



# Preventing violence against women through arms control in Latin America and the Caribbean

Recommendations during the COVID-19 crisis

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## INTRODUCTION

According to the Pan American Health Organization, violence against women (VAW) affects one in three women throughout their life.<sup>1</sup> This type of violence resulted in at least 3,800 feminicides<sup>2</sup> (the homicide of a woman for gender-based reasons) in 2018 in Latin America and the Caribbean,<sup>3</sup> the region considered to be one of the most dangerous in the world for women. 14 of the 25 countries with the highest rates of feminicide in the world are found in this region.<sup>4</sup> UN Women warns that measures to prevent and mitigate the spread of COVID-19, such as quarantine, isolation or social distancing, and restrictions imposed on mobility, have exacerbated the violence against women, girls and adolescents that occurs in

homes,<sup>5</sup> since many of them have been forced to stay confined for long periods of time with their aggressors.

VAW occurring in the private sphere is exercised by intimate partners, ex-partners and other family members or people living with them. The presence of firearms in the home increases the risks of VAW and its lethality, since not only can they be the means of committing feminicide, but they are also facilitators of other types of gender-based violence: physical, psychological and/or sexual. However, although firearms can be used to threaten, intimidate and coerce, there is usually not enough information regarding this matter.

<sup>1</sup> PAHO (2019) Intimate partner violence in the Americas: a systematic review and reanalysis of national prevalence estimates.

<sup>2</sup> UN Women defines feminicide as “murder for gender-based reasons, a primary cause of death among women of certain countries”. UN Women (2013). Annual Report 2012–2013. <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2013/6/unwomen-annualreport2012-2013-es.pdf?la=es&vs=1835>

<sup>3</sup> Gender Equality Observatory for Latin America and the Caribbean, ECLAC

<https://oig.cepal.org/es/indicadores/feminicidio>.

<sup>4</sup> UN Women (2019). Spotlight Initiative.

<https://mexico.unwomen.org/es/noticias-y-eventos/articulos/2019/12/spotlight>

<sup>5</sup> UN Women (2020): Prevention of violence against women in the context of COVID-19 in Latin America and the Caribbean, BRIEF v 1.1. 23.04.2020.

In fact, it is often ignored that firearms, even those that are legally owned, facilitate VAW, meaning that police investigations and responses are faced with challenges that are not always visible and of which there are few records.

Although victims of armed violence<sup>6</sup> are mostly men, and these deaths occur in contexts of organized crime, common delinquency and interpersonal violence, armed violence against women is not only present in the public sphere, but also the private. Some countries in Latin America and the Caribbean appear among the countries with the highest rates of violent deaths of women worldwide, and in many cases a firearm is the object used to commit the murder.

Arms control therefore constitutes a key factor when it comes to preventing and reducing violence against women, which means it is necessary to promote the discussion on gender-based violence and its link to arms control measures. In this respect, it is essential to cross-reference the standards that regulate and control the possession and carrying of firearms with those that seek to prevent, punish and eradicate VAW, as well as to ensure coordination and communication between authorities with responsibilities in both matters.

For several years, the United Nations Regional Centre for Peace, Disarmament and Development in Latin America and the Caribbean (UNLIREC) has been promoting the discussion on gender-based violence and its link to arms control measures. In particular, UNLIREC has focused on reviewing regulations for the prevention of VAW and those concerning the control of firearms for civilian use in the countries of the region.

This regulatory analysis demonstrated that several countries have a national legal framework linking the regulation of firearms for civilian use with certain gender criteria, which facilitates addressing

the impact of the possession and carrying of firearms on VAW.

The health crisis generated by COVID-19 and the increase of VAW cases and their consequent visibility reinforces the need to establish links between firearms control and the various measures that are being taken to deal with VAW during the pandemic.

Within this specific context, UNLIREC carried out an investigation into the various measures that the States in the region have been taking to respond to the increase of VAW during social confinement in the midst of the health crisis. In this regard, we consulted open sources, such as media news, official pages of ministries, as well as decrees and laws enacted in recent months regarding the topic in question.

As a preliminary, it can be concluded that, with some exceptions, the majority of measures designed to combat VAW during the COVID-19 crisis do not explicitly include a direct link to arms control. In this context, UNLIREC is making the present document available to the States in the region with the aim of publicizing a series of recommendations to address and prevent VAW during the COVID-19 crisis from the perspective of firearms control.

## VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND ARMS CONTROL IN TIMES OF COVID-19

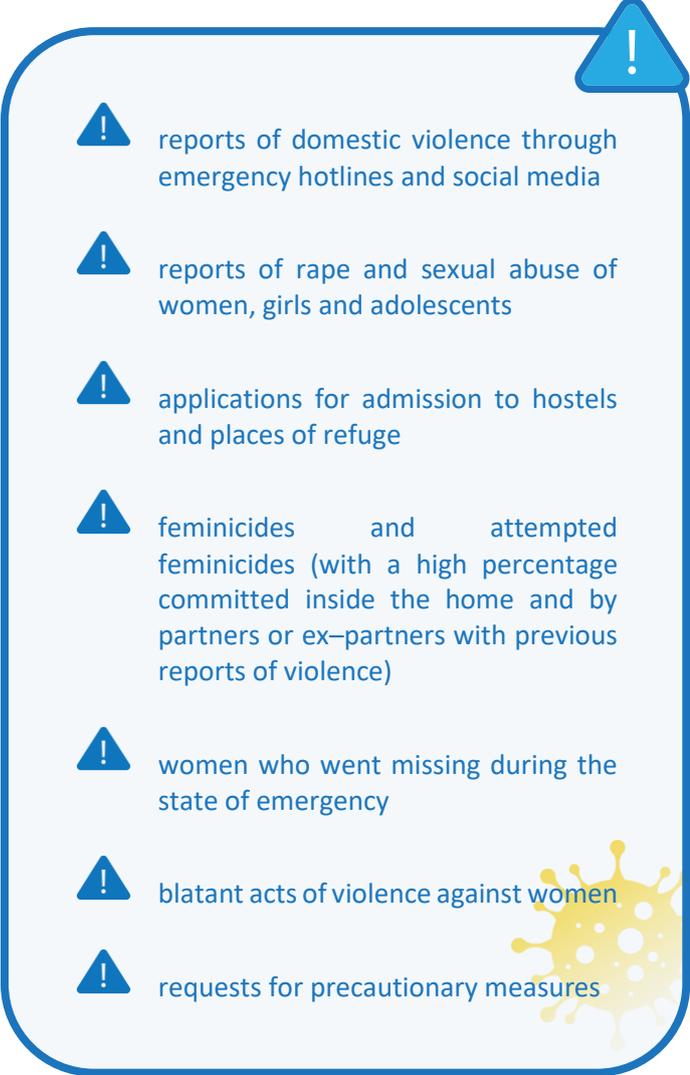
According to official sources from Latin American and Caribbean countries, VAW has intensified during the state of emergency in response to the coronavirus pandemic, which has included confinement, social isolation and curfews, among some of the adopted measures.

Reports on domestic violence and VAW have increased by up to 60-70% in several countries. Months after measures restricting the freedom of

<sup>6</sup> Armed violence is defined as *the intentional use of physical force through arms, in practice or as a threat, against oneself, another person, a group, a community or a State, that causes loss, injury, death and/or psychosocial damage to one or more persons and can undermine the security and achievements and*

*development prospects of a community, country or region.* See: United Nations (2009). Promoting development through the reduction and prevention of armed violence –Secretary General’s Report in the context of the sixty-fourth session of the United Nations General Assembly (A/64/228). Page 4.

movement were imposed, the investigation carried out by UNLIREC showed that in the majority of States in the region there has been an increase in:

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- reports of domestic violence through emergency hotlines and social media
  - reports of rape and sexual abuse of women, girls and adolescents
  - applications for admission to hostels and places of refuge
  - femicides and attempted femicides (with a high percentage committed inside the home and by partners or ex-partners with previous reports of violence)
  - women who went missing during the state of emergency
  - blatant acts of violence against women
  - requests for precautionary measures

As has been previously indicated, in contexts of intrafamily violence, the mere presence of a firearm in the home means that women are exposed to an increased risk of death and that domestic violence is perpetuated.

Unfortunately, there is little information about the presence of firearms when committing this type of violence, especially during the COVID-19 crisis; whether or not femicides were committed with

firearms; or whether other acts of violence were facilitated by firearms. The presence of firearms in a domestic sphere is not only a lethal risk factor for women, girls and adolescents, but also plays a determinant role in other crimes or forms of violence, such as intimidation, coercion and threats.

The United Nations has made the Modular Small Arms Control Implementation Compendium (MOSAIC) available to States, which consists of a set of practical and voluntary orientation guidelines on arms control throughout the life cycle of firearms. In view of the link between firearms and VAW, various MOSAIC modules are useful in developing measures to prevent and eliminate VAW.<sup>7</sup>

UNLIREC has observed that among the different measures taken by the States in the region to respond to VAW during the pandemic, the presence of firearms has not been considered as an element of analysis. On another note, many of the extraordinary measures on arms control that were implemented during the initial months of the health crisis, did not incorporate a gender approach to prevent and reduce VAW.

Below are several of the responses that Latin American and Caribbean countries have adopted at the national and local level, which are complemented by concrete recommendations to include arms control as one of the key components in public policies to prevent and reduce VAW in a holistic way.

In addition, some of the arms control measures been taken during the health crisis are presented, which could incorporate a gender approach to prevent and reduce VAW.

The following recommendations are based on international guidelines, such as MOSAIC and recognized good practice.

<sup>7</sup> Some of these modules are: National regulation of civilian access to small arms and light weapons (03.30); National coordinating mechanisms on small arms and light weapons control (03.40); Designing and implementing a National Action Plan (04.10); Designing and implementing community safety

programming (04.20); Awareness raising (04.30); Conducting small arms and light weapons surveys (05.10); and Women, men and the gendered nature of small arms and light weapons (06.10). For more information see: <https://www.un.org/disarmament/convarms/mosaic/>

**Recommendations for integrating arms control measures into responses to prevent and reduce violence against women during the COVID-19 crisis**

	<b>Measures to address, prevent and reduce violence against women</b>	<b>Recommendations for integrating arms control</b>
<b>Statistical information</b>	<p>Records of VAW (femicides, sexual violence, physical and psychological violence, among others).</p>	<p>Record data broken down by sex and other variables (age, location, etc.) and include the means of committing the crime.</p> <p>Share information and coordinate official data between various institutions with responsibilities on the topic (Police, Public Ministry, Forensic Institutions).</p> <p>If the means of committing the crime is a firearm, verify its legality and inform the body responsible for the control of firearms for civilian use to take the corresponding actions.</p>
<b>Emergency care services and equipment</b>	<p>Strengthening of emergency hotlines (Police, Public Prosecutor's Office, Human Rights Offices) and of victim care to receive and address complaints and provide advice and information.</p> <p>Creation of platforms and channels of communication through Whatsapp (encrypted and silent conversations), emails, chats and applications (with panic button and help messages to emergency contacts with the victim's location) to report acts of VAW.</p> <p>Equipping pharmacies, grocery stores, supermarkets, service stations so that women can report acts of domestic violence, even with specific codes so as not to be discovered.</p> <p>Mobile emergency teams taking complaints from homes in isolated regions or where basic services are scarce and there is little internet coverage.</p>	<p>Include protocols for registering the presence of firearms in the home in complaint handling and risk assessment procedures and whether these are being used to violate the complainants.</p> <p>Incorporate any other relevant information into the complaint records, such as number and types of firearms in the home; presence and quantities of ammunition and firearms components; permit to carry or possess firearms; whether the firearm corresponds to a regulatory firearm (police, military, private security guards).</p> <p>Channel information to the corresponding bodies for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ suspending or revoking arms licenses;</li> <li>▪ disabling the application for permits to carry and possess firearms;</li> <li>▪ seizing or confiscating firearms and their ammunition.</li> </ul>

### Recommendations for integrating arms control measures into responses to prevent and reduce violence against women during the COVID-19 crisis

	Measures to <b>address, prevent and reduce violence</b> against women	Recommendations for <b>integrating arms control</b>
<b>Police intervention</b>	<p>Preparation of action protocols for police officers to intervene in cases of VAW in the context of confinement due to COVID-19.</p>	<p>Include information about the following in the complaint and care forms in cases of VAW:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ If the aggressor owns firearms and where to find them.</li> <li>▪ If the aggressor used firearms to exercise violence.</li> <li>▪ If the violence intensified during isolation.</li> <li>▪ If the seizure or confiscation of firearms and their ammunition is requested as a measure, the suspension of licenses and the prohibition on applying for new permits to acquire or carry firearms.</li> </ul> <p>Include specific guidelines for taking special actions for aggressors who possess regulatory arms for the exercise of their work duties since these (the firearms) belong to their institution or company.</p> <p>Consider cases restricting the possession or carrying of regulatory arms for security forces personnel or private security agents with reports of domestic violence and gender-based violence.</p>
<b>Legal intervention</b>	<p>Creation of guides and guidelines for prosecutors with urgent measures suggested for cases of VAW.</p> <p>Automatic extension and renewal of protection measures like restraining orders.</p> <p>Request to judges to expedite the adoption of precautionary measures on acts of domestic violence.</p> <p>Enabling ways to hold hearings or legal proceedings in a remote manner, including the issuing of the sentence, so as not to paralyze the process.</p>	<p>Consider the suspension or revocation of firearms licenses, as well as the seizure or confiscation of firearms that were in possession of the aggressor.</p> <p>Establish the prohibition of applications from aggressors for licenses to carry and possess firearms.</p>

## Recommendations for integrating arms control measures into responses to prevent and reduce violence against women during the COVID-19 crisis

	Measures to <b>address, prevent and reduce violence</b> against women	Recommendations for <b>integrating arms control</b>
<b>Interinstitutional coordination</b>	<p>Establishment of critical care routes for women in situations of violence<sup>8</sup> for various sectors and bodies such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Women’s institutes or secretariats and municipal women’s bodies</li> <li>▪ Public/citizen security secretariats</li> <li>▪ Municipal police</li> <li>▪ Emergency centers, victim care committees</li> <li>▪ Family police stations</li> <li>▪ Public prosecutors’ offices or attorney general’s offices</li> <li>▪ Health services</li> <li>▪ Host center/hostels</li> <li>▪ Rescue brigades that go to homes and relocate at-risk women</li> </ul>	<p>Ensure efficient coordination between various bodies providing care services to female victims of violence and standardize the procedures implemented by the staff of each institution with regard to the presence and record of firearms.</p> <p>Include on first contact, initial interviews and/or questionnaires or consultations about the presence of firearms in the home, even if this has not been the method of committing the reported violence.</p> <p>Assess/detect the risk posed by the firearm in the home or if it has been used to threaten or assault women, despite not being formally reported.</p> <p>Channel the information to the competent bodies for recording purposes and take actions.</p> <p>Through the monitoring of reported cases of VAW, ensure that the correct measures have been taken with regard to the firearm to avoid revictimization or fatal outcomes.</p>
<b>Awareness raising campaigns</b>	<p>Launch and implementation of online awareness raising campaigns to encourage reports of abuse and VAW.</p> <p>Strengthening and accompanying civil society organizations that offer advice and training on topics of prevention and care of VAW.</p>	<p>Raise awareness and disseminate information about the impacts (physical and psychological) that firearms have in contexts of domestic violence.</p> <p>Advocate and ensure that arms control measures are included in the initiatives and responses to tackle VAW during the pandemic.</p>

<sup>8</sup> For more information consult: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime – UNODC (2019): Critical routes in terms of care for women in situations of violence in Mexico  
[https://www.unodc.org/documents/mexicoandcentralamerica/2020/Mexico/Rutas\\_Criticas\\_en\\_materia\\_de\\_atencion\\_a\\_mujeres\\_en\\_situacion\\_de\\_violencia\\_en\\_Mexico\\_VF.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/mexicoandcentralamerica/2020/Mexico/Rutas_Criticas_en_materia_de_atencion_a_mujeres_en_situacion_de_violencia_en_Mexico_VF.pdf)

**Recommendations for integrating gender perspectives into the extraordinary arms control measures during the COVID-19 crisis**

	<b>Arms control</b> measures taken during the pandemic	Recommendations for <b>integrating the gender perspective</b> with a view of preventing violence against women
<b>Permit to possess and carry firearms</b>	<p>Extension of license expirations, qualifications, registrations and firearms permits for civilians and private security guards during the health crisis.</p> <p>Restriction of permits to carry firearms for providers of security services, food distribution transport, securities, cargo and other services that are considered necessary for addressing the crisis.</p>	<p>Cross reference data with the institutions that keep the records of perpetrators of domestic violence and VAW to suspend the extension of expirations and suspend/cancel licenses.</p> <p>Review whether the automatic extension of license expirations allows license holders to purchase ammunition.</p> <p>In the case of services considered essential during the pandemic, ensure that firearms carriers can leave regulatory arms in secure storage facilities in the companies/organizations to which they belong.</p> <p>Restrict the carrying of firearms to only during service or working hours and avoid the transfer of firearms to homes.</p>
<b>Applications for possession</b>	<p>Restriction of application for registration and purchase of new firearms to individuals.</p>	<p>Consider as grounds for denial of a license not only the absence of a history of gender-based violence, but also include an assessment of the candidate that allows the competent authority to profile the risk of violent behavior.</p> <p>Consult records of aggressors and reports with updated information and take into account that police records or reports of violent behavior may not have resulted in criminal records or restraining orders or protection.</p>

As can be deduced from this analysis and crossover of sectoral measures, it is necessary to generate greater awareness of the risks implicated by firearms for female victims of violence and for various institutions with competencies on the subject to join forces, particularly in the present context whereby measures of social distancing and restrictions on mobility for preventing and mitigating the spread of COVID-19 have exacerbated the violence against women and girls.

UNLIREC encourages national authorities with responsibilities in the fields of arms control and prevention and care of VAW, as well as other relevant sectors (health sector, judicial body, Public Ministry) and civil society organizations to reinforce mechanisms and channels of communication and coordination to streamline processes of addressing VAW during the COVID-19 crisis, and to implement procedures and protocols that consider the presence and role of firearms in facilitating various forms of VAW.

In addition, States are invited to support the measures for addressing VAW that have proven effective, even after social isolation, and to develop and implement public policies with regard to gender-based violence beyond the health emergency, incorporating arms control as an axis of intervention.

The recommendations presented here are in accordance with the provisions included in the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women (Convention of Belém do Pará, 1994)<sup>9</sup>,

which proposes mechanisms for the protection and defense of women's rights to fight against the phenomenon of physical, sexual and psychological violence, both in the public and private spheres.

Moreover, linking the responses to address VAW with arms control measures is in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. As part of their targets, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 5 (Gender Equality) and 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) include eliminating all forms of violence against women and girls in the public and private spheres (5.2); considerably reducing all forms of violence and mortality rates (16.1); as well as reducing illicit arms flows (16.4).<sup>10</sup>

Lastly, implementing arms control policies with a gender approach responds to the call of the Agenda for Disarmament "Securing our Common Future" launched in 2018 by the UN Secretary-General António Guterres. The Agenda for Disarmament calls for the full and equal participation of women in processes of decision making relating to disarmament, as well as to the promotion of gender-sensitive disarmament policies.<sup>11</sup>

UNLIREC encourages States, agencies of the United Nations System, society organizations and other partners to share the measures and good practice that are being implemented in various countries in the region with regard to the topics covered here.

UNLIREC appreciates the generous support from the Government of Canada and the European Union that has made this investigation possible.

<sup>9</sup> For more information on the Convention of Belém do Pará and the Follow-up Mechanism, see: <https://www.oas.org/es/mesecvi/convencion.asp>

<sup>10</sup> For more information on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, consult: <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/es/development-agenda/>

<sup>11</sup> For more information, consult: *United Nations Secretary-General (2018). Securing our common future: an agenda for disarmament.* <https://www.un.org/disarmament/sg-agenda/es/>