

# **Too Close to Home: Domestic Violence in the Americas**

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**Andrew Morrison and Loreto Biehl, editors**

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# Executive Summary

The most dangerous place for a woman in Latin America and the Caribbean may be her own home.  
*Ulrica Messing, Swedish Minister for Equality Affairs*

One of the world's most violent regions, at home and on the streets, is Latin America. The homicide rate—almost 30 murders per 100,000 people—is more than twice the world average. Domestic violence is also widespread. According to surveys in the region, almost half of all women suffer from psychological abuse, while one to two women in five experiences physical violence.

Domestic and social violence are closely linked: children who experience or even witness abuse are more likely to behave violently as adults, in and outside the home. And violence carries a high cost: Its multiple effects on the economy include loss of productivity or lost wages for victims of violence. In several countries, violence has discouraged foreign investment and reduced savings, thus reducing long-term growth prospects.

Domestic violence also affects the region's growth possibilities. Women who are victims of domestic violence earn much less than their non-abused peers, which amounts to an estimated regional wage loss of 1.6 to 2.0 percent of GDP. Children who witness their mothers being abused perform poorly in school, limiting both their future labor market possibilities and their ability to contribute to the region's socioeconomic development.

While the problems of domestic and social violence are difficult to solve, there are policies and programs that can reduce their incidence. The first policy decision must be whether to target programs at specific risk factors (such as abuse of alcohol), or to undertake more comprehensive interventions at the household and community levels. The next choice is between prevention and treatment programs. Prevention programs are generally more effective and cost-efficient. They can reduce the risk of violence, increase protection, and address a variety of determinants of crime and violence. Low-cost, high-productivity measures include programs to prevent child and spousal abuse violence; violence prevention curricula in elementary and secondary schools; alcohol and substance abuse prevention programs; and steps to make environments safer, such as gun control programs, street lighting, closed circuit television monitoring of public places, and community policing initiatives. Finally, the media can play a key role in curbing domestic and social violence. Well-designed media campaigns help people change their attitudes and behavior, and can lead to an overall reduction in violence.

This book focuses on domestic violence against women and how it is linked to other forms of violence. Part I analyzes the prevalence of domestic violence against women in the region, the socioeconomic consequences of domestic violence (for women's health and labor), and causal links between violence in and outside the home. While personal losses from such violence are high, its total costs go far beyond the women involved and their families. Socioeconomic impacts include expenditures on the criminal justice system, shelters, medical care and social services such as counseling, education and prevention activities, and training costs for police, judicial and medical personnel, as well as productivity losses, absenteeism, and increased mortality and morbidity. The impact on gross domestic product from women's lower earnings alone is between 1.6 and 2.0 percent, according to estimates from Chile and Nicaragua (Chapter 3). Rafael Lozano Ascencio has calculated the burden of disease for women in Mexico City, using a measure called disability-adjusted life years (Chapter 4). Domestic violence is the third most important source of DALYS lost: after diabetes and childbirth-related conditions, but before traffic accidents or congenital abnormalities.

The tragedy of violence can be transmitted from one generation to the next, and domestic violence against women has a very damaging impact on children. Recent studies have shown that being abused as a child significantly increases the likelihood of delinquency, adult criminality and violent criminal behavior. Other research indicates that a child need not even be a victim of domestic violence; simply witnessing chronic abuse of women makes children more likely to become abusers as adults. Thus, social and domestic violence are intimately linked. Violence is largely a learned behavior, and if children are exposed to violent behavior at home, they are likely to imitate it. Chapters 1 and 3 briefly discuss the causal links between domestic and social violence.

One key issue is whether poverty is a cause of domestic violence. In Chapter 2, Efrain Gonzales de Olarte and Pilar Gavilano Llosa maintain that other factors are more important, including the man's age and employment status, whether the couple is married or not, and the length of their relationship. Poverty may be a factor that triggers or magnifies conflicts between partners. Some researchers suggest that domestic violence *seems* more prevalent in low-income households, because victims are more likely to report it to the police, or to medical personnel in emergency rooms, where they turn for assistance. By contrast, middle- and upper-income victims of abuse are better able to hide evidence of their abuse or less likely to report it, because of social norms. In fact, domestic violence is found at all levels of society. Physical violence, however, is more prevalent among the poor, while better-off women appear to suffer more psychological violence.

In all, domestic violence undermines progress toward human and economic development. New understanding of the problem is reflected in the wide range of responses at local, national, and international levels. Part II of this book highlights several very promising strategies.

In Monterrey, Mexico, a comprehensive network of services has expanded to offer victims of domestic violence assistance quickly, efficiently, and economically. Also in Mexico, men are meeting in groups to learn to overcome violent feelings and behavior toward women. In El Salvador, a system of hotlines has evolved to help that nation cope with a wave of violence. Brazil has established special police units to deal with crimes against women. Through such units, the police can offer female victims of violence greater understanding and expertise. In Costa Rica, the Supreme Court is spearheading steps to sensitize the judiciary to issues of gender-related violence. In London, Ontario, Canada, the public schools are forums for a formal education program to prevent violence. In Jamaica, a theater group dramatizes issues of domestic violence to help both men and women deal with the problem, and works with other nonprofit groups to inform women of their rights and recourse should they suffer abuse.

Part III explores the role of the mass media. With their capacity to reach wide audiences, the mass media can either reinforce violent behavior, or encourage positive change. The media can alert communities to the problem of domestic violence, provide positive role models, change attitudes toward women within the family, and publicize strategies for addressing the problem. Elena M. Suárez and Charo Quesada explore these possibilities in Chapter 13. In Chapter 14, Patricia Poppe describes the advantages of strategic communication: a coherent, comprehensive approach to inform and educate society about ways to fight violence. Colombia's former First Lady, Jacquín Strouss de Samper, summarizes a survey of public attitudes toward television and violence in Colombia. She contends that viewers want television to play a more positive role in strengthening the family and fighting violence, including domestic violence (Chapter 15).

Ultimately, domestic violence must not be merely curbed, but eliminated. In Hillary Clinton's words, "We do not believe that domestic violence is 'simply cultural.' We believe it is simply criminal." The purpose of this book is to offer insights and strategies that can help nations and people advance toward ending domestic violence.

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