

Horror Story: Lydia Cacho's Exposé of Pedophilia Has Her Critics Up in Arms

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Photos

Lydia Cacho's Cancun

Journalist and activist Lydia Cacho is one of Mexico's most celebrated and imperiled journalists. She will be honored in Washington by Amnesty International with a human rights award, but her investigations and activism have also put her life in danger.

CANCUN, Mexico – The bodyguards linger in the steakhouse foyer, conspicuous with their handguns in lumpy fanny packs. The bulletproof SUV sits in quick-getaway position outside.

And now Lydia Cacho Ribeiro's cellphone rings.

"Yes, I got in okay," Cacho says from an out-of-the-way table. "I'm fine."

Cacho sets the phone down, a weary smile forming beneath high cheekbones and dark, deep-set eyes.

"He was worried," she says of her longtime partner, the prominent Mexican editor and columnist Jorge Zepeda Patterson. "This is my life."

A crusade against pedophiles has made Cacho, who will be in Washington tomorrow and Tuesday to be honored by Amnesty International, one of Mexico's most celebrated and imperiled journalists. She is a target in a country where at least 17 journalists have been killed in the past five years and that trailed only Iraq in media deaths during 2006. Do-gooders and victims want to meet her, want to share their stories. Bad guys – well, they want her in a coffin.

In the spring of 2005, Cacho published a searing exposé of the child abuse and pornography rings flourishing amid the \$500-a-night resorts and sugar-white beaches

of Cancun. Her book “The Demons of Eden: The Power That Protects Child Pornography” chronicles in cringe-inducing detail the alleged habits of wealthy men whose sexual tastes run to 4-year-old girls.

But her book was just a middling seller, and her fight against child abusers was getting little attention until one afternoon in mid-December 2005 – the afternoon the cops showed up.

On that day, seven months after her book was published, Cacho says, police officers from the far-off state of Puebla shoved her into a van outside the women’s center she runs on a crumbling side street well removed from Cancun’s gaudy hotel strip. They drove her 950 miles across Mexico, she says, jamming gun barrels into her face and taunting her for 20 hours with threats that she would be drowned, raped or murdered. The police have disputed her version of events, saying she was treated well.

Cacho found herself in police custody because Mexico’s “Denim King,” the textile magnate Kamel Nacif, had accused her of defamation, which at the time was a criminal offense under Mexican law. (Inspired by Cacho’s case, the Mexican Congress recently passed a law decriminalizing defamation.) Cacho had written that Nacif used his influence to protect a suspected child molester, Cancun hotel owner Jean Succar Kuri, and that one of Succar’s alleged victims was certain Nacif also abused underage girls.

Cacho’s arrest set off a furious chain reaction. She had triggered her car alarm as she was being taken into custody, a predetermined signal to alert her staff to trouble. Friends suspected that the men in uniform were only posing as police. E-mails and phone calls zinged from Cancun to Mexico City, and from there to international human rights groups. While Cacho, who was recovering from pneumonia, tried unsuccessfully to persuade her captors to stop for medicine, her friends were panicking and demanding answers.

“There was so much fear,” recalled Lucero Saldaña, then a Mexican senator. “We were thinking there might have been an attempt on her life, that she might have been kidnapped.”

Saldaña, taking no chances, was waiting when Cacho arrived at the jail in Puebla, a picturesque city east of Mexico City famed for its rich, chili-infused molé. She scrambled to arrange bail. But even the presence of a fired-up Mexican senator could not save Cacho from a humiliating strip search while a clutch of male officers loitered on the other side of a thin plastic curtain.

After nearly half a day in jail, Cacho was free on bond, though rattled. She was soon to find out how highly placed her enemies were.

Anonymous Voices

Two months later, tapes started airing on Mexican radio stations, crude male voices spewing obscenities out of car speakers in Mexico City's perpetual traffic jam and everywhere else in the country. It was clear the men were talking about Lydia Cacho. The tapes had been delivered anonymously to Mexico City newspaper and broadcast reporters, but no one knows who made the recordings.

In one conversation, presumably recorded the day of Cacho's arrest, an unidentified voice tells Nacif to pay "a woman in the jail to rape her."

"No, no, no," Nacif responds, "I've already given the order. . . . She's with the crazies and the lesbians."

But the real blockbuster was on another tape.

"My precious governor," Nacif can be heard saying.

"My hero," another voice says.

That second voice was unmistakable. It was Puebla Gov. Mario Marín, a stalwart of the Institutional Revolutionary Party, which dominated Mexico in authoritarian style for seven decades before losing its grip on the presidency in 2000.

"Well, yesterday, I gave a [expletive] whack on the head to that old bitch," Marín tells Nacif.

Nacif thanks his "precious governor" for ordering Cacho's arrest and says he will send Marín "a beautiful bottle of cognac."

Marín acknowledged to the press that the voice was his, but he said the recordings were taken out of context. His rebuttal had almost no impact. In the court of public opinion, the verdict was clear: Cacho was the victim of influence peddling and a political vendetta.

Cacho has since persuaded Mexico's Supreme Court to hear a human rights complaint – the first such case involving a journalist for a court that previously had only looked into human rights cases from the distant past. But in Mexico, where corruption and violence against women are rampant, there have been no repercussions for the central players.

Still, with each new tape, commentators went wild, many calling for Marín's resignation. Satirists went even wilder. Almost overnight, performance artists were taking to stages to mock the governor, songs were being composed and satiric cognac ads were being posted on the Internet.

"For that very special occasion, to celebrate among friends, arrives the commemorative cognac 'My Precious Governor,' begins one spoof advertisement set to the new-agey

strains of Enya's "Orinoco Flow (Sail Away)." "My Precious Governor. So that you can become a good pedophile."

Suddenly, Cacho was everywhere: the evening news, talk shows, newspaper front pages. Nacif and Marín, unwittingly, had made her a star.

Feminist from the Start

Lydia Cacho is 42 years old, but she looks younger. She keeps fit with a yoga regimen and favors tight jeans, spike-heel boots and plunging necklines. She's a head-turner and she knows it.

She also knows she doesn't fit the mold of a feminist expected by the old-style, "machismo"-dominated political system that she says infuriates her for neglecting women.

"They think we're all ugly, fat, mustachioed feminists," Cacho, who studied humanities at the Sorbonne and speaks four languages, said one recent afternoon over hibiscus flower tea at a Cancun cafe. "I don't have to dress like a man to demonstrate that I am intelligent. I am a woman. I dress like I want. If they have a problem with my attractiveness, with my sexuality, that's their problem."

Cacho's feminism sprouted in the "lost cities" outside Mexico City, the impoverished squatters' hells that developed in the 1960s and 1970s with almost no government regulation. She didn't much like playing with dolls, she says, so she spent weekends as a child in the lost cities working on homespun social aid programs with her mother, Paulette Ribeiro Monteiro, an early Mexican feminist who died four years ago.

"Her passion comes from her mother," said Lucía Lagunes, director of a Mexico City news agency that focuses on women's issues. "Her mother taught her to have ideals and to fight for them."

In more than two decades straddling activism and journalism, those ideals have been tested. Cacho has run from angry drug dealers waving AK-47s because she sheltered their battered wives. She has been threatened too many times to count.

She's gotten used to death and says she doesn't fear her own. Her grandfather, she says, died in her arms when she was 17. He was the first of 20 people who she says have breathed their last while she held them, most clients of an AIDS shelter she founded.

In 1999, she says, she was raped by a man in a bus station bathroom.

"He left me for dead and I walked out of the public bathroom at the bus station with fractured bones, but the adrenaline of fear," Cacho wrote in an e-mail. "As a journalist before, I kept writing about the importance of filing reports with the police, and after the rape I learned that the main thing is to recover and to be protected and to be more sensitive to victims of violent crimes."

A friend in the prosecutor's office told her she was probably attacked as revenge for her social work and her newspaper columns. But she decided not to pursue the case.

"I did not want to be news (ha ha)," she wrote. "I just wanted to keep going."

Digging Deep

In 2004, a journalist friend asked Cacho to co-write a book about a burgeoning child abuse scandal in Cancun. A young woman had approached the authorities and said Succar, the multimillionaire Cancun hotel owner, had begun abusing her when she was 13. Others, including her sister and girls as young as 8, also had been molested, the young woman said.

Cacho had hosted her own local radio and television shows, as well as written newspaper columns for years, but this was to be her first attempt at a nonfiction book. Still, she spun an outline in a matter of days for a book that would not only allege Succar had abused more than 100 girls, but also accuse him of laundering money for organized crime and of being protected by powerful politicians.

"Are you crazy?" she recalls her friend telling her.

The friend, whose name she keeps secret for fear of repercussions, quickly dropped out. Cacho started writing.

"Demons of Eden" opens with a 13-year-old girl, whom Cacho calls "Cintia," clutching a stuffed animal as she tells a psychologist how Succar – the man she called "Uncle Johnny" – molested her at the age of 8. Afterward, Cintia says, he brandished a knife and threatened to cut her "into pieces." Cacho quotes the girl saying, "He is the devil."

In muscular, stinging prose, Cacho writes that Succar's victims suffer as much after they approach authorities as before. A local prosecutor calls a news conference and distributes photographs of the girls, their addresses, their parents' names and even their cellphone numbers. A school "morals teacher" reveals that she knew about Succar's abuse for years but did nothing about it.

The reporters following the case are depicted as vile as well. Cacho writes of overhearing a group of male journalists speculating in a smoke-filled room about whether a 12-year-old could enjoy sex and commenting that "old Succar likes young meat."

A key moment comes when Succar's first accuser, whom Cacho calls "Emma" in her book, lures Succar to a Cancun restaurant equipped with a hidden camera set in place by law enforcement officials. In the video, Succar describes sex with 4-year-old girls as "my vice" and says he knows he is committing a crime.

Armed with such damning evidence, Cacho says, the authorities do nothing, except tip off Succar about the allegations. The heads-up gives him ample time in late 2003, she

writes, to buy a first-class ticket to the United States, where he owns a Los Angeles mansion.

Succar was arrested in Arizona in February 2004 and was extradited last July to Mexico, where he is being held in a maximum-security prison while his case is argued. José Wenceslao Cisneros, Succar's attorney, said in an interview that six of seven accusers have submitted signed affidavits recanting their testimony. He also says Emma was not a minor when she had what he calls a consensual relationship with Succar.

"Succar Kuri never abused a minor," Wenceslao says. The tapes, he says, were doctored by law enforcement officials, whom he accuses of trying to extort \$1 million from his client. As for Cacho, he calls her "a little crazy one."

Cacho says Succar bribed and pressured his accusers to sign papers recanting their allegations, adding that Emma, in particular, suffers from Stockholm syndrome.

Emma didn't want to sign, Cacho says, but her abuser still can dominate her.

'Closed Off'

It's night in Mexico City and Cacho has slipped away from her bodyguards, a risky move, but one she undertakes for a brief and increasingly rare taste of freedom. A waiter spreads shot glasses around the table at La Covadunga, the crowded and smoky hangout of Mexico City intellectuals where the clientele shouts to be heard over the slap of dominoes on tabletops.

"When you toast with tequila, you have to look a person in the eye," Cacho says as the glasses are raised. "If not, you have seven years of bad sex, which is worse than no sex."

Cacho calls over the shoeshine man and lifts her boot dramatically to be polished. Everyone is watching. A man at a neighboring table timidly asks her to autograph his copy of her book, then races off, only to return moments later to show off a sheaf of pictures of Cacho.

The conversation soon turns back to sex. Cacho likes the subject. She once wrote a novel about a couple struggling to repair their relationship after the husband contracts HIV from a prostitute.

"I love sex, don't you?" she asks, laughing and tossing back her long mane of thick, black hair.

Some of Cacho's rage at the pedophiles she has tracked so obsessively comes from her certainty that they rob victims of normal sex lives as adults. She writes of Emma struggling with sobbing fits when she tries to be intimate. Cintia, Cacho writes, wears four pairs of underwear since being molested by Succar.

"Moved by fear," Cacho writes, "her sexuality had been closed off, her right to pleasure."

Despite Cacho's notoriety, Lagunes, the news agency director, laments that child abuse still gets little attention in Mexico. The media here focus on the political scandal spawned by her case rather than the abuse itself in a country where an estimated 20,000 children are abused each year.

"It's disgraceful," Lagunes says.

Cacho writes in her epilogue that "hundreds of Mexican girls are and continue to be tortured, violated and trained by powerful men to be sold and photographed."

But she has still more to say.

Cacho is already at work on a new book, this one focused on the trafficking of women and girls. At La Covadunga, she whispers that tomorrow she has a meeting with "a really good source." She raises her eyebrows in anticipation and rubs her hands together.

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