

Changing mindsets can save women's lives in Latin America

Equality between women and men is unfinished business. The #MeToo movement has focused the international spotlight on the widespread prevalence of sexual assault and harassment. The truth is that violence against women and girls is one of the world's most common, entrenched and devastating human rights violations.

This violence is part of daily life in many places, a constant threat that props up destructive notions of masculinity and shapes routine human interactions. "Machismo", while not unique to Latin America, is certainly not an uncommon part of daily life throughout the region. This archaic notion of manliness, coupled with the wide availability of firearms, is a recipe for those who feel entitled to wield power over others.

In homes and between intimate partners, the power of guns to menace and terrorize makes acts like stalking and rape easier for abusers to commit. Perpetrators routinely target individuals for months and years, their crimes only ending with the deaths of their victims.

Latin America is home to 14 of the 25 countries where "femicide" is most common. Twelve of these murders happen in the region each day, most with a gun, and the law never provides justice for 49 of every 50 victims.

As the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women on 25 November kicks off [16 Days of Activism against Gender-based Violence](#), people across the region share a responsibility to press for an end to these acts and the cultural attitudes that make them possible. As my colleague, Amina Mohammed, Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations, says, "No woman should die because she is a woman."

Recent years have seen a raft of new international commitments to countering gender-based violence. I'll mention three here. In 2014, the **Arms Trade Treaty** became the first legally binding agreement to curtail weapons transfers between States if there is a risk that these weapons will be used to facilitate gender-based violence. The **2030 Sustainable Development Goals**, signed onto by every country in the world in 2015, supports efforts to end all forms of violence against women and girls and to significantly reduce the availability of illicit guns. And this year, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres recognized in his [Agenda for Disarmament](#) that to eliminate systematic violence against women, women will have to be part of the decision-making every step of the way.

We now need to translate these visions and commitments into real change on the ground. One step would be for governments to frame laws that more tightly regulate guns and ammunition, making them harder for abusers to acquire. Additionally, the UN disarmament office in Lima is helping the region's police officers acquire skills to handle the physical evidence of gender-based gun violence more carefully. This makes it much less likely that courts will throw out cases based on poor evidence. The UN is also cooperating with the region's governments to destroy confiscated, excess and obsolete guns, permanently removing them from circulation. To date, we have helped countries in the region to destroy over 100,000 guns and 125 tonnes of ammunition.

While governments bear the primary responsibility for controlling guns, fully addressing the social and cultural factors behind armed violence will require improving cooperation and dialogue among international, regional and sub-regional organizations, research institutes, private companies and civil society. By pooling our experience, strength and expertise to address this problem head-on, changing mindsets, behaviours and deeply rooted ideas of manhood, we can save women's lives.

The recognition of gun violence against women and girls is building and so is the movement to eradicate it.