent female killings attributed to organized crime, drug trafficking, or gangs underscore this trend (Menjivar 2011).

The deliberate targeting and systematic killing of activists are termed “selective extermination” (Figueiredo 2021, 2022). In Mexico, this extermination has been overshadowed by the massive wave of killings that accompanied the onset of the War on Drugs in 2006. While not exclusively targeting activists, feminist struggles are integral to Collective Human Rights Struggles, revealing the analytical neglect feminists face. Those killings are aimed at silencing communities, with homicides often committed by illegal groups associated with drug trafficking. Also, impoverished families are re-victimized while defending their loved ones to prevent them from being labeled as involved in criminal activities (Morato 2021).

A parallel stream of literature examines existing research on feminicides and violence against women (VAW). VAW stresses the symbolic economy that links the aggressor and victim. The aggressor embodies the moral authority within this system, while the victim represents indiscipline, disobedience, and disrespect. I address the idea of feminicides as a form of social cleansing and endorse its differentiation from femicide since the latter is “the killing of females by males because they are females—in the hope that naming these crimes will facilitate this recognition” (Russell 2001, 3). Femicide is a crime of power, demonstrating the perpetrator’s capacity for decision-making and violence (Segato 2022). This resonates with Segato’s idea of a “war against women’s bodies” waged across Latin America (2008, 2014). The region exhibits alarmingly high rates of domestic feminicide, contributing to the normalization of this form of violence against women. Furthermore, a non-state sphere of life control is expanding in Latin America, exemplified by the state’s co-optation and bureaucratization of organized crime (Segato 2008; Valencia 2018; Gago 2020). Segato emphasizes the novelty in those wars, analyzing non-state power for their frequency of exercising violence, which is not unusually linked to illegal capital.

In summary, a crucial aspect of feminism in Latin America is that activists face dangers in their political actions that are drug and violence-related. I emphasize that among the feminists murdered in the last decade, there are several stories of persecution, incarceration, threats, and, ultimately, murder by police forces, the army, and narco-traffickers, as shown in Figure 2. Particularly in Mexico, but to a smaller degree in other countries, organized crime allegedly bears responsibility for such assassinations. But these distinct groups within this category, “organized crime,” often collaborate when their interests coincide, spreading terror in a population. There are many difficulties in parsing responsibility for the murders committed by these actors, as their

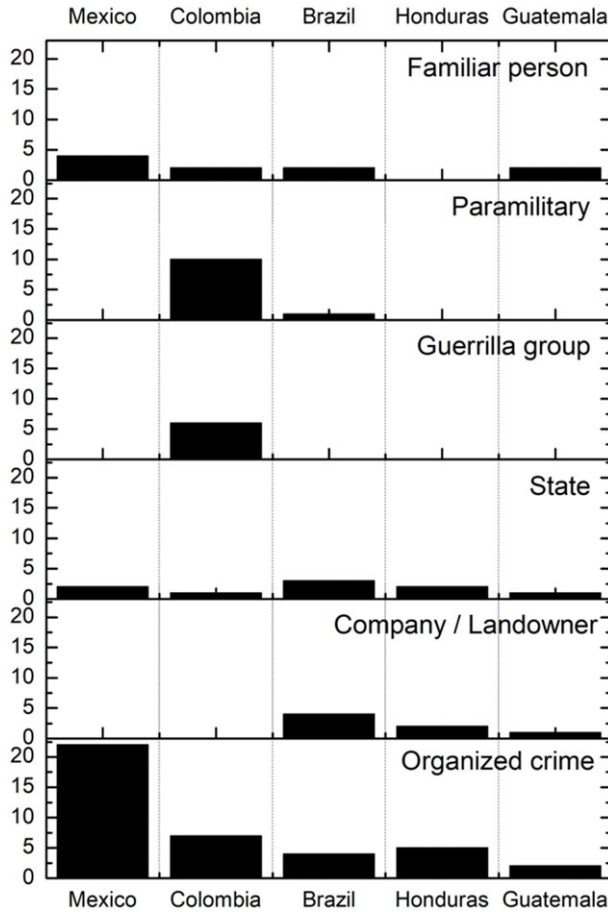


Figure 2. Responsible for Assassinations and Countries
 Source: Author’s own elaboration.

primary goal of the violence and context of fear created is confusion. So, people are killed and disappear. Still, as it is hard to set responsibilities, fear is maintained. This pluralization of violent actors poses a significant obstacle to feminist engagement, as many Latin American women refrain from participating in social movements, opposing governments, or narco-trafficking routines.

The Vulnerability of LGBTQIA+ Rights Activists

The patriarchal state claims to protect certain women while not protecting others (Verges 2021). The idea of un-grievable lives puts in perspective differential forms of allocation of precariousness and vulnerability (Butler 2006, 2016). Butler’s ideas chart the diverse ways that power is mobilized against those left to die, with bodies marked by terms that define the grievability of death. Those notions help us understand how some populations are more subject to arbitrary violence than others, making the high rate of impunity characteristic of these killings more comprehensible. The embodied character of those assassinations is inserted in gender hierarchies, ideologies, and identities played in embodied oppression. Also, there is a denial of the tortured body, a negative approach towards the suffering of women who carry in their bodies visible signs of oppression, such as the historical gendered resistance of the *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* (Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo), fighting against the military dictatorship in Argentina. The embodied and emotional

Table 2. Organizations with the Highest Number of Activists Killed

Organization	Number of Activists Killed
Asociación de Prevención y Educación Sexual en Salud y Sida de Tela (Aprest)	2
Colectivo de Mujeres Trans Trabajadoras Sexuales de El Trébol	2
Movimento dos Atingidos pelas Barragens (MAB)	2
Organización ProUnión Ceibeña (OPROUCE)	2
Organización Trans Reinas de la Noche (OTRANS)	7
Asociación LGTB Arcoiris de Honduras	8
Total	23

dimensions of risky political activity become apparent in this case, where even relatively minor actions of political propaganda carry high risks (Sutton 2018).

Challenges within social movements are irrevocably gendered, and gender-based violence within feminists' social circles may hinder their continuation of human rights work. LGBTQIA+ rights activists and advocates for sex workers and women's rights, face greater marginalization and discrimination, not rarely leading to the fragmentation of collectives and social movements (Nah 2020). There seems to be resistance to an economy of exhaustion in which "the pillage and plundering of women" is manifested in two ways: "an unprecedented bodily destruction" and "the trafficking and commercialization, taken to extremes, of what these bodies can offer" (Verges 2021, 34). Trans activists are seen as a threat, and violating them is seen as a secondary, protective, defensive response (Dorlin 2020).

The assassinations of LGBTQIA+ and transfeminists were preceded by assaults or death threats, often reported among their networks and to authorities without any investigation. This pattern has been evident in several cases since 2020: Mexican Mireya Rodríguez Lemus; Hondurans Luz Clarita Zúniga, Scarleth Campbell, and Mía Colluchi; Guatemalan Andrea Mutz González and Zashima Zúniga; and Salvadoran Zashy del Cid, among others, brutally murdered in the region. Most feminists, particularly transfeminists, had enjoyed some degree of national or international recognition, contributing to the visibility of the community they represented. In Mexico, Karla Valentina Camarena del Castillo headed the fight for the recognition of the gender identity of transgender women in Guanajuato; María Elizabeth Montaña Fernández led a national initiative to improve gender identity for transgender individuals, also in Guanajuato, and was leading a national initiative to improve healthcare for the transgender population. Mireya Rodríguez Lemus founded Unión y Fuerza de Mujeres Trans Chihuahuenses A.C. and was a promoter of the Global Fund for the Struggle. In Guatemala, Andrea Mutz, murdered in 2021, was the president of Trans Reinas de la Noche, a pioneering organization in the defense of the rights of the transgender community. Regardless of this, since 2015, seven activists have been murdered within this organization, turning them into the second movement with the highest number of feminists killed in Latin America. The Asociación LGTB Arcoiris de Honduras leads the number of activists killed in a single organization. Table 2 presents the organizations with the highest number of activists killed, and the leading organizations are LGBTQIA+ rights organizations.

The data points to the invisibility in which bodies are treated, as most of the attacks on feminist activists are not recorded. Also, mass media frequently associates the violence they suffered with personal causes, such as domestic violence or casual encounters, registered as common violence. Politicians and the police quickly state that their deaths have nothing to do with their activism,

Table 3. Percentages of Urban and Rural Killings of Feminist Activists in Latin America

Context of the Assassination	Percentage
Urban	63%
Rural	37%

de-politicizing their assassinations.⁵ Media records occur at an early stage, stating their deaths were perpetrated by their partners and do not need to be investigated. There is considerably less information on transfemicicides than the killings of cis activists. Their specialities also matter, as discussed in the following section in greater detail.

The Violent Spatial Targeting of Socio-environmental and Communitarian/peasant Activists

Latin America has substantive internal differences in its geographies and asymmetries that are revealed in the killing of activists. Of the total murdered feminists, 44 came from Mexico, 39 from Colombia, 27 from Honduras, 25 from Brazil, and 19 from Guatemala.⁶ The rest of the countries had relatively small percentages compared to the latter. For instance, five were from Argentina, four from Chile, four from El Salvador, three from Ecuador, two from Nicaragua and Paraguay, and Peru, Haiti, and Venezuela all had one case each. While that does not mean there are no Uruguayan, Cuban, Bolivian,⁷ or Dominican feminists murdered, it does mean no activists with high visibility were killed in those countries, at least since 2015.

While the majority of the killings happened in urban contexts, I draw attention to the leadership of the rural Cauca department in Colombia, followed by Francisco Morazán in Honduras and Guanajuato in Mexico, the second predominantly urban. In Table 3, we follow the percentages of rural and urban killings. Killings were concentrated in a small number of states, with three states in Brazil accounting for 44 percent of the cases, three in Colombia also accounting for 44 percent of the cases, and three in Mexico accounting for 36 percent of the cases.

In Colombia, the cases follow a general pattern of overall internal high murder rates and murder of activists. For instance, Cauca has accumulated FARC combatants, FARC dissidents, paramilitaries, narcotraffickers, and the Colombian armed forces on a war being waged throughout the country. Also, disputes between the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN, National Liberation Army) and the paramilitary Las Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC, United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia) are frequent (Rios 2023). Twelve feminists have been murdered in this department since 2015 (Figure 3). It is also the deadliest place for activists in Colombia, especially since the 2016 peace agreements⁸ (Albarracín et al. 2023).

The targeted violence in this region is a case in point, part of nine departments deeply impacted by Colombia's armed conflict: Arauca, Bolívar, Cauca, Chocó, Cundinamarca, La Guajira, Norte de Santander, Putumayo, and Valle del Cauca. These areas are known to be dominated by different

⁵An example is AMLO's treatment of killings of *madres buscadoras*, in Mexico. The day after the murder of *buscadora* Angélica León, the president soon mentioned it had nothing to do with her political activities. For more, see <https://www.elseldemexico.com.mx/mexico/sociedad/asesinato-de-angelita-leon-podria-ser-ajeno-a-su-activismo-amlo-11415094.html>.

⁶For instance, five were from Argentina; four from Chile; four from El Salvador; three from Ecuador; two from Nicaragua and Paraguay. Peru, Haiti, and Venezuela all had one case each.

⁷The murder of Juana Quispe in 2012, a town councilor in Ancoraimes, a small municipality on the Bolivian shore of Lake Titicaca in the La Paz department, for example, is paradigmatic of the dynamics of women within institutional politics. The councilor had already filed a complaint for political harassment, preventing her from carrying out her duties as a councilor.

⁸For more, see <https://verdadabierta.com/lideres-sociales-asesinados-en-valle-del-cauca/>.

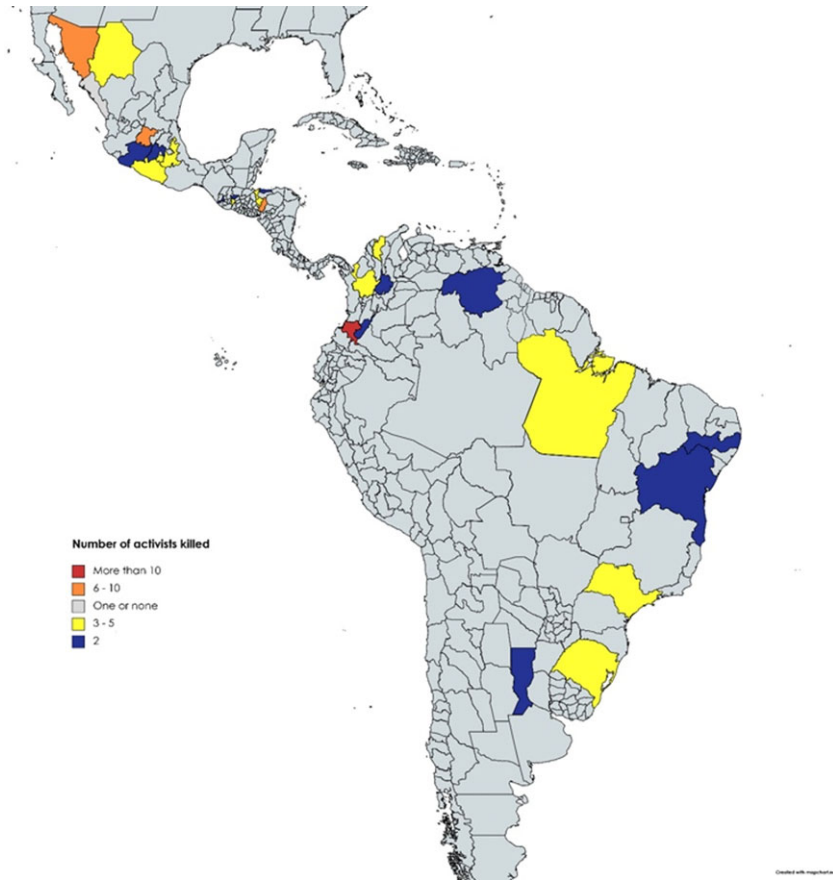


Figure 3. Departments and States.
Source: Author's own elaboration.

armed actors (Stallone and Zulver 2023). The capital of Francisco Morazán's department, Tegucigalpa, has a murder rate of more than 73 per 100,000 residents each year.⁹ On the other hand, the Mexican state of Guanajuato is known for its narco-trafficking disputed territories, with important drug cartels quarreling. Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG, Jalisco New Generation Cartel) and their rivals, the Santa Rosa de Lima Cartel (CSRL), have been at war for years, sending homicides skyrocketing in the state.

This violent targeting of feminists unveils the intentionality of the killings. The state's (lack of) response shows dynamics that maintain those rates at high levels. There is a pattern of secondary under-criminalization of the police when using excessive force in the Global South, resulting in the assassination of activists. Table 4 shows the overall distribution of responsibility for the killings. Brazil leads the cases of state-led killings. Nonetheless, although the majority of the killers remain unknown, they are closely followed by organized crime (street gangs, militias, guerrillas, and death squads), the state, paramilitaries, and guerrillas.

Finally, Latin America's centuries-old land struggle demand is essential in this context. While Mexico had some successes attributed to its 1910 Revolution, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Peru are deeply marked by internally distinct Agrarian Reforms, and countries still deal with intense land conflicts. Communitarian and peasant communities were the primary focal points for feminists in

⁹For more, see <https://citymonitor.ai/community/tegucigalpa-city-850000-people-and-600-murders-year-2460>.

Table 4. Attributed Murderers of the Feminists

Perpetrator	Count	Percent
Organized crime	44	24,9
Isolated man	23	13
Personal relationship	16	9
Paramilitaries	11	6,2
State	10	5,6
Enterprises/landowners	8	4,5
Guerrilla	6	3,4
Total known	118	66,7
Unknown	59	33,3
Total	177	100

Latin America at the time of their murders. Collectives of women in communitarian or peasant communities or both who are articulated with socio-environmental struggles strive, especially in Brazil and Colombia. In those countries, conflicts over land are frequent amid an ongoing ethnocide, and women involved in political organizing are more vulnerable in this context.

There is also a high number of “unknowns,” signaling a general absence of judicial solutions for the murders.¹⁰ This also indicates an underreporting of killings as well as cases where the perpetrators act as “intermediaries” used by political actors (or private companies) to carry out killings (Albarracín et al. 2023). While organized crime is present in several cases, half of them occur in Mexico. This points to a dynamic of murders of women who have most undoubtedly disturbed narco-trafficking routines. While the press and public officers imply that personal relationships are common, they account for very few cases. There is a widespread lack of investigation and prosecution in the researched contexts.

Resistance and Fear Among Missing Persons, Victims of Violence, And Women’s Rights Activists

Violence traverses the trajectories of many activists in Latin America. While high-risk activism (McAdam 1986) addresses the anticipated dangers of engaging in social movements, primarily within specific contexts, it fails to capture the region’s complexity. Loveman (1998) applied this concept to understand the human rights activists during military dictatorships in Chile, Uruguay, and Argentina. Ley (2022) analyses how activists overcome fear in the face of crime and protest within violent contexts in Mexico. Zulver (2022) extends the concept by examining gendered activism in northern Colombia, focusing on intersectionality. She underscores that women in leadership positions are at a higher risk of experiencing additional sexual violence and threats to their families.

Women’s involvement is often framed as acts of resistance, echoing Scott’s (1985) notion of everyday forms of resistance. These acts encompass small acts of rebellion or noncompliance by individuals in settings where large-scale movements are complex to mobilize. Scott’s Hidden Transcript are subtle forms of resistance—boycotts, foot-dragging, pilfering, and sabotage, drawn in his fieldwork with peasants in rural Malaysia, enabling them to navigate and undermine the

¹⁰While the data on the perpetrators of those killings point to two-thirds of known cases, the remaining one-third is of “unknown” cases.

Table 5. Homicides of *Buscadoras* in Mexico (2010–24)

Year	Name	Homicide Place	Responsible for Killing	Social Movement
2010	Marisela Escobedo	Chihuahua	State	Unknown
2014	Sandra Luz Hernández	Sinaloa	Organized crime	Madres con Hijos Desaparecidos
2015	Norma Angélica Román	Guerrero	Organized crime	Familiares de los Otros Desaparecidos
2016	Cornelia San Juan Guevara	Estado de Mexico	Organized crime	Movimiento por Nuestros Desaparecidos en México
2017	Miriam Rodríguez	Tamaulipas	Organized crime	Desaparecidos de San Fernando
2019	Zenaida Pulido	Michoacán	Organized crime	Caravana “Buscando Encontraremos”
2020	Maria del Rosario Zavala	Guanajuato	Organized crime	Colectivo de Buscadoras Guanajuato
2020	Maria Carmela Vasquez	Guanajuato	Organized crime	Personas Desaparecidas de Pénjamo Guanajuato
2021	Gladys Aranza Ramos	Sonora	Organized crime	Madres y Guerreras Unidas de Sonora
2022	Ana Luisa Garduño	Morelos	Unknown	Ana Karen Vive
2022	Brenda Beltrán	Sonora	Personal relationship	Colectivo Guerreras Buscadoras de Cajeme
2022	Blanca Esmeralda Gallardo	Puebla	Organized crime	A dónde van los desaparecidos Puebla
2022	Griselda Armas	Michoacán	Organized crime	Unknown
2022	Carmen Vázquez	Guanajuato	Organized crime	Personas Desaparecidas de Pénjamo
2022	Rosario Rodríguez Barraza	Sinaloa	Organized crime	Corazones sin Justicia
2023	Teresa Magueyal	Guanajuato	Organized crime	Una promesa por cumplir
2024	Angela Meraz León	Baja California	Organized crime	Unión y Fuerza por Nuestros Desaparecidos Tecate
2024	Lorenza Cano	Guanajuato	Unknown	Salamanca Unidos Buscando Desaparecidos

Source: Author's own.

power of the elites. Those are unconventional forms of resistance, not tied to overthrowing systems or ideologies of emancipation. Resistance is also a diagnostic of power, drawing from Abu-Lughod's (1990) fieldwork with women in a Bedouin community in Egypt's Western Desert. The author stresses the creative ways women resist the power of those who control so much of their lives, even if they both resist and support the existing power system. In this article, I chose not to emphasize resistance, as it is frequently employed in analytical terms for movements and activists' activities when their task is difficult. Romanticizing resistance implies reading its manifestations as signs of resilience and creativity in refusing to be dominated.

To resist is what is asked of activists who face life threats and perform very challenging tasks, as the missing persons, victims of violence, and women's rights activists categories exemplify. I focus here on their fears instead. The under-researched feelings of militant fear (Dorlin 2020) engender a conflict between different bodily engagements. Activists constantly grapple with awareness and self-defense, adjusting their protective actions based on their surroundings or the causes they advocate for, ultimately leading to impasses and feelings of exhaustion. Fear is crucial in this context. The widely publicized murder of women's rights activist Nadia Vera, in 2015, exemplifies how it instilled fear among activists across Mexico. Acts of terror and violence against activists from distinct collectives can be experienced in various ways (Nah 2020).

In 2022 alone, four *buscadoras* were killed in Mexico, making it at least 18 since 2010, as seen in Table 5. Notably, this same year saw the tragic murders of Marisela Escobedo Ortiz, who was protesting the unsolved murder of her daughter two years earlier in Chihuahua. The table shows how, in Mexico alone, these activists are mainly killed by organized crime.

The dataset's results show that contrary to prevailing literature (Gomes 2016; Nah 2020), visibility alone does not guarantee safety, as some women had either received human rights awards or enjoyed high visibility. Tragic instances such as the murders of women's rights activist Berta Cáceres in Honduras in 2016 and victims of violence activist Marielle Franco in Brazil in 2018¹¹ serve as poignant examples. Nonetheless, international visibility may enhance their security and raise the political cost of actions against them, even if it does not always guarantee protection (Nah 2020). Lastly, ignoring feelings of fear, fatigue, and demobilization processes may hinder future analyses of social movements in the region, perpetuating a narrow focus on resistance. This overlooks the experiences of those unable to resist, who often face dire consequences, including death.

Concluding Remarks

As mentioned in the cases of Berta Cáceres and Francia Márquez, some of the researched women had previously received human rights prizes in the past decade. This article points out the association between the content of their work and their killing. The timing of the assassination of most aforementioned feminists is relevant. Before her assassination, Nadia Vera had spoken in a documentary holding then-Veracruz Governor Javier Duarte Ochoa culpable if anything were to happen to her, the same public officer behind the killing of Marisela Escobedo, who also had publicly denounced him days before her assassination. The threats and persecution of Berta Cáceres had increased months before her killing, because she was shadowed by two SUVs carrying armed locals whom she knew were linked to the mining company she denounced while driving out of Río Blanco. In 2022, Mexican *buscadora* Blanca Esmeralda Gallardo was interviewed and asked for anonymous messages indicating where her daughter could be found. This was followed by a news outlet publishing an article indicating a local drug dealer was behind her disappearance

¹¹While both Berta Cáceres and Marielle Franco did not have the feminist movement as their primary engagement, they have shown substantive engagements with different feminist collectives and events in their hometowns and for that they figure in the dataset of this research.

and citing information from anonymous sources. Gallardo was terrified and asked anyone who had shared the article on social media to delete their posts; soon after, she was killed.

While not always acknowledged, it calls attention to the de-politicizing of their killings by public officials and mass media. The article aimed to demonstrate how the classification of femicide must be considered within this discourse, but with the unintended consequence of rendering their political activities invisible. This way, LGBTQIA+ rights, missing persons, and socio-environmental activists are the most targeted in Latin America. The latter have appeared systematically in human rights reports, topping the number of killed in the region. The causes defended prior to the deaths of “victims of violence,” “communitarian/peasant,” and “women’s rights” activists implicate a high number of sociopolitical concerns in their countries, such as *feministas comunitárias* (peasant feminists) in Colombia, deeply involved in land struggles.

Political feminicides address the issue of feminists being targeted for their activism, as Latin American feminists often disrupt the dynamics of drug trafficking in the region, whether through their awareness-raising efforts or by publicly denouncing various forms of violence, constantly negotiating boundaries. For that, there is a strong probability that they have become targeted and killed.

This article contributes to the emerging discourse on the political ramifications of criminal violence. It presents cases of murdered Latin American women engaged in feminist activism, a topic absent from existing literature on social movements. It also sheds light on everyday experiences among feminists in the region, where their political engagement is marginalized by society; even in death. I argue that while social movements theory has traditionally posited a positive relationship between repression and mobilization, current feminist mobilizations in Latin America challenge this assumption. Despite the significant value placed on feminist resistance movements, data reveals a progressive increase in murders, as well as less severe forms of criminalization of activists in the region. Consequently, strategies previously beneficial to activists no longer seem adequate, including efforts to gain national and international visibility and establish solidarity networks.

While activists globally face risks, defending women and queer rights, particularly in the Global South, tends to be even riskier. These activists are targeted not only for their causes but also for who they were as individuals. There is a disconnection between legislative advancements to protect women from violence against women and the escalating rates of gender-based violence in Latin America. After all, the region is notorious for being the most violent for women, and feminist activists do not appear to be exempt from this reality.

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