# Domestic Violence in Mexico

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THE MOST heavily populated city in the world, Mexico City, has only 1 shelter for battered women located in a working-class suburb distant from the metropolitan area. A converted house serves as the shelter with limited occupancy for 3 women. To be admitted to the shelter, a woman must show evidence that she is in the process of filing a legal claim against her partner.

In Mexico, violence against women in their homes has remained, in most cases, out of the mainstream concerns of the medical profession, with relatively few publications on the subject in the medical literature. Change takes time. Almost 50 years ago, the phenomenon of violence in the home was rarely discussed as a medical problem anywhere in the world. Within the last 30 years, medical attention has increased, at first focusing on child abuse.[1] Domestic violence has been underreported as a consequence of what has been described as the physicians' reticence to open Pandora's box and confront problems beyond medical expertise.[2-4] A health system operating in close collaboration with government institutions, a supportive judicial system, shelters, and self-help organizations for battered women improves the likelihood of detection and referral of women who need assistance.

**See also pp 1903 and 1915.**

Violence is part of the lives of many women in urban as well as rural Mexico (Figure). The statistics on the diversity of problems brought by survivors of domestic violence seeking attention in medical settings, although fragmentary, have shown similar features as those from reports from other nations.[5-7] In Mexico, the home is the most dangerous place for women and children; men are more at risk outside the home.[8]

## EPIDEMIOLOGY OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN MEXICO

Ramirez and Vazquez[9] conducted a cross-sectional study on the epidemiology of violence within the home against women and girls older than 12 years in the state of Jalisco. Among the findings, 44% of 1163 rural women and girls and 57% of 1228 urban women and girls reported being physically abused in their homes. They reported that the abuse was inflicted by husbands in 60% of cases and by parents in 40%. Among the demographic variables examined, low levels of education and families with 7 or more children were associated with domestic violence.[9]

In 1995, the attorney general's office in Mexico City reviewed the registers of the family courts and randomly selected 837 women who were not employed outside the home from the 16 suburbs of the city (mean age, 26 years). Of these 837 women, 61% (502) reported being physically abused at least once by their husbands or partners.[10] Of these 502 battered women, 65 (13%) were not willing to complete a legal claim. For 442 (88%) of the cases, alcohol intake was associated.[11] In Tijuana, Baja California Norte (population, 747 381), 2 cases of domestic violence were reported daily in 1994. In San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas (population, 89 335), 100 cases of domestic violence were reported in 1994.[12]

In 1987, the Research Center for the Fight Against Domestic Violence was founded in Ciudad Nezahualcoyotl, a heavily populated shantytown in urban Mexico City with a population close to 2 million. In 1990, the research center sponsored a survey of domestic abuse in the town. Social workers from the Maravillas Health Center interviewed 342 women, randomly selected from a sample of women living in households in the town. The survey included demographic data, type of abuse reported (verbal, physical, psychological, or sexual), effects of the abuse (physical, psychological, and work-related), and problem-solving strategies. Thirty percent (102) of the women reported being forced to have sexual intercourse with their partners. Overall, 113 (33%) of the women reported surviving attacks of domestic violence. Of these, 86 had been abused by their spouses, 48 had been verbally abused, 26 physically abused, and 13 sexually abused. Of the 26 women who reported physical abuse, 7 stated that the attacks included a weapon (eg, guns, sticks, canes, and knives). Ten women reported that the abuse had caused physical injuries, although the extent and severity were not detailed. Five women said they had been abused during pregnancy, which is similar to the figure reported by the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (17%).[13] Fifty percent of the 113 survivors of abuse reported that the abuse had taken place in the presence of other people (children, relatives, or neighbors). Only 6 women had reported an episode of domestic violence to the authorities and only 3 had initiated legal action.[14-16]

Surveys from other Latin American countries have disclosed similar results.[17]

## CULTURE AS A BARRIER FOR BATTERED WOMEN

In a study of Anglo-American women and Mexican-American women attending shelters in the United States, the severity and type of assault did not differ between them; however, their concept of what constituted domestic violence differed.[18] Anglo-American women perceived more types of behavior as being abusive and exhibited a less tolerant attitude toward abuse by their husbands than did Mexican-American women. Women are more likely to accept certain levels of abuse as normal when immersed in cultures that grant men the implicit right to control and censure their behavior. Heise et al[16] and Campbell[19] describe the concept of the "moving target" or perceptual change, whereby a woman begins to recognize certain behaviors as abusive only when she is subjected to an analysis of the situation and is able to recognize that she is entitled to a life free of violence.

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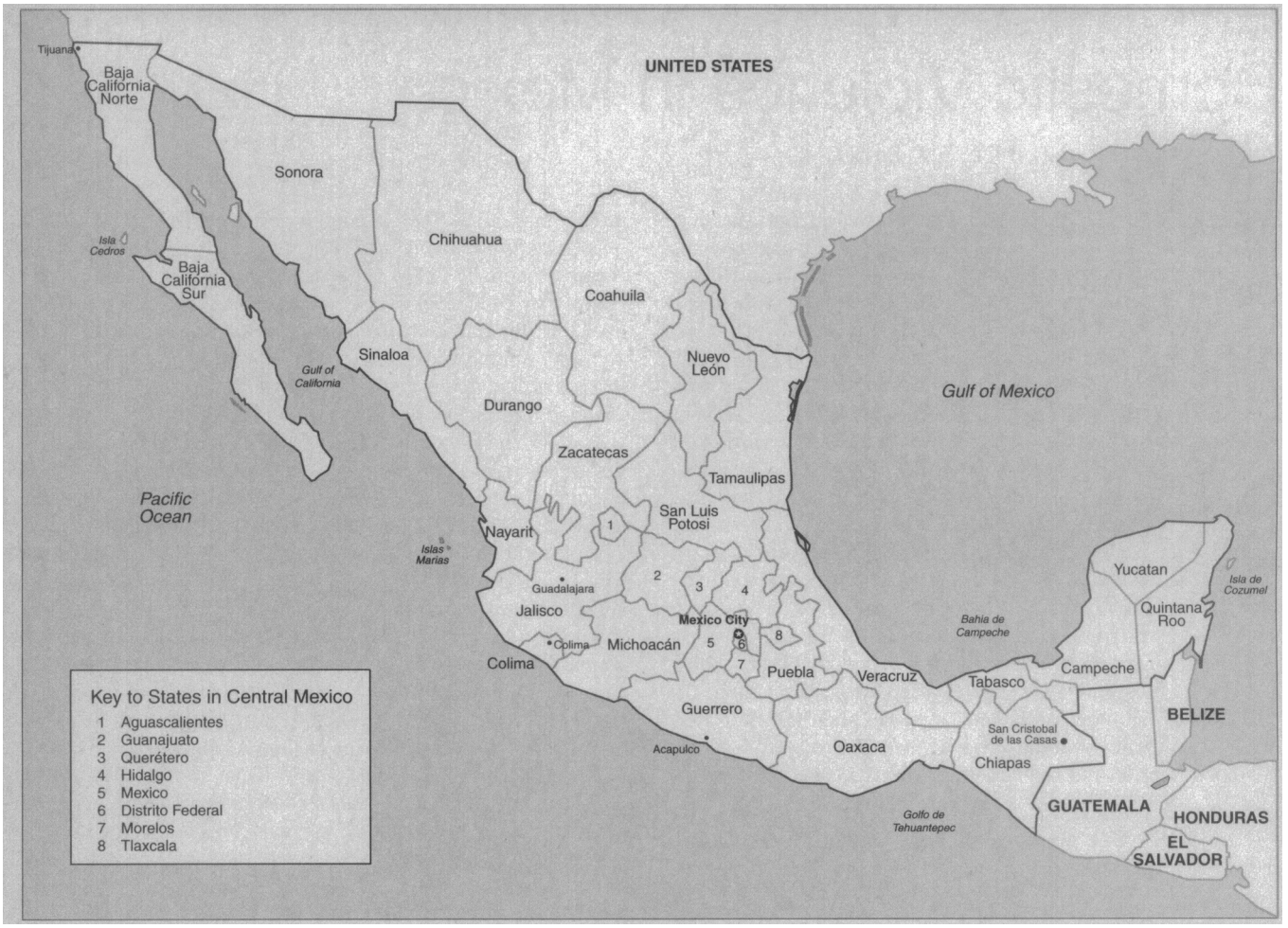


Cities and states in Mexico.

## Domestic Violence in Rural Mexico

Stereotypes are a simplistic way of understanding cultures, and the image of the Mexican macho/machismo is a commonly recognized and accepted stereotype. This stereotype has been reinforced by some ill-considered beliefs about wife battering that seem culturally determined, such as the instances in which domestic violence is not necessarily a hidden and shameful act. For example, acts of domestic violence may be boasted about among Mexican men as signs of prowess, with statements such as, "If I don't hit her, she'll think I don't love her"—a common statement that may appear outlandish to outside observers.

Violence is a common life experience of many of the underprivileged of Mexico. Research has shown how low socioeconomic status participates in the genesis and manifestations of this phenomenon with a marked preference for more physical forms of violence. For example, Lara[20] described the lives of poor women in Mexico, characterized by inadequate housing, insufficient services such as education and transportation, low-paying jobs, crime, sexual abuse against the young, and living conditions that make women more vulnerable to abuse.

In rural sectors of Mexico, a tradition of violence against the vulnerable has existed for centuries, first at the hands of the conquistadores and later at the hands of the landowners. For example, in excerpts of a Jalisco prison record dating from 1895, a woman accused of abandoning her abusive husband writes: "Good-bye, I wish to God you marry again so that you can beat your wife and she will leave you as I have done."[21]

Anthropological and historical studies of rural communities in Mexico have been the focus of interest for many years. An anthropologist's description[22] of husbands and wives in a Mexican village in 1949 mentions how wife beating was a common occurrence, especially in instances when the woman questioned her traditional role and engaged in activities that kept her away from the home, a state of affairs not welcomed by rural men then and now.

Consulting the registers of the local jail in a town in central Mexico between 1880 and 1910, González[23] studied the historical roots of violence against peasant women in Mexico, comparing their status with that of contemporary rural women.

Several records from the registers described women who were severely beaten when they failed to serve meals in a quick and expeditious manner or young female servants who were raped by the heads of their households. The same results tend to be reproduced today, only with slight variations. Some reports[24-26] have disclosed alarming figures, although the lack of adequate scientific research in the area of domestic violence makes actual prevalence difficult to determine. As with violence in other social groups, rural women are battered as a corrective measure geared toward imposing male authority

and to discourage behaviors that question the tenet that women are possessions and are, therefore, subject to disciplinary measures in the form of physical force.

To this day, violence against women in rural areas mimics the pattern of power and domination exhibited by peasant men at the turn of the century. One hundred years ago, almost no options were open to women who wanted to escape violent relationships. A recent study found a similar environment for survivors of domestic violence in some contemporary rural areas.[27] A commonly held belief in some rural areas is that marriage lasts forever, so that when men die, "women will follow them to continue serving them in heaven."[28] Additional cultural factors to consider are that rural women tend to marry or live in a common law marriage at an earlier age than women in the city, and their childbearing years start soon after menarche. The existence of economic dependence and the common practice of the newlywed woman moving in to live with her in-laws, thus curtailing her own independence within the household, increase the stress of newly married couples. Nevertheless, young rural women survivors of domestic violence have begun to challenge the concept that the marital bond is insoluble.

### Domestic Violence Among Mexican Immigrants to the United States

Women residing outside their own countries must manage their daily routines while simultaneously adjusting to a different culture. Mexican women living in the United States as illegal aliens face additional problems. They seldom speak English (which produces a climate of social isolation), they lack the necessary education to hold well-paying jobs, and their legal status makes fear of deportation a deterrent against reporting episodes of domestic violence, or seeking help. Thus, the statistics on abuse among illegal immigrants are incomplete because of underreporting.

Approximately 8 million Mexicans have immigrated to the United States, and many of them live in California and Texas. These states have had to accommodate this new demographic reality in their budgets, and a growing number of shelters for battered women now service the immigrant population. Some service centers offer hot lines in various languages, and their trained counselors speak fluent Spanish. The children of battered women are given English classes or are enrolled in school The women are also offered legal counseling, especially in immigration matters. These centers aim to reduce the cultural gap for women seeking help by empowering them and translating a modus operandi that is culturally foreign to them.[29]

## JUDICIAL OBSTACLES FOR BATTERED WOMEN

In Mexico, an impediment for understanding the actual prevalence of domestic violence is the amount of legal problems involved, which is an important cause of underreporting.[8] The bureaucratic procedures that must be completed before filing a claim for domestic violence are such that many women prefer to let the incident go unreported to the authorities. One report estimates that 80% of instances of domestic violence are not registered because in many cases the judicial authorities consider that episodes of domestic violence constitute a private (not a public) matter, an attitude that should change once the law concerning domestic violence is modified.[30]

The current penal law in Mexico requires a woman presenting a claim of domestic violence to show evidence of motive, even when physical bruises are obvious. In addition, a witness has to accompany the woman to attest that her bruises are in fact the result of domestic violence.

In 1974, the following addendum was made to Article 4 of the Mexican Constitution: "Men and women are equal before the law." However, the addendum has done little for battered women during the last 20 years. Domestic violence is not addressed in the penal code,[30] and sanctions for violence are based on the severity of the wound as measured in time to heal. For wounds that take less than 2 weeks to heal, there is no serious sanction against the aggressor. For wounds that take more than 2 weeks to heal, the sanctions stated in the penal code are lenient and include mostly fines that are determined on the basis of the perpetrator's salary. The severity of the wounds required by the judicial system and the time restrictions for healing deter legal claims of domestic violence.

The legal barriers to reporting domestic violence been challenged during the last 15 years by academics, justice ministers, and activists who have tried to educate legislators about the social and health consequences of domestic violence. Reform groups are working to overturn shortcomings in the law that limit and trivialize the application of sanctions to offenders. Similar efforts have already proven successful in other Latin American cultures. For example, Puerto Rico has 27 laws against domestic violence—battering is punishable with prison sentences of 12 to 18 months in prison, assault is punishable with sentences of 3 to 5 years, and spousal sexual abuse is punishable with sentences of 15 to 50 years.[31] In Peru,[32] 16 laws make the government the responsible agent to secure a woman's safety, with the option for the judge to declare a marital separation in instances of wife battering. Chile has 8 laws that mandate a batterer to attend up to 6 months of psychological counseling and payment of a fine equalling 10 days of wages. Chilean judges may also dictate restraining orders to secure a woman's safety.[33]

The next session of the Congress in Mexico City (September 1996) will debate 2 proposals submitted to create a law to penalize domestic violence in instances of physical, psychological, and sexual abuse. Extreme neglect will also be included. Legislators are optimistic because in the beginning of 1995 Mexico signed the *Interamerican Convention to Prevent, Sanction and Eradicate Violence Against Women.*[34]

Change will not come solely from modifications to the law or with stricter sanctions against aggressors. Educational programs aimed at prevention of the problem and effective solutions for the abused are also needed. The current system tends to be excessively lenient with the aggressor, provides the abused few legal options, and is biased in favor of male perpretators. For example, Azaola-Garrido[35] reports that women convicted of homicide in Mexico receive on average a 30% longer sentence than men (mean of 8 vs 6 years in jail). Men who have killed a relative receive a mean of 18.6 years in prison whereas women who have killed a relative receive a mean sentence of 23 years.

A retrospective review[35] of records of 450 prisoners convicted of homicide (400 men and 50 women) from a prison in Mexico City showed that 308 men (77%) had killed in street fights or assaults and 32 (8%) were convicted for killing a relative. Thirty-eight women (76%) were convicted of killing a relative. Of the 32 men who killed a relative, 16 had killed their spouse or partner. Of the women who killed a relative, 26 had killed their children or stepchildren, 11 their partner

or spouse, and 1 her mother. Thirty-five of the convicted women reported being survivors of family violence (sexual assault, verbal and physical abuse, and childhood abandonment). Thirty-three women reported being abused by their partners, and 30 reported suffering physical abuse, torture, and verbal insults at the hands of the police either when arrested or when they had previously gone to the police to report attacks from their spouses.[36] The mean age of these women was 26 years at the time of imprisonment and 16 years when they left their parents' home. Yet these factors are seldom considered by the judge when dictating the prison term. The disparity in prison terms between men and women has its roots in the legal system, as domestic violence is not defined in the penal code as a serious offense and cannot be considered as an extenuating circumstance in the homicide of a perpetrator of domestic violence.

From the legal records of injuries and assaults suffered by women, a disturbing finding is the number of deaths of Mexican women defined as "injuries for which it is not determined whether accidentally or purposefully inflicted." Recent national mortality data for men and women show that 47 823 deaths were reported as "not determined whether accidentally or purposefully inflicted" during the years 1979 through 1992 (ie, 10 deaths per day). Researchers in the field point to significant inconsistencies in the national classification and coding systems as an additional problem (M. Hijar, PhD, oral communication, April 1996).

According to a newspaper report,[37] the records of the district attorney's office of Mexico City show that between 1989 and 1994, the number of jail sentences for those who caused "intentional" deaths was 22.5% for homicides involving male victims and 12.8% for homicides involving female victims. This means that 77% of male homicides and 87% of female homicides were left unpunished. Both these figures are unsatisfactory, but again they are worse for women.[38]

From 1989 through 1994, hospitals and clinics in Mexico City reported attending a yearly average of approximately 28 000 people suffering intentional injuries, 21 000 men (76%) and 6700 women (24%). A total of 5200 (78%) of the women had been injured by their spouse or by a male member of the family, 1850 (28%) filed charges, and 102 sentences (1.5%) were passed.[37]

## SERVICES FOR SURVIVORS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Family violence affects all groups in society, but certain sociocultural aspects such as level of education and economic status may have a greater impact on the way in which violence manifests itself in cultures that are more permissive than others with regard to tolerance for the mistreatment of the vulnerable.[38] Mexico is no exception, and domestic violence must compete for attention with other difficult-to-manage public health problems such as alcoholism, malnutrition, and infectious diseases.

In Mexico, aside from grassroots organizations, a few scattered government institutions have recently been created in the capital city and in some states to include domestic violence in their list of social and health problems demanding attention.[39] In 1979, a nongovernmental organization was created to help survivors of rape. In 1984, the organization's scope was broadened and the Orientation Center for Domestic Violence was created. In 1995, the center reported 500 annual cases of domestic violence against women—40% included reports of sexual violence, 76% battering, and 99% psychological abuse. Of the women who sought help following sexual assault, 15% became pregnant by the aggressor.[40,41] Administrators at the center report that in cases of emergency, women are referred for temporary shelter to institutions like the Salvation Army or convents and religious organizations that are and have been actively involved for centuries in the care of survivors of violence. Recently, a shelter for pregnant teenagers run by a Roman Catholic priest was opened in Ciudad Nezahualcoyotl in the suburban area of Mexico City. The shelter also provides care for battered women.

In 1990, the attorney general's office created the Center for the Attention of Domestic Violence in Mexico City. Earlier, the state of Colima founded the "Procuraduría de Asuntos de la Mujer" (Attorney's Office for Women's Affairs) when a woman governor was in office. These centers report an increasing willingness of the population to denounce domestic violence, an aspect that has made the numbers of reported cases increase. The Center for the Attention of Domestic Violence receives an average of 1500 monthly reports of family violence, of which 90% come from women and 10% come from men reporting instances of domestic violence (usually child neglect and abuse). This center, unique in the country, offers a multidisciplinary approach with a staff of 50, including psychologists, physicians, social workers, and lawyers attending approximately 100 new cases daily. Some women seek legal counseling when considering divorce, to help obtain alimony payments, or simply to have an official record of domestic violence so divorce will be granted in the future. Through outreach programs in the community and a referral network, the center has increased its services by an estimate of 600% since beginning operation in 1990. The figures for the first half of 1995 show a total number of 9253 domestic violence claims, which represents 21% of the 41 000 violent felonies registered in the entire city during the same period.[33,34,42]

Since its inception in 1989, the Human Rights Commission of Mexico has approached the phenomenon of violence against women, children, and the elderly as one that is endemic in marginal socioeconomic groups. The opening statement of the commission's publication on women's rights reads as follows: "A society that is willing to have only one of its sexes profit from the benefits of development and modernity is condemned to forget more than half of its labor force, women."[43] Domestic violence has been clearly defined as a violation of a fundamental human right, which seems appropriate in a country like Mexico where many of its citizens are increasingly aware of their political and health care rights but are skeptical of official institutions.

In 1994 and 1995, the Human Rights Commission of Mexico received 9000 requests for assistance. One of the founding pillars of the commission has been community education programs aimed at creating an understanding of human rights and domestic violence. Through brochures, symposia, radio and television broadcasts, and continuing education courses in universities,[43] the Women's Program of the Human Rights Commission of Mexico and other nongovernmental organizations like the Mexican Academy of Human Rights have worked to bring domestic violence to the forefront of the political agenda.

## CONCLUSION

It is unquestionable that domestic violence is a public health problem in Mexico, yet researchers and policymakers have yet to define the scope of the problem and the intensity of the action and resources required to address the problem. Imme-

diate actions must include continued research on the health effects, resulting social dynamics, and psychological consequences of domestic violence, widespread participation of the medical profession,[44] inclusion of domestic violence as part of the curriculum in medical schools,[13] changes to the current penal code and legal system, police training to ensure the safety of women living with repeat offenders, restraining orders for stalkers and ex-partners, use of hot lines, creation of more shelters, and behavior modification education for violent men.

Reform of Mexican law to appropriately penalize perpetrators of domestic violence is expected this year. In addition, efforts to elucidate Mexican women and children's "unknown" causes of death should be made, similar to those implemented in the United States, where child death review teams have been created to address the death of a child under questionable circumstances.[45]

The state of domestic violence in Mexico, as in many other countries, stands in agreement with the following remarks from Koshland[46]:

[C]ultural acceptance is a contributing factor. Many cultures have an unwritten code that the husband can command and deserves to control the wife. The wife's personal fear is only one of the factors that lead many to tolerate the abuse. Economic dependence, desire to preserve the home and concern about separation from the children add to the reasons for a woman's unwillingness to leave or to press charges even when the police intervene for an urgent call for help.

However, the way in which Mexican women respond to violence in the home has begun to evolve. This change has been influenced by increased access to new information, the portrayal of the "ideal" contemporary family on television, women's evolving expectations about an autonomous role within the couple, women holding jobs before marriage (making them more aware of the means for subsistence), and the growing awareness that battered women can initiate legal action or return to their paternal household. Mexican women have started to understand their own rights within interpersonal relationships, something not common in Mexico in the past.[21]

Active social and political participation in Mexico is an emerging phenomenon, and it is increasingly acknowledged that health care institutions and professionals must play a key role in the attention to women's health. It is through physicians women will seek help throughout their life—when they give birth, become ill, and take their children and parents for medical care. In Mexican society, physicians are held in high regard, and as a result, they should lead Mexico's attention to the public health crisis of domestic violence.

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