

Why Is Latin America the Most Dangerous Region in the World for Women?

Christopher Sabatini, Jimena Galindo | Tuesday, July 25, 2017

Protecting women against gender-based violence is too often overlooked as a global human rights issue. On the surface, Latin America may look like an exception. All of the region's countries have ratified the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and 14 have ratified the convention's optional protocol that permits a special U.N. committee to monitor states' compliance. Latin American countries have also committed to treaties such as the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence Against Women, which affirms that gender-based violence constitutes a violation of women's human rights and fundamental freedom.

Yet too many Latin American states are lagging behind in actually implementing these measures to protect women and end femicide, or what U.N. defines as the violent and deliberate killing of women. According to a Small Arms Survey report (<http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/gbav>), Latin America is home to 14 of the 25 countries with the highest rates of femicide in the world.

Why have Latin America's commitments not always translated into effective laws or the political will needed to uphold international obligations? In 2008, nine Latin American countries had special legislation on femicide. By 2015, 16 countries in the region had modified their laws to include a specific type of crime referring to the murder of women. However, the laws and practices set to convict perpetrators of femicide are still extremely weak.

Part of the problem of legal implementation stems from how vaguely different countries treat femicide. Unlike in Colombia, for example, in Nicaragua and Chile, the murder of women is not considered femicide if the victim has no relationship to the perpetrator. Mexico has also been unclear on what the law defines as femicide. The Mexican state of Chihuahua does not differentiate between the killing of women through extreme violence and other murders. For a murder to be considered a femicide in the state of Mexico—the country's most populous region—the victim must show signs of sexual assault or mutilation or have



Activists with signs that read in Spanish, "Stop violence against women," during a march against gender violence, La Paz, Bolivia, Oct. 19, 2016 (AP photo by Juan Karita).

experienced a history of abuse.

This lack of consistent, internationally prescribed definitions allows cases of femicide to be misidentified as general homicide, further restricting already limited data on gender violence. In the words of Adriana Quinones (<http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2017/2/take-five-adriana-quinones-femicide-in-latin-america>), U.N.

Women's country representative in Guatemala, Latin America “needs comparable statistics to analyze and compare between countries what works and what doesn't work to end femicide. When we have better statistics, we can see the patterns and the gravity of the situation, and make informed policies.”

Most cases of femicide are underreported and misidentified, which severely limits understanding of the brutal reality of femicide in the region. According to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, on average 12 women are murdered each day in Latin America.

Those numbers do not even include Brazil, which has one of the worst records of gender-based violence in the region, despite having a femicide law in place. As the U.N. Economic Commission on Latin America and the Caribbean determined, Brazil's law on femicide has not been collecting the rigorous data on the murder of women needed for enforcement.

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Overall, the femicide laws that are on the books in other Latin American countries have failed to address many of the legal and cultural roots of violence against women. The Dominican Republic, for example, has no specific criminal category for gender-based violence and has a female homicide rate of about 4 women per 100,000 women. Yet it still has lower rates of female homicide than countries that do have femicide laws, like Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala.

According to the Global Burden of Armed Violence 2015 database, El Salvador and Honduras—with rates of more than 10 female homicides per 100,000 women (<http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/gbav>)—have the second- and third-highest rates of female homicides in the world, respectively. The level of violence against women in both countries exceeds the combined rate of male and female homicides in 14 of the 50 countries with the highest murder rates in the world.

Although general violence and domestic abuse are considered to be the main contributors to high rates of femicide, drug trafficking plays a role (<http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/why-does-latin-america-have-the-world-s-highest-female-murder-rates>), too. Gangs often rape and brutally execute women who are associated with

other gangs, whether through family ties or intimate relationships, as a tactic to intimidate their enemies. Sometimes murdering women is even part of a gang initiation.

Across Latin America, wherever there is widespread narcotics trafficking and high rates of crime, there is also impunity—especially for femicide. In El Salvador and Guatemala impunity for the murder of women can exceed 90 percent (<http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/how-the-drug-trade-fuels-femicide-in-central-america>). The Organization of Salvadoran Women for Peace in El Salvador found that in 12 percent of the reported cases of violence against women, the perpetrators were the judges, prosecutors, lawyers and police officers in the communities in question. And in Mexico, the Femicide Observatory, a coalition of 43 groups that jointly document crimes affecting women, found that only 16 percent of female homicides in 2012 and 2013 were classified as femicides—and just 1.6 percent resulted in convictions.

Although progress to stem gender violence has been slow, there have been some advances. To improve its tracking of femicides, The Public Ministry of Peru has developed a femicide registry that records women's deaths in cases of intimate femicide, non-intimate femicide and femicide not based on relationships. It is seen as a best-practice model for improved data and evidence of better decision-making now that femicide is part of the country's criminal code.

Last November, Guatemala inaugurated the Prosecutor's Office for Crimes Against Femicide within its Public Ministry. And earlier this year, the northern regions of Mexico discussed the possibility of creating a special prosecutor to handle cases of violence against women, especially femicide.

Yet laws and practices to convict perpetrators of femicide are still extremely weak in Latin America. A patriarchal system of inequality and social exclusion remains high in areas plagued by poverty, crime and conflict. Moreover, as the patterns of murder demonstrate, femicide tracks largely with a general decay of security and the increase in criminality: El Salvador and Honduras rank as not only the top two countries in the region in terms of femicide, but also two of the top five globally, alongside Syria, Libya and Venezuela.

It's a pointed reminder that drug trafficking and insecurity affect the most vulnerable first. Addressing those broader, more familiar issues means focusing on those who are most at risk.

Christopher Sabatini is a lecturer at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs and the director of Global Americans (<http://theglobalamericans.org/>).

Jimena Galindo is a research associate at Global Americans.