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Costa Rica Bolsters Programs to Prevent Violence Against Women

by *George Rodríguez*

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Domestic violence is an environment where there is an abusive exercise of power targeted at women, ranging from basic control—what women do, how they dress, whom they relate with—to extreme aggression or femicide, said Alejandra Mora, president of Costa Rica’s Instituto Nacional de las Mujeres (Women’s National Institute, INAMU).

Twenty-two femicides were recorded in Costa Rica last year—five fewer than in 2015 and the same number as in 2014—or an average of two such murders per month.

Mora, who also heads the Ministerio de la Condición de la Mujer (Women’s Status Ministry), told the Latin America Data Base (LADB) that solving the problem has to involve society as a whole, not just institutions such as INAMU or the Security and Justice ministries.

In Costa Rica, where authorities are concerned about a rising trend in the general homicide rate, the gender violence issue is addressed through a variety of initiatives, which include not only women and children, but men as well. Local governments, as well as communities and families, should realize that protecting women’s lives is a shared responsibility, Mora said.

Her views coincide fully with those of Costa Rica security officials, who are implementing strategies to prevent violence that promote the participation of local governments and community organizations. The strategies place particular emphasis on children and teenagers.

According to data from the Organismo de Investigación Judicial (Judicial Investigations Bureau, OIJ), homicides in Costa Rica jumped from 8.8 to 11.8 per 100,000 population between 2012 and 2016.

In comparison, Nicaragua, its neighbor to the north, saw nine homicides per 100,000 population last year, while Panama, to the south, saw 10 homicides per 100,000. Those statistics differ dramatically from the figures of the countries that make up the area known as the Northern Triangle of Central America ([NotiCen, March 31, 2016](#), [Sept. 1, 2016](#), [Oct. 13, 2016](#)): El Salvador, with 81.7 homicides per 100,000, Guatemala with 27.3, and Honduras with 58 ([NotiCen, Jan. 5, 2017](#)).

Organized crime

General violence in Central America is largely a result of the presence of organized crime, mainly drug trafficking networks, and in the case of the Northern Triangle, of violent gangs that, among other illegal dealings, also take part in drug trafficking.

The somber scenario has turned women and children into vulnerable actors. In Costa Rica, where women make up 52% of its population of 4.7 million, legislation is in place to protect women from gender violence. Nevertheless, as in the rest of the region, machismo is a deeply-rooted cultural phenomenon that, in its most severe version, claims women’s lives—281 in the past 10 years in Costa Rica, according to official data.

"It's important to distinguish between domestic violence and social violence, because our country has showed an increase in social violence, and it's very important to identify, in social violence, some conditions that have to do with women," Mora told LADB.

She pointed out that many of the people who are involved in drug trafficking and in gangs live within unstructured families that are prone to violence.

"That's why, although they are different—domestic violence against women has to do with their having a woman's body, with following a ritual of all that's associated with what's symbolically feminine—the truth is that at the base of social violence, there's also an important component of domestic violence," she said.

When the Security Ministry conducts studies of street children who are organized to commit crime, they often find that there is domestic violence in their homes, she said.

"Domestic violence has to do with women's lives, of course, but it has to do with the lives of the youngsters who live in those cultures where women's bodies are transgressed," Mora said. In domestic violence, there is an "abusive exercise of power" as a means for men to impose on women the role of subordinate.

"It's an entire environment of control that starts with the smallest signs—such as whether he likes, or not, the clothes she wears—[and moves] up to controlling who her friends are," she said.

Assistance centers

To address the problem, INAMU has created assistance centers for women to go when their lives are at risk. The centers are known as *Comités Locales para la Atención Inmediata y el Seguimiento de Casos de Alto Riesgo por Violencia contra las Mujeres* (local committees for immediate assistance of high-risk cases, CLAIS) and *Centros Especializados de Atención y de Albergue Temporal para Mujeres Afectadas por la Violencia* (specialized assistance and temporary lodgings for at-risk women, CEAAM).

The CLAIS operate on the basis of a structure that includes the emergency line 911, INAMU, the *Fuerza Pública* (Public Force, Costa Rica's police), and the legal system.

Gender-violence related calls to 911 are transferred to a 24-hour INAMU emergency line run by women specialized in violence. They provide advice if the caller has not made up her mind about what to do, or activate assistance in case the caller is in actual danger and needs immediate help.

In the second case, a protocol is activated and coordination is established between INAMU, *Fuerza Pública*, and the Judiciary, so that the caller receives information about the services INAMU offers, and police personnel can bring the victim before a judge to lodge a complaint.

Family Judge Songhay White coordinates the CLAIS in Desamparados, a densely populated, lower-middle class municipality in the southwestern suburban area of San José, the nation's capital. Desamparados is one of the country's most violent district, the result of chronic gender violence as well as an ongoing territorial war between rival drug-trafficking gangs.

"The CLAIS have saved many lives," Songhay recently told *Semanario Universidad*, the weekly newspaper of the Universidad de Costa Rica (Costa Rica University, UCR). "They're very effective,

because it has been possible for several institutions to come together ... to immediately prevent possible femicides."

Meanwhile, the CEEAM "are the centers of assistance for violence victims where we accept women, after an evaluation in which they state they're at risk, as well as their children, and they can stay for as long as they need," Mora explained, adding that the average stay is between 23 and 30 days.

"We assist them in filing the complaint, we accompany them psychologically so they understand that what they're doing has to do with exercising rights, so they can better handle the situation with their sons and daughters, and we even look for community resources or their reinsertion, perhaps not in the same place where they were living but somewhere else," she added.

The CEEAM structure is also helpful in processing alimony. Additionally, it has teachers working at the centers to ensuring that children do not see their education cycle interrupted when they have to move with their mother.

In its prevention action, INAMU centers its attention primarily on women, but it also focuses on men, seeking to make them a part of the effort, Mora pointed out.

"We've worked a lot with women," Mora said, to enable them to empower themselves and understand that they have a right to decide, to be respected in their personal decisions, and to demand ways to relate with men other than what historically has been the case. Reaching those goals requires that men change their conduct, she added.

A man that is used to resorting to violence as a means to see that things in the relationship are done his way has two options, Mora said. One involves understanding that the woman is no longer answering to being bullied, and that he has to adapt. "That's the intelligent decision," she said. The other is "to worsen the violence" and secure the control mechanisms he is not willing to abandon, she said.

"Privileges are not so easy to give up, and somehow this is an exercise of privileges, of who decides on everything," she said. "So, that's why now, besides working on women's empowerment, we're trying to work better with men, from their masculinity, because what lies at the bottom of all that we're talking about is a social construct that continues to stereotype the roles men and women have."

Men have trouble ridding themselves of the stereotype that if they don't decide or control, it means they're losing their masculinity, Mora said. But she added that there's

a much more comprehensive way to understand masculinity: "A way where [the man] understands the woman is an equal—that he can cry, that he can develop affectivity in a better manner, which is one of the issues lost in the construction of masculinity."

This includes "not only the affection he gives the woman but also his children, how he constructs his fatherhood, for example, how he kisses, how he hugs, how he lulls, how he manages to spend hours with that child and say, 'He's my son, and how can I let him know what I feel?'"

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