

# **Entre la acción y la pasividad: agencia, estrategias y búsqueda de ayuda de las mujeres mexicanas víctimas de violencia de pareja<sup>12</sup>**

## **Strategies and help-seeking behavior among Mexican women experiencing partner violence**

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### **Resumen**

Según datos de la Encuesta Nacional sobre la Dinámica de las Relaciones en los Hogares 2006 (ENDIREH), el 10.72% de las mujeres ha sido objeto de violencia sexual de pareja, el 23.71% ha experimentado violencia física en manos de su pareja actual o última pareja. A partir de los datos de la ENDIREH 2006 y datos de una serie de entrevistas realizadas en México con expertos se examina en primer lugar si las mujeres que han sufrido violencia física o sexual de pareja pidieron ayuda a instancias gubernamentales para hacer frente a la situación de violencia. En segunda instancia, entre las que no hicieron nada, se analizan los motivos por los que no pidieron ayuda, y en tercer lugar qué tipo de atención recibieron en las distintas instancias. Los análisis permiten dilucidar qué características sociodemográficas, situacionales y de la propia violencia que sufren las mujeres están asociadas a las acciones e instituciones a las cuales acuden las mujeres para hacer frente a la situación de violencia doméstica de la que son víctimas.

### **Abstract**

According to the Mexican National Survey on Household Dynamics in 2006 (ENDIREH 2006), 10.72% of women have at some point experienced sexual partner violence, and 23.71% physical violence at the hands of their current or last partner. Using the data from this survey and a series of semi-structured interviews with experts conducted in Mexico, this paper uses a mixed-methods approach in order to examine first whether women who experienced physical or/and sexual violence turned to law-enforcement agencies for help, and what the characteristics of these women are compared to those who did not seek assistance in these agencies. Secondly, it studies what type of service and treatment they reported receiving. Thirdly, an analysis of the reasons women did not request help from police and law-enforcement agencies is presented. The type of violence experienced by women emerges as a key factor in predicting women's help-seeking behavior in law enforcement agencies and the reported treatment received. The context and women's expectations account for the treatment women reported receiving in law-enforcement agencies.

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Partner violence against women is a common phenomenon in Mexico. According to data from the most recent National Survey on Household Dynamics in 2006 (Encuesta Nacional sobre la Dinámica de las Relaciones en los Hogares), 23.7% of women have experienced physical violence at the hands of their most recent or current partner, and 10.7% have suffered sexual violence. The type of violence experienced by these women fall into the situational couple violence identified by Johnson (Johnson, 1995, 2005; Johnson & Leone, 2005), which is mostly found in surveys (Johnson, 2005; Straus, 1990). While the consequences of partner violence and the factors associated with it have been the object of extensive research, women's reactions and their help-seeking strategies in law-enforcement agencies have not yet received such attention.

Help seeking is a dimension of coping, which could be defined as “the things that people do to avoid being harmed by life-strains,” (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). It has been considered a "multilayered experience that varies depending on a broad range of individual, interpersonal and socio-cultural factors, including individual trauma histories, coercion and intimidation by an abusive partner, identification with cultural and religious groups, access to economic resources, perceptions of and exposure to mainstream formal supports, access to informal supports and general beliefs about help seeking” (Liang, Goodman, Tummala-Narra, & Weintraub, 2005:82). Abused women might seek formal support either in public, private and non-profit organizations such as shelters, law enforcement agencies, medical services, or with mental health professionals; or indeed informal support among their friends, family, or acquaintances. Existing research suggests that both formal and informal support is instrumental in putting a stop to domestic violence (Frias & Angel, 2007; Goodkind, Gillum, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2003). However, under many circumstances women are reluctant to seek help (Fugate, Landis, Riordan, Naureckas, & Engel, 2005). As it will be shown, inaction or not seeking help might be conceptualized as an action, since women might consider that turning to formal or informal sources of support may aggravate their situation.

In Mexico, as opposed to other countries, there are no studies using representative samples that enable assessment of how extensive the help-seeking behavior in formal and informal networks is and the factors associated with it (Fanslow & Robinson, 2010; Langan and Innes, 1986, cited in Kaufman Kantor & Straus, 1990; Renisson and Welchans, 2000, cited in Moe, 2007). This study aims to fill this gap in our current knowledge by examining the prevalence and factors associated with resorting to law-enforcement or police offices for help.

In Mexico, the increasing public attention on the issue of violence against women and the approval of state and federal-level legislation on family violence are two of the main factors behind the creation of an array of public agencies whose goal is to provide assistance to victims of partner violence. It is necessary to differentiate between types of public agencies: agencies that “do family violence work”, and “agencies dealing with family violence”. The first type of agency does “family violence work” meaning they *own* the issue of family violence since they make violence against women a focal concern in their institutions instead of avoiding the issue.<sup>4</sup> In this category fall most of the agencies of the executive branch of the

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<sup>4</sup> I adapted this term from Patricia Yancey Martin (2005). In *Rape Work: Victims, Gender and Emotions in Organization and Community Context*, she argues that some agencies “do rape work”, meaning that these

State that promote domestic violence awareness and provide assistance to victims. The second type of agency “deals with family violence”, and in addition to family violence their scope of action includes other issues. This second type of agency tends to belong to the judiciary power (agencies dependent on the [general] attorney’s office, known as *Ministerio Público*) or executive power in the case of local police. For the purposes of this paper, and acknowledging the variety of sources of help women can turn to, I will focus on law-enforcement institutions (police and other public authorities), which fall within the category of “agencies dealing with domestic violence”.

The first part of this manuscript reviews our current knowledge about help-seeking behavior among women who experienced physical or sexual partner violence in their current or last relationship, and the attitudes and quality of service perceived by victims. Then, data sources and the analytical strategy are presented. This research uses a mixed-methods approach in which, in addition to survey data, data from the interviews conducted by the author with key informants in Mexico are used to illustrate the findings and to obtain a deeper understanding of the processes examined with the quantitative data. The third section examines whether women that experienced physical or sexual partner violence sought help in governmental agencies. The fourth section focuses on those women that experienced violence and explores the reasons why women did not seek help or remained passive, which indeed might be regarded as an active strategy. The fifth part studies women’s perception of the treatment or service they received upon their arrival to the law-enforcement agency. Then, the sixth section focuses on the factors that might lead women to claim that they received a high quality service. The last section presents the conclusions.

## **GETTING HELP AFTER THE ABUSE**

Help-seeking is a dimension of coping, which could be defined as “the things that people do to avoid being harmed by life-strains” (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978:1), which indeed “consists of the changing cognitive and behavioral efforts used to manage specific internal and external demands that exceed the resources of the victim” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, cited in Kaukinen & DeMaris, 2009: 1336). Women victims of partner violence go through different stages before they receive the necessary help: problem recognition and definition, decision to seek help and selection of the support source (Liang, et al., 2005).

Given that the nature, severity and presence of violence are in constant change, the recognition and definition of the problem is complicated. The complexity increases since in certain communities or cultures violence is condoned or justified (Krahe, Bieneck, & Moller, 2005; Levinson, 1989; Pérez Robledo, 2004; Sagot, 2000). In the case of Mexico, almost 5% of all Mexican women see violence against women a male’s right and prerogative (author’s calculation based on ENDIREH 2006). In addition, labeling certain behaviors as violence and the attributed level of severity to these behaviors is associated with certain socio-demographic and situational variables (Peek-Asa, García, McArthur, & Castro, 2002), as well as the individual’s agreement with patriarchal social norms (Ahmad, Riaz, Barata, & Stewart, 2004).

Once women are conscious of the problem, the next stage is to decide whether to seek help for interpersonal violence or not. As in the previous stage (problem recognition) several individual, interpersonal, socio-cultural and institutional factors influence women’s decisions to seek help (Fleury, Sullivan, & Bybee, 2000; Ingram, 2007; Wolf, Ly, Hobart, & Kernic,

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agencies *own* the issue. Agencies that own the case of family violence that instead of avoiding the issue make of violence against women a focal concern.

2003). The decision of seeking help seems to be shaped by language proficiency among migrants, poverty or isolation (Fugate, et al., 2005; Murdaugh, Hunt, Sowell, & Santana, 2004). In other cases, negative experiences, and apprehension about further re-victimization associated to police response might influence where women seek help. Fears for their own safety or that of their loved ones if the aggressor realizes of her attempts, or fears of stigmatization by community members, family or friends might discourage women from engaging in any help-seeking behavior. The severity of the abuse emerges as an important variable in predicting the decision to seek help and where to turn to for it (Bonomi, Holt, Martin, & Thompson, 2006; Fugate, et al., 2005). Once the violence has escalated in terms of severity and frequency, women might try to externalize their situation and seek first support from family and friends, and later, turn to law-enforcement agencies and/or community agencies (see Liang, et al., 2005).

The third stage of the theoretical framework for understanding help-seeking processes proposed by Liang et al. (2005) is the selection of a help provider. The type of support women choose is influenced by their coping and interpersonal relational styles, as well as by a cost-benefit analysis of the situation. Given their individual characteristics, women evaluate their needs and how well they think one source of support or another will fulfill their expectations. Desire for privacy, potential stigmatization, severity of violence and in some cases the desire to have the abuser removed from the home, or the need to end the relationship are some of the factors influencing women's decisions (Fugate, et al., 2005; Hickman & Simpson, 2003). The decision to select one help provider or another are shaped by the availability of support and family networks, the knowledge about formal support agencies, and the possibility of having access to them (Rose, Campbell, & Kub, 2000). The reactions of women in terms of retaliation or passivity during the violent episode have been related to the likelihood of calling the police; "women violating traditional sex-role norms, though few in number, may feel that because they have fought back they are equally guilty and therefore less deserving of police assistance" (Kaufman Kantor & Straus, 1990: 481).

The revision of existing literature using convenience, shelter and community samples shows that sexual assault victims are less likely to call the police than victims of non-sexual violence as they prefer to turn for help to friends and family members (Kaukinen, 2002). Cases of severe physical violence are more likely to be reported to the police than cases of moderate physical violence (Kaufman Kantor & Straus, 1990). Women are more likely to call the police if they have children at home than those without children (Bonomi, et al., 2006), and they are more likely to call repeatedly if children are in the house. Age, ethnicity, income, education, marital status, and size of the city where the woman lives are not predictors of seeking help from the police (Bonomi, et al., 2006; Kaufman Kantor & Straus, 1990). Previous research shows that upper and middle-class women are less likely to use law-enforcement agencies since they tend to be more financially dependent upon the aggressor, and "reporting victimization to police may jeopardize their partner's source of income and thus the victims means of support" (see Hickman & Simpson, 2003:609)

### **SEEKING HELP FROM LAW-ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES AND PERCEIVED TREATMENT RECEIVED:**

To know how many abused women turn for help to police offices or public authorities is a complex task in Mexico. In Mexico, women tend to seek help in public offices when violence has become physical. Regardless of the provisions of the law for types of violence other than the physical and sexual, the activities of law-enforcement agencies are mainly centered on

these two types of violence since they don't easily recognize psychological violence (Frías, 2009).

The flourishing of different agencies after the approval of family violence laws led to coordination problems. In practical terms, this results in women having to go in search of assistance from one agency to another, from state to municipal level, or among agencies within each level (municipal and state). This practice has been labeled by some as "*peloteo*" or "*peregrinaje*" (pilgrimage), and it has resulted in victims not seeking help (Frías, 2009). Governmental data about services provided to victims of domestic violence are unreliable because cases are counted multiple times or not counted at all since women are often, directly or indirectly, encouraged to return to their homes and recommended not to press charges.

The State, and more specifically, law-enforcement institutions such as the police have been largely criticized for their patriarchal nature and for re-victimizing women and ignoring their calls for help (Frías, 2009, 2010; Gillis et al., 2006; Hannah-Moffat, 1995; Kaukinen & DeMaris, 2009; Mirchandani, 2006; Saunders & Size, 1986; Stephens & Sinden, 2000; Torres-Falcón, 2004a). Literature centered in countries other than Mexico agree that police bodies that deal with domestic violence constitute a highly masculinized and hierarchical institutions and that in their performance they contribute somehow to the revictimization of women (Edwards, 1989; Rigakos, 1995; Stanko, 1989). The case of Mexico adds on this complexity since the local police and the police officers assigned to the different attorney's offices are held in low regard by Mexican citizens. The problems of Mexican police forces are well known both nationally and internationally and have been extensively documented: lack of accountability, high turnover rates, poor compensation and extensive corruption (Brown, Benedict, & Wilkinson, 2006; Davis, 2006; Urbalejo, 2003).

Those critical of public agencies have pointed to factors associated with the organization of these agencies and the availability of resources as contributing to the unsatisfactory service reported by women. They claim that the agencies are under-staffed and composed of individuals lacking any training in domestic violence issues. It has even been reported that some local-level police officers that attend to domestic violence training had committed disciplinary misdemeanors, and that their attendance to the domestic violence seminar was the disciplinary action (Frías, 2009). Additional problems such as a lack of professionalism and need of resources have also been mentioned as problems associated to the poor quality service provided by governmental and law-enforcement offices.

In some aspects, the situation for Mexican women does not fundamentally differ from those of other countries. Women are often reluctant to call the police, and police officers tend to minimize situations of domestic violence, or perceive it as not constituting a legal problem; they are too inclined to behave arrogantly in front of abused women, and to consider them as uncooperative and weak (Gillis, et al., 2006; Hannah-Moffat, 1995; Menjívar & Salcido, 2002; Stephens & Sinden, 2000). Moreover, in Mexico reports of police officers recommending that women resolve the situation of violence through sex and seduction are not unusual (Frías, 2010). Their attitudes are often dismissive of women's experiences of violence, and their dismissal reproduces patriarchal attitudes still prevalent in Mexican society. The following expressions of police officers to victims of partner violence illustrate this fact: "If you were raped, it is because you looked for it", "Madam, he only hit you a little", "It is better that you go home and do not make him angry again", "How is it possible that you claim you were raped, when you are not even crying".

However, not all governmental offices and public officials provide poor quality service to women or contribute to their re-victimization. Frías (2010) argues that the attention that victims of partner violence receive in governmental offices depends on two factors. First, the referral or accompaniment of the abused woman to law-enforcement offices by an employee of an agency *doing family violence work* is a guarantee of better treatment because of personal or organizational connections of the individual accompanying the woman with someone of or the law-enforcement agency. In addition, police officers are afraid of being accused of not providing quality service by someone in a visible position. The individual characteristics of the person assisting the victim of partner violence are further factors associated with the service or perceived attention the woman receives. The individuals that tend to protect women and provide them with quality service tend to be women that have developed diverse strategies to contravene the organizational culture and the legislation (details in Frías, 2010; Frías, forthcoming). Yet, despite the insensitivity of these frequent police remarks, state human rights commissions (public institutions, responsible for defending citizens' interests from malfeasance committed by public administration practices or civil servants) seldom receive complaints against MPs or civil servants displaying such attitudes and behaviors. Nevertheless, the perception is that the situation has improved over the last few years.

## **DATA, METHODS AND ANALYTICAL STRATEGY**

The goal of this manuscript is to fill the gap in our current knowledge about help-seeking behavior among Mexican women victims of physical or sexual partner abuse in Mexico, the reasons why they did or did not seek help, and the perceived attention they received upon their arrival. The evidence provided is mostly drawn from a recent survey. The quantitative analysis is complemented with qualitative data in order to understand how women perceive the service they receive

### **Sources of data**

The qualitative analyses use data of the second cross-sectional wave of the Survey on National on Household Dynamics (Encuesta Nacional sobre la Dinámica de las Relaciones en los Hogares, ENDIREH) conducted in 2006. The ENDIREH is representative of all Mexican women from the age of 15 regardless of their marital status. In addition, the ENDIREH is representative of each of the 32 states that compose Mexico. Among many other topics, the ENDIREH collected extensive information about different forms of violence against women perpetrated by different people (partner, family members, non-partners) and different spheres (family, school, workplace, street), as well as attitudes and reactions toward the violence experienced. The ENDIREH 2006 is the most complete and recent source of information about experiences of violence among Mexican women.

The qualitative data consists of a series of semi-structured in-depth interviews with both men and women in professional positions in the three branches of the State, NGOs and scholars who deal with or study the phenomenon of partner violence (details in Frías, 2009). I conducted 89 in-depth open-ended interviews during 2005 and 2006 with key informants from whom I gained insights into how domestic violence is conceptualized by key actors, the role of the agencies as well as the official stance and actions of the institutions and organizations that they belong to. I also collected information related to their evaluations of the effectiveness of their organization/institution in addressing the problem, as well as their perception concerning other agencies and institutions.

## Analytical strategy

Regarding the analytical strategy, data about the percentage of women victims of physical and/or sexual partner violence that ever turned for help to law-enforcement agencies is first presented. A logistic regression examining the factors associated with seeking help from a law-enforcement agency is offered next. Then, the analysis focuses on those women that did not seek help from these agencies, and it examines the reasons why they took the decision not to go. The final part of the analysis shows the quality of service abused women reported receiving in law-enforcement offices, and a further logistic regression examines the factors associated to reporting having received quality service and attention.

## The sample

This analysis is based on those married, separated, cohabiting or divorced women who experienced either physical and/or sexual violence in their current or last relationship (26.08% of the weighted sample;  $N= 22,639$ ). A woman will be considered a victim of physical or sexual violence if her current (for those currently cohabiting or married) or last partner (for those currently divorced or separated) has ever perpetrated at least one of the following acts against her. The following acts constitute physical violence: (1) being pushed or having one's hair pulled out; (2) being tied up; (3) being kicked; (4) having something thrown at her; (5) being slapped, punched, beaten with hands, fists, or other object; (6) being choked; (7) having been cut with a knife; and/or (8) being shot at with a fire arm. And sexual abuse: (1) being forced to have sex against her will ; (2) being forced to have any sexual activity against her will; (3) being forced to have sex under threat of physical violence. 10.49% of Mexican women who were married, cohabiting, separated or divorced in 2006 suffered some type of sexual abuse by their current or last romantic partner, and 23.49% experienced physical violence. The variables measuring physical and sexual violence are based on a variation of the Conflict Tactics Scale that have been adapted for use in Mexico (Castro, Peek-Asa, García, Ruiz, & Kraus, 2003; Peek-Asa, et al., 2002).

While most of the women (73.92%) did not experience physical or sexual partner violence in their last or current relationship, 26.08% did: 15.59% only experienced physical violence, 2.59% only sexual violence, and 7.90% both physical and sexual violence. The structure of the survey does not allow assessment of whether after each act of violence or type of violence (sexual or physical) the woman sought help in law-enforcement offices. For that reason I decided to focus both on women who experienced physical and/or sexual violence. The type of violence that these women experience is principally situational couple violence, as this is the type of violence mostly captured by national surveys (Johnson, 1995; Johnson & Leone, 2005; Straus, 1990).

## Measures

As it was mentioned, this analysis has two dependent variables. *Seeking help in law-enforcement offices or public authorities* is a dichotomous, coded 1 if the woman reported that “after the conflicts with her husband or partner (ex-husband or ex-partner for those divorced) she turned to the attorney’s office, preventive police or other public authorities,” and 0 otherwise. *Quality treatment* is also a dichotomous variable that assesses if the women “received quality treatment, orientation and information” (coded 1), or if the authorities “treated her badly”, or “did nothing or paid no attention to her” (coded 0).

Regarding the independent variables, I identify four individual and relation-level sets of characteristics associated to the experiences of partner violence: socio-economic and demographic, violence background, household characteristics, and individual support of women's rights as a proxy for patriarchal ideology. Among the personal history factors, the woman's *age* and *years of education* are continuous variables, both measured in years. *Employment* is coded 1 if the respondent worked for pay during the week preceding the interview and 0 otherwise. *Abuse background* measures if the respondent experienced physical violence perpetrated by a family member during childhood or adolescence. It is coded 1 if any abuse was reported and 0 otherwise. *Marital status* assesses whether or not a woman is cohabiting, married, divorced and separated. The racial/ethnic diversity is measured by indigenous, a variable that assesses if the woman speaks an indigenous language. By measuring those who speak an indigenous language, we are creating a proxy that allows us to identify, at least, the less acculturated indigenous individuals.

The measure of *socio-economic status* follows the classification scheme used developed by Echarri (2008) based on three household characteristics. The first is average years of education of the members of the household. This measure includes both those who have completed their education and those still in the educational system by imputing the expected number of years of schooling according to their age and gender for those who are still in school. The second household characteristic refers to the occupational status of the household member with the highest potential income based on the average for that occupation. The third household characteristic consists of household basic amenities such as water and electricity, the structural characteristics of the home, the number of people per room, and the availability of a kitchen. Based on these three characteristics, Echarri's classification assigns each household to one of four economic strata: very low (25.67% of those that experienced physical and/or sexual violence), low (45.32%), medium (7.75%) and high (11.26%).

Among the violence background and experiences, *type of violence experienced* is a variable with four categories that assesses the type and severity of violence suffered: moderate physical violence, severe physical violence, physical (any severity) and sexual violence, and only sexual violence. 23.49% of Mexican women who were married, cohabiting, separated or divorced in 2006 have experienced some type of physical violence at the hands of their current or last partner. Almost one fourth (23.34%) has experienced moderate partner violence (was pushed, kicked, hit, or had an object thrown at her ) and 4.66% severe partner violence (was tied, choked, hurt with a weapon or knife) (details in Frías & Angel, 2005). *Experienced physical violence in family of origin* records the respondents' experience of physical violence during childhood or adolescence. *Witnessed physical violence in family of origin* assesses if the respondent observed physical violence in their family while growing up. These two variables are coded 1 if an affirmative response was provided and 0 otherwise.

There are four independent situational variables. The *number of residents in the household* is a continuous variable that measures the number of people sharing the household with the interviewee. *Urban* is a dichotomous variable that assesses whether the woman lives in an urban setting, more than 2,500 inhabitants (coded 1), or in a rural area (coded 0). The *average age of the women's children in the household* has five categories: no children, less than five years, between five and ten years, between more than ten and fifteen years; between more than fifteen to eighteen years. *Last occasion that women sought help in law enforcement agencies* is a continuous variable that measures the number of years elapsed since the woman sought help.



Finally, an individual variable measuring *women's support of women's rights* is a dichotomous variable based on women's agreement or disagreement with all four statements about women's rights: 1) "men and women must have the same right to make their own decisions"; "men and women must have equal freedom"; 3) "men and women must have the same right to defend themselves and press charges in the event of violence or aggression"; 4) "women must have the possibility to make decisions about their own life"; and, 5) "women must have the right to a life free of violence". *Women's support of women's rights* aims to capture some kind of subjective appropriation of women's rights in a context in which legislation has attempted to de-construct a naturalized experience of women's subordination (Agoff, 2009).

## **HELP-SEEKING BEHAVIOR IN LAW-ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES AND ASSOCIATED FACTORS**

Most of the Mexican women (73.92%) currently married, separated, cohabiting, or divorced have never experienced physical and/or sexual violence at the hands of their current or last partner. Table 1 presents data about where the women who experienced violence (26.08% of the sample) sought help, in the event that they did. As Table 1 reveals, 22.93% of the women have at some point turned to police or public authorities, and 10.70% to governmental agencies that provide assistance to victims of partner violence. Turning to governmental offices seems to be associated with the type of violence and its severity. A higher percentage of women turn to police or governmental agencies (40.16%) when they experience severe physical violence or any type of physical violence in combination with sexual violence (37.39%). In contrast, Table 1 shows that only a small percentage of women who experienced sexual violence sought help in police or public authorities (3.89%) or governmental agencies (7.32%). A higher percentage of women who experience physical and/or sexual violence tend to talk to their family (47.32%) than turning to law-enforcement agencies (37.39%). For the purposes of this article, I will focus on the 22.93% of women that sought help in law-enforcement offices.

[Table 1 about here]

Table 2 presents odds-ratios from a logistic regression predicting women's likelihood to turn to public governmental offices upon the occurrence of any event of physical and/or sexual violence in their last or current relationship. The first group of variables aims to capture the influence of women's experiences of violence in their childhood and adolescence. As suggested in the bivariate analysis presented in Table 1, compared to women who experienced moderate physical violence, those who suffered severe physical violence have 262% higher odds of going to police or public authorities for help, and the odds are 174% higher for those who experienced both physical and sexual violence. After controlling for other variables in the model, Table 2 reveals that women who only experienced sexual violence have 80% lower odds of seeking help in law-enforcement offices. Women who experienced physical violence in their family of origin are also less likely to seek help in governmental offices than those who were not physically disciplined or abused while growing up.

[Table 2 about here]

Several socio-demographic variables are also associated with turning to police or public authorities for help after the occurrence of partner abuse. Younger women are more likely to turn to police bodies for help than their older counterparts. In contrast, the coefficient for the variable *indigenous* that measures if the woman speaks an indigenous language reveals that

indigenous women have 40% higher odds of turning to the police or public authorities for help than non-indigenous women. In indigenous communities, indigenous and non-indigenous authorities coexist (Chenaut, 2006; Pérez Robledo, 2004; Vallejo Real, 2004). It could be hypothesized that the proximity of community authorities might explain why indigenous women have 1.40 times higher odds than non-indigenous women of turning to authorities.

Finally, compared to women currently divorced or separated, cohabiting and married women have lower odds (58% and 65%) of seeking help in police offices. This finding must be taken into consideration cautiously since, for some women, the physical or sexual violence might have caused the dissolution of the couple. However, there is no information in the survey about when the violence occurred or when the woman turned to police or public authorities. . Moreover, 54.05% of the separated or divorced women who experienced physical and/or sexual violence, after the separation or divorce also experienced violence perpetrated by their ex-husband or ex-partner (analyses not shown).

Some situational variables such as the number of people in the household decrease the likelihood of women turning to police or public authorities for help. The presence or absence of children in the house seems to be associated with the help seeking behavior. Childless women or women with children aged between 5 and 10 years have the same odds of turning to law-enforcement offices. However, women whose children are less than five years old have 35% lower odds of seeking help in police offices. In contrast, those whose children are aged 10 or over are more likely to turn to the police. After controlling for other variables in the model, women from the very low and high categories of SES do not differ in their odds of seeking help from the police. However, compared to women from the very low SES category, women in the low category have 14% higher odds, while those in the medium category have 14% lower odds. Women living in urban areas have 19% higher odds of seeking help in police or public authorities than those residing in rural areas. This fact might be explained by the accessibility to these services. As the last variable, appropriation of women's rights is positively associated with turning to police or public authorities.

## **INACTIVITY AND REASONS WHY FEMALE VICTIMS OF PHYSICAL AND/OR SEXUAL PARTNER VIOLENCE DO NOT USE LAW-ENFONCEMENT CHANNELS OF PROTECTION**

The reasons why women remain passive pose a very interesting question. Table 3 shows the reasons behind women's reluctance to turn to police and public authorities. These reasons are grouped into four categories: a) causes associated with the partner; b) reasons associated with women's perceptions of public authorities and women's knowledge of rights; c) causes related to women's feelings and perceptions of violence; and d) family reasons. 14.89% of the women who did not turned to police or public authorities argued that they were frightened of their partner or threatened by him. 2.40% of the women did not seek help because they believe that their husband or partner has the right to discipline them. This percentage illustrates the firm establishment of the patriarchal ideology among Mexican women.<sup>5</sup> Table 3 also reveals that 6.96% of the women that experienced physical and/or sexual violence by their current or last partner did not seek help in police or public authorities due to distrust, and 8.74% because they did not know that they could press charges against their assailant.

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<sup>5</sup> According to the data of the ENDIREH 2006, 4.88% of all divorced, separated, married and cohabiting women aged 15 and over agree with the statement that "when a woman does not fulfill her duties, her partner has the right to use physical force against her.

[Table 3 about here]

The most alleged reason why women that suffered physical or sexual violence did not turn to police or public authorities is the normalization and minimization of the violence experienced, (32.04%). For 15.45% of the women, the embarrassment they experienced prevented them from seeking help; 9.97% decided not to go to the police because they believe their partner would not change. If we take a deeper look into this cause, we can see that on the one hand they believe that by turning to the police or public authorities for help they could make their partner change, meaning that he would stop his abusive behavior. In Mexico this situation is complex because the involvement of public authorities and the resources available to address family violence issues are to a certain extent limited (Frías & Angel, forthcoming). On the other hand, women's inactivity might be associated to a certain acceptance of their fate to endure the husband or partner's violence, since all women who pointed out that *he would not change* are currently married or cohabiting with the person who acted physically and/or sexually violent against them. Perhaps some of the women who fall into this category might think that they could handle and manage the violence. It must be remembered that these women experience situational couple violence, which is defined by Johnson (2005: 1127) as "violence that is not embedded in a general pattern of power and control but is a function of the escalation of a specific conflict or series of conflicts". Therefore, in this context in which the violence has not escalated in terms of frequency and severity women might opt for inactivity.

The last set of reasons or causes are linked to the women's family. 19.41% argued that they did not turn to police or public authorities "because of their children", 11.43% mentioned that they did not want their family to know about the violence, and 2.01% stated that their family persuaded them not to go to police or other public authority. The reasons why they dissuaded the woman from going to the police might be related to family members' distrust of public authorities, their willingness to keep the family together, or their desire to protect the woman or her assailant.

### **TREATMENT OF FEMALE VICTIMS OF PARTNER VIOLENCE WHO SEEK HELP IN GOVERNMENTAL OFFICES**

As it has been mentioned in previous sections and also documented in the existing research in Mexico, public authorities are distrusted and the quality of service women receive when they use the formal governmental channels to protect their right to a life free of violence have been largely criticized. In this section, the treatment received by female victims of partner violence upon their arrival to police offices and other public authorities is examined. It must be noted however, that the perceived treatment and subsequent report of cases of domestic violence is associated with women's expectations (Hickman & Simpson, 2003). Most of the women who went to the police or to another public authority reported having received quality service and treatment (69.28%). Slightly more than one quarter reported that the authorities "did nothing, and paid no attention to her" (21.65%), and the remaining 5.11% stated that "they treated me badly".

Figure 1 shows the last occasion on which female victims of physical and/or sexual partner violence that have ever turned for help to police or public authorities turned to them. Unfortunately the survey did not collect information about how many times women sought help in law-enforcement offices. The data reveals that in the four years prior to the survey (from 2003 to 2006) 30.81% of the divorced, separated, cohabiting and married women who ever turned for help to police or public authorities sought help during that period. It should be

noted that in recent years the percentage of women has increased, which could be explained by two complementary hypotheses. On the one hand it is likely that women have been enduring partner violence for a long time and Figure 1 only captures the *last time* they sought help in the police or other public authorities.

[Figure 1 about here]

It is also plausible that given increasing public awareness, the approval of legislation regarding family violence and the development of public offices that provide services to victims, more women than before raise their voices and seek help. This hypothesis receives some support in Figure 1 since altogether with the high percentage of women that have turned to public authorities or police for help during the years preceding the survey, in 1990 and 1996 we see two peaks that could be explained in a political context and by the introduction of legislation concerning family violence in Mexico. In 1990 a group of women from different spheres of society, *Grupo Plural*, came together after nineteen rapes perpetrated by members of the General Attorney's Office. Its goals were the enactment of legislative reforms concerning sexual violence perpetrated against women, and changes in the family violence legislation (Frías, 2009). In 1990, the first Center of Integral Services for Family Violence Victims (CAVI; *Centro de Atención Integral a la Víctima de Violencia Intrafamiliar*) was created in Mexico City. In 1996, Grupo Plural lobbied for the approval of reforms in the civil and criminal code concerning partner violence. These were signed by President Zedillo in 1996. That same year, the first state-level family violence law in Mexico came into force in the Federal District. It is likely that the attention the issue of family violence received in 1990 and 1996 from the mass media, the political class and civil society drove women experiencing partner violence to seek help from police or public authorities.

The second bar of Figure 1 represents the percentage of women in any given year that considered that they were treated well and received quality service from the police or public authorities. Figure 1 does not reveal a clear pattern. On average, in any given year, 68.7% of the women victims of partner violence that turned to law-enforcement offices reported *quality treatment* and *quality service*. Among those women that turned to the police or public authorities in 2004, 70.4% reported being treated well, 75.44% in 2005 and 72.08% in 2006.

The coefficients of the logistic regression predicting women's report of *quality treatment* are presented in Table 4. Table 4 reveals important findings concerning the treatment in police departments and by public authorities reported by women depending on the characteristics of the violence experienced by women. Women that experienced sexual violence by their last or current partner have a lower probability of reporting having received good treatment in the police or public authorities than those women who experienced any kind of physical violence. Women that suffered both, physical and sexual, have 44% lower odds, and women that experienced only sexual violence have 62% lower odds.

[Table 4 about here]

Regarding socio-demographic variables associated to the *quality treatment*, women with higher levels of education are less likely to report good service than women with lower levels of education. One possible reason is related to their better knowledge of their rights and available resources. Compared to women currently cohabitating, divorced or separated, married women are more likely to report good service in public offices. It could be hypothesized that women that are not legally attached to their partner, therefore, transgressing

the traditional couple arrangements, are treated worse because they are not within the traditionally legal and socially acceptable parameters.

Compared to women of very low, low and medium socioeconomic status, women victims of physical and /or sexual violence in the high socioeconomic category have higher odds (63%) of reporting that they received good service. After controlling for other variables in the model, the recent the attendance of women to the police or public authorities is, the higher the odds of reporting quality service ( $p < .10$ ). Finally, those women who support women's rights are less likely (32% lower risk) to report that they received good service and attention.

### **THE “QUALITY SERVICE” UNVEILED: WOMEN’S ACTIONS IN THE LAW-ENFORCEMENT OFFICES AND PERCEPTION OF SERVICE RECEIVED**

Most of the women reported *quality* service. However, it is necessary to go beyond their reports in order to construct a definition of “*quality* service”. Only 40.7% of the women pressed charges; 15% reported that their assailant was put under arrest; and only 3.3% were granted a protection order. Among women whose husbands were placed under arrest and those who were granted a protective order –probably these are women who experienced intimate terrorism- there is a higher level of satisfaction than among those that only pressed charges against their partners/husbands and no further action of the law-enforcement agency took place. Among those who pressed charges, 70.1% reported *quality* service, the percentage increases to 78.5% among those who were granted a protective order, and even more (85%) among those whose husbands/partners were placed under arrest (analyses not shown).

The high crime rates in Mexico and the State's efforts to decrease the criminological indexes have influenced how family violence disputes are being handled in the State Attorney's Offices, which are indeed reflected in the percentages reported above. In addition, the family violence laws enacted in most states in the last fifteen years have promoted the conciliation of the victim with the aggressor. Formal conciliation is a process in which some attempt is made to settle disputes between the aggressor and the victim with the aid of a mediator who helps both parties reach an agreement regarding their rights and obligations, without having to go to court. However, the conciliation procedure is often purposefully *confounded* with reconciliation of the couple by law-enforcement agencies (Frías, 2010), partially in order to decrease the crime indexes. Therefore, law-enforcement officers discourage women from pressing charges, which could be interpreted by some women as *unsatisfactory service*. On the other hand, some women attribute new meaning to the conciliation. As some of my informants from the law-enforcement agencies, judges and women working in NGOs providing assistance to women victims of partner violence said, “they just want to teach their partner/husband “a lesson”, which means that they want somebody with authority to “reprehend or scold the man about his violent behavior”, “slap at her husband's wrists”, “tell her husband that hitting your wife is wrong”, or “tell her husband that if he continues with that type of behavior we will put him into prison”.

Nevertheless, it is still puzzling how high the percentage of women who reported to have received good service is. I argue that the “quality service” must be understood in conjunction with the “unsatisfactory service”. Based on the interviews, I identified three main reasons for why law-enforcement officers might treat women badly: 1) systematic patriarchy; 2) dysfunctions specific to police departments, and; 3) the perception that women use the police for their own purposes. As it will be shown, this last reason might explain differences in the report of quality / unsatisfactory service.

Systematic patriarchy is related to the patriarchal nature of the society and how the patriarchal system pervades even the institutions that are supposed to protect and support women. Because men and women cannot detach themselves from their socialization, either directly or indirectly they tend to reproduce the subordination of women so characteristic of patriarchal societies. In Mexico, domestic violence is accepted as a normal phenomenon among couples and is often excused in society (Borjón López-Coterilla, 2000; Salcido & Adelman, 2004; Torres-Falcón, 2004b). The problem is so extensive in Mexican society that many law-enforcement officers are involved in partner violence in their private lives (Frías, 2009). They therefore cannot be detached from it. “If they are violent in their homes, what type of service and treatment do you want these officers to provide to women?” said the director of an agency that provides services to female victims of partner violence.

The second reason refers to the specific characteristics of the political system and the system of the law-enforcement in Mexico. The status of those working in the police departments is low, and they do not receive enough training in gender and family violence issues. Their work is not considered to be prestigious. Law-enforcement officers are often ignorant of the new laws, and “since the crime of family violence is new in Mexico, and before it was just an aggravating circumstance linked to another crime; most public authorities do not know about it, and that’s the reason why women are treated badly”, said a male lawyer working in a social assistance agency. Problems with the rule of law and impunity in Mexico only worsen the situation, because complaints against civil servants that treat women badly are often dismissed, and sanctions are rarely imposed upon, explained a male judge in the State of Morelos.

The third set of reasons why some women are dissatisfied with the service received in law-enforcement offices is associated with the use that women make of them. Many people working in public and law-enforcement agencies mentioned that many women seek assistance because they want someone in authority to give their husband/partner a scare with an official reprimand. Therefore, they do not pay much attention to women. This perceived use of law-enforcement coupled with the lack of personnel in police offices and the saturation of work only worsens the situation of women who do seek assistance and expect some other reaction than an official reprimand to their aggressor. It could be hypothesized that some women seek help not because they want to break up with her partner; instead, they use public agencies as a strategy for stopping violence. A female state judge in a criminal court in Jalisco mentioned, “Approximately 90% of the females that suffer violence do not want to break the marriage. Women believe that they have to forgive him, and that all administrative and criminal process has the objective of giving a lesson to the man”. In those circumstances and regardless of the type or severity of violence and quality of service provided, if a woman turns for help to law-enforcement agencies and they subsequently call her husband to initiate the conciliation process to tell him to stop being violent, the woman will probably report that she received quality *service*.

## **CONCLUSION**

The household is still one of the most dangerous places for Mexican women. More than one out of every four women (26.08, either married, cohabiting, separated or divorced, has experienced physical and/or sexual violence perpetrated by their male partner. Among those, 22.93% have turned to law-enforcement agencies for help. In Mexico, according to the data of the ENDIREH 2006, after family members, police bodies and public authorities are the second most used source of support for women who have experienced physical and/or sexual violence. Still, 77.07% of the women decided not to press charges or seek assistance in law-

enforcement agencies. This does not mean that they did not request help from informal sources of support such as family or friends, or other formal sources.

Violence against women perpetrated by a romantic partner is still considered a male's prerogative by some (2.4% of the women who experienced violence and 4.08% of all Mexican women), or even considered as something insignificant. Indeed, 32.04% of the women who experienced sexual and/or physical violence did not turn to law-enforcement agencies for help because they considered the violence to be insignificant. These findings argue for the symbolic nature of domestic violence (Bourdieu, 1998). Family is often regarded as an important source of support for victims of partner violence, however, research in Mexico has proved that family ties might represent an additional hazard for victims of partner violence (Agoff, 2009; Agoff, Herrera, & Castro, 2007). This research supports this claim by showing that 11.43% of the women who experienced partner violence did not turn to law-enforcement offices because they did not want their families to know, and 2.01% did not because the family persuaded them not to do so. Distrust of public authorities and a lack of knowledge about women's rights emerge as a secondary explanation as to why women do not seek help from police offices: 8.7% of the women did not know that physical and/or sexual violence was a felony and that they could press charges. A similar percentage, 6.9%, claimed that they distrust public authorities.

This research has shown that women who experienced severe violence or both physical and sexual violence, have higher odds of turning to police offices, which supports previous research in other countries (Bonomi, et al., 2006; Fugate, et al., 2005). In addition, in this Mexican sample, the more severe the violence experienced by the woman, the less likely she is to report having received quality treatment. Future research will have to assess whether this was associated with a further re-victimization of women, or with their level of satisfaction.

Marital status also emerges as an important variable since separated or divorced women have higher odds of turning to a law-enforcement office than married or cohabiting women. As it was mentioned before, the survey did not collect information about when the violent event(s) occurred or when the visit to the police took place, so it is possible that in some cases the women sought help from the police after the dissolution of the couple. In this sample, 58.04% of the women reported having experienced physical and/or sexual violence by their former partner after the separation or divorce. This indeed also supports previous research that suggests that the risk of partner violence is associated with the dissolution of the couple (Bybee & Sullivan, 2005; Frías & Angel, 2005). The findings about marital status, however, are reversed when the perceived treatment is examined: married women reported 37% higher odds of being treated well than cohabiting, separated or divorced women.

This finding has several implications. In a patriarchal context in which the woman is always attached to a male, to be married probably infers a higher status than those who are not married. For that reason, it could be hypothesized that police officers treat differently women depending on their marital status. An alternative hypothesis is linked with the perceived use of law-enforcement offices that was mentioned in the last section of this manuscript. Married women could be regarded as having invested more in the relationship, and therefore find it harder to dissolve the partnership. For that reason, it might be the case that they *use* public authorities with the intention of teaching their husband a lesson with the final goal to put a stop to the violence. Therefore, regardless of the actual treatment received, if the outcome of her visit to the law-enforcement office fulfils her expectations, then it is probable that the woman would report having received quality treatment.

Another relevant finding is related to the social learning perspective, since women who experienced physical violence in their family of origin are not only more likely to be involved in partner violence in their adulthood (Frías & Castro, 2011), but also they have lower odds of seeking help in law-enforcement offices, and reporting that they received good treatment. This research also shows the importance of the household structure in a woman's decision to seek help. As the number of people in the house increases, the likelihood of turning to law-enforcement agencies decreases. Similarly, the existence of children in the house is an important factor in women's decision making. Compared to women who do not have children, women whose children are in average less than five years old have lower odds of going to the police. In contrast, women whose children are 10 or older are more likely to turn to public authorities. Previous research found that the presence or absence of children explained the use of the police by victims of partner violence (Bonomi, et al., 2006), but in accordance with the Mexican data, this article demonstrates that the ages of the children must be taken into consideration in order to understand women's help-seeking behavior in law-enforcement offices.

The data highlights the relationship between socioeconomic status and help-seeking behavior in law-enforcement agencies, and the treatment received by women there. Given the socioeconomic stratification of Mexican population, poverty and lack of resources among women in the very low SES category prevent them from seeking help in public authorities. Only women in the low socioeconomic status category have higher odds of seeking help in public authorities than women from any other category. The fact the women in the medium and high categories of SES have lower odds than women in the low category suggests that economic dependency might be associated with their behavior, given that women's employment status does not emerge as a significant variable. However, when better-off women turn to law-enforcement offices for help, they are more likely to report that they were treated well.

Regarding the reported treatment of police officers, and taking into consideration the above mentioned problems of the law-enforcement bodies, this research shows that the more recent the woman sought help in law-enforcement agencies, the more likely she is to report having been treated well. Therefore, existing criticisms of the treatment received by women by law-enforcement officers need to take into consideration that women report better treatment in recent years.

The limitations of this research are linked to the use of secondary data since additional information about the violent events associated with the woman turning to law-enforcement offices for help, and the number of times women sought help is needed. Another limitation is related to the potential changes in the independent variables from the present to the time at which the abuse occurred. Almost half of the women of the sample who ever sought help in law-enforcement offices turned to them at some point during the last five years. Unfortunately, the survey did not collect data about the individual and situational characteristics of the woman as well as the type of the violence experienced by the woman at the time she went to the police. This fact must be considered in future surveys.

By providing information about the Mexican context, the results of this research can be used to inform public policies and to direct NGOs actions toward women both in Mexico and in the U.S., especially among women of Mexican origin (both U.S. born and Mexican born) that experience partner violence. It is highly probable that attitudes and behavior regarding how women seek help in situations of violence that have developed or are socialized at in Mexican society will somehow be duplicated in other countries and contexts.



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**Table 1:** Help-Seeking Behavior among Women who Experienced Physical and/or Sexual Violence

Help Seeking behavior	Only Physical		Physical & Sexual	Only Sexual	Any_type
	Moderate	Severe			
<b>Governmental offices</b>					
Police or public authorities	15.60	40.21	36.66	3.83	22.84
DIF, psychologists or social workers	6.16	14.93	21.90	6.92	11.03
<b>Social Networks</b>					
Family	38.14	47.22	49.67	33.71	41.47
Friends	10.73	18.19	21.08	11.64	14.14
NGOs & Battered women’s Shelters	0.47	2.48	2.61	0.61	1.18
Priest, church or religious organizations	4.71	9.91	13.5	10.5	7.75

Table 2: Logistic Regression Model of the Predictors of Help Seeking Behavior in Public Authorities in Mexico (Weighted)

	Odds Ratio (e <sup>B</sup> )
<b>Violence(s) Experiences</b>	
<i>Type of violence experienced (moderate)</i>	
Severe	3.47***
Physical & Sexual	2.80***
Only sexual	.19
<i>Experienced physical violence in family of origin</i>	.92**
<i>Witnessed physical violence in family of origin</i>	1.06
<b>Sociodemographics</b>	
<i>Age</i>	.99***
<i>Years of education</i>	1.01**
<i>Speaks indigenous language</i>	1.43***
<i>Employed</i>	.96
<i>Marital Status (separated or divorced)</i>	
Cohabiting	.51***
Married	.42***
<b>Situational</b>	
<i>Number of people in the household</i>	.97***
<i>Average age of children in the household (no children under 18 in the house)</i>	
Less than 5 yrs	.66***
Between 5 and 10 years	.98
Between more than 10 and 15	1.33***
Between more than 15 and 18	1.14**
<i>SES (very low)</i>	
Low	1.13**
Medium	.91
High	1.01
Urban (rural)	1.22**
<b>Support of Women's rights</b>	
Appropriation of women's rights	1.33***
<b>Intercept</b>	
	-.93***
<b>-2 Log likelihood</b>	18711.9

Notes: =Analysis based on 17869 women (23% of the sample), among these, 22% of the weighted sample sought help in public authorities, and 78% did not.

\*\*\*  $p < .0001$ ; \*\*  $p < .05$ ; \*  $p < .10$

**Table 3:** Reasons why women victims of physical and/or sexual violence did not turn to police or public authorities for help

Reasons ...	Percentage
<b>Partner</b>	
She was frightened of her partner or was threatened by him	13.59
She thinks her husband/partner has the right to discipline her	2.19
<b>Authorities and knowledge about rights</b>	
She distrusts public authorities	6.35
She did not know she could press charges	7.98
<b>Women's feelings and perceptions</b>	
Violence was insignificant	29.25
She was embarrassed	14.10
She believes he will not change	9.10
<b>Family reasons</b>	
Because of the children	17.72
She did not want her family to know	10.44
My family persuaded me not to do it	1.83

N=20,051 cases, weighted percentages. Source: ENDIREH 2006

**Table 4:** Logistic Regression Model of the Predictors of Receiving Good Service in the Police or by Public Authorities among Women who Sought Help (Weighted)

	Odds Ratio ( $e^{\beta}$ )
<b>Violence(s) Experiences</b>	
<i>Type of violence experienced (moderate)</i>	
Severe	.87
Physical & Sexual	.58***
Only sexual	.39***
Experienced physical violence in family of origin	.85**
Witnessed physical violence in family of origin	1.11
<b>Sociodemographics</b>	
Age	1.01
Years of education	.97**
Speaks indigenous language	1.15
Employed	1.02
<i>Marital Status (separated or divorced)</i>	
Cohabiting	1.14
Married	1.37***
<b>Situational</b>	
Number of people in the household	.98
SES (very low)	
Low	.92
Medium	.95
High	1.57**
Urban (rural)	.84*
Last year women sought help	1.01**
<b>Support of Women's rights</b>	
Appropriation of women's rights	.71***
<b>Intercept</b>	-28.87**
<b>-2 Log likelihood</b>	5001.872

Note: Analysis based on 3829 women that sought help in public authorities. Among these, 69.61% of the weighted sample reported receiving good service