

# The Machista Costa Rican Institute of the Woman

by Fabiola Sanabria

*It was not until I got to NYC that I felt comfortable enough to wear a short skirt casually. Back home in Costa Rica, my mom would buy me dresses, skirts, and shorts, but, weather aside, I unconsciously wore them only at the beach. While I was writing “The Machista Costa Rican Institute of the Woman,” I realized this is a subconscious defense I was using against microaggressions in a machista society where there are “subtle,” everyday manifestations of a culture that enables femicides and rapes.*

*In this sense, the most valuable aspect about this essay is the fact that it began with a purpose, a specific case of femicide that exposes Costa Rica’s institutional failure to protect women. But then, this led to the proposal of a comprehensive solution to address the roots of a general and more complex problem. Following my Professor’s advice, I let myself explore the reasons why I decided to write about this topic in order to discover a new insight. Personally, this was something hard to accomplish because the exploration process requires losing control, which intimidates me. But when I let my fear go, I was able to explore a possible method that the government could apply so women can one day grow more comfortable wearing those skirts that their mothers buy for them.*

—Fabiola Sanabria

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Dear Lic. Patricia Mora Castellanos,

I have been following your career as a politician and an active feminist in the public sector of Costa Rica. I am writing to discuss the work you have done as the Costa Rican Minister of Women’s Affairs and Executive President of the National Institute of the Women (INAMU by its Spanish initials). With all due respect, I was expecting more from you. INAMU has a lot to improve, and I would like to explain why.

I will never forget the day Eva Morera died. On that first of November in 2019, I was in my dorm room when my friend called me, crying out of fear, and told me that her cousin was murdered. I felt chills all over my body. I had been following the news about femicides in Costa Rica: before Eva’s death, ten had been reported that year. However, now the story was for the first time about someone close to me. That day, another woman had been killed by someone she

trusted, just for being a woman. It repulsed me to know that we, women, are being killed just for our gender. I could feel the fear all over my body for my sister, my cousins, my friends, and myself.

The femicide of the nineteen-year-old mother and college student, Eva Morera, influenced not only my life but also those of young Costa Ricans, who recognized this new failure in what was becoming a war between a chauvinistic culture and rising feminist activism. Morera's murder was the eleventh femicide in the country in 2019. According to the Costa Rican Judicial Investigation Agency (OIJ), Eva was shot in the back by a man whose last name is Garita, her ex-partner and the father of her three-year-old son, when she arrived at his house. She was found dead in Garita's home, where her son and Garita's daughter were present throughout the murder (Vargas). The suspect was taken to preventive prison, in which people accused of a crime are often sent before a formal trial if a judge believes they may commit another crime before being convicted, after two witnesses mentioned seeing him with a gun. During the investigation, Eva's father mentioned to the press that since Eva met Garita, a hell of physical and psychological abuse began for her and her entire family. Moreover, a month before her death she had been politically advocating on Facebook, calling on Costa Rica to remember previous victims of gender violence and making her followers aware of the ongoing violence in the country ("Estas Fueron Las Palabras"). Her posts on Facebook offer a glimpse into her long fight against domestic violence, and because of the pain that could be seen in her frequent Facebook posts, her death was publicly condemned. Various feminist movements in Costa Rica and people from different sectors, including the Costa Rican President himself, used trending hashtags on their social media like "#4eva" and reprisals from other femicides like "#niunamenos" (roughly translated as "not another one less") and "#vivasnosqueremos" ("we want us alive") to grieve for Eva Morera.

This case was shocking for Costa Rican citizens because it represented the failure of INAMU and their strategies to alleviate gender violence. The news about the femicide spread quickly, not only because Eva was a feminist activist, but also because she had, for a year and a half before her death, participated in INAMU's own counseling and workshops against domestic violence. She originally reached out to the Institute for help because her partner at the time, whom she began dating after her split from Garita, was "also a violent man" (Alvarado). INAMU guided her to ask for protection measures from her partner at the time, acknowledging the emotional and physical risk he posed. Ana Hidalgo, coordinator of the department of Gender Violence at INAMU, declared to the press, it was the father of her son, not her partner, who murdered her ("Eva"). However, whether it was her current partner or ex-partner should not matter. The larger issue is that INAMU was aware of Eva's multiple relationships with abusive men, and failed to identify the threat her ex-partner posed.

Let me clarify, Ms. Mora: I am not blaming you personally for the femicide of Eva Morera. But I do believe that everyone involved could have done more, and that you should start *doing more* in order to help other Costa Rican women in situations like Eva's. In the article "Machismo como un fenómeno psicocultural" ("Machismo as a psychocultural phenomenon"), Octavio Giraldo exposes the cultural traits of machismo in Latin American culture as a product of heterosexuality and aggression which leads to the normalization of a male's sexual potency, violence, and a

female's submission to a man. Giraldo describes machismo as "the exaggeration of masculine characteristics and the belief of male superiority" (295). This term is ingrained in Costa Rican culture, and the violence against women persists.

In August 2018, the Costa Rican government declared violence against women a national emergency because of the rise of incidents in the previous years. In 2016, 386 women received services from INAMU because they were in imminent risk as victims of violence. That same year, the National 9-1-1 Emergency System received 1,175,412 calls about domestic violence ("Por Qué"). According to the Costa Rican Judicial Power's Observatory of Gender Violence, there have been 357 femicides between 2007 and 2020. Forty-four of these happened during your two-year mandate as the Executive President of the INAMU ("Femicidios"). Because of this data, would you agree that it might be time to change the institution's approach to addressing the role of patriarchy in gender violence? This way the thousands of women per year who reach INAMU for help will have a better support system.

I am aware that the mission of the institution is to protect and promote the effective exercise of human rights for women—their inclusion, empowerment, and gender equity—but how will we solve the existing gender inequality in the country if we do not address this situation as a whole society? In other words, how will we approach and combat machismo in our society if we continue denying men their role, responsibility, and opportunity to improve the system? This half of the population must be invited to help repair and reform the culture. But INAMU's webpage offers no specific programs for men. How are we supposed to eliminate gender inequality promoted by machismo tendencies if INAMU's strategy insists on labeling men exclusively as the individual enforcers of the inequality and purposeful performers of the violence? How are the cycles going to be broken if men's participation in reforming the culture continues to be denied?

As an alternative, your institution should adopt the strategies used in the Costa Rican Institute of Masculinity, Couples, and Sexuality (WEM in the Spanish abbreviation). Even though INAMU hired various workers from this non-government affiliated organization in the past, the alliance was never public. As a result, the support that the WEM Institute, a small nonprofit, is willing to give to men has never been transmitted to the public by INAMU, a much larger government organization. It was not until recently that I learned about the WEM Institute and their interesting approaches to gender violence. For twenty-one years, this organization has worked on gender issues by targeting the male population, focusing on topics such as violence, gender equality, and the promotion of "new forms of masculinity." It aims to free women from violence and challenge hegemonic conceptions of masculinity through therapeutic and anger management programs ("WEM"). They consider this task essential because it is the only way in which the foundations of the patriarchy and its derivations can be rebuilt rather than just broken down. This organization first began work in small communities. Today, they contribute to the construction of a positive masculinity throughout Costa Rica and three other Latin American countries ("Historia"). They advise couples, individuals, and businesses, organizing therapeutic groups on personal growth and reflection on masculinity in Central America specifically ("Programas").

With this in mind, Ms. Mora, I strongly think that something needs to change in order to make INAMU more effective and wide-reaching. In order to impact the roots of the patriarchy, the potential enablers of machismo, women *and* men, should both be included in the process. Gender equality cannot be reached if women are the only ones to be included in the solution-building for gender violence; the process must be integrated. In this sense, the WEM Institute must be better known as a resource for Costa Rican men, and in order to make this happen, the organization needs broad distribution and guidance from INAMU. The alliance with WEM will represent the INAMU's alliance with men as well. This way, gender violence will be more holistically addressed, and this will, hopefully, open a permanent road toward the elimination of cases like Eva's, the elimination of violence, and the elimination of femicides in Costa Rica.

I truly appreciate your time taking this proposal into consideration.

With fear,

Fabiola Sanabria

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