

# Reporting on Violence against Women

A Case Study of Select News Media in Seven Countries in Latin America and the Caribbean

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## **Abstract**

This report outlines the results of a preliminary case study of the portrayal by the news media of violence against women in Latin America and the Caribbean. It focuses on national print news agencies in seven countries: Brazil, Colombia, El Salvador, Jamaica, Mexico, Paraguay, and Uruguay. The aim of this analysis is to identify general patterns on the way the news media conveys violence against women and highlight areas that require additional scrutiny by the news media as well as civil society, government, and the international development community.

JEL Codes: Z18, I39

Keywords: violence against women, Latin America and the Caribbean, Brazil, Colombia, El Salvador, Jamaica, Mexico, Paraguay, Uruguay, media, violence, victim, gender, news outlets, masculinities, gender equality, international day of elimination of violence against women.

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## **Abbreviations**

COPIP	Coordinator of Peasant and Indigenous Organizations of Paraguay (Organizaciones Campesinas e Indígenas del Paraguay)
IDB	Inter-American Development Bank
LAC	Latin America and the Caribbean
OLT	Organización de Lucha por la Tierra (Organization of Struggle for Land), Paraguay
UN	United Nations

## **Key Findings**

- Print news media in the seven countries included in this study have, to varying degrees, effectively identified a broad range of manifestations of violence against women, and linked them to a patriarchal social structure. The phenomenon, however, is misleadingly presented as one hinged on the outlandish actions of aberrant males, while the broader issues underpinning violence against women are left unchallenged: those of gender inequality and damaging social constructs of masculinity.
- News media reporting largely oscillates between the banalization of violence and its sensationalization, and fails to humanize the issue.
- The omission of men as subjects in the debate on ways in which to address violence against women is salient. The role of male perpetrators is rendered invisible by the news media, and what occurs instead is the effective “feminization of responsibility”: the placement of accountability for ending violence on the women experiencing it. This is done through messaging that encourages survivors to become activated to stop the cycle of violence by speaking out, reporting abuse, realizing their individual worth, and rejecting their aggressors.
- Understandings of justice are shaped by a narrow focus on judicial impunity. This is evidenced by the large share of stories surrounding trials, and the numerous policies and campaigns relating to conviction rates. This understanding of justice is advanced at the expense of an understanding that recognizes a fundamental need to change underlying gender norms in order to address the context in which this violence is occurring, and end all forms of discrimination against women..

## **Key Recommendations**

- It is essential that there be more focus on the education of men to prevent violence against women. The news media can play a role by covering this specifically, as can other actors.
- News media must not approach the issue of violence against women in a way that further subjugates women by putting the accountability for change on them.
- News media must work to humanize their presentation of violence against women.

## Introduction

Women suffer from violence disproportionately around the world. This is an unequivocally systemic and pernicious issue that continues to erode our society. The United Nations broadly defines such violence as follows:

(...) any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life (UN General Assembly, A/RES/48/104, 1993).

The phrase, gender-based violence, has been widely adopted in reference to violence that can be attributed to the basis of sex. It reflects and reinforces inequalities between men and women. While men, women, and other groups (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT)) experience gender-based violence, they do so in significantly different ways. Boys and men are more likely to experience violence in armed conflict and criminal activity; LGBT individuals are disproportionately victims of targeted hate crimes related to deviations from norms of gender identity; girls and women are more likely to experience intimate partner violence and sexual violence in general (Bott et al., 2012).

Violence against women remains today a significant human rights issue in Latin America. A United Nations (UN) rapporteur on violence against women, Rashida Manjoo, declared on a recent visit to Mexico that gender-based violence is “the most generalized human rights violation that we confront today”. A series of surveys undertaken in 12 Latin American and Caribbean countries found that between one-fourth and one-half of women reported having experienced violence by an intimate partner at some point in their lifetime. This includes various forms of physical violence, coercion, and emotional abuse (Bott et al., 2012). A large proportion of women were also found to have experienced sexual violence in its different forms at some point in life, perpetrated mainly by men known to them (Bott et al., 2012). The World Health Organization has also highlighted violence against women as a leading public health issue in many countries. It is estimated that in Mexico City, for example, violence committed against women by husbands/partners is the third highest cause of mortality and morbidity for women (Bott et al., 2012).

In addition to constituting a grave human rights issue, violence against women has far-reaching consequences in society, including public costs, disruptions to economic productivity, and intergenerational effects. While it is essential to recognize these consequences, care must



be taken to avoid instrumentalizing the issue of violence against women in order to promote other development goals, as doing so could further undermine the imperative to eliminate such violence on human rights merits.

Violence against women does not occur in a vacuum. It is not a matter of isolated, spontaneous, or arbitrary actions by pathological monsters “out there”. While certain groups are more vulnerable experiencing violence, its ubiquitous prevalence is well documented and constitutes only one manifestation of the patriarchal social structure that underpins it—a proverbial tip of the iceberg.

Patriarchy refers to a social structure in which individual roles and relations are prescribed along the lines of gender, and in which men hold predominant power. Violence against women cannot be stopped without addressing unequal power relations between men and women across society. Evidence demonstrates that it rests not only on adopting responsive penal codes and social policies, but on shifting relational understandings and cultural values. The complexity of addressing the issue is corroborated by findings of relatively low help-seeking behaviors among women themselves, their widespread acceptability of violence as normal and their support of norms that reinforce gender inequality (Bott et al., 2012). The studies bring to light how gender inequality is behind such seemingly contradictory behavior by women: the data point to ingrained familial and societal norms, economic dependence, shame, fear of retaliation, lack of recourse, not knowing where to go, and believing that anyone can help as factors, among others.

Violence against women occurs predominantly in the private sphere and at the hands of acquaintances. A challenge to overcoming this is the continuing resistance to the idea that “the personal is political,” as preached in the 1960s by American feminists.

The news media is at once an indicator and a propagator of the state of affairs in any given society—it serves as both a mirror and an agent. The manner in which violence against women is treated in media discourse is a serious matter that merits analysis. If the subject is not treated carefully, media actors risk inadvertently compounding and perpetuating the incidence of violence against women. The news media cannot be disassociated from the events they relate; As news media actors select, articulate, and disseminate information, they are implicated in the public discourse that informs social beliefs and behaviors. It is therefore essential that news media actors be sensitized to this issue in a way that supports the global movement to eliminate all forms of discrimination and violence against women.

## A Review of the Literature

The media largely shapes perceptions of violence against women. The press not only documents instances of violence against women, but it also molds and reifies our beliefs regarding gender norms and roles.

News is a cultural product that reflects the dominant cultural assumptions about who and what is important, determined by race, gender, class, wealth, power and nationality, and about what social relations and arrangements are deemed normal, natural and inevitable (Marhia, 2008).

The task of trying to identify what the press deems important, normal, natural, and inevitable is essential because this knowledge can be used to challenge distorted and damaging gender constructs. Women's movements have recognized this and regard the press as "a critical site of transformation in the struggle for global gender equality" (Marhia, 2008). Indeed, the representation of women in the media is one of the 12 areas of critical concern delineated in the UN Women's Beijing Platform for Action—a series of commitments to advance the aims of equality, development, and peace, agreed to by UN member countries at the Fourth World Conference on Women.<sup>1</sup>

There is a large body of literature on the depiction of violence against women by the press. While the goal of a gender-sensitive media depends on the adoption of universal codes that respect and affirm the human rights and dignity of women, the occurrence and perception of violence differ by context, and regionally-specific data should be used to identify opportunities for intervention. The rapidly changing dynamics of mass communication suggest that knowledge of this issue should continuously be revisited.

Across societies, femininity is largely associated with traits like passivity, vulnerability, subjection, selflessness, as well as cunning. Such beliefs reflect and reproduce gender discrimination, inequality, and the objectification of women. Evidence from many studies shows that the news media is responsible for reproducing such gendered stereotypes through the narratives they construct around female victims.

A British analysis of press coverage relating to rape cases identified a pattern in the way in which they are presented. The study found that stories of sexual violence are most often

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the Beijing Platform for Action, see <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/>.

<sup>2</sup> Translation: "RIO – A theme ignored in the second round of debates of the presidential campaign, women's health has been an inescapable subject in the press, accounting for numerous reports of domestic violence and deaths as a result of abortions within clandestine networks."

<sup>3</sup> "Many things have changed in Mexico since the feminist writer published her doctoral thesis [...] but in the opinion of the author, oppression, inequality, exclusion, discrimination, and the violence with which Mexican women live, in a

covered on a case-by-case basis, which results in an “individualizing effect,” and the treatment of violence against women are a series of irregular crimes that are carried out by a pathological and monstrous few. As Marhia (2008) notes, “Press reports of sexual violence very rarely portray it as a social or structural issue involving systemic injustices and discrimination, and almost never as a gendered practice of power and control”. According to the author, this is reflected in the way the press fails to identify patterns between cases and to link them to the broader continuum of violence against women. A Brazilian analysis of the media discourse on rape found that this individualization by the press has the effect of mystifying the figure of the aggressor, distancing him from the rest of society when, in fact, their profiles are representative of the population at large (Pimenta, 2014).

Various studies highlight yet another pattern to press reportage of sexual violence—that of constructing “the ideal victim” (Marhia, 2008). This construction occurs in various ways, one of which is by typecasting women as passive and helpless to reinforcing the notion that they were unable to resist. Another is by focusing on their behavior prior to the attack, thus removing any doubt that their actions or disposition may have precipitated the assault. Finally, the expectations of the ideal victim are created by referencing the victim’s decision to report. These behavioral stereotypes lead to the construction of a suite of myths that surround sexual violence (Marhia, 2008).

**Table 1: The Myth of Rape versus the Evidence**

<b>Rape myth</b>	<b>Research evidence</b>
It is committed by strangers	It is mainly committed by known men
‘Real rape’ happens at night, outside and involves a weapon	Rape happens at many times, most commonly inside, often involving threats and other forms of coercion
There are always injuries	A minority of reports involve clear external or internal injuries
Anyone facing the possibility of rape will resist	Many do resist, many freeze through fear or shock or decide that resistance would be futile and/or dangerous
Women ‘ask for it’ by their dress/ behavior / taking risks	Many sexually aggressive men deliberately target their victims, and a proportion know them very well
All victims react in the same way if they have really been raped	There are a range of responses, from extremely distressed through to quiet and controlled
To be raped is worse than being killed, or at least one of the most terrible things that can happen	Rape – defined as sex without consent – is in fact rather commonplace, and most victims choose to survive

When women who have been violated do not conform to the role of the “ideal victim,” the media can tend to be complicit in violating them doubly by placing the responsibility for the violence on them. This is reflected, for example, through an emphasis on their behaviors prior to the crime, through questioning the adequacy of their demonstration of resistance, or through judgment of their decision not to report. The expression “victim blaming” has been widely adopted in response to the perverse social treatment of victims. The social pressure to respond accordingly to violence, together with the projected impression of weakness or deviance can affect the recovery of the victim and contribute to feelings of shame.

On the one hand, the idea that the victim did something to deserve violence or did not adequately resist can lead to their being judged and ostracized, thus excusing the aggressor and the aggression. On the other hand, even when female victims are viewed as “legitimate”, we are faced with a problematic paradox: by emphasizing women’s disproportionate share of the burden of violence, female identity becomes further associated with this very oppression. For example: when victims of violence are referred to as “battered women,” as opposed to “women who have been battered,” their identity becomes linked to the violence that was perpetrated against them. The word “victim” in itself is controversial for the same reason, with many advocating for the use of the word “survivor.”

The propagation by the press of myths surrounding rape was determined by the British study to contribute to a vicious cycle of sexual violence. Uncertainty over what constitutes “real rape” has led to low conviction rates, enforcing the perception that many rape claims are baseless (Marhia, 2008). While this particular analysis focuses on sexual violence reporting only in the United Kingdom, its findings can be applied more broadly. The press plays a role in molding perceptions around what constitutes violence against women. Because the press only focuses on select, usually grisly, manifestations of it, the perception of violence against women in the public imagination is limited and ambiguity reigns over its more nuanced and systemic manifestations, normalizing a large part of the continuum of violence against women. As a result, victims and perpetrators themselves accept such forms of treatment as normal, thus sustaining the cycle of violence. On another plane, the focus on legal justice has its own implications.

The recognition that violence against women is a pressing human rights issue has led to the adoption of a series of international agreements formally acknowledging its incidence and delineating measures to combat it. An example is the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1993.

In 1994, the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women—the Belém do Pará Convention—was adopted as an instrument to guide Latin American countries in implementing policies and passing legislation to eradicate violence against women. It includes recommendations to amend the penal codes to address high levels of impunity (Gasman and Alvarez, 2010).

Renewed government focus on impunity is reflected in press coverage that frequently revolves around trials and sentencing. However, according to Maria Zapater (2014)—a legal scholar specialized in penal justice—the elaboration of penal codes and policing practices that address aggression can only be one part of the solution; dismantling the culture of violence requires more than just the threat of punishment; it requires fundamentally changing the belief that violence against women is acceptable (Zapater, 2014).

## **Findings from Media Monitoring**

### **Methodology**

The countries included in this study are Brazil, Colombia, El Salvador, Jamaica, Mexico, Paraguay, and Uruguay, representing members of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB). While the analysis is not regionally representative nor exhaustive, it does represent a starting point from which to expand. The selection of countries is not based on any empirical set of criteria related to violence against women. While other forms of media such as entertainment and social were outside the scope of this project, they themselves deserve future study. The analysis included a few hundred pieces of news items, including stories and editorials.

The analysis was carried out in two parts. First, major national newspapers and magazines from each focus country were identified and directly monitored over the course of six weeks (October 19 to November 30, 2014). The selection was based on the national reputation of each agency. This initial prioritization was based on considerations related to the reach that such outlets have in shaping the public discourse, and to practical constraints relating to the scope of the project. Second, for the sake of contextualization and comparison, daily Google alerts were set up using key terms to gauge the kinds of news agencies covering the issue, as well as the frequency and substance of this coverage. The following news agencies were researched and monitored.

**Table 2. Newspapers and Magazines Researched and Monitored**

<b>Country</b>	<b>Newspapers and magazines</b>
Brazil	Folha de São Paulo, O Globo, Veja, IstoÉ, Época
Mexico	El Universal, Reforma, La Jornada, Nuevo Excelsior, Proceso
Colombia	El Tiempo, El espectador, El Espacio, El Periódico, Semana
El Salvador	El Diario de Hoy, La Prensa Gráfica, El Mundo
Jamaica	Daily Star, Jamaica Observer, Jamaica Daily Gleaner
Uruguay	El País, Brecha, La República, Búsqueda, El Observador, La Diaria
Paraguay	Diario ABC Color, La Nación, Última Hora

The Google alerts below were set up for a daily clipping of material containing relevant key words. After a two-day test, it became clear that Spanish-language coverage of the issue was particularly high in Spain and Argentina, so relevant alerts were modified in an attempt to filter out those results.

Daily alerts tracked:

- “gender based violence” + Jamaica
- “violence against women” + Jamaica
- “violência contra as mulheres”
- “violencia contra las mujeres” –España –Argentina
- “violência de gênero”
- “violencia de género” –España –Argentina
- violencia + mujer –España –Argentina
- violencia + mujer + Colombia
- violencia + mujer + El Salvador
- violencia + mujer + Mexico
- violencia + mujer + Paraguay
- violencia + mujer + Uruguay
- violência + mulher

The author acknowledges that this methodology has shortcomings and lends itself to potential inaccuracy. More robust criteria for the selection of targeted news agencies would make comparability of country findings more precise. These would include, for example, establishing an equal number of agencies by country for analysis, as well as equalizing to the best degree possible the qualities of these agencies, such as readership and ideological bent. The coverage by national media agencies identified for this study may vary significantly from that of local ones captured by the alerts. A disaggregated analysis by agency would also be important in order for country results to not be distorted by the coverage of any one exceptional agency. As this was a short-term analysis, long-term trends in coverage were not analyzed. Furthermore, a more technical understanding of Google alert algorithms would have contributed to a more representative sample of daily news clippings, making the analysis of the frequency of coverage of violence against women more accurate.

Since many manifestations of violence against women are not linked to the broader issue of gender-based violence and gender inequality, news clippings reflecting these disparate news stories may not have been captured. For example, an article about rape, domestic abuse, or sexual harassment in the work place that makes no explicit mention to violence against women, nor contains the key terms “violence,” “women,” and/or “gender” will have been excluded from search results. Furthermore, research into the gender balance of authorship and readership could have shed light on whether there is inequality among those who produce media content and among those who consume it. Despite these limitations, however, this remains a preliminary study that raises some useful insights and serves as a model from which further studies can depart.

## **Key Findings**

### ***Understanding what is violence against women***

While the UN and many LAC countries officially recognize the magnitude of the issue of violence against women and, to varying degrees, comprehensively define it in national legislation—accounting for its many manifestations, roots, and consequences—the degree to which this nuanced understanding has been mainstreamed varies. Gauging the extent to which this understanding has been absorbed by the public can be measured in various ways, including through national surveys, sociological studies, and media reviews. The way in which violence

against women is articulated in the media serves as one indicator for evaluating the degree to which a holistic awareness of the issue has saturated the public discourse. Such an analysis serves to identify the correlations between the degree to which violence against women is publicly understood and the quality of the media reportage. Moreover, it is useful in identifying possible problem areas and opportunities for intervention. The rationale for this study was not to draw those correlations, but merely map the news media coverage to facilitate future studies.

The national news media of the countries studied have to varying degrees demonstrated a nuanced understanding of the broad range of manifestations of violence against women and of the link between such violence and gender inequality. Many forms of violence are covered by the media, and linked to the broader continuum of violence against women. Coverage, however, continues to give priority to reports relating to sexual and physical abuse, obscuring the depth of the issue and the underlying social constructions of masculinity.

One positive observation that can be drawn from the results of this study is that a high proportion of news stories are centered on cases in which violence is perpetrated by a partner or acquaintance, which corresponds accurately to statistics. This suggests that media coverage does not distort the extent to which this is a problem that occurs in the private sphere and predominantly at the hands of known men. However, media coverage of domestic violence across the countries studied focuses almost exclusively on non-sexual physical violence. The implication with this coverage is that it obscures other forms of domestic violence, such as sexual, emotional, economic, and psychological abuse.

The table below illustrates the frequency of national news reporting of the various forms of violence against women over the course of the study period. Given the time parameters and the small number of news agencies analyzed, the sample size does not make these findings statistically significant. Nevertheless, a notable trend in coverage emerges.



**Table 3. Frequency of National News Reporting of Various Forms of Violence on Women**

	Brazil	Colombia	El Salvador	Jamaica	Mexico	Paraguay	Uruguay
Femicide <sup>1</sup>	***	**	***	**	***	**	***
Domestic violence <sup>2</sup>	***	***	***	**	***	***	***
Physical/Sexual violence <sup>3</sup>	**	***	***	***	**	**	**
Trafficking/abduction	***	*	*	*	*	*	*
Violence in conflict	*	**	*	*	*	*	*
Psychological/emotional abuse <sup>4</sup>	*	**	*	*	**	*	*
Harassment <sup>4</sup>	***	*	*	*	**	**	*
Violence by the State <sup>5</sup>	**	*	**	**	*	*	*

Key: High frequency = \*\*\*; Medium frequency = \*\*; Low frequency or not at all = \*

<sup>1</sup> A feminist term used to distinguish between circumstantial homicide and the systematic murder of women simply because they are women.

<sup>2</sup> This classification is used broadly in reference to cases in which violence occurs in privacy or in a familiar area, and encompasses all of its forms: sexual, physical, emotional, psychological, and economic, among others.

<sup>3</sup> Refers to the occurrence of these forms of violence against women outside of the domestic realm.

<sup>4</sup> This term is used to classify stories centered on these forms of violence specifically, although this can overlap with domestic violence since it also occurs in the private sphere, as well as with harassment as a form of psychological and emotional abuse.

<sup>5</sup> This term classifies the stories in which *de facto* and *de jure* discrimination by the State—in terms of policies and governance—are explicitly identified as a form of violence against women.

The depiction of violence against women across countries centers on physical manifestations. In addition to the predominant frequency with which such cases are covered, it is possible to qualify this coverage as one concentrated on grisly incidences. One implication of this trend is that it abstracts subtler, cumulative, and chronic manifestations of violence against women from the public perception of the issue by separating “softer” forms of violence from those that are more pronounced, normalizing actions and behaviors that in fact underpin and feed into physical violence, like the objectification of women. The mystification of these other forms of violence in the public discourse leaves individuals with little reference regarding whether the abuse they experience/perpetrate constitutes an act of violence. Furthermore, the focus on particularly horrific cases also has the effect of isolating these from the broader systemic issues of male aggression, shifting the focus from the larger social crisis of masculinity to a handful of “exceptionally” pathological unhinged protagonists, and excusing the former from inquiry.

On the other hand, it is evident from this study that the topic of violence against women does also receive sophisticated amplification in mainstream media. With regards to more

expansive and profound understanding of violence against women, some notable examples came up in the respective countries.

According to Brazilian news media, the government is often explicitly implicated as responsible for violence against women. The examples refer especially to obstetric violence, based on the high rates of episiotomies and cesarean sections within the country's medical system which are considered medically unnecessary. This is exacerbated by what is considered reproductive health violence: the government's failure to provide contraception to women, as well as the government's policy criminalizing abortion, which results in the death of thousands of women each year because of clandestine abortions. The following excerpt places domestic violence under the umbrella of public health issues, on a par with the mortalities that result from abortion:

RIO — Tema ignorado nos debates do segundo turno da campanha eleitoral para presidente, a saúde da mulher tem sido assunto obrigatório na imprensa, que contabiliza inúmeras notícias de violência doméstica e mortes decorrentes de abortos feitos em redes clandestinas (O Globo, November 5, 2014, Brazil).<sup>2</sup>

In Mexico, an interview with a feminist author, regarding a new book, included a discussion on the connection between gender inequality and the exclusion and discrimination of women in Mexico. It referred to the femicide epidemic that afflicts the country:

“Muchas cosas se han transformado en México desde que la escritora feminista publicó su tesis doctoral [...], pero a juicio de su autora no han cambiado la opresión, desigualdad, exclusión, discriminación, o violencia que viven las mexicanas, en un país donde el feminicidio está diseminado por doquier en el país y es solo la punta del iceberg.”<sup>3</sup> (El Universal, November 15, 2014, Mexico)

In Colombia, an article about a new center that has opened in Bogotá to attend to victims of violence draws attention to the secondary victimization that occurs when victims of violence receive neglectful, judgmental, or scornful treatment from government entities:

Petro afirmó que se espera que haya un cambio en los procesos con la población femenina debido a que, según él, ‘la mujer víctima de la violencia vivía prácticamente

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<sup>2</sup> Translation: "RIO – A theme ignored in the second round of debates of the presidential campaign, women's health has been an inescapable subject in the press, accounting for numerous reports of domestic violence and deaths as a result of abortions within clandestine networks."

<sup>3</sup> "Many things have changed in Mexico since the feminist writer published her doctoral thesis [...] but in the opinion of the author, oppression, inequality, exclusion, discrimination, and the violence with which Mexican women live, in a country where femicide exists everywhere therein, it is only the tip of the iceberg."

una segunda victimización, empezando por el portero de las entidades donde las atendía (El Tiempo, November 30, 2014, Colombia).<sup>4</sup>

In El Salvador, stories depict the stigma that child victims of sexual abuse face when speaking out against it, such as the denial by elders they confide in—a result of prevailing social norms:

Irónicamente, algunos menores de edad que han sufrido abuso sexual no solo deben soportar que su agresor sea un pariente cercano. Hay casos en los que además deben aguantar el desprecio de otros familiares que no creen cuando los niños les revelan que están siendo violados (El Salvador.com, November 18, 2014, El Salvador).<sup>5</sup>

An article in the Salvadoran news about a protest planned by Paraguayan civil society organizations to coincide with the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women highlights the connection between violence against women and the government's lack of attention to indigenous communities, especially with regard to women, harmful land practices, and the absence of universal health care:

“Contra la violencia del Estado hacia las mujeres. Por tierra, trabajo digno y comunidades libres de agrotóxicos,’ es el tema de la marcha convocada por la Coordinadora de Organizaciones Campesinas e Indígenas del Paraguay (Cocip) junto a la Organización de Lucha por la Tierra (OLT) (El Mundo, November 22, 2014, El Salvador).<sup>6</sup>

In Jamaica, an explanation appeared relating to the regression in the laws governing rape, weakening the case for protection against marital rape. Another article refers to the work of advocates to have financial abuse classified as a form of domestic violence:

Going forward—Marriage does not mean irrevocable consent to sexual intercourse. As a people, let us not use the notions of privacy and sanctity of marriage to condone sexual violence. Join our voices in calling for equal protection for all women. Let us not deny that rape is rape (The Gleaner, November 14, 2014, Jamaica).

She said that, in Jamaica, domestic violence is normally limited to mere physical acts of violence, but that this view overshadows the existence of other forms of domestic abuse. She said that financial abuse, despite the lack of any formal recognition of this concept, is very prevalent in Jamaica (Jamaica Observer, October 30, 2014, Jamaica).

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<sup>4</sup> "Petro said he expects a change in processes within the female population because, according to him, 'women victims of violence practically suffer from a second victimization, beginning with the doormen of the facilities they visit.'"

<sup>5</sup> "Ironically, some children who have suffered sexual abuse don't only have to deal with the fact that their attacker is a close relative. There are cases where they must also endure the scorn of other family members who do not believe them when the children reveal to them that they are being violated."

<sup>6</sup> "Opposition to state violence against women. For land, decent work, and communities free of pesticides is the motto of the march, organized by the Coordinator of Peasant and Indigenous Organizations of Paraguay (COCIP) along with the Organization of Struggle for Land (OLT)."

In Uruguay, an article was published about a march organized to protest the legal charges brought upon the murderer of a woman as being gender blind:

“Pedimos que se cambie el caratulado del expediente. La fiscal Sabrina Flores, no pensó en su género al pedir homicidio simple. Exigimos que la carátula se cambie a homicidio especialmente agravado,’ indicó Zicavo.”<sup>7</sup> (El País, October 30, 2014, Uruguay)

In Paraguay, there was the caustic condemnation by an Ecuadorian deputy, in an interview, of Paraguay’s lack of laws to govern violence against women. Reported simultaneously was the benevolent treatment by Paraguayan society, at large, in response to a bill under consideration:

Los datos de Paraguay son escandalosos, son alarmantes. Paraguay ocupa uno de los primeros lugares en violencia contra las mujeres a nivel de Sudamérica. [...] Es sorprendente que hasta hoy día Paraguay no haya podido prosperar una ley que proteja a las mujeres de la violencia. No basta el Código Penal solamente, porque el tema de la violencia contra las mujeres es un fenómeno que tiene que ser abordado de diferentes puntos de vista, no solamente desde la perspectiva del derecho penal. ¿Por qué? Porque es un tema en donde está involucrada la familia, la pareja, los hijos, los hermanos de las mujeres. Justamente por eso no es tan sencillo visibilizar al delincuente, cuando este delincuente es el marido, son los hijos, son los hermanos, entonces, por eso se hace necesario una normativa. Esa normativa debe tratar el problema de forma integral, que no naturalice la violencia, que no sea condescendiente, que no sea benévolo con la violencia, pero también establezca otros caminos diferentes al del derecho penal.

Quizás se han cometido errores, al simplificar el problema, al creer, por ejemplo, que el tema de la violencia contra las mujeres es un tema periférico, un tema ligero, un tema que no merece toda la atención de la sociedad. Entonces, una comunidad que ha permitido la violencia se convierte en cómplice; una agrupación que no se ha movilizó, es benevolente a la violencia contra el género femenino (ABC Color, November 2, 2014, Paraguay).<sup>8</sup>

The news from the countries studied demonstrates a capacity to treat the issue of violence against women in a gender-sensitive manner. This is far from the norm, however, and

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<sup>7</sup> “We ask that the charges be changed. The prosecutor Sabrina Flores did not consider gender when she asked for simple manslaughter. We demand that the charges be switched to especially aggravated murder,’ said Zicavo.”

<sup>8</sup> “The data relating to Paraguay are outrageous, alarming. Paraguay has one of the highest rates of violence against women in South America. [...] It is surprising that to this day, Paraguay has been unable to create a law to protect women from violence. The penal code is insufficient because the issue of violence against women is a phenomenon that has to be addressed from different angles, not only from the perspective of criminal law. Why? Because it is an issue that involves a woman’s family, couples, children, and siblings. That is exactly why it is not as simple as exposing the offender, when the offender is the husband, the children, the siblings; that is why legislation is necessary. Legislation must address the problem holistically, in a way that does not normalize violence, is not condescending, is not benevolent towards violence, but in a way that also establishes other avenues than criminal law.”

“Perhaps mistakes have been made in simplifying the problem, in believing, for example, that the issue of violence against women is a peripheral issue, a light issue, a subject that does not deserve society’s attention. Therefore, a community that has allowed violence to continue becomes an accomplice; a group that has not mobilized itself is benevolent towards violence against the female gender. ”

additional work must be done to link particular cases covered in news stories to the broader continuum of violence against women.

### ***The burden of responsibility***

The most important step in eliminating violence against women is to prevent it from occurring in the first place. It follows, therefore, that the target of intervention should be men and boys, the primary perpetrators of this violence. This logic, however, contradicts the actions of many governments, civil society, international development organizations, and the media. Instead, there is a disproportionate focus on policies and programs to empower women that fail to address the broader context of their oppression and victimization.

While female empowerment is certainly an important factor in achieving gender equality, approaching the issue of violence as a simple matter of “activating” women not only sustains the stereotype that they are passive victims; it ignores the broader structural issue of gender inequality. The focus on female empowerment also leads to the placement of onus on women while continuing to exclude men from scrutiny, diverting attention from the need to educate them and to fundamentally challenge the social construction of gender roles and relations.

According to a World Bank paper, men can play a crucial role in fighting for women’s rights and protecting them from violence. So why are men often absent from and overlooked in advocacy efforts and public policy?

In most countries, the majority of men are not violent against women but play a role in enabling violence. Nonviolent men may not desire to limit the agency of the women in their lives, but many of these men do not fight against the higher level systems (i.e., institutions/organizations, and public policies) that are limiting the agency of the women in their families and community.

Prominent gender scholar R.W. Connell describes this as a complicit version of masculinity where men are not in favor of fighting for male dominance over women, but they are also hesitant to fight against it. Connell describes most men’s complicity as being motivated by the patriarchal dividend, or the advantage men in general gain from the overall subordination of women (Fleming et al., 2014).

Since men still hold disproportionate power over most institutions around the world, this thesis explains the laggard effort to involve them in addressing gender-based violence, limiting the critiques of damaging constructions of masculinity. It is not only a matter of current power imbalances in institutions around the world; rather, it is also cultural norms that have reified beliefs about gender roles and, more crucially, the desirable process of female emancipation.

The acceptable pathway to gender equity is presented as one in which aberrant males are weeded out of the system, while damaging norms of masculinity are left unchallenged. In this way, the news media is complicit in “othering” the construction of patriarchy and treating the problem as if it does not universally apply. Othering refers to the mental classification, perception, and portrayal of individuals or groups as being different. This concept can be applied to the process of disassociating oneself, or the group to which one belongs, from social phenomena. One way in which this othering is manifested in the news media is not only through the high number of sensational stories of cases, but also through the focus on victim reporting as a solution to the problem, with the implicit logic that higher rates of reporting will lead to the removal of exceptional aggressors from society:

Todos los participantes no cesaban de decir casi que en forma de coro que las mujeres violentadas deben denunciar a tiempo porque es su vida la que está en riesgo (El Tiempo, October 28, 2014, Colombia).<sup>9</sup>

Afortunada por no haber padecido hasta ahora ningún tipo de violencia en su vida, Arámbula asegura que si llegara a ocurrir, no podría quedarse callada. ‘No he tenido que pasar por eso y lamentablemente si lo viera obviamente lo denunciaría, créanme que soy una mujer a la que no le gustan las injusticias y apoyo e invito a las mujeres que lo denuncien, a que no se queden calladas porque quedarse callada es permitir que sigan abusando,’ asegura (El Universal, November 10, 2014, Mexico).<sup>10</sup>

Sostuvo que paulatinamente se ha ido creando una cultura de la denuncia, y aun que demanden y se defiendan se tiene que crear conciencia en la sociedad para ir arraigando ese tipo de educación (Excelsior, November 14, 2014, Mexico).<sup>11</sup>

Hay herramientas para protegerse y las mujeres deben hacer uso de esas herramientas porque no están solas y por eso estamos convocadas para demostrar que estamos indignadas. La sociedad no puede ser indiferente”, dijo una de las representantes del colectivo (El País, November 13, 2014, Uruguay).<sup>12</sup>

In some cases, a causal relationship is established between low rates of reporting by women and continued violence against them—effectively a form of victim blaming:

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<sup>9</sup> “All the participants kept saying, almost in a chorus, that battered women must report as soon as possible because it is their life that is at risk.”

<sup>10</sup> “Lucky not to have experienced violence so far in her life, Arámbula assured that if it were to occur, she would not be able to remain silent. ‘I have not had to go through this and if, unfortunately, it happened to me, I would obviously report it; believe me, I’m a woman who dislikes injustice and I support and encourage women to report it, not to remain silent, since to remain silent is to allow them to continue abusing,’ she maintained.”

<sup>11</sup> “He argued that gradually a culture of reporting is being created, and even if they demand and defend themselves, you have to create awareness in society in order to ingrain this type of education.”

<sup>12</sup> “There are tools for women to protect themselves, and women should use these tools because they are not alone and because of this, we are called to show that we are indignant. Society cannot be indifferent,” said one of the representatives of the collective.”

But one of the reasons intimate partner violence continues unabated is that the victim, out of fear or a desire to protect the partner and preserve the relationship, remains silent and suffers physical and emotional pain (Jamaica Observer, October 20, 2014, Jamaica).

Elizabeth Velásquez, coordinadora de la asociación, recomienda que todas las mujeres sometidas a este tipo de actos lo denuncien; no hacerlo podría desembocar en un feminicidio. 'Cada vez que ignoramos las alertas de violencia va incrementando y se pasa a un nivel más de violencia. Comienza por pellizcos, pasan a agresiones físicas más serias, hasta llegar a la violencia sexual y lo que es muy triste es llegar hasta quitarle la vida a la mujer', señaló (El Mundo, November 19, 2014, El Salvador).<sup>13</sup>

While resistance to reporting, or silence, is certainly a *symptom* of gender inequality, to posit it as the *cause* of continued violence is to problematically efface the perpetrator's role and disregard calculated decisions made by women—the victims of violence—regarding their options and perceptions of risk. Indeed, the World Health Organization has found that women often do not report violence because they are threatened and could face even greater abuse should they do so (Bott et al., 2012). To equate underreporting with causality also assumes that reporting would lead to a definitive solution to the immediate problem in an environment of often unreliable response systems. It also ignores the complex economic, psychological, and emotional considerations that inhibit women from speaking out.

Impunity for gender-based violence is a widespread challenge, and the way that countries treat this within the broader legal codes for criminality is complex and continues to be a source of significant contention. Our societies are based on human relations. To the extent that the relationship between men and women continues to be defined by inequality, and that violence against women continues to constitute the most generalized violation of human rights, it becomes difficult to apply a judicial solution that involves removing all perpetrators of gender-based violence from our societies. The legal system is forced to make judgments regarding scales of severity between the different forms of violence against women that inevitably have implications for the bigger movement to eliminate all forms of violence against women, since these are all part of a continuum, and since these judgments may not match victims'.

Heavy advocacy urging victims to report abuse reinforces an understanding of violence against women that privileges its most physical and verifiable manifestations. Without undermining the aim of ensuring women's physical safety and wellbeing, this has the effect of further marginalizing more subtle, chronic and psychological forms of violence against women that are very damaging and can lead to and contribute to the continued perpetration of physical

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<sup>13</sup> "Elizabeth Velasquez, the coordinator of the association, recommends that all women subjected to such acts report it. Failure to do so could lead to femicide. 'Every time we ignore the warnings of violence, it increases and leads to the next level of violence. It starts with pinching, then it progresses to more serious physical assaults, until it reaches sexual violence, and what is really sad is when it leads to the life of the woman who is abused,' she said."

abuse. For example, while women are encouraged to report hitting by a partner, we do not see equal encouragement for them to report controlling behavior of a man towards the woman. This is debilitating in itself and discourages women from exercising the full extent of their rights.

There is a presumption that lower levels of violence across society can be achieved simply through higher levels of reporting. According to this theory of change, higher levels of indictment will lead to higher levels of conviction, and the threat of incarceration will dissuade men from committing violence. The conviction rate for violence against women is in fact very low in many countries. This presumption has the effect of placing the future interests of the collective ahead of the immediate situation faced by a victim. By pressuring victims to react by assisting society in freeing itself of its more monstrous men, the victim faces shame not only from the abuse itself, but doubly so, for not meeting social expectations of appropriate responses to abuse.

These examples support the idea developed by existing studies cited earlier related to the construction of the “ideal victim”—one who is expected to exhibit “appropriate responses” to abuse. Only a handful of press articles were found to reference programs to educate men about nonviolence. This omission is staggering.

The disproportionate advocacy around reporting of violence as compared to advocacy around educating men to not abuse leads the public to focus on only one component of the solution to the problem of violence against women. In Paraguay, for example, the news media often cites the statistic that nine out of ten Paraguayan women experience violence. Should all of these women report their abuser, and should the perpetrators be effectively convicted and incarcerated, Paraguay would be left with very few free men. Even if this the statistic were lower, if we consider the range of violent manifestations and the scope of this problem, the idea that penal justice is the most important solution to the problem is myopic, since we cannot remove from our societies such a large number of perpetrators.

When accountability for violence is not placed on the victim, it is often shifted to the State and any other contingent forces, obscuring the problem with male aggression and patriarchy in our societies:

Si bien la historia de Colombia es violenta existen muchos detonantes para la violencia intrafamiliar como la cultura, las drogas, el alcohol, el desempleo, la crisis económica, la dependencia económica, la infidelidad (que ahora se ha acentuado tanto en hombres como en mujeres) pero la verdad, no hacen falta más estudios para conocer la raíz del problema, porque es obvio que las causales están plenamente identificadas, la pregunta del millón es ¿qué falta por hacer para controlar y erradicar esta serie de asesinatos que



parecen sacados de los Cuentos de la Cripta? (El Tiempo, November 5, 2014, Colombia).<sup>14</sup>

Again, violence is normalized when causality is presented where there is only correlation. With regard to the above excerpt, for example, while it is true that there is a correlation between drug use and violence, drug use does not inherently and inevitably prompt violence. Violence against women is socialized, and it is therefore not a matter of addressing these external contingencies, but rather, of education and sensitization to prevent it. Again, there is no mention of men's role.

Without closely examining governments' policies and campaigns to eradicate violence against women, the impression imparted by the news media in the seven countries studied is that there are more campaigns focused on activating women to break out of the cycle of violence than there are targeting men to stop the cycle of violence. There is little, if any, coverage of initiatives that target men and boys. Nevertheless, there is ample coverage of government policies centered on retroactively providing women with the resources to overcome violence. The invisibility of men in such government initiatives is salient.

For example, during the recent presidential elections in Brazil, there was much coverage in Brazil and even other countries like Paraguay about the proposed program Casa da Mulher Brasileira by incumbent candidate Dilma Rousseff to address violence against women. This program is centered on the construction of centers around Brazil where women can seek legal, psychological, even financial recourse.

Implantar nas capitais a Casa da Mulher Brasileira, que reúnem delegacia de atendimento à mulher, juizado, atendimento psicológico e orientação para o trabalho (Folha de São Paulo, October 25, 2014, Brazil).<sup>15</sup>

A similar program in El Salvador, Urban Women Centers (Centros Ciudad Mujer), also received press attention:

Este proyecto integra 14 instituciones del Estado y ofrece servicios en salud reproductiva, atención psicológica a mujeres víctimas de violencia, asesoría jurídica,

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<sup>14</sup> "While Colombia has a violent history, there are many triggers for domestic violence, such as culture, drugs, alcohol, unemployment, economic crises, financial dependence, infidelity (which has now been highlighted by both men and women), but the truth is that no more studies are needed to determine the root cause; it is obvious that the grounds have been fully identified. The big question is what needs to be done to control and eradicate this series of murders that seem to have been taken from the Tales from the Crypt? "

<sup>15</sup> "Implementation of the program Casa da Mulher Brasileira [Brazilian Woman's Shelter] in the capitals, which brings together police stations to attend women, special courts, psychological assistance, and professional guidance."

capacitación laboral y apoyo para establecer pequeñas empresas (El Mundo, November 22, 2014, El Salvador).<sup>16</sup>

A new bill in Congress in Paraguay is also seen to focus more on addressing response to violence than on education to prevent it. The title of the article reads: “What can women do to protect themselves from street harassment?”, as opposed to, “what can society do to stop men from harassing women on the street?” and follows:

El procura de la prevención y la protección de la mujer contra este tipo de agresiones, en el congreso descansa el proyecto de ley denominado ‘Ley Integral para Prevenir, Sancionar y Erradicar la Violencia contra las Mujeres Basada en Asimetrías de Género’. De aplicarse, la ley sería una herramienta a través de la cual las mujeres podrían reclamar antes la policía y el ministerio público el respeto a sus derechos (La Nación, October 29, 2014, Paraguay).<sup>17</sup>

Coverage by a Paraguayan newspaper about a speech given by Bolivian President Evo Morales on the topic again reinforces this trend of the “feminization of responsibility,” of delineating actions women must take to not let violence befall them:

En un discurso ante escolares de la ciudad amazónica de Cobija, Morales se refirió a este asunto al animar a las niñas a que se esfuercen en sus estudios para poder ser económicamente independientes. ‘Estos días, con mucha preocupación, escuchamos (casos de) feminicidio, una mujer agredida, asesinada por su pareja... No es que no había (violencia machista), había siempre, pero ahora recomendamos a las mujeres (que) denuncien, (que) no oculten, están denunciando ahora’, aseveró el mandatario (ABC Color, November 21, 2014, Paraguay).<sup>18</sup>

The overall message from these examples is: if only women report violence, study harder, become financially independent, and realize their individual worth, they will be able to prevent violence. While government programs to improve the response system for victims are certainly essential, men are still omitted from discussions of solutions to the problem of violence against women. Their role is rendered invisible by the news media, and the larger problem of socialized violence and gender inequality is left unchallenged.

It is interesting to note from coverage of presidential platforms during the recent Brazilian elections that the problem of violence against women is treated distinctly from the problem of “public security.” The roots of such violence are arguably the same—related to the construction

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<sup>16</sup> “This project integrates 14 State institutions and provides reproductive health services and counseling services to women victims of violence, legal advice, job training, and support to create small businesses.”

<sup>17</sup> “In the pursuit to prevent and protect women against such attacks, a bill in Congress called the ‘Comprehensive Law to Prevent, Punish, and Eradicate Violence against Women Based on Gender Asymmetries’. If implemented, the law would be a tool through which women can ensure, in the face of the police and prosecuting authorities, the respect of their rights.”

<sup>18</sup> “In a speech to schoolchildren in the Amazon city of Cobija, Morales addressed this issue by encouraging girls to work hard on their studies in order to become financially independent. ‘These days, with great concern, we hear cases about femicide, of battered woman killed by their partner ... The case is not that there was an absence of macho violence before; there always has been, but now we recommend that women report it and not hide it, and they are reporting now,’ said the President.”

of masculinity in our societies—and this distinction has the additional effect of treating violence against women as women’s problem, as opposed to a broader social problem. It additionally reinforces the notion that what happens in the private sphere is not political.

With regards to other tacit forms of victim blaming by the press, we find, on the other hand, some positive results in the coverage over the time period examined. The excessive scrutiny of women’s actions and lifestyles—like a focus on what the victim was wearing, what time they were out, what kind of venue they work in, infidelity, etc.—in an inadvertent attempt to justify why the perpetrator may have been prompted to abuse, was not found to be common in news outlets studied. It appears that this unfair social treatment is being effectively exposed and rejected, though a larger sample size and longer-term study would be necessary for a full assessment of progress. Nevertheless, vocal resistance to this is promising:

El grupo criticó la cobertura mediática del crimen. Helena Suárez, integrante del colectivo, rechazó en declaraciones a Montevideo.com la publicación de datos de la vida privada de la adolescente que trascendieron a partir de testimonios de vecinos recogidos por la prensa. Suárez afirmó que la ‘violencia mediática’ se suma a la violencia del caso y ‘deja a todas las mujeres expuestas’. Al respecto, señaló el ‘uso de estereotipos’ y ‘los intentos de explicar qué cosas hizo Yamila que pudieron llevar a que la asesinaran’, enfatizando que ‘no hay nada que pueda hacer una mujer para merecer que la maten’. (El País, November 13, 2014, Uruguay).<sup>19</sup>

For the reasons delineated above, more focus on educating men is urgently needed by various actors, and the news media can play a role in this in their coverage of the issue. While addressing impunity, and government and social responsiveness are very important tasks, government, development and civil society actors must be careful to not approach it in a way that further violates victims of violence by putting additional responsibility for the problem on them.

### **News hooks**

In journalism terminology, a “hook” refers to the element of a story that makes a piece relevant, timely, or novel. To analyze news hooks is to identify what component or angle of an issue or event captured the attention of news media. Journalists and reporters must play a balancing act between setting the agenda of “news worthy” issues and appealing to audiences’ preferences

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<sup>19</sup> “The group criticized the media coverage of the crime. Helena Suarez, a member of the group, denounced Montevideo.com with regard to their publication of information on the private life of a teenager that had been gained from the testimonies of neighbors and collected by the press. Suarez said that ‘media violence’ adds to the violence of the case and ‘leaves all women exposed’. In this regard, she noted, ‘stereotyping and attempts to explain the things that Yamila did could have led to her murder’, and emphasized that ‘there is nothing that a woman does to deserve murder’.”

for information in order to remain in business. Understanding what qualifies as “news worthy” helps us identify what is deemed important and what is not. Because gender inequality is premised on imbalances in power and part of that power dynamic includes the suppression of voices and issues, part of the process of eliminating violence against women is to address this power imbalance in the news media as well, by identifying disconnects between news coverage and lived reality and encouraging marginalized voices and issues to be brought to the fore.

The table below breaks down the frequency with which the identified news hooks featured by country over the course of this study:

**Table 4. Frequency of News Hooks by Country**

	Brazil	Colombia	El Salvador	Jamaica	Mexico	Paraguay	Uruguay
Recent conference/meeting/panel/report	**	**	***	**	**	***	*
New domestic law/policy/resource/initiative	**	*	**	*	**	***	*
Day for Elimination of Violence Against Women	***	***	***	*	***	***	***
Domestic (civil society) advocacy/campaign	**	*	**	*	***	**	***
International initiative/agreement	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Linked to Development	*	*	*	*	**	*	*
Case involving celebrity	*	*	**	***	**	*	*
Sensational case	***	***	*	**	*	***	***
Foreign country campaign/story/case	***	**	**	**	**	***	*
Advocacy through art	**	**	*	*	**	**	**

Key: High frequency = \*\*\*; Medium frequency = \*\*; Low frequency or not at all = \*

Over the course of the study, considerations of what was newsworthy varied by country. Nevertheless, some overarching trends can be identified. The relatively frequent press coverage across countries of conferences, panels, and new reports on the topic of violence against women appear to have positive effects in the dissemination of important facts about the scope, manifestations, and consequences of the issue. This doesn’t, however, appear to catalyze more discussion regarding the roots of the issue and actual actions needed to address it. Often times, pieces about new reports and analyses summarize the figures, and leave it at that. Coupled with the high rate at which sensational cases of violence against women appear in the news media, the barrage of alarming figures and alarming stories by the news media leads to the oscillation between the banalization of violence and its sensationalization, further abstracting the problem. Indeed, the news media largely fails to humanize the stories, dealing primarily with criminal and judicial details, and ignoring details that reveal the human narrative behind each case.

In Brazil, coverage of violence against women in the national media was largely about stories, cases and campaigns in other countries, especially the United States. Over five weeks, the mainstream outlets in Brazil covered: the Bill Cosby rape allegations in the United States, the new American TV series *Stalker*, the case of domestic violence by an American NFL player, “witch” killings in Tanzania, increase in gender selective abortion in Eastern Europe, a study of rape as a weapon of war in South Sudan, controversy over the censuring of an Argentinean documentary over alleged male-discriminating child custody policies, the public posting of a photograph of a female murder victim by her killer in Oregon in the United States, the story of an American woman in a situation of domestic violence who called 911 pretending to order a pizza, and coverage of sexism in video-gaming prompted by death threats received by female gamers in the United States.

The disproportionate coverage of American news by the Brazilian mainstream news outlets is likely linked to the weight of American culture in Brazil generally. Nevertheless, two main observations can be drawn regarding the implications of this coverage. On the one hand, the treatment of the American stories as relevant to Brazilian audiences demonstrates a presumption of similarity between the dynamics of violence against women in the United States and Brazil that in fact overshadow its incidence in the Brazilian context, further obscuring these. On the other hand, American stories are still mostly treated as exceptional cases and not linked to the broader problem of gender inequality that both countries continue to face, something we see is a rather common trend.

Coverage of violence against women in Argentina, Eastern Europe, South Sudan, and Tanzania have additional undertones of “otherness” which, given the disproportionate coverage of domestic examples in national news agencies, risks imparting a false sense that other societies experience violence against women to greater and/or more objectionable degree than Brazil. While Brazil stood out in this regard, the news media in the other focus countries similarly covered many foreign cases over the course of this study, including stories about Boko Haram girl kidnappings in Nigeria, the Pistorius sentencing in South Africa, allegations that Maradona hit his girlfriend, statistics about female genital cutting and child brides in Africa, and a viral U.S. video about catcalling. In some cases, the “othering” of violence had nationalist, racial, and classist undertones, risking disassociation from a problem that is, in fact, universal and cuts across all social groups.

Another interesting news hook revolved around the public condemnation of leaders for misspeaking on the subject of violence against women. In Jamaica, many news stories covered the outcry by citizens over the trivialization of rape by Senator Nicholson, and his ensuing

apology. In Paraguay, news stories picked up the public outcry against the President's remark in a recent meeting in Uruguay: "Paraguay needs to be that beautiful woman, it needs to be an easy country." The news media has a positive role to play in amplifying the message that how we speak about violence against women matters, contributing effectively as a platform of accountability.

Finally, an interesting trend emerged in Jamaica: a complementary move to highlight men's issues and their contributions. Multiple articles were written around International Men's Day, celebrated on November 19th, to bring awareness to issues that affect boys and men, such as their struggle within the education system, involvement in crime, challenges of father-child relationships, and inadequate attention to health issues (e.g., sexual and reproductive health), as well as to celebrate their contributions to community, family, marriage, and childcare. Links were effectively drawn between patriarchy and the damaging consequences of gender stereotyping on men, and how the movement for gender equality is ultimately one for human rights.

Studies, meetings, advocacy days, local protests and campaigns, and art productions relating to violence against women receive widespread attention in national news media. This provides the opportunity to integrate a spin that favors and promote the movement to eliminate all forms of violence against women. In order for the wealth of information that is available to become more compelling, it must be humanized and articulated in a way that draws connections between the experiences of violence and the social context that we are all implicated in.

## **Conclusions**

This study comprises a snap-shot of overarching patterns in the depiction of violence against women by the news media in seven LAC countries. The most striking observations is that of the sheer absence of men from the subject of debate. This conveys the degree to which it continues to be seen not as a transcendental humanitarian and social crisis, but as a tangential women's problem. In this vein, the feminization of responsibility is a detrimental turn taken by advocates that risks further subjecting women. This is reflected in the rhetoric of empowerment and activation that encourages women to take on violence by simply deciding to not tolerate it any longer, undermining their existing agency and distracting from scrutiny of male aggression. Whether representative of actual governmental policies or not, the excessive focus on policies and programs related to retroactive response mechanisms to succor victims overshadows the need for focus on programs aimed at preventing the violence through universal education.

Broader analysis of the portrayal of women in news media can provide additional insight into the social backdrop of violence against women. For example, a search for “women” in a Brazilian news agency will bring up a large number of stories about women’s bodies and actions, reflecting the shaming and policing that women disproportionately face. A quick search through Paraguayan news coverage reveals that women’s identities are tied to their relations with men, and they are often referred to as “the sister”, “the mother”, “the wife”, reflecting their social perception as possessions. Gender stereotypes that sustain inequality also abound. Many news outlets have pages on their websites especially dedicated to women, with cooking and fashion content, while no such labeling is in place for men, presumably because the rest of the newspaper is intended for male readership by default. It is essential to develop comprehensive guidelines for gender reporting and promote them through government, civil society, and the international development channels.

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