



Fighting cholitas – or women freestyle wrestlers – competing in Bolivia. The sport has recently enjoyed a huge rise in popularity in the country

Street fighting women

They started out as a novelty act. Now Bolivia's female wrestlers are a sporting phenomenon – with a cultural message

BY PETER POPHAM
PHOTOGRAPHS BY DANIELE TAMAGNI



Her visiting card reads “Carmen Rosa: elegance and distinction in *la lucha libre* – freestyle wrestling”. And in her frilly petticoats, layered skirts, dainty pumps and bowler hat, the claim is no exaggeration. In the ring in El Alto, a high, freezing-cold suburb of the Bolivian capital La Paz, Carmen and her colleagues have no contenders for the title of the world's best-dressed wrestlers.

Las cholitas, as Bolivia's indigenous women are called, are relatively new to the fighting ring. Most of them come from families where the men are fighters, and when women's wrestling was first introduced in 2001, it was a commercial gimmick intended to pull in bigger crowds. And the crowds, overwhelmingly male, poured in, lured by the seedy fascination of watching gaudily-overdressed womenfolk bash and trample one another.

But the phenomenon has outgrown its origins. Its popularity coincides with a real improvement in the stature of Bolivia's indigenous majority, largely brought about by Evo Morales, an Aymara Indian who was elected president in 2008. For five centuries since the Spanish invasion, the cholitas belonged to the indigenous underclass, banned from voting and with no other options but working as peasants. Today, less than three years after Morales came to power, they are found in government, in the courts and in business – and Indian culture has enjoyed a big boost. The fighting cholitas are on the crest of a wave.

“I work in the family snack bar,” says Carmen Rosa, whose real name is Polonia Ana Choque Silvestre. “I'm one of the pioneers of wrestling; I was women's champion in 2004 and 2005. Bolivian women are getting stronger: there are businesswomen, women in the government, women football players... At the start, my husband was against it but now he works as my agent. Our son Vismar Junior, who is 18, is also a terrific wrestler.”

At the beginning, a local impresario trained up to 50 cholita fighters and toured them around Bolivia and Peru to packed houses. But the →

Below: Carmen Rosa (left) and Yulia la Pacena in the wrestling ring. Carmen is one of the pioneers of women's wrestling in Bolivia and was champion in 2004 and 2005



Below: Yulia la Pacena before a charity fight at a school in La Paz. Bottom: Yulia (left) and Carmen Rosa wear the colourful 'pollera' skirts that help to draw the crowds



Below: Carmen Rosa takes a pummelling during a fight.
Bottom (left to right): Yulia, Carmen and Yolanda, the three 'Goddesses of the Ring'



relationship soured when the women discovered that he was pocketing large sums from the spectators and passing a pittance on to them. "So we quit him and formed our own group, called Diosas del Ring - Goddesses of the Ring," said Carmen. Even now, they are not getting rich; Carmen earns the equivalent of £17-£20 per show, but money is not the main motive. "The public are stressed out by their lives and watch us to relax... I have 10 different costumes; I like to play my part in our cultural identity."

Another fighter, Benita the Untouchable (real name: Mariela Averanga), said, "I'm 29 and I have been fighting for seven or eight years. I've followed wrestling since I was a child because all my family are in the game. With *la pollera* - the multi-layered skirt - "it's difficult to fight, but it draws the public. I am also training to be a nurse. Wrestling does not provide enough money to live on so you need another job."

Carmen Rosa is looking forward to life outside the ring. "In the future I would like to have my own gym. I'm also about to go into politics. I think if a woman wrestler was in government it would signify a big change for all the women who have been shut out of our country's political, economic and social life. And I will fight even harder in politics than in the ring." *