

#METOO MOVES SOUTH

The fight against harassment in Latin American science gains strength

By Lindzi Wessel and Rodrigo Pérez Ortega

For decades, from his base at the University of Los Andes (Unian-des) in Bogotá, Colombia, biologist Adolfo Amézquita Torres made his name studying the diverse, jewel-like poisonous frogs of the Andes and the Amazon. But on campus, he compiled a darker record, former and current students have alleged in dozens of complaints. They say he mistreated women, including by favoring and emotionally abusing female students he was dating and retaliating against those who rejected his advances or complained about his behavior. Earlier this month, university officials concluded he was guilty of sexual harassment and misconduct and fired him in a watershed moment for the university—and for a growing effort to fight sexual mis-

conduct on campuses across Latin America.

Amézquita Torres, who until recently was head of Unian-des's biology department, tells *Science* he did have consensual relationships with students, but claims that such dating was long considered acceptable and that he didn't knowingly violate any university rules. He denies harassing, favoring, or retaliating against anyone, and says he will challenge the 6 February verdict, claiming the process was flawed and unfair. He vows to "use all available legal tools to recover as much as I can of my dignity."

The firing marked a dramatic turn in a twisting, nearly 15-month-long controversy, which deeply divided one of Latin America's most prestigious private universities and was closely watched by Colombia's media and women's rights groups. Many applauded the

university's decision. "This is going to send a huge message ... I think instructors are going to be much more careful," says ecologist Ximena Bernal, a native of Colombia who earned her undergraduate degree at Unian-des and now works at Purdue University.

But she and others complain that the Unian-des investigation was marred by bureaucratic bungling and a lack of transparency. They say those missteps, which included reversing an earlier decision to fire Amézquita Torres, highlight how universities across Latin America are struggling to protect women within cultures that have long tolerated, and even celebrated, male privilege and a set of attitudes known as machismo.

"There is a lot of variation from university to university, but some places exhibit rampant and almost institutionalized ma-



National movements, like the one behind this demonstration in Santiago, Chile, have helped drive changes on campuses.

chismo,” says Juan Manuel Guayasamin Ernest, a herpetologist at San Francisco University of Quito in Ecuador. And although women have gained ground in employment and status at Latin American universities in recent years, most research institutions are still “dominated by men surrounded by more men,” he says.

Such masculine demography has helped promote a sometimes toxic atmosphere for women in academia—including faculty and students in the sciences—according to dozens of researchers from across Latin America who spoke with *Science*. Machismo can actively deter women from pursuing a career in scientific research, Bernal says. “We have lost a lot of scientists because of this.”

Many universities in the region lack formal policies for reporting, investigating, or

punishing abuse or sexual misconduct, or don’t rigorously enforce the policies they do have. And campus administrators have long winked at potentially problematic behaviors, such as male faculty members dating their female students. Women who speak out about such issues can face retaliation and public vilification. “It’s very common to hear ... ‘Oh yeah, those feminazis, they’re just crazy people,’” says Jennifer Stynoski, a herpetologist from the United States who works at the University of Costa Rica, San José.

Now, the tide might be turning. At Unian-des and elsewhere, administrators are promising to adopt stronger policies and enforce them. In some countries, legislators and agencies are moving to enact new, nationwide standards for reporting sexual harassment at campuses and research institutes. In 2019, more than 250 researchers signed a letter, published in *Science*, urging “scientists and institutions across Latin America to be aware of the damage that machismo, and its denial, inflicts on women and the enterprise of science as a whole,” and to take stronger action to deter misbehavior. And an emerging constellation of advocacy groups has been ratcheting up the pressure for reform through social media campaigns, legal challenges, and other tactics—including marches and even the takeover of university buildings.

“In Latin American countries in the last 5 years or so, we’ve had this movement against gender-based violence and harassment,” says Mario Pecheny, a political science researcher at the University of Buenos Aires. “It’s raised a huge mobilization of women.”

NATIONS IN LATIN AMERICA have some of the world’s highest reported rates of violence against women, according to a 2017 United Nations report. University campuses are no exception. The National University of Colombia, Bogotá, surveyed 1602 of its female students and found that more than half reported experiencing some kind of sexual violence while on campus or during university-related activities. (The survey was first reported by Vice Colombia.) Verbal harassment and discrimination are at least as prevalent.

But when victims go to university officials to report harassment or an assault, they often meet with indifference or confusion. In part, that’s because many administrators have no guidebook. In 2019, journalists Ketzalli Rosas, Jordy Meléndez Yúdice, and a team of 35 reporters at Distintas Latitudes, a digital news platform that covers Latin America, surveyed 100 universities in

16 Latin American nations and found that 60% lacked policies for handling sexual harassment complaints.

Janneke Noorlag, a Dutch immigrant to Chile, got a firsthand look at the consequences of such gaps when she was a master’s student studying environmental sustainability at the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile (PUC), Santiago. In 2015, Noorlag’s husband and a faculty member, acting on her behalf, filed a sexual assault complaint against one of Noorlag’s classmates and a second man. PUC declined to investigate because it “lacked the competence and technical means to investigate properly,” according to a letter it sent to Noorlag’s husband. The university acknowledges that, at the time, it had no “specific protocols on sexual violence.”

Instead, university officials told Noorlag to pursue the matter with local law enforcement. (She did; they declined to pursue charges.) Noorlag says she ultimately dropped out of PUC because of the university’s lapses, including allowing one of her alleged attackers to continue to attend classes and serve as a teaching assistant. (A university spokesperson says it did ultimately suspend the alleged attacker from teaching, adding that PUC now has a policy against allowing complainants and alleged perpetrators to attend the same classes.) Now, Noorlag says, “I really have no trust in university authorities.”

Even a formal policy “doesn’t guarantee anything,” says Meléndez Yúdice, who is director of Distintas Latitudes. Some policies can be difficult to implement because they lack important details, he says, such as a clear deadline for filing complaints, definitions of ambiguous terms, and procedures for protecting an accuser’s identity. And the existence of a policy “doesn’t mean the will is there to use it,” Meléndez Yúdice says. Universities have let cases drag on indefinitely, without communicating a timeline for resolution, says Isadora Fragoso, an undergraduate student at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), Mexico City, and a member of the feminist student movement Rosas Rojas (Red Roses). “Although women go to the appropriate authorities to make complaints ... they simply remain archived,” she says. “They never proceed.”

When universities do take action against alleged harassers, the punishment can seem mild. In 2017, Austral University of Chile scrambled to develop a sexual misconduct policy for professors after multiple allegations emerged against a prominent

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Juan Manuel Guayasamin Ernest,
San Francisco
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faculty member, biochemist Alejandro Yáñez Cárcamo. Complainants alleged he had harassed a female administrator working under him, assaulted a female student, and made inappropriate comments toward women. (Yáñez Cárcamo did not respond to requests for comment.) In April 2018, after an investigation, the university suspended him from teaching for 2 years, but allowed him to continue his research at a field station.

Protests by those who felt the school's actions weren't strong enough erupted throughout Chile. At Austral, faculty and students took over a building and went on strike. The university then moved to fire Yáñez Cárcamo, but a court reinstated him, ruling he could not be punished twice for the same misbehavior. In September 2018, the case received renewed attention when Yáñez Cárcamo attended a campus event—defying a request from the university's president to stay away—and was confronted by ecologist Olga Barbosa, then a professor at the university, who respectfully asked him to leave. A photograph of the confrontation went viral, and the incident made Barbosa, now the southern regional secretary for Chile's Ministry of Science, Technology, Knowledge and Innovation, an icon for antiharassment activists. (Yáñez Cárcamo remains on the faculty and was allowed back on campus last year.)

AT UNIANDES, the contentious case of Amézquita Torres put the challenges facing Latin American universities in the #MeToo era on very public display. Administrators at the university, which enrolls nearly 25,000 undergraduate and graduate students and is considered one of Latin America's top 10 training institutions, first began to examine the allegations against the herpetologist in November 2018, according to documents obtained by *Science*. That was just 2 years after Uniandes became one of the first universities in Colombia to adopt rules on reporting and investigating allegations of abusive behavior and sexual misconduct. By then, Amézquita Torres, who arrived at Uniandes as an undergraduate in 1985, had established an active international research program and become head of the biology department.

As word of the complaints against Amézquita Torres spread, some students and faculty rallied to his defense, praising him as a skilled mentor and researcher and arguing he was being attacked for behavior—particularly dating students—long considered acceptable. Others took a decidedly different view. Female and male complainants, as well as more

than 20 people familiar with the case interviewed by *Science*, paint Amézquita Torres as a charismatic but mercurial personality who fostered divisiveness. “You go from being on his good side to being on his bad side, and then you kind of have this verbal abuse wrath,” says one man, a former Uniandes student who worked with Amézquita Torres and asked not to be named for fear of retaliation. “He’ll start not reading your manuscripts, he’ll start neglecting you.”

Mónica Pinzón, a former student of Amézquita Torres who is now a filmmaker, wrote to the university last year to describe how he targeted her for retribution. In 2003, he made sexually charged remarks

city's announcement that it was firing him. Many of the accusations, he said, were the result of a “witch hunt” led by one person who had a conflict with him over “politics and money.” “Having relationships with the students,” he said, “makes you vulnerable to people with evil intentions.”

Such defenses ultimately did not sway university officials, but the process that produced their verdict was chaotic. In early 2019, after an initial investigation, the university fired Amézquita Torres for failing to disclose his sexual relationships with students, ruling that such ties constituted conflicts of interest. But he won reinstatement after arguing the university hadn't followed proper procedures. The university then removed him as head of the biology department and barred him from teaching, but allowed him to continue his research, while a special faculty panel conducted a new investigation.

In March 2019, fearing that the university was burying the case, the complainants and their allies used public demonstrations and other tactics to press their demands for more information and action. On social media, users widely shared a video of a student reading aloud from a statement written by a woman who claimed that Amézquita Torres had harassed her. Nearly 300 alumni of the biology department signed a letter to university officials, urging them to clarify where the investigation stood. Allies of Amézquita Torres responded by condemning the pressure campaign, and the researcher himself went to court in a bid to silence media outlets covering the case and students sharing the video on social media. He failed.

Amid the escalating public battle, Uniandes got a new president: economist Alejandro Gaviria Uribe, a former minister of health in Colombia. When he arrived in July 2019, Gaviria Uribe recalls promising to bring the case to “a fair and quick” resolution. “Unfortunately, the process [took] longer than I expected,” he told *Science* earlier this month.

Now, students and faculty on all sides are digesting the verdict. “Before, [such behavior] was normalized,” says a member of the university's faculty who asked not to be named for fear of retaliation. “But now, with the #MeToo movement and the various other movements of female students, it has stopped being normal. The spark has ignited so that this case would finally explode.”

“This isn't just about him. ... It's an action against bad behavior in science,” adds one of the complainants, who asked to remain anonymous because of fears of



In an image that went viral, ecologist Olga Barbosa confronts alleged harasser Alejandro Yáñez Cárcamo on a Chilean campus.

and subjected her to “unmeasured rage” after she camped in an unapproved site during a field trip, she wrote. After that, “His treatment was horrible. ... He wouldn't read my thesis. ... He made the rest of my time in the lab very bitter,” she says. Pinzón was also distressed by what she describes as controlling and manipulative behavior by Amézquita Torres toward his then-girlfriend, who was a student. The experience led Pinzón to leave academia. “The only thing I regret,” she says, “is not speaking up when these things were happening.”

In interviews with *Science* and in lengthy statements sent to the university, Amézquita Torres flatly denied many of the specific allegations against him, including that he retaliated against students. “I don't do that ... I am not aggressive to the students,” he told *Science* prior to the univer-



In Santiago, Chile, women demonstrate against impunity for aggressors in a public performance piece that has since been replicated in many other nations.

retaliation. “It took us literally years, but something finally happened.”

Gaviria Uribe has vowed to fix the bureaucratic problems exposed by the case. Although the sexual misconduct policy Uniandes adopted in 2016 “has no precedents in Colombia and only a few in Latin America ... we still have much to learn,” he says. The university plans to offer legal resources to complainants, he says, and add courses on gender issues. Officials will also need to define what constitutes appropriate relationships between students and professors, Gaviria Uribe notes.

Many hope the campus can now start to heal. Uniandes officials will be moving students who had been studying with Amézquita Torres to new supervisors. But biologist Catalina Palacios, a Uniandes doctoral student who aided some of the complainants, says, “We expect rough days ahead in terms of trying to rebuild the community here.”

THE UNIANDES CASE underscores how far universities in Latin America have yet to go in addressing sexual harassment issues. One needed step, Bernal says, is for universities to step up training and awareness. She recalls that it wasn’t until she left Colombia for the United States in 2001 that she realized behaviors long tolerated at Latin American universities weren’t OK. Recently, she spoke to a group of female Ecuadorian students who characterized their university as free of harassment—until Bernal started to ask specific questions about whether their professors dated their students and made sexist

remarks. “They were like, ‘Oh yeah, well, guys are guys,’” she says. “When you think this is the norm, you don’t realize there’s a problem.”

In 2018, such experiences led Bernal to circulate the letter eventually published in *Science* (22 February 2019, p. 825) that called for obliterating that norm. “Latin American women scientists ... are immersed in a society where culturally ingrained masculine pride (‘machismo’) is normalized and deeply intertwined with the scientific endeavor,” Bernal and her cosigners wrote. “Machismo promotes sexist attitudes that often pass unnoticed,” they added. They urged scientists in the region to become “proactive about recognizing, confronting, and penalizing inappropriate behaviors.”

Bernal and others see signs of progress, including a recent uptick in the number of universities adopting policies on sexual misconduct. UNAM, which adopted its policy in 2016, says it has now fielded more than 1200 complaints and ousted about 100 alleged perpetrators—albeit sometimes after student protests that included building takeovers. Mexican academics campaigning against harassment have even adopted a popular hashtag: #MeTooAcademicos (#MeTooAcademics). And across Latin America, students have taken to social media under the hashtag #MePasóEnLaU (It happened to me in the university).

The campus-based movements echo broader campaigns against gender violence. Brazil has #NãoéNão (No is No), Argentina #NiUnaMenos (Not One Less), and Chile Educación No Sexista (Nonsexist Educa-

tion). In many countries, activists have replicated a Chilean mass protest anthem and performance, called “Un Violador En Tu Camino” (“A Rapist In Your Path”), which includes women donning blindfolds and chanting against impunity for aggressors.

Science groups and governments are also moving to address sexual misconduct in research. In recent years, major conferences held in the region—including those sponsored by the Latin American Conference of Herpetology and the Colombian National Conference of Zoology—have added symposiums on the issue. In August 2019, the Chilean Senate approved a bill requiring all government-sponsored institutions to develop detailed sexual harassment policies; the bill now awaits action in its House of Representatives. And the country’s science ministry recently announced a gender equality policy. Argentina’s National Scientific and Technical Research Council is working to establish similar policies at its research centers.

In many Latin American nations, inaction remains the norm. Yet Barbosa is encouraged by what she is seeing. The rising challenge to machismo, she says, has helped her realize that she’s “not crazy” for envisioning a better future for female researchers in Latin America. Those who commit harassment and abuse are beginning to face consequences, she says, which is what is needed “to make sure that this will not happen to anyone else.” ■

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Science

#MeToo moves south

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