

# The pandemic in the shadows: femicides or feminicides in 2020 in Latin America and the Caribbean



**Gender Equality  
Observatory**  
for Latin America and the Caribbean



As part of the campaign "UNiTE by 2030 to End Violence against Women",<sup>1</sup> in 2020 the United Nations Secretary-General, António Guterres, urged all governments to make prevention and redress of gender-based violence against women and girls a key part of their national response plans to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic.

This call was answered by 146 Member and observer States, which expressed strong support for this goal and a commitment to accelerate concrete policy responses to gender-based violence in the context of COVID-19, as well as to promote zero tolerance of gender-based violence in all spheres of society and everywhere. This effort is in addition to the progress made by the governments of the region in providing annually updated information on femicides or feminicides, one of the indicators prioritized for the monitoring of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Latin America and the Caribbean.<sup>2</sup> Each year, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) consolidates and publishes in its Gender Equality Observatory for Latin America and the Caribbean the figures provided by governments on femicides, feminicides or gender-related violent deaths of women,<sup>3</sup> in order to generate comparative information and contribute to public debate, policymaking and accountability on the progress of the international commitments made by States to prevent and eliminate gender-based violence against women and girls.

Through the United Nations Secretary-General's strategy of political commitment to end violence against women in 2020, governments were urged to take the following measures:

- **Prioritize funding** for an essential services package that includes prevention of gender-based violence against women and girls in fiscal stimulus measures and ensure funding for civil society organizations.
- **Prevent** gender-based violence against women through zero tolerance policies at the national level.
- **Respond** with explicit measures to ensure that services for survivors of gender-based violence are maintained or treated as essential services and to ensure continuity of access to the criminal justice system.
- **Collect** data for improvement of gender-based violence services and programmes.

In 2021, this call became all the more urgent with the expansion of the campaign "UNiTE by 2030 to End Violence against Women",<sup>4</sup> which sought to mobilize governments, civil society, women's organizations, young people, the private sector, the media and the entire United Nations system to join forces in addressing the global pandemic of violence against women and girls.

<sup>1</sup> See [online] <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/take-action>.

<sup>2</sup> Complementary indicator C-5.2: Rates of femicide or feminicide (gender-related killings of women aged 15 years and older per 100,000 women).

<sup>3</sup> In this text the terms "femicide," "feminicide," or "gender-related killings of women", which are the three forms used in the different countries analysed, are used interchangeably.

<sup>4</sup> UN-Women, "United Nations Secretary-General's 2020 Political Commitment Strategy to End Violence against Women. 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence Against Women & Girls 25 November - 10 December 2021. Concept Note for engagement" [online] <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/what%20we%20do/evaw/unite-campaign-2021-concept-note-en.pdf?la=en&vs=4835>.

## A. Femicide is the most extreme form of gender-based violence against women

Femicidal violence comprises a progression of gender-based violent behaviours —experienced by at least one third of women in Latin America and the Caribbean in 2018 (WHO, 2021)<sup>5</sup>— expressed in a continuum of manifestations of gender-based violence that can culminate in femicide, feminicide or the violent gender-related killing of women and girls. This set of behaviours involving misogyny, impunity and social and State tolerance, which can end in murder and other forms of violent death,<sup>6</sup> is a human rights violation of pandemic proportions. The violence affecting women and girls also has an impact on society as a whole, as it represents an obstacle not only to the achievement of equality, but also to sustainable development and peace.

### Box 1

#### International and regional legal framework on violence against women

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women enshrines the commitment of States parties to ensure “the effective protection of women against any act of discrimination” (article 2(c)), the most serious manifestation of which is gender-based violence against women. The Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, in article 4(c), establishes the obligation of States to “exercise due diligence to prevent, investigate and, in accordance with national legislation, punish acts of violence against women, whether those acts are perpetrated by the State or by private persons”. The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, in its general recommendation No. 19, established that “States may also be responsible for private acts if they fail to act with due diligence to prevent violations of rights or to investigate and punish acts of violence, and for providing compensation”.

At the same time, the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women (Convention of Belém Do Pará) provides for the obligation of States to “apply due diligence to prevent, investigate and impose penalties for violence against women” (article 7.b). The aforementioned due diligence obligation implies that States must have in place an adequate legal framework for protection, with effective enforcement and prevention policies and practices that enable effective action to be taken in response to complaints. The prevention strategy must be comprehensive, that is, it must prevent risk factors and at the same time strengthen institutions so that they can provide an effective response in cases of violence against women. States must also take preventive measures in specific cases where it is evident that particular women and girls may be victims of violence.<sup>a</sup>

**Source:** Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979); Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, general recommendation No. 19 (1992); United Nations General Assembly Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, 1993; Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women (Convention of Belém do Pará), 1994.

<sup>a</sup> Inter-American Court of Human Rights, “ Caso González y otras (“Campo Algodonero”) vs. México: Sentencia de 16 de noviembre de 2009 (Excepción preliminar, fondo, reparaciones y costas)” par. 258 [online] [http://www.corteidh.or.cr/docs/casos/articulos/seriec\\_205\\_esp.pdf](http://www.corteidh.or.cr/docs/casos/articulos/seriec_205_esp.pdf).

All the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean have legislation on violence against women and girls and that reflects the guidelines of the international and regional legal framework for addressing violence against women (see box 1). Currently, 13 Latin American countries have enacted comprehensive laws to protect against violence, identifying its various types and the settings in which it occurs (Argentina, Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Plurinational State of Bolivia and Uruguay).

Seventeen Caribbean countries and territories (Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Montserrat, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, and Turks and Caicos Islands) and six Latin American countries (Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Honduras and Puerto Rico) have legislation on domestic or intrafamily violence.

In Latin America, progress has also been made in the criminalization of feminicide or femicide, and there are currently 17 countries that have adopted laws or reforms to criminal codes in that direction (Argentina, Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Plurinational State of Bolivia and Uruguay).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> World Health Organization (WHO) and others, *Violence Against Women Prevalence Estimates, 2018. Global, regional and national prevalence estimates for intimate partner violence against women and global and regional prevalence estimates for non-partner sexual violence against women*, Geneva, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Government of Mexico (2007), *Ley General de Acceso de las Mujeres a una Vida Libre de Violencia*, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Gender Equality Observatory for Latin America and the Caribbean, “Violence laws”, 2021 [online] <https://oig.cepal.org/en/laws/violence-laws>.



## B. Femicide is a problem that continues to affect thousands of women and girls every year in Latin America and the Caribbean, despite its increased visibility and the pressure exerted by women's mass movements that have expressed their rejection of gender violence in different countries

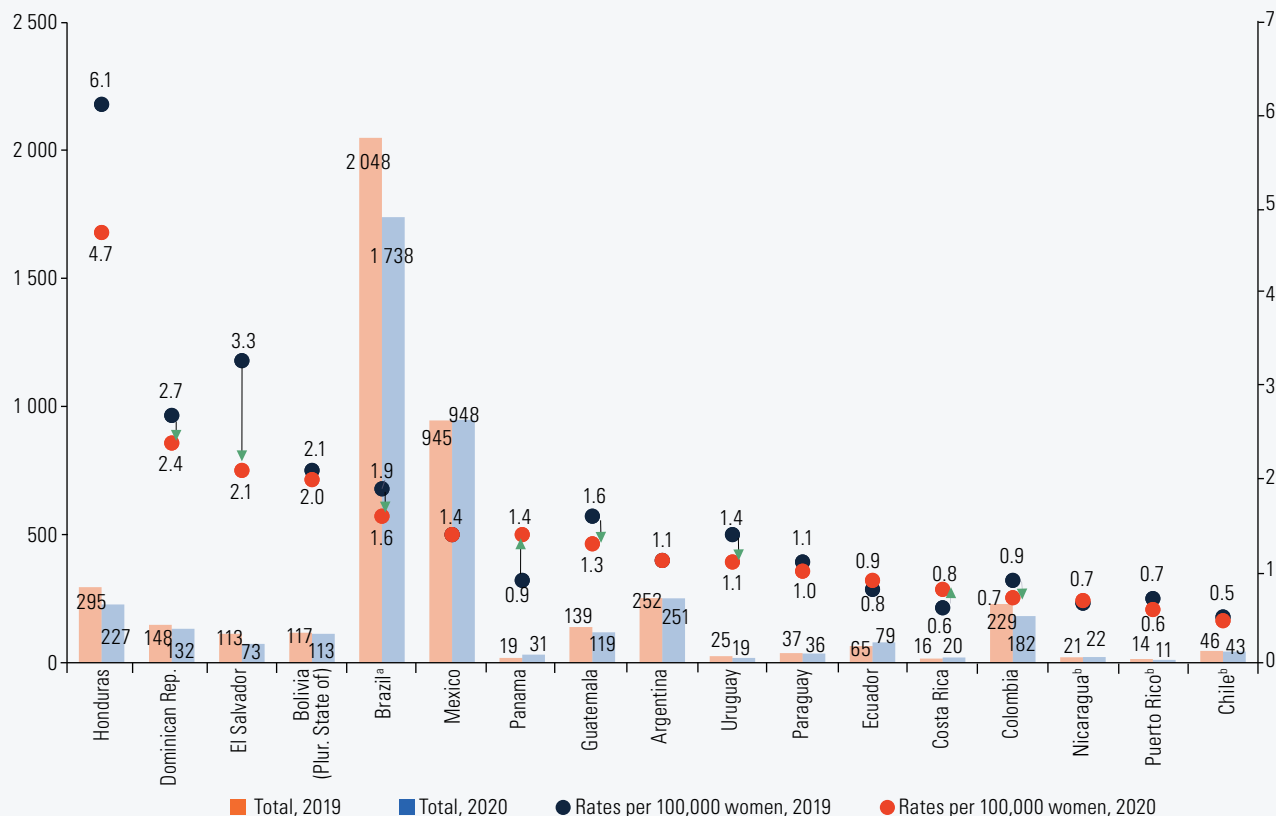
In 2021, the Observatory received information on femicides registered in 26 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean throughout 2020. In Latin America, the three highest rates of femicide occurred in Honduras (4.7 per 100,000 women), the Dominican Republic (2.4 per 100,000 women) and El Salvador (2.1 per 100,000 women). However, all three countries show a decrease in this figure from the previous year, particularly in Honduras (6.1 per 100,000 women in 2019) and El Salvador (3.3 per 100,000 women in 2019). The decrease is slightly smaller in the case of the Dominican Republic (from 2.7 per 100,000 women in 2019).

Seven other countries reported declining rates of femicide, albeit to a lesser extent, to the Gender Equality Observatory for Latin America and the Caribbean: Brazil, Colombia, Guatemala, Paraguay, Plurinational State of Bolivia, Puerto Rico and Uruguay.

The femicide rate remained unchanged from 2019 in Argentina, Chile, Mexico and Nicaragua, and increased year on year in three countries (Ecuador, Costa Rica and Panama); of these, Panama reported the most significant rise (see figure 1).

**Figure 1**  
Latin America (17 countries): cases of femicide or feminicide, 2019–2020

(Absolute numbers and rates per 100,000 women)



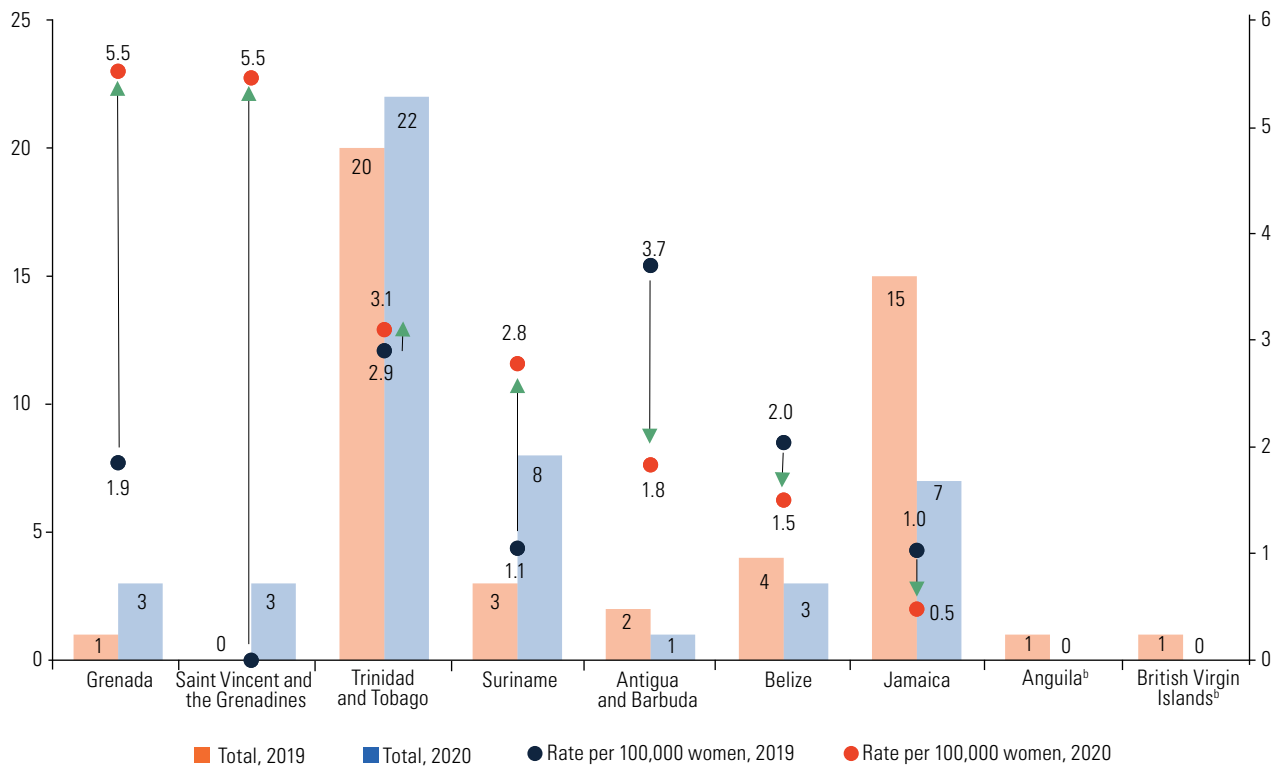
Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), Gender Equality Observatory for Latin America and the Caribbean [online] <https://oig.cepal.org/en>.

<sup>a</sup> Brazil does not have a single register of cases of femicide. The National Council of Justice only registers new procedural cases entering the legal system.

<sup>b</sup> Chile, Nicaragua and Puerto Rico report only cases of intimate-partner femicide, that is, committed by the woman's partner or former partner. Chile amended its legislation in 2020 to include the generic concept of gender-based killing of women.

In the Caribbean, four of nine countries and territories with available data on femicide recorded an increase in the rate per 100,000 women from 2019 to 2020 (Grenada, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname and Trinidad and Tobago), although the number of cases is lower than elsewhere owing to their smaller populations. On the other hand, the rate decreased in three countries (Antigua and Barbuda, Belize and Jamaica).

**Figure 2**  
The Caribbean (9 countries and territories): gender-related killings of women,<sup>a</sup> 2019–2020  
(Absolute numbers and rates per 100,000 women)



**Source:** Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), Gender Equality Observatory for Latin America and the Caribbean [online] <https://oig.cepal.org/en>.

<sup>a</sup> Antigua and Barbuda, Belize, Grenada, Jamaica, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines and Suriname only report cases of deaths of women caused by their intimate partner or former intimate partner. In the cases of Anguilla, the British Virgin Islands and Trinidad and Tobago, the data relate to gender-related killings of women, without specifying the nature of the relationship with the perpetrator.

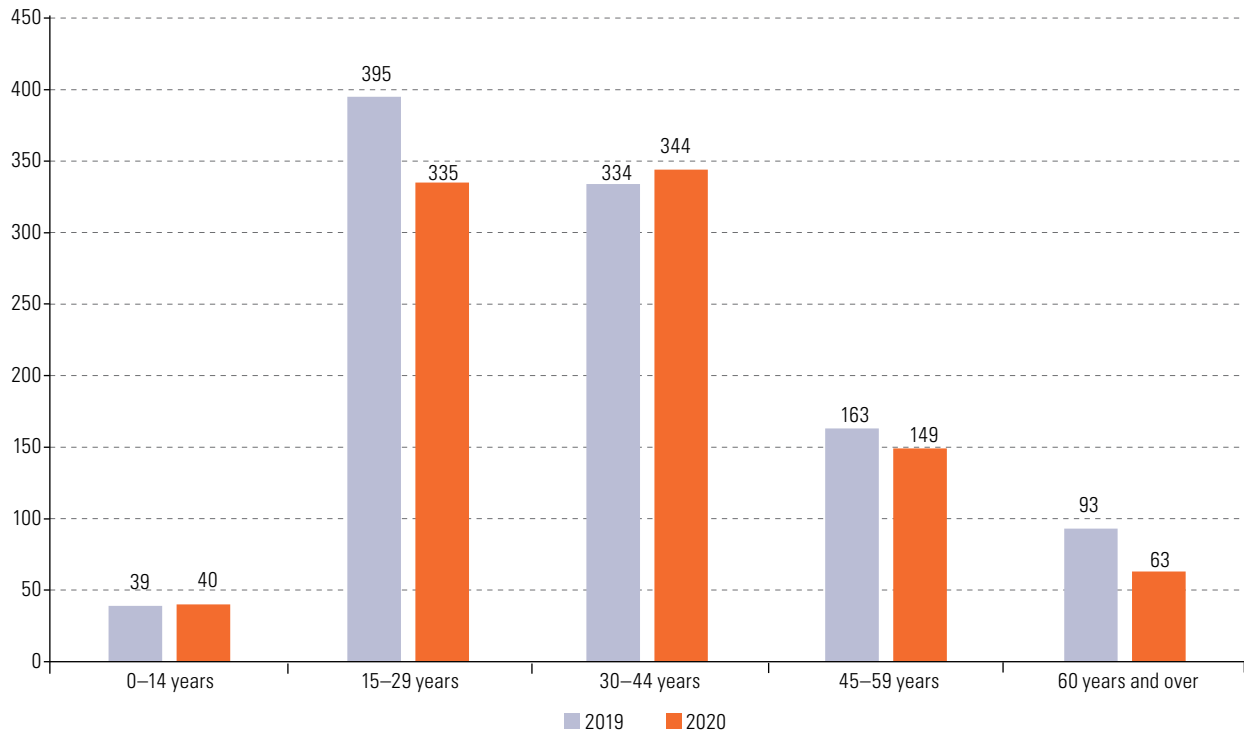
<sup>b</sup> The calculation of the rate per 100,000 women is not possible for the British Virgin Islands, Montserrat and Saint Kitts and Nevis owing to lack of population estimates.

Regarding the ages of victims of femicide in the region, the data collected in 18 countries show that, although femicidal violence occurs most frequently during women's reproductive years, it is nevertheless present throughout their life cycle. In fact, the absolute number of cases is highest in the 30–44 age group (344 women in 2020). Adolescent girls and young adult women aged 15–29 represent the second highest incidence of femicide, with 335 victims in 2020. However, girls and adolescent girls are also at risk of gender-related killings, and available data show that at least 40 girls under the age of 15 were victims of femicide in 2020 (see figure 3).<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> It is often the case that greater difficulties are faced in registering the violent deaths of adolescents under 18 years of age, and especially of girls under 15 years of age, as femicides than in the case of adult women.



**Figure 3**  
**Latin America and the Caribbean (18 countries and territories):<sup>a</sup> femicides by age range of victims, 2019–2020**  
*(Absolute numbers)*



**Source:** Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), Gender Equality Observatory for Latin America and the Caribbean [online] <https://oig.cepal.org/en>.  
<sup>a</sup> Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, Argentina, Belize, British Virgin Islands, Chile, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Grenada, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Puerto Rico, Trinidad and Tobago and Uruguay.

Foreign victims of femicide constitute 4.5% of all femicide victims, according to information provided by 10 Latin American countries with disaggregated data (Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay and Uruguay). In three of these countries, the percentage is close to 10%: Argentina (9%), Chile (13%) and Costa Rica (11%).

Femicide affects not only the immediate victims, but also their entire environment and, in particular, their closest dependents. Seven Latin American countries (Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay and Uruguay) recorded a total of 357 children, adolescents and other dependents in the care of femicide victims in 2020. An obligation thus arises to provide comprehensive redress—which should form part of due diligence—to the indirect victims of this crime. Argentina (2018) and Uruguay (2011) have laws that provide for economic redress and access to national health insurance for children and adolescents whose parents have been victims of femicide.<sup>9</sup> These reparations are paid for by the State and also provide for full coverage or inclusion in State health insurance for recipients.

<sup>9</sup> In Argentina, Law 27.452 of 2018; in Uruguay, Law 18.850 of 2011. In Ecuador, under Decree 696/2018, a voucher is granted to children and adolescents who are orphaned as a result of femicide and, in addition, living in poverty according to the Social Registry.

## C. Sexual violence affects a very high proportion of women and girls in the region and must be addressed as resolutely and comprehensively as femicide

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that 11% of women and adolescents over the age of 15 in Latin America and the Caribbean have experienced sexual violence at the hands of third parties at least once in their lifetime (from the age of 15), which is twice the global average.<sup>10</sup>

Rape perpetrated by persons known or unknown to the victim is not the only form of sexual violence: practices such as child marriage and crimes such as trafficking and smuggling of women and girls for sexual exploitation, sexual harassment, unwanted sexual advances or any sexual threats or practices against women and girls without their consent or where they are unable to withdraw their consent, constitute violations of their human rights. Social and institutional tolerance, impunity and difficulty in accessing timely and quality health services and justice, among other factors, contribute to the occurrence and perpetuation of all these forms of violence against women.

Some countries have conducted surveys to measure the prevalence of sexual violence and, although the results are not comparable owing to the different methodologies and definitions applied in each country, they do show that sexual violence affects a significant percentage of women in their lifetime (see table 1).

**Table 1**

**Latin America (6 countries): percentage of women reporting having suffered sexual violence during their lifetime, latest available year**

(Percentages)

Country	Year	Women who report having experienced sexual violence in their lifetime
Bolivia (Plurinational State of)	2016	43.6
Dominican Republic	2018	51.3
Ecuador	2019	32.7
El Salvador	2017	43.0
Mexico	2016	41.3
Uruguay <sup>a</sup>	2019	44.8

**Source:** Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), Gender Equality Observatory for Latin America and the Caribbean [online] <https://oig.cepal.org/en>.

<sup>a</sup> In the case of Uruguay, the data refer only to sexual violence in the public sphere.

Every day, hundreds of women, girls and adolescent girls suffer forms of sexual violence committed even in contexts that should afford them the greatest sense of security, such as the home, or by those they should be able to trust the most, such as members of their own families. Sexual violence against women, given that it arises from structurally unequal power relations, occurs in various spheres of victims' daily lives. It also affects women and girls who are in transit. It is both a push factor from the places where they live and a violation committed against them during transit or on the journey to their destination. They are also often victims of sexual violence in places of arrival, which is another manifestation of the discrimination they face there.

The countries of the region have striven to recognize the different spaces in which this type of violence can occur and to address it through legislation. In 15 Latin American countries and 4 Caribbean countries and territories,<sup>11</sup> sexual harassment in the workplace is recognized and punished through various legal means, such as labour and criminal legislation, special laws or comprehensive laws for protection against violence. Legislation on sexual violence in education has also been passed in 13 countries in the region (12 in Latin America and 1 in the Caribbean),<sup>12</sup> through comprehensive protection laws, specific laws or education laws, or teachers' statutes. Lastly, sexual violence in public

<sup>10</sup> See [online] <https://srhr.org/vaw-data>.

<sup>11</sup> Latin America: Argentina, Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Plurinational State of Bolivia, Suriname, Uruguay and. In the Caribbean: Barbados, Belize, Montserrat and Saint Lucia.

<sup>12</sup> Latin America: Argentina, Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Plurinational State of Bolivia, Suriname and Uruguay. In the Caribbean: Grenada.



spaces and sexual harassment in the street have been criminalized in seven Latin American countries: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Peru and Uruguay.

The crime of rape —the most extreme form of sexual violence— is criminalized in all the countries of the region, and the latest legislative advances concern the non-applicability of statutes of limitations in cases where the victim is a minor.<sup>13</sup>

El Salvador has criminalized feminicidal suicide or inducement to suicide, which it treats as a form of feminicidal violence, insofar as women, especially adolescents and young women, may be pushed to take such a dramatic step after having suffered sexual violence or becoming pregnant as a result of it.

This expansion of the legislative frameworks to encompass the various forms of sexual violence, reflects the need to make this type of violence visible and punishable, as well as to establish redress measures and develop long-term preventive public policies that are effective in addressing the particularities of each form. Undoubtedly, strengthening the regulatory framework must be accompanied by other steps, such as the development of evidence-based public plans and programmes that incorporate prevention and essential quality services.

## D. Breaking the statistical silence to improve policies

The campaign “UNiTE by 2030 to End Violence against Women” proposes to strengthen collective and systematic public action to end violence against women along four main lines: funding, prevention, response and data collection.

In recent years, in the context of legislative progress to address gender-based violence against women more resolutely, 10 Latin American countries have passed laws that include articles on administrative records and data collection on femicide and violence against women, either in the framework of comprehensive protection laws or in special laws.<sup>14</sup> These standards determine the design and implementation of administrative registers, their characteristics and the minimum of variables they must contain in accordance with domestic legislation and in line with international standards on statistical development in the framework of human rights.

As the production of statistics on gender-based violence against women has become more institutionally established, information has improved on the prevalence of violence against women, as have the administrative records of femicides managed by States. At the same time, the incorporation of data on other variables associated with this crime has made it possible to perform increasingly comprehensive and complex analyses.

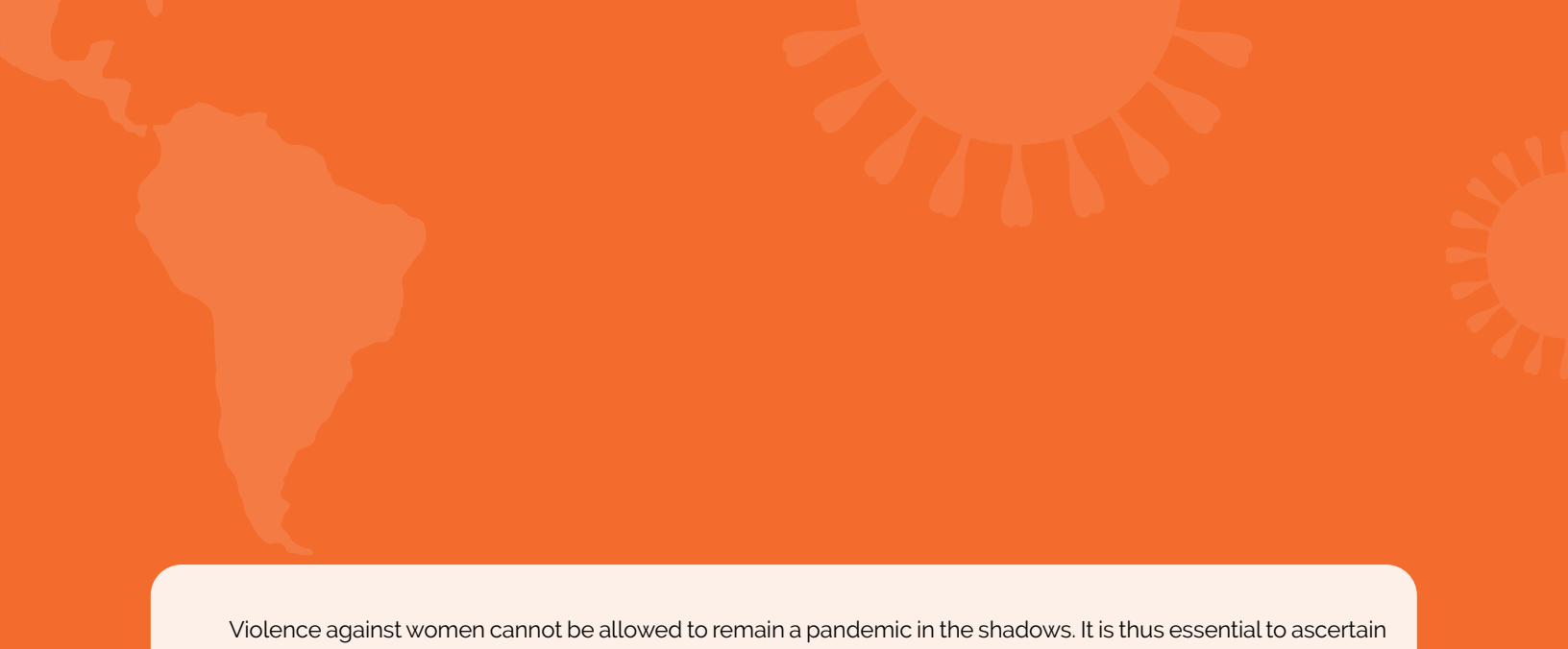
With regard to the standards of administrative records in the countries of the region, there are significant challenges that hinder progress towards the collection of quality information that would serve to identify past and present victims of femicidal violence. These challenges must be overcome in order to reach a better understanding of how gender-based violence against women is linked to different axes of discrimination and inequality associated with poverty, migration status, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, age or disability, among others, in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Better quality of data on femicides, feminicides or gender-related violent deaths of women would make it more comparable, which would facilitate timely monitoring of the results of State action and the implementation of local, national, regional and global laws to put an end to this extreme form of violence.

ECLAC, on the basis of lessons learned and the sharing of good practices in the countries of the region, has proposed the creation of a single register of femicides or feminicides that would include six analytical areas and their respective variables, in order to characterize the contexts in which these crimes occur and the situations with which they are associated, in greater detail. The areas proposed are: type of crime, time when the act occurred, place where the act occurred, characteristics of the victim, characteristics of the alleged perpetrator, and modus operandi of the femicide. This proposal, in addition to better highlighting the magnitude and characteristics of the phenomenon, seeks to improve access to justice for victims and the formulation and follow-up of intersectoral policies for prevention and response as regards violence against women and girls.

<sup>13</sup> Such laws have been passed in Chile (2019), Colombia (2021) and El Salvador (2015). This legislation establishes the imprescriptibility of all types of sexual crimes, not only rape.

<sup>14</sup> Argentina (2009), Colombia (2015), Ecuador (2018), El Salvador (2011), Mexico (2007), Panama (2013), Paraguay (2016), Peru (2015) Plurinational State of Bolivia (2019 and 2013) and Uruguay (2018).



Violence against women cannot be allowed to remain a pandemic in the shadows. It is thus essential to ascertain and analyse the numbers of femicides and, in general, of the different expressions of gender-based violence against women that occurred in the region during 2020 and 2021, in order to more clearly understand the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the prevalence of this violence and the measures taken by governments to prevent it from worsening. This information is essential to identify good practices and lessons learned that can contribute to the development of public policies in emergency contexts. The data obtained in the context of the pandemic also turn a spotlight on the challenges that remain in terms of recording situations of violence and understanding the factors and dimensions linked to gender-based violence, as well as identifying high-risk scenarios and the multiple barriers that victims face in reporting these crimes. Information systems are key tools for guaranteeing a timely, comprehensive and reparative response to this serious violation of women's human rights, as well as for understanding and eliminating the structural factors behind gender-based violence.

It is also necessary to expand the measurement and visibility of other forms of violence that are part of the continuum of femicidal violence; in particular, sexual violence, which is closely linked to femicide, since it is common for killings of women and girls to have been preceded by acts of sexual violence by perpetrators who do not necessarily have a present or past close or family relationship with the victims.

Meanwhile, the Follow-up Mechanism to the Belém do Pará Convention (MESECVI) recognizes, in its 2018 report, that there are high numbers of women and girls reported missing in some countries in the region, even though this information is underreported. The Mechanism recommends that States implement measures to make these cases visible and act to prevent and punish them, recognizing their connection with other forms of gender-based violence against women and girls established by the Convention, such as femicide, trafficking in women and girls, and sexual violence.

In order for women and girls in the region to be able to effectively exercise their right to a life free of violence, it is urgent to advance in measures to reduce the gaps in the implementation of existing regulations. As proposed in the United Nations Secretary-General's campaign "UNiTE by 2030 to End Violence against Women", the time to end violence against women is now, and to do so it is imperative that timely, reliable and relevant data be made available and translated into transformative policy decisions.

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