

Violence against Women in Latin America

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The history of violence against women in Mexico spans many years and affects both rural and urban communities. In historical terms, it is not markedly different from the patterns of violence experienced by women in various parts of the world. Across diverse economic, social, and political contexts, women have been subjected to acts of violence perpetrated by individuals both known and unknown to them throughout history.

On average, women have less physical strength than men, and their reproductive anatomy includes internal structures that can be subjected to invasive acts. These physiological characteristics, when combined with gendered power imbalances, increase women's vulnerability to sexual violence. In Latin America, violence against women is a deeply rooted problem that can be traced back to the times of the Spanish conquest. This is not to say that such violence did not exist prior to colonization; however, the destruction of cultural records and institutions brought about by the conquest has left us with limited knowledge about the nature of gender relations in pre-Hispanic societies.

When the Spaniards arrived in Mesoamerica, they not only took the lands and resources that were valuable to them, such as gold, as Eduardo Galeano would say,¹ but also the women, from whose sexual appropriation the mestizaje we all share as current Mesoamericans derives. Our most typical patronymics speak of our painful yet undeniable past. They are formed from the Spanish "el hijo de" with the ending ez, as seen in my surnames Vázquez and Gomez. This is like what occurs in other cultures that are influenced by processes of invasion and conquest.

Violence against women dates to this era when women were sexually abused by the conquerors and, consequently, were the ones who lost. Octavio Paz calls this woman the open one, the "rajada."² In contrast, the man who was not killed but prevailed during the conquest does not want to be like that loser, like that "rajada." He wants to be the man, the victor. Once the conquest was over, the woman remained in a state of defeat, while the man became the new victor, the macho, who, as we would say in Mexico, "no se raja," that it is not to be weak nor a loser like that woman. It doesn't matter that this is due to her own natural condition.

The preeminence of the man over the woman has been there since then with machismo, that although diminished, it is still present in our days.

Based on this precedent, we find that the maintenance of male dominance over women results in situations of violence against them, a fact that in Latin America is alarming. According to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, approximately 12 women are murdered every day in the region, which amounts to a femicide every 2 hours.³ A study by the World Health Organization (WHO) indicates that between 17% and 53% of women in Latin America and the Caribbean have experienced physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner at some point in their lives.⁴

In Mexico, we had a very serious problem regarding this in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, several years ago. Ciudad Juárez is one of the busiest Mexican cities bordering the US. The phenomenon of the “Muertas de Juárez” refers to a series of murders of women in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, that began to be noticed in 1990. As reported by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in 2003, 268 women and girls were murdered between 1993 and early 2002.⁵ Most of the victims were young women working in maquiladoras—assembly plants predominantly owned by American companies or with significant U.S. investment. Many of these factories opened along the Mexico-U.S. border following NAFTA in the mid-1990s.⁶ The enrollment of young, low-income women from rural areas into these factories created a demographic that was both economically visible and socially vulnerable to violence.

Although most companies provided transportation to and from the factories, these arrangements were often unsafe. Workers regularly encountered dangerous conditions while commuting, increasing their risk of assault or disappearance. This combination of factors—together with a culture of impunity in the city and the failure of authorities to ensure women’s safety contributed to making them easy targets for criminal acts.

The situation of the “deaths of Juárez” sparked protests both in Mexico and abroad. Women's groups and human rights defenders demanded justice and changes in security policies. This phenomenon also inspired artistic works that addressed gender-based violence and human rights. Figure 1 shows a memorial of pink crosses created in Los Angeles in 2005 to honor the victims of femicide in Juárez.



Figure 1. *Memorial of pink crosses created in Los Angeles in 2005 as a tribute to the victims of femicide in Juárez.* Photo by Denise Rowlands, Wikimedia Commons, licensed under CC BY 2.0.

This issue cannot be understood without considering the context of drug trafficking and the violence associated with it. Gender-based violence, impunity, and the struggle for territorial control among cartels continue to affect the lives of many women and the general population in Ciudad Juárez. The situation has left a profound mark on this society and remains a significant challenge for the country.

Now, in more recent times, and particularly in the State of Mexico, it is estimated that around six women are murdered each day due to gender-based violence. According to the National Public Security System, 212 femicides were reported nationwide between January and April 2025, with 24 of them occurring in that state—the highest number recorded across the country.⁷

In a patriarchal culture such as Mexico's, women are often held responsible for the violence they experience. Victims are frequently accused of having provoked the abuse-by dressing "inappropriately," walking alone at night, attending social gatherings, or being involved with a "problematic" partner. In short, discourse tends to shift blame from the perpetrator to the victim, reinforcing patterns of impunity and social tolerance toward gender-based violence.

Another manifestation of impunity stems from the revictimization women often face when reporting violence to the authorities. In many cases, their complaints are dismissed or minimized, with officials invoking the same prejudiced arguments mentioned above. Victims are frequently told that no action can be taken unless there are clearer or more severe signs of abuse.

Fortunately, protests and public demonstrations are emerging to demand justice for women who have been abused, disappeared, or murdered. In Mexico, as in the world, March 8 is commemorated as International Women's Day. It is not a day of celebration but a remembrance of the struggle that previous generations have started for a better future for Mexican women.

The protest for justice is growing larger every day. One of the most powerful protest compositions in recent years is the anthem created by the Chilean feminist collective Las Tesis, titled *Un violador en tu camino*. This performance, which includes the phrase “Y la culpa no era mía” (“And it wasn’t my fault”), has become a rallying cry for the feminist movement across Latin America and beyond.⁸ Various initiatives have sought to expose gender-based violence and demand accountability from authorities. Even so, society continues to blame women for what they have been victims of.

Unfortunately, these justifications are not voiced exclusively by men. At times, they come from women themselves, who blame each other or even internalize the guilt. Despite the evidence, some women raised in deeply patriarchal environments believe that responsibility lies with those who allegedly “provoke” such reactions from men.

On social media, Mexican women have launched creative and impactful campaigns intended to encourage public reflection and engage with this social reality. One of the most remarkable of these proposed the idea:

Y la culpa no era mía, dijo la mujer que salió de la fiesta,
Y la culpa no era mía, dijo la niña que jugaba en el parque,
Y la culpa no era mía, habría dicho la bebé que aún no sabía hablar,

referring to the blame often placed on a woman who was late to a party, the girl returning home from school, and perhaps the most heartbreaking case of all – the baby who couldn’t even speak yet.⁹

Nevertheless, women continue to be attacked indiscriminately. In Mexico, in 2021, I recall the news about a case where a 106-year-old woman was raped and murdered in her own home,¹⁰ along with cases of young girls who were kidnapped and later found in graves near their homes. Many graves have been uncovered containing the remains of teenagers, young women, mothers, and grandmothers, many of whom experienced sexual violence and tragic ends without any justification. Official statistics highlight the severity of this issue: in 2022, 139 femicides were reported among females under 18 years old, alongside thousands of cases involving girls aged one to 17 seeking medical care for sexual violence.¹¹

As stated at the beginning of this document, the roots of this issue appear to trace back to the era when indigenous women were abused by the conquerors, who left them in a position of subjugation and defeat. Acts of violence against women continue to be perpetrated today, despite numerous awareness campaigns promoted among the general population.

One example of cultural resistance is *Canción sin miedo* (“Fearless song”), a song composed in 2020 by Mexican singer Vivir Quintana (see Figure 2), who was born in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, in 1987. The song gained prominence as an anthem of protest and empowerment in the fight against gender-based violence in Mexico. It demands justice from the government by listing real and symbolic cases of violence against women:¹²

“Soy Claudia, soy Esther y soy Teresa,
Soy Ingrid, soy Fabiola y soy Valeria,
Soy la niña que subiste por la fuerza,
Soy la madre que ahora llora por sus muertas.
Y soy esta que te hará pagar las cuentas.
¡Justicia, justicia, justicia!
[...] Cantamos sin miedo, pedimos justicia,
Gritamos por cada desaparecida.
[...] Que caiga con fuerza el feminicida.”
(I am Claudia, I am Esther, and I am Teresa,
I am Ingrid, I am Fabiola, and I am Valeria,
I am the girl you forced into your car,
I am the mother now mourning her dead.
And I am the one who will make you pay.
Justice, justice, justice!
[...] We sing without fear, we demand justice,
We shout for every missing woman.
[...] Let the femicide fall with all its weight).



Figure 2. Still image by Vivir Quintana (00:01:23). Video published on YouTube by Vivir Quintana, November 25, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VLLyzqkH6cs>

Many people seem to be aware of the problem and claim to reject such violence; nevertheless, the situation persists. It appears that the issue is often overlooked or minimized by the government, which remains preoccupied with other pressing matters such as poverty, organized crime, and corruption.

Currently, for the first time in Mexico's history, we have a female president. During her inauguration, much of the discourse focused on Mexican women—now increasingly empowered and increasingly free. One of the key statements read: “I don't come alone; we all—women—come together.”¹³ Many Mexicans look to this new leader's administration with hope, expecting that, because she is a woman and seemingly very aware of what that means in a society like Mexico's, she might mark the beginning of a new era. Only time will tell whether this hope will be fulfilled.

Hope does not lie in reversing the roles of oppression—where men become the abused—but in building a more just society in which all people can coexist equitably and respectfully. A society without male dominance or female dominance, but one in which each of us is recognized, first and foremost, as a human being.

NOTES

1. Eduardo Galeano, *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent*, trans. Cedric Belfrage (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1997).
2. Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude: Life and Thought in Mexico*, trans. Lysander Kemp (New York: Grove Press, 1961).
3. Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), “At Least 11 Women Are Victims of Femicide Every Day in Latin America and the Caribbean,” press release, November

- 22, 2024, <https://www.cepal.org/en/pressreleases/least-11-women-are-victims-femicide-every-day-latin-america-and-caribbean>
4. Pan American Health Organization/World Health Organization (PAHO/WHO), “Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence against Women Widespread in 12 Latin American and Caribbean Countries,” press release, January 17, 2013, <https://www.paho.org/en/news/17-1-2013-intimate-partner-and-sexual-violence-against-women-widespread-12-latin-american-and>
 5. Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), *The Situation of the Rights of Women in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico: The Right to Be Free from Violence and Discrimination*, OEA/Ser.L/V/II.117, Doc. 44, rev. 1 (2003), <https://www.cidh.org/annualrep/2002eng/chap.vi.juarez.htm>
 6. Congressional Research Service, *Industry Trade Effects Related to NAFTA*, Congressional Research Service Report RL31386 (2001), accessed June 19, 2025, <https://www.congressionalresearch.com/RL31386/document.php>
 7. Secretariado Ejecutivo del Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública, *Información sobre violencia contra las mujeres: Incidencia delictiva y llamadas al 9-1-1 de emergencia. Cifras con corte al 30 de abril de 2025* (Ciudad de México: Gobierno de México, 2025), <https://drive.google.com/file/d/14FrY4TUIlgoiSp8sd675ikQgg5PkHCYL/view>
 8. Paula Serafini, “‘A Rapist in Your Path’: Transnational Feminist Protest and Why (and How) Performance Matters,” *Feminist Theory* 21, no. 2 (2020): 147–63, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549420912748>
 9. This phrase is the author’s own adaptation of versions circulating on social media related to feminist protest campaigns inspired by *Un violador en tu camino* by Las Tesis.
 10. *Abuso sexual contra adultas mayores: La violencia de género no tiene límites*, Coordinación de Género UNAM, septiembre 14, 2021, <https://coordinaciongenero.unam.mx/2021/09/abuso-sexual-contra-adultas-mayores-la-violencia-de-genero-no-tiene-limites/>
 11. Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI), *Estadísticas a propósito del día internacional de la eliminación de la violencia contra la mujer*, November 2023, https://www.inegi.org.mx/contenidos/saladeprensa/aproposito/2023/EAP_VCM_23.pdf
 12. Vivir Quintana, “Canción sin miedo,” YouTube video, 3:48, published November 25, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VLLyzqkH6cs>
 13. Claudia Sheinbaum. “No llego sola, llegamos todas,” YouTube video, 1:37. Published May 30, 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dn9L67Vde6s>.