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Diffusion of #NiUnaMenos in Latin America: Social Protests Amid a Pandemic

By Adriana Piatti-Crocker¹

Abstract

Using archival documentation, digital platforms, and reports, this paper explores the diffusion of #NiUnaMenos [“Not One (woman) Less”] in Latin America, a social movement conceived first in Argentina to protest misogynist violence. To explain diffusion, this paper will explore the role of social media, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, in helping spread messages, strategies, and the goals of the movement with unprecedented speed (Tarrow 2005, Hanson and Piatti-Crocker 2020). Five years after the first protest, the COVID-19 pandemic had two contrasting effects on the #NiUnaMenos movement. On the one hand, when the virus began spreading around the world, it became clear that measures intended to contain it were exacerbating gender-based violence (also known as the “second pandemic”), which added new urgency to this pervasive problem. On the other hand, COVID-19 created new challenges for #NiUnaMenos activists and their massive street demonstrations, which were no longer safe and in many cases, banned or limited by governmental policy. Hence, some women’s groups became more creative by organizing virtual protests in an attempt to hold leaders accountable for their inaction, but with mixed effects (San Diego Tribune 2020, Telam 2020). Overall, and despite the recent pandemic, #NiUnaMenos has given women across Latin America a platform to demand greater gender equity and an end to misogynist violence.

Keywords: COVID-19, Diffusion, #NiUnaMenos [“Not One (woman) Less”], Social Protests, Misogynist Violence.

Introduction

Diffusion may be seen logically as both external and internal processes. In the first case, external factors influence the domestic affairs of a state or groups of individuals within a state. In the second, it is a subfield of linkage politics, where both internal and external events interact within a state (True and Mintrom, 2001; Piatti-Crocker 2011, 2017, 2019). Thus, an appropriate explanation of diffusion should be given in terms of both the unit of analysis (e.g. states, individuals, or groups of individuals) and the social structures in which these units are embedded (e.g. world or regional systems).

Drawing on archival documentation, digital platforms, academic journals, and reports, this research will explore the diffusion of a protest movement in Latin America. Starting in Argentina in 2015, this paper will explain how the hashtag #NiUnaMenos (“Not One [woman] Less”), created to combat violence against women and girls, led to the spread of a regionwide movement. A year after its introduction, hundreds of thousands of activists mobilized on the streets of major cities in Latin America. Movements arose to protest against specific circumstances and contexts

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under the hashtag #NiUnaMenos, but the main goal of all of these protests was to fight against misogynist violence. Moreover, unlike previous social movements, the use of social media, such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Twitter, changed the depth and scope of these protests and led to an unprecedented speed in helping transmit their messages, strategies, identities, and goals.

The COVID-19 pandemic that spread pervasively throughout Latin America had two contrasting effects on the #NiUnaMenos movement. On the one hand, when the pandemic began spreading around the world, it became clear that measures intended to contain it were exacerbating gender-based violence (also known as the “second pandemic”); thus, the demands of social movements like #NiUnaMenos added new urgency to this pervasive problem. On the other hand, COVID-19 created new challenges for activists and their demonstrations, a core strategy of their campaigns, which were no longer safe and in many cases, banned or limited by governmental policy. Hence, some women’s groups became more creative by organizing virtual #NiUnaMenos protests in an attempt to hold leaders accountable for their inaction, but with mixed effects (San Diego Tribune, 2020; Telam, 2020).

This paper attempts to shed light on the pervasive violence against women and girls (VAWG) in Latin America, and explores the significant role of social media in raising awareness of this regional deep-seated crisis. Overall, the #NiUnaMenos movement was the spark that ignited the flame; a single hashtag spread with force with the help of both social media outlets and the mobilization of women that stood behind it. It still rests to see whether a post-COVID-19 Latin America will intensify the urgency to adopt policies that deal with violence against women and girls in the region and whether protest movements will continue pressuring governments to implement them effectively.

Literature Review and Methodology

In broad terms, diffusion refers to the process by which institutions, practices, behaviors, or norms are transmitted among individuals and/or social systems. The process “involves a set of assumptions about the nature of systems, how they interact, and how the environmental context will affect the units studied” (Most et al., 1989; Gurowitz, 2007). According to McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001, p.68) diffusion is the “transfer in the same or similar shape of forms and claims of contention across space or across sectors and ideological divides.” Indeed, the nature, forms, and consequences of the diffusion of policy are complex subjects because they can be studied at several levels of analysis and may refer to distinctive processes (Piatti-Crocker, 2017, 2019). Diffusion models have been employed to interpret the spread of wars, democratic regimes, free markets, and gender mainstreaming (Piatti-Crocker, 2011, 2017, 2019; True and Mintrom, 2001). Certainly, some similarity must be present, but in many cases, diffusion includes a process of adaptation that reflects the receiving group’s cultural or institutional circumstances. Most et al. (1989, p. 938) assert that diffusion models may be conceived in a general framework, “where there are linkages between some state’s policy and other previously occurring factors, which are external to the state.” In addition, frequent interactions between domestic and international forces have broadened the policy process to a larger array of groups, including those traditionally considered less powerful, such as those concerned with the advancement of gender issues (True and Mintrom, 2001, p. 38).

Research on social movements has long recognized that ideas, organizational, cultural, and tactical strategies and repertoires can spread transnationally among a diverse number of social

movements. In this case, diffusion entails the spread of information about a movement, but also about the process by which social movements act upon and adopt messages, communication networks, and strategies originated in other countries (Shawki, 2013). Diffusion of social movements is not new (Tarrow, 1998), but the systematic study of diffusion processes, their mechanisms, and the actors involved in them is more recent (McAdam and Rucht, 1993). As Tarrow (2010, p.208) noted, studying the mechanisms of diffusion is critical for establishing that the mobilization of similar movements in other places is not coincidental or indicative of independent reactions to the presence of the same or similar structural conditions or triggers, but the result of the diffusion of processes and strategies. In addition, recent studies (Matsuzawa, 2011; Shawki, 2013; Tarrow, 2010) have challenged the idea that diffusion is vertical (from one actor to another) but rather fluid and bi-directional between actors.

Regarding diffusion channels, McAdam and Rucht distinguish between relational and non-relational models. Relational models identify interpersonal contact and communication between transmitters and adopters as the main diffusion channel. In contrast, nonrelational models of diffusion emphasize channels of information diffusion that do not depend on personal contact, such as the media (McAdam and Rucht, 1993). These nonrelational channels have become very significant more recently, as technological advances in communication have led to subsequent changes in the diffusion process, where ties between individuals or groups of individuals have deepened and the speed of diffusion and the spread of a movement's strategies, identities, and goals across movements have increased (Tarrow, 2005). At the same time, the rapid spread of information also assumes that adopters recognize some similarity between themselves and the transmitters. Indeed, the complex world of state borders and non-governmental organizations provide for a constant dynamism to the spread of ideas, strategies, and identities (Walsh-Russo, 2014).

This paper will examine the #NiUnaMenos' movement, from its origins in Argentina to its rapid diffusion in other Latin American countries. This paper will also explore how participants of the #NiUnaMenos movement shared similar ideas and strategies, using both relational and nonrelational channels of communication to help spread their messages within and across countries. Finally, this paper will explore the effects that the COVID-19 pandemic and the policies that ensued had upon the movement and its methods and strategies. To explore these topics, this paper employs qualitative research, including archival documentation, blogs, reports, academic journals, and internet sources. In addition, tables with data gathered from the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) are included, to illustrate the pervasive problem of VAWG and the policies enacted by several Latin American countries to deal with it, but with mixed effects.

Protest Movements and Social Media

Political protests are obviously not new, what is new is the use of social media outlets to spread the message and the speed and reach of its diffusion as a result. Indeed, the fact that it is possible for a large number of people throughout the world to access and even participate in a protest through microblogging (e.g. Twitter) and social networking (e.g. Facebook) is a novel phenomenon. Digital media has been linked to the spread of protest movements around the world. In fact, most social movements today employ their own unique hashtags on Twitter to connect a group with meaning and content. Twitter is a "micro-blogging service" that allows users to compose short messages (up to 280 characters). To facilitate searches, a hashtag convention has

developed, whereby individually defined keywords are preceded by a pound symbol “#” (Jos et al., 2018).² Facebook has similar capabilities in the sense that messages can be liked and owners can be liked and followed. According to Shirky (2011), “As the communications landscape gets denser, more complex, and more participatory, the networked population is gaining greater access to information, more opportunities to engage in public speech, and an enhanced ability to undertake collective action” (p. 1).

Indeed, social media has transformed traditional models of social mobilization and participation and has led to “an acceleration of processes that normally occur much more slowly” (McGarty et al. 2013, p.3). This snowballing effect includes the communication of basic information, such as the time or location of a demonstration, spread of the message, strategies, and goals. In addition, whereas group identification (such as gender, race, and class) is important in promoting collective action, in the case of social media, generally a trigger mechanism leads to the quick and massive spread of the message. Accordingly, McGarty et al. (2013) argue that “although the relative importance and causal order of the factors is disputed, collective action is more likely when people have shared interests, feel relatively deprived, are angry, believe they can make a difference, and strongly identify with relevant social groups” (p. 2). Jos et al. affirm that factors such as “moral outrage, social identification, and group efficacy—affect the individual’s desire or motivation to participate in protest” (Jos et al. 2018, p. 94).

There is no doubt that through social media this outrage can have multiplying effects, as it was the case with the #NiUnaMenos movement. The movement was created after a tragedy struck a chord in the minds of many Argentine women and beyond, a subject to which we now turn.

#NiUnaMenos: Argentina and Beyond

“THEY ARE KILLING US”, tweeted the Argentine journalist Marcela Ojeda on May 11, 2015, after the body of a pregnant fourteen-year-old Chiara Páez was found severely beaten and buried by her seventeen-year-old boyfriend in the Central Province of Santa Fe. A few minutes later Florencia Etcheves, a TV journalist, responded: “I think that well-known public women should call for a *mega* mobilization. Not sure whether it will work, but it will make us visible” (Perfil, 2015). The founders of the movement never thought that #NiUnaMenos³ would become one of the most influential current social movements for women not only in Argentina but also in the region and beyond.

Indeed, less than a month after such tragic episode, massive numbers of women filled major streets of Buenos Aires to shout “Ni Una Menos.” The epicenter of the meeting was the National Congress with mostly women carrying signs reading “They are killing us: Aren’t we going to do anything?” and “Your mother, your grandmother, your sister and your aunt, we all say enough” (Pissetta, 2019)⁴. Digital tools and social media helped organize the demonstration, and quickly the hashtag #NiUnaMenos became a trending message. Protests spread across the country in major

²Users of Twitter may “follow” and see the “tweets” of other users. If others “follow” a given Twitter user, they are considered “followers.” In addition, messages can be seen by others if they have not been labeled as private (Jos et al 2018).

³The name #NiUnaMenos has its origins in a 1995 phrase used by the Mexican poet and activist Susana Chávez, “Ni una muerta más” (Spanish for “Not one more [woman] dead”), in protest of the female homicides that took place in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico.

⁴I was conducting research in Argentina’s National Congress and interviewing a Congresswoman on the day of the first #NiUnaMenos protest. The massive number of people gathering in front of the Congress to protest against violence against women and girls was notable, indeed.

cities gathering more than 200,000 people and regionally throughout Latin America and beyond. As explained below, Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp messages, which all included the hashtag #NiUnaMenos, went viral nationally and later transnationally. These digital platforms helped not only to organize the structure, location, and time of the protests throughout the country, but also to highlight the activists' demands and their goals (Pissetta, 2019).

Digital platforms played a significant role in the rapid diffusion of #NiUnaMenos to many corners of the world. First, a Facebook page and a Twitter account were created under the name #NiUnaMenos by the group organizers, which included journalists, artists, and prominent feminists and lawyers. These organizers then reached out to their social and professional networks. The movement became very visible as they appeared in talk shows and were featured in newspaper articles and radio programs (Telam, 2015; La Voz Digital, 2016). In turn, this exposure helped multiply the reach of the movement on digital platforms creating new Facebook pages throughout the country, re-tweeting the events, and communicating through messages sent on WhatsApp, YouTube, and Instagram (Laudano, 2017). According to Laudano, on June 3, 2015, the day of the first protest, the hashtag #NiUnaMenos was in first place in the tweeting ranks in Argentina all day and became the number one ranking hashtag globally the same day in the afternoon (Laudano, 2017). Many public figures such as journalists, artists, and politicians, used Twitter to share their stories using #NiUnaMenos (Telam, 2015). In addition, early in the same month the Facebook page created by the movement had accrued 130,000 likes (Laudano, 2017). Other organizations, including two of the largest public universities in Argentina (the University of Buenos Aires and La Plata) supported this protest and subsequent ones by providing strategic and financial support as well as media venues such as their public radios to spread their message (UBA, 2016; UNLP, 2015; Laudano, 2017).

Women-led protests in Argentina are not new. The Argentine feminist movement dates to the late 19th century, when feminists fought for political and civil rights, such as the right to vote and work. Yet, it was not until 1947 that women were granted suffrage under the auspices of Eva Peron, wife of the then president Juan Peron. Military dictatorships in the late 20th century were also the reason for women to protest, in this case, as mothers of their disappeared children and grandchildren during the oppressive military regime of 1976-1983 that led to the dirty war and the killing of tens of thousands of people. Since the return to democracy in 1983, women have again protested for political inclusion (Piatti-Crocker, 2011, 2017, 2019).

However, the #NiUnaMenos movement is different from previous movements in scope and extent. It is centered on specific episodes of violence against women and girls. It demands the effective implementation of Law 26,485, which ensures the “integral” protection to prevent, punish, and eradicate violence against women, the publication of official statistics on femicide,⁵ and the creation of shelters for women victims of violence. In addition, and as discussed above, #NiUnaMenos is a movement rooted in social media, and served as model for many other social protests thereafter. Examples of these include; #VivasNosQueremos (#WeWantUsAlive) in 2016, #BastaDeViolenciaMachista (#StopMachistaViolence) in 2017 and #AbortoLegal (#LegalAbortion) in 2018, until the voluntary termination of pregnancy became law in 2021 (Perfil, 2019). One of the movement's founding members, stated that #NiUnaMenos embraces “feminism from below that is intersectional, transversal, and horizontal and engages with marginalized communities and activism passed down from the Mothers, Grandmothers and other

⁵Femicide is the gender-motivated killing of women or girls and may carry a punishment of life in prison in some Latin American countries (e.g. Argentina and Mexico) or long prison terms (between 15 to 40 years). <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2020/02/13/las-penas-mas-severas-para-el-feminicidio-en-los-paises-de-america-latina/>

Argentine human rights groups” (Danielli, 2019). In joining forces with the International Women’s Strikes, #NiUnaMenos makes crucial connections between gender violence and economic and social inequities that affect women worldwide (UNWomen, 2020).

Overall, Argentine women have protested before, as suffragists during the first part of the 20th century and as mothers during the dirty war of the 1970s, and more recently, as victims of domestic violence and other social and economic inequalities. However, one of the most significant differences between this more recent movement and others before is on the usage of digital platforms, which led to a rapid diffusion of protests not only throughout Argentina, but transnationally, across Latin America and beyond, a topic we explore below.

Beyond Argentina: Women, Hashtags, and Protests

VAWG is not new; it is rooted in centuries of a widespread social power imbalance that benefits men, whether socio-economically, politically, or within intimate relationships. In Latin America, widespread machismo⁶ has led to violence against women. In 12 Latin American and Caribbean countries, between 17 and 53 percent of women reported having suffered physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner in 2014 (PAHO, 2014). Latin America also includes 14 of the 25 countries in the world with the highest rates of femicide⁷. On the other hand, this appalling situation has served as a call for action for Latin American women, as they have remained at the global frontlines in confronting gender-based violence. After all, even before the UN recognized the International Day of the Elimination of Violence Against Women and Girls in 1999, the Latin American feminist gatherings (*Encuentros*) recognized this day in 1981 to honor the Mirabal sisters. These three sisters were political activists in the Dominican Republic and were brutally murdered in 1965 for their opposition to the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo (Hanson and Piatti-Crocker, 2020).

Everett Rogers (2003) suggests that an innovation can be communicated in a number of ways; however, socialization plays a critical role in facilitating its diffusion (Rogers 2003, 3). Thus, through socialization, members of a diffusion network are exposed to new ideas or policies. Moreover, more recent scholarship on diffusion discussed the process as both relational, when people and networks are socially connected, and nonrelational, when in the absence of direct social networks, the learning process may occur through digital platforms or traditional media. #NiUnaMenos is an example of diffusion in both relational and nonrelational terms. In the first case, activists used similar social networks and structural organizations. However, the movement diffused rapidly due to the use of digital media to communicate their messages, strategies, and goals.

Indeed, the Argentine hashtag sparked a social uprising against these appalling murders elsewhere (The Guardian, 2020; Alacaraz, 2017). Accordingly, a year after the first massive gathering, #NiUnaMenos organized protests in Argentina's most important cities. These gatherings were also replicated in other Latin American capital cities where VAWG has been pervasive, such as Lima (Peru), Quito (Ecuador) and Mexico City, among many others. For example, the #NiUnaMenos protest in Lima, Peru on August 13, 2016, gathered thousands of people in front of the Palace of Justice, demanding policy change against misogynist violence (Fawks, 2016; El

⁶According to the Cambridge Dictionary, *Machismo* is defined as male behavior that is strong and forceful and shows very traditional ideas about how men and women should behave. Frequently this behavior leads to physical violence. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/machismo>

⁷See also Table 1 for more details.

Comercio, 2017). In Quito, a massive demonstration was organized in November of 2016 (a day after the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women) using the hashtags #VivasNosQueremos and #NiUnaMenos with both Facebook and Twitter accounts (El Comercio, 2016). Undoubtedly, social media and digital platforms were powerful tools to drive the protests, to provide awareness of pervasive misogynist violence, femicide, and other feminist demands to end discrimination against women and to promote gender equality (Decoding Digital Activism, 2017).

Although “emulation” is central to diffusion, the “emulating” social group does not necessarily adopt a given social structure, norms, or rules of behavior in an identical manner. Certainly, some similarity must be present, but in many cases, diffusion includes a process of adaptation according to the receiving group’s cultural or institutional circumstances. Rogers (2003, p. 17) calls this adjustment process “re-invention” and shows that most adopters modify the emulated behavior (Piatti-Crocker 2011, 2017, 2019). For example, in Mexico, #NiUnaMenos went viral in 2016, in an effort to break the imposed silence around sexual assault and the murders of women that have been so prevalent in Mexico, but the slogan was later adapted to mirror internal struggles. During that same year, #MiPrimerAcoso (#MyFirstAssault) went viral as thousands of women bravely shared their first experiences of sexual assault among their social networks. Later, #SiMeMatan, (#IfTheyKillMe) went viral after the murder of a young student by her boyfriend, and particularly, after authorities falsely claimed that the young woman victim of femicide had committed suicide instead. In response, women all over the country used the hashtag #SiMeMatan to post what the authorities and media would say if they were murdered, that they committed suicide instead. In 2020 the hashtag #JuntasOrganizadas (#TogetherAndOrganized), was used to march and strike and to “show the power of digital social media to empower women who have had enough and are ready to emphatically break the silence around gender-based violence and murder” (Petersen and Shaw, 2020).

Overall, #NiUnaMenos and its complementary hashtags adapted the initial movement into new identities and contexts throughout Latin America but shared similar goals and strategies, at least until COVID-19 spread with force in the region, a topic to which we now turn.

Table 1: Femicides in Eight Latin American Countries

Country	Absolute number of femicides	Femicide rates per 100,000 women
Argentina	252	1.1
Bolivia	117	2.1
Colombia	226	0.9
Dominican Republic	148	2.7
Ecuador	67	0.8
Mexico	983	1.5
Paraguay	37	1.1
Peru	128	0.8

Prepared by Hannah Mitchell. Source: CEPALSTAT, 2019.

Protest Movements and the COVID-19 Effect

The coronavirus pandemic spread alarmingly throughout Latin America, leading to a variety of government responses. Fear of the virus and the implementation of physical distancing measures in most of Latin America led to a sharp decrease in street protests or, alternatively, social movements held protests virtually. Yet, popular frustration with government responses to the pandemic, such as insufficient emergency relief plans, a dramatic increase in coronavirus cases and deaths, lack of financial support for the large informal labor sector in the region, and unprecedented misogynist violence grew increasingly throughout the course of 2020 and 2021. This also created a sense of urgency to hold street protests, despite government stay-at-home policies.

The COVID-19 pandemic initially reduced the number of protests. Yet, the economic crises resulting from the policies that ensued and the countries' poor responses led to instability and social unrest (Parkin Daniels, 2020). Citing Fiona Mackie, Parkin Daniels writes that “these issues that we saw around access to public services and income inequality, along with other issues that have been prevalent in Latin America, like corruption, high youth unemployment, crime—all of these persist and will emerge again as problems” (Parkin Daniels, 2020). Confirming Parkin Daniels' arguments, a 2020 survey from the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) found that the virus was exacerbating inequality in the region, with greater job losses among lower-income respondents while wealthier people were not only more likely to remain employed but also had greater food stockpiles at home and higher savings (Hoffman and Vera-Cossio, 2020).

Protests began to spread again throughout the second half of 2020. As discussed above, in some cases, mobilization focused on the economic fallout from coronavirus-related restrictions, demands for a reopening of the economy, and better government support to mitigate the crisis.

Additionally, health workers across the region held demonstrations to call for better working conditions and proper protective equipment. At the same time, civil society actors took to social media more intensively than before and implemented new strategies to reach the victims of human rights violations and corruption. For example, Mexican activists and human rights nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) marked Mother's Day with a virtual march for their missing children.⁸ In Colombia, the killing of a young man by police led to a massive mobilization against the government (Bitterly, 2020). Frustration led to protests early in 2021 when Latin Americans became aware that scandal, cronyism, and corruption had made its way into their political powerful class by allowing cutting "the vaccine lines" in favor of friends, family, or political partisans in Ecuador, Peru, and Argentina, among other countries (Taj et al., 2021).

Overall, despite the initial disruption of protests during the first half of 2020 due to COVID-19 and the devastating economic and social effects of the pandemic, particularly among the poor, protests increased and spread during the second half of 2020 and have continued since then.

#NiUnaMenos and COVID-19

By mid-2020, when COVID-19 was spreading with fury throughout Latin America, it was also the five-year anniversary of #NiUnaMenos. The COVID-19 pandemic had two contrasting effects upon the movement. First, it was more urgent than ever that women mobilized on the streets due to unprecedented levels of VAWG in the region, and second, stay-at-home policies either restricted or banned crowd gatherings keeping activists and victims of VAWG inside their homes (Hanson and Piatti-Crocker, 2020). Thus, the movement adapted the venues and strategies to protest by relying at least initially on virtual sites. Yet, later in 2020 and beyond, protests began to unfold gradually on the streets as domestic violence reached unprecedented levels of urgency and policy inaction remained a constant.

To confront the COVID-19 pandemic, more than 90 countries imposed some level of lockdown in 2020, with almost four billion people sheltering at home. "Stay safe at home" was the underlying message guiding mandates on physical distancing in public spaces and shelter-in-home orders. Yet, for many women and girls, the mandatory lockdowns and stay-in-place orders confined them with their abusers in dangerous and violent spaces from which school, work, and public streets previously provided some escape. Around the world, domestic violence increased between 10-30 percent within the first weeks of lockdown situations. In early April, UN Secretary General António Guterres called for a "ceasefire" on domestic violence due to its "horrifying global surge," urging governments to put women's safety first as they respond to the COVID-19 pandemic (Hanson and Piatti-Crocker, 2020).

In Latin America, increasing acts of domestic violence reached unprecedented levels. For example, in Peru, more than 1,000 women disappeared between March and June of 2020, and when lockdowns went into effect in Paraguay in March, cases of domestic violence rose by more than 35 percent per day, according to the local Public Ministry. In Colombia, a local nonprofit said that 99 women had been murdered between January and June of 2020. A local emergency phone line in the country reported a 230 percent increase in calls regarding domestic violence (Krumholtz 2020; see also Table 2, below).

⁸See for example, Aureliani Thomas (2020). "La marcha digital de las madres de los desaparecidos en México," Dactive, University of Amsterdam, Holland. Accessed 25 May 2021, <https://data-activism.net/2020/05/bigdatasur-covid-la-marcha-digital-de-las-madres-de-los-desaparecidos-en-mexico>.

COVID-19 and the policies of physical distancing in 2020 did not deter women from protesting, even if activists had to meet virtually due to restrictive policies of gathering or even outright prohibition. For example, in Argentina, a document entitled “We love each other free and *un-indebted*” was issued after a virtual meeting was held to celebrate five years of #NiUnaMenos. The document, written by three female deputies from different regions in the country, stated that “The increase in sexist violence” was still pervasive in Argentina. Support to end this endemic violence included Argentina’s largest newspaper, Clarín, which published the names and stories of more than 300 women murdered in just a year as part of a special obituary section (Chaina, 2020).

Across the region, leaders of #NiUnaMenos and several other international groups worked with authorities, police forces, the private sector, and local communities to come up with innovative ways to tackle soaring rates of VAWG. For example, in Argentina, Chile, and Peru, an emergency app called “No estás sola” (“You are not alone”) sent out alerts to five close contacts when the holder shook their mobile phone (Dupras Dobias, 2021; See also Table 2). Yet, street demonstrations seemed to spread the message more effectively as protests become visible, plus, for poor women who have little or no access to virtual venues, street protests may have been the best way to voice their concerns. For example, with the uptick of VAWG in Mexico, women organized a day without women’s strike on International Women’s Day (8 March) to protest violence across Mexico. On 9 November 2020, protesters mobilized on the streets of Mexico City to demand justice after a girl had been found dead (Zissis, 2020). In Ciudad Juárez, known for the large number of women who have gone missing over the years, relatives of the disappeared carried pink crosses with the slogan #NiUnaMenos in protest (BBC, 2021). The main goals of these demonstrations were to change, update, or implement pertinent policies adequately as explored below.

#NiUnaMenos and Policy Change

#NiUnaMenos greatest asset has been its visibility, as powerful cross-regional protests and actions against gender-based violence spread rapidly. As was the case of Argentina, those associated with the movement in other countries have consistently demanded policy change. For example, some of those demands entail the gathering and publication of official statistics on VAWG, the adoption of policies intended to guarantee the protection of women affected by violence, such as the creation of shelters for victims, and the protection of women’s rights, including the legalization of abortion and the provision of comprehensive sex and gender education. As explained by Judith Butler, #NiUnaMenos was formed “through a realization of a common social condition and a social bond, one that recognizes that what is happening to one’s life (...) is also happening to others” (Langlois, 2020).

Indeed, 24 of 30 Latin American and Caribbean countries adopted national legislation geared to protect the rights of victims of domestic or intra-family violence even before #NiUnaMenos. More than half of the countries in the region have also adopted legislation against femicide; yet, rates of domestic violence and femicide are still high and many of them remain allegedly unreported. Thus, #NiUnaMenos brought these problems to light. For example, Bolivia adopted a law to guarantee women a life free of violence in 2013. Yet, Bolivia had the highest rate of femicide in South America according to the World Health Organization and as seen in Table 1. In 2019, the country had more than two femicides for every 100,000 women (The Borgen Project, 2020; Table 1). In 2015, Mexico adopted a Federal Law to Prevent and Eliminate Discrimination,

a General Law for Equality between Men and Women, Regulations of the General Law on Women's Access to a Violence Free Life, and a federal judicial Protocol to Address Gender-Based Political Violence against Women, with the Electoral Court as its main authority. Yet, Mexico had one of the highest rates of femicides in Latin America, with 1.5 femicides for every 100,000 women in 2019 (Hanson and Piatti-Crocker, 2020; Table 1).

In addition, and as stated above, COVID-19 and the policies that ensued, exacerbated episodes of domestic violence in Latin America. Stay at home policies also made it difficult for women to network and protest in the streets (Hanson and Piatti-Crocker, 2020) and despite the number of policies adopted during the pandemic, as seen on Table 2, these policies have not been enough or were not implemented effectively to prevent episodes of VAWG. It is precisely for this reason that governments needed to address the disproportionate implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on women and other vulnerable populations more successfully (Sader, 2020; Celorio, 2020).

Overall, the effective and rapid transnational diffusion of a movement that started with a modest hashtag indicates the significance of digital platforms in their contributions to activism. They are employed as important tools for communicating and networking among its members (Gerbaudo, 2012). Moreover, unlike traditional social networking, digital media has multiplied both the levels of reach and scope of the diffusion process and has accelerated the speed of transmission. Yet, even if powerful, these movements are not enough to make real changes for women, as activism and governmental policy need to translate into effective action.

Table 2: COVID-19 Measures Pertaining to Violence against Women in Latin America

Country	Action	Authority	Date
Argentina	Established pharmacies as access points for women to report violence by requesting a #BarbijoRojo	Ministry of Women, Gender, and Diversity	03-30-2020
Argentina	Reinforced hotline #144 with new technology and more personnel and created a Whatsapp hotline	Ministry of Women, Gender, and Diversity	03-30-2020
Argentina	Declared women's shelters essential service	President of Argentina – Administrative Decision 524/2020	04-18-2020
Chile	Established pharmacies as access points for women to report violence by saying the keyword #Mascarilla19	Ministry of Women and Gender Equality	04-25-2020
Chile	Expanded the Housing Subsidy Agreement for Women Victims of Violence	Ministry of Women and Gender Equality & Ministry of Housing and Urbanism	11-11-2020
Colombia	#EnCasaSinViolencia Campaign made supermarkets and pharmacies safe places to report domestic violence abuses	District Secretariat for Women of the Mayor's Office of Bogota	03-21-2020
Colombia	Established 65 new safe houses throughout the country in response to increase in calls to hotline #155	Vice President	04-06-2020
Mexico	Declared women's shelters essential service	National Institute for Women	03-31-2020
Mexico	Formed interagency group to collect real time data on the number of domestic violence cases reported	National Institute for Women	06-15-2020
Peru	"You Are Not Alone" campaign posters put in supermarkets and pharmacies to share #100 hotline	Ministry of Women and Vulnerable Populations	05-10-2020
Peru	Granted the Ministry of Women and Vulnerable Populations the authority to use messaging systems for outreach	President of Peru -Legislative Decree 1470	04-26-2020
Dominican Republic	Established supermarkets as access points for reporting violence by requesting "Comprobante fiscal 212"	Ministry of Women	06-12-2020
Ecuador	Established protocol for assisting victims of domestic violence during Covid-19	Secretary of Human Rights	04-01-2020
Paraguay	Reinforced and expanded communication channels for reporting domestic violence, including two Whatsapp hotlines	Ministry of Women	04-15-2020

Prepared by Hannah Mitchell. Source: ECLAC, COVID-19 Observatory in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2021.

Conclusion

Diffusion is the “transfer in the same or similar shape of forms and claims of contention across space or across sectors and ideological divides” (Tarrow and Tilly, 2001). It entails the communication of information about a movement but also about the process by which adopters embrace ideas and strategies originated in another country. The diffusion of political protests are obviously not new, what is new is employing social media platforms to spread the message, and the speed and reach of its diffusion as a result.

#NiUnaMenos was born as both a social movement and a hashtag, with the main goal of prioritizing women’s rights, as hundreds of thousands of women throughout the region took a stand against gender violence. The movement and hashtag that started in Argentina in 2015 led to their diffusion throughout the region. Digital platforms including Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp were the main strategies employed by organizers to create the movement and recruit members who, in turn, participated in protests in the region. Substantively, #NiUnaMenos has proven effective in bringing light to the pervasive phenomenon of gender-based violence that transcends all social classes and age groups. Indeed, this movement has given women across Latin America a platform to demand an end to VAWG and a means to advocate for greater gender equity.

Five years after the first protest, COVID-19 had a profound effect on how significant and urgent #NiUnaMenos demands are still today and how much work remains to be accomplished to guarantee women governmental policies that can protect them effectively (Prusa et al., 2020). Indeed, COVID-19 made it clear that measures intended to contain the pandemic were exacerbating gender-based violence in Latin America, yet, because of lockdowns, street protests were restricted or outright banned, so #NiUnaMenos had to resort to virtual protests, at least initially, to pressure governments for urgent action.

Latin America is still affected by sexism, discrimination, and *machismo*, which fuel gender-based violence. A clearer understanding of the problems facing women victims of abuse, a collective effort to end violence between grassroots organizations, and effective, operational, governmental policies are necessary to help find solutions to this deep-rooted Latin American crisis.

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