

Cuba Slow to Act Over Domestic Abuse

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Activist groups struggle to overcome lack of legislation or state support.

Sitting in the living room of her home in Santa Clara, 33-year-old Tamara Mora recounted how her husband had physically abused her throughout the coronavirus lockdown.

“He beat me,” she said. “One day he threw a frying pan of hot fat at my feet.”

Originally from Las Tunas, Mora had worked cleaning hostels in Santa Clara. But ever since tourism ground to a halt, she had depended on her husband’s income. With nowhere else to go, she said that she felt like a victim of daily blackmail.

As in many countries around the world, rates of domestic violence have soared in Cuba since the start of the pandemic.

Yet the authorities have been very slow to react to the situation, despite numerous warnings from international organisations of an increase in gender-based violence.

In early April, for instance, UN secretary-general António Guterres tweeted a message urging governments to “put women's safety first as they respond to the pandemic”.

However, the Cuban government took no action to combat domestic violence during the months of lockdown.

It was not until July 21, when the country was already entering a post-pandemic phase, that state television announced the launch of a hotline where victims could file complaints and receive psychological support.

The programme belatedly reported that “after months of social distancing due to the Covid-19 pandemic, there is evidence of domestic violence which has particularly affected women.”

In Cuba, statistics on assaults or murders of women are not disclosed by authorities. Media outlets, controlled by the state, do not report these events either.

The Cuban criminal code is one of the few in Latin America that does not recognise any specific form of violence against women beyond general injury or threat. Such cases are only investigated when reported by the victim, and those who are attacked often do not report it.

A survey published in 2016 by the National Office of Statistics and Information found that only four out of every 100 women who reported being victims of male violence sought help from an institution.

Many Cuban women feel they cannot report violence because they are economically dependent on their partners, a situation exacerbated by the economic crisis that has accompanied the pandemic.

According to activist group YoSíTeCreo en Cuba, which manages a Facebook page with a hotline number, it was also partly due to the dismissive response they often encountered from officials.

“When women go to the police, they are often told things like ‘no one should interfere between a husband and wife,’” they said in a statement.

In one incident on June 11, their Facebook group was contacted by a concerned neighbour in a Havana apartment block who heard the screams of a young woman being beaten by her partner. This was, the neighbour reported, the fourth time this had happened in recent weeks.

After the activists contacted the authorities, a patrol unit with military personnel and police arrived at the scene. However, although her two young daughters told police what had happened, their mother declined to speak to them or to file a report.

Not long after the patrol unit left, the beating began again. The activists, again alerted by the neighbour, continued to call the police but the officers never returned.

Due to the lack of official data, the work carried out by YoSíTeCreo provides one of the few insights on what happened in Cuba during the months of confinement.

Since April, the group has documented the murders of five women and children by husbands or former

partners, although independent media outlets have reported at least two other similar crimes.

“The problem worsened because of the isolation, as we saw in the cases we had been following since before the confinement,” YoSiTeoCreo said.

“During this stage of Covid19, we have accompanied 30 women between the ages of 18 and 70, most of them from Havana. The actual number of people we support is greater, as we also take care of the family members, especially children.”

Some health care workers say they have also noticed an increase in the number of female victims of violence.

Ana, a long-time nurse on duty at the Comandante Pinares Hospital in San Cristobal, Artemisa, asked not to be identified for fear of repercussions.

She said that in the last two months she had seen more and more patients who had been injured in domestic disputes, including women beaten by their partners.

“We've seen arguments between siblings that end up with stab wounds, between parents and children, husbands and wives,” she said.

Cecilia, a doctor working at a polyclinic in the city of Santa Clara who also asked to remain anonymous, said she too had seen a rise in cases of abuse.

In recent months she had treated five women who had been assaulted, a noticeable increase. In one case, a young woman arrived at the polyclinic covering her face with a towel and claiming she had fallen off a bicycle.

Later, during a private consultation with Cecilia, the woman explained that she had been beaten by her former partner.

“She said that he had been threatening her for months, that he was a heavy drinker and that he had become jealous of a new relationship she had started,” Cecilia said.

Bertha Guillén contributed to this report.

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