

# The Role of Local Government in the Prevention of Violence against Women and Girls during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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This article discusses aspects of the emerging evidence around the impact of COVID-19 on violence against women as well as local government interventions relating to the prevention of domestic violence in Latin American countries. I show how, during the coronavirus outbreak, local governments are vital in the prevention of violence against women and girls, and I present examples of some local actions that seek to guarantee access to the appropriate support and services during the pandemic.

Keywords: Latin America, local government, violence against women and girls.

As a measure to slow down the spread of COVID-19, Latin American countries put in place sanitary lockdowns where individuals were confined to their homes and only permitted to go outdoors for essential services. A dark and unintended consequence of the coronavirus lockdowns has been the triggering of a new wave of gender-based violence and femicide in Latin America. This is the invisible side of the coronavirus pandemic, named by women's rights campaigners as *la otra pandemia* (the other pandemic). Health policies to address the coronavirus have also served to highlight how women and girls in Latin America are vulnerable to domestic violence, with women in abusive relationships finding themselves isolated from their family and friends as well as cut off from resources that can help them (United Nations Women, 2020: 4).

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, domestic violence was already one of the most serious human rights violations. Latin America has among the highest rates of gender violence in the world. Six countries (Mexico, Peru, Brazil, Argentina, El Salvador and Bolivia) represent 81 percent of femicide cases on the continent (Nice and Borushek, 2020). As the COVID-19 pandemic advances, this number is likely to grow, with multiple impacts for women's wellbeing (United Nations Women, 2020). According to the UN Women report 'Covid-19 and Ending Violence Against Women and Girls', since the outbreak of COVID-19 violence against women and girls has intensified (United Nations Women, 2020: 2). Emerging data shows that domestic abuse rose during the lockdown, with increasing numbers of calls to abuse hotlines.

In Argentina, emergency calls regarding domestic violence cases have increased by 25 percent since the lockdown started (United Nations Women, 2020: 6); in Colombia, calls to the national women's hotline were up approximately 130 percent during the first eighteen days of the country's quarantine (Sigal et al., 2020); and in Brazil, the number of occurrences of violence against women increased by 44 percent in the state of São Paulo, according to the Brazilian Public Security Forum (Forúm Brasileiro de Segurança Pública, 2020). In Chile and Bolivia, the data shows a decline in formal complaints. However, national security officers have stated that this was due to women being unable to reach protection services, rather than due to a decline in gender-based violence (United Nations Women, 2020). Yet these are not the only countries where lockdowns turned into a nightmare for women and girls. The situation is similarly severe elsewhere in Latin America, where measures taken by the authorities are often not accompanied by adequate protection for the victims.

As noted by Albuquerque and Pacheco (2020), COVID-19 is not a democratic disease. Although it does not discriminate against social class, race or gender, some segments of society are more exposed than others. For women, their fragility arises from gender issues and the social context. The intersectionality approach explains this phenomenon, as structural racism, class oppression, patriarchal relations, and other aspects create and reinforce inequalities (Bernardino-Costa, 2015). This concept reveals the vulnerabilities, disadvantages and oppression suffered by vulnerable women. In the context of the pandemic, the burden of the crisis was borne unevenly across the genders and women are often the main frontline workers. Workers deemed 'essential' are often from the Black and migrant communities and are, most likely, females in low income jobs (Anderson, Olson and Kastanis, 2020). Confined at home, women often have the double journey of professional work and home care, taking care of sick, children and elderly but without the support of their regular networks and daycare services. Trans women, indigenous women and Roma women have also been affected during the crisis and have had their vulnerabilities accentuated during this period (Albuquerque and Pacheco, 2020).

Women who have access to specialist services are more likely to report domestic violence and remain engaged with the prosecution. So engaging the help of their local services and local authorities in fighting violence against women is, therefore, critical. Despite the advances in responding to violence against women and girls in Latin American – including the institutionalisation of various protective services for women at risk of violence such as the *Lei Maria da Penha* in Brazil and the *Ley Geral de Acceso de las Mujeres a una Vida Libre de Violencia* in Mexico – defenders of women's rights rightly claim that the well-intentioned COVID-19 lockdown orders increased the amount of contact that women had with their aggressors, leading to a rise in the number of cases of domestic abuse in the region. These numbers were already high before the pandemic, but they are now even higher due to the closing of essential protection services or women's inability to reach those services.

An effective response requires reflecting on gender issues. Women must be involved in leading the recovery after COVID-19 and in future responses to global emergencies. A strategic response to the violence includes greater investment in online care services, the creation of temporary shelters for victims, psychosocial support, and a strong message from law enforcement that aggressors will be prosecuted. I highlight next some of the awareness and prevention services created by local government.

In attempting to address the violence, the Ciudad del Mexico has implemented a strategy for the prevention of violence against women and adolescents during the pandemic.

*No estas sola* (You are not alone) facilitates the reporting of domestic violence through WhatsApp. Similarly, the local authorities in the metropolitan area of the Aburrá Valley (Colombia) created the *Línea de orientación a mujeres* (Advice Helpline for Women) as a first-contact telephone care service (psychological and legal) for gender-based violence. To mitigate the effects of domestic violence, law enforcement bodies in Brasília (Brazil) have expanded a new form of registration for reports of domestic violence which can be done through the Delegacia Eletrônica da Polícia Civil do Distrito Federal (PCDF, Electronic Police Station of the Civil Police of the Federal District) and Buenos Aires (Argentina) has configured *Boti*, the city's WhatsApp service for those who need help but cannot make a phone call. Pichincha province (Ecuador) has implemented an emergency protocol named *Canasta roja* (Red Basket), in which women in imminent danger can request help and receive urgent attention by contacting a call centre and indicating the keywords *Canasta roja* in order to request emergency assistance. A similar initiative has been successfully implemented in Argentina and Chile by the national governments, where women using local commercial services, such as pharmacies or supermarkets, say *Mascarilla 19* (Mask 19) and the staff will immediately know that the woman is in a violent situation and needs help.

The increase in domestic abuse is not limited to Latin America. Italy, Spain, China and many other countries have seen similar trends. The concern in Latin America is that violence against women, which is already a widespread issue, is getting much worse. The surge in COVID-19 cases is bringing even the best-resourced health systems to the verge of collapse, including those on the front line who are responding to acts of violence (United Nations Women, 2020). The experiences above show that local governments have a critical role in addressing domestic violence. Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, they are in a position to take the lead and ensure that their services support the women and target perpetrators. At a time when vulnerable women need closer attention from policymakers, diverging practices in recording and prosecuting violence against women make it difficult to grasp the scope of the problem in Latin America (Fumega, 2020). Besides providing services to address violence against women, local and national governments need to improve and facilitate the official registration of violent incidents. Good quality, granular data can assist governments in making informed decisions in order to create effective evidence-based policies.

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