

## **Women's Police Stations in Latin America Case Study: An Entry Point for Stopping Violence and Gaining Access to Justice (Brazil, Peru, Ecuador and Nicaragua)**

### **Summary**

Since the first women's police station (WPS) opened in Sao Paulo, Brazil in 1985, their numbers have grown considerably, with 475 WPS in Brazil, 34 in Ecuador, 59 in Nicaragua, and 27 in Peru by 2010, among several others in Latin America. Their purpose is to provide specialized services to women survivors of domestic and/or sexual violence, though there are many significant differences among the models. The experience of WPS in Latin America has shown that:

- The WPS continue to be one of the most important entry points for accessing the justice system and specialized services in general.
- The greatest contribution of the WPS has been to make violence against women more visible as a public-sphere issue, a crime, and a collective matter.
- The WPS, along with other actors, have contributed to increasing women survivors' access to justice (sanctions and protection measures), as well as support and referral services, a perceived reduction of violence against women, and improving women's knowledge and exercise of their rights.
- More effective and timely access to justice for all women requires further improvements in the WPS, such as: defending and guaranteeing women's rights by giving information to women regarding their rights, legal procedures and other local specialized services, providing fast and consistent access to effective protection measures, accepting all women's complaints of all forms of violence, and consistently treating women as subjects of rights; coordination with other local and national agencies for improved prevention, administration of justice, and comprehensive service delivery; consistent enforcement of the law with perpetrators; and institutional reforms, including service protocols, ongoing training and monitoring and oversight mechanisms to ensure the WPS and operators are complying with their due diligence as duty-bearers.

### **Background information on the Stations**

- The objective of the WPS is to improve access to justice for women who have suffered different forms of gender-based violence.
- The WPS in Brazil, Ecuador, Nicaragua and Peru were established in the 1980s and 1990s during 1) growing demands for recognition of women's rights by feminist and women's movements and 2) processes of (re)democratization.
- The WPS were created as one of the first state responses to violence against women, preceding the passage of laws on violence against women or family violence in these countries. In 2010, there were 475 WPS in Brazil, 34 in Ecuador, 59 in Nicaragua, and 27 in Peru.
- There are different models of WPS in each country, and they have changed historically. In Brazil, Nicaragua, Peru (and most countries in the region), the WPS are part of the police. In Ecuador, they are justice administration units.
- WPS procedures in all 4 countries include prevention, receiving and investigating complaints. In the judicial model (Ecuador), they also deliver verdicts, as well as grant and emit requests for protection measures. In the police model (Brazil, Nicaragua, Peru),

they remit the completed case file to the judicial branch. In Brazil and Nicaragua, the WPS also have jurisdiction for receiving applications for protection measures, which are then transferred for a judicial decision.

- The models can also be distinguished according to the laws on violence against women as well as the institutional and legal structure of the security and justice sectors. For example, they vary according to the different forms of violence addressed (physical, psychological, or sexual violence) against specific victims (adult women, girls and boys under 18 years) the victim's relationship with the aggressor (whether an (ex) intimate partner, family member or not), and the crime committed, i.e. whether a summary offence (lesser crime) or an indictable offence (major crime). The most common form of violence dealt with in the WPS in these four countries is physical domestic violence against adult women.
- Funding for the WPS has been provided exclusively by the state in Brazil and Peru. In Ecuador and Nicaragua, where joint management models existed in the past, some funding from development cooperation agencies has been received. In Nicaragua, the WPS have almost always received partial funding from bilateral or multilateral donors.

### **Findings about women's police stations in practice**

Common features of the WPS are:

- WPS operators usually receive some specialized training.
- The first WPS in Brazil was staffed by all women operators, but currently there is no policy on the sex of WPS operators in Brazil or Ecuador. In Nicaragua, almost all WPS operators are women. In the Peruvian WPS there is a sexual division of labour, whereby only female officers deal directly with survivors.
- The WPS coordinate with other police/justice institutions and other specialized actors to complete the police/judicial route, providing women with multidisciplinary or comprehensive services, as well as taking joint actions to prevent violence against women. Direct services can include: coordination throughout the police-justice system; forensic medicine and psychology; psychosocial counselling and group therapy; medical services; legal information and representation for violence, divorce, child custody or other proceedings; emergency shelters; workshops on women's rights; and job skills training. Transportation may be subsidised and childcare may be provided in some circumstances.
- The WPS are usually located separately from a regular police station. In the WPS studied, some of the other specialized services and/or institutions are located in the same building as the WPS.

*Services provided in the WPS do not always reflect the formal legal/institutional framework or international human rights standards:*

- Some operators provide quality and compassionate services: they diligently inform women of their rights, encourage women to continue through the legal process, and contribute to their empowerment process.
- Operators and various aspects of the WPS may also be affected by values and attitudes that reflect a so-called "family-values" approach instead of national laws and international human rights standards. Women may not be allowed to file a complaint or operators may encourage women to negotiate with the perpetrator instead of upholding their rights. In

other cases, women have been blamed for the violence inflicted on them by their (ex) partner.

- Other forms of filters may be imposed by WPS operators that impede due diligence: psychological violence is often ignored or underestimated, and women who are poor or do not know or demand their rights may be turned away or receive inadequate services and information.

*Women's knowledge of their rights and their paths towards ending domestic violence and gaining access to justice:*

- Women in the general public have limited knowledge of their rights and the services provided by the WPS. Only in Brazil had a majority of women surveyed receiving training or information about their rights one or more times (by any source): 54% in Brazil, 42% in Nicaragua, 34% in Peru, and 23% in Ecuador.
- Gaps in women's knowledge are related to the intersection of gender with other power structures. Significant differences were found as regards age, socio-economic status, education level, area of residence (urban/rural), and ethnicity; however, none of the gaps were constant in all four sites.
- Women often spend months or years in a situation of domestic violence, resisting the violence without telling anyone. Very few women visited the WPS right after the first episode of violence.
- Women's paths vary considerably from the official access to justice route. Women's prime concern is to put a stop to the violence, while accessing justice can be either a means to that end or a separate goal. Each woman's path is unique; however, some commonalities were identified across the countries.
- When many of the users interviewed first visited the WPS, they knew little about their rights or WPS or other local services, and were still in the process of breaking the silence. Most also felt that they and/or their children were in immediate danger. Women's expectations of the WPS the first time included: stopping their aggressor's violence; being supported and feeling understood; receiving guidance about their rights, WPS procedures, and other specialized services; and making a public denunciation of the violence.
- Women's expectations of the WPS usually change after they gain access to information and learn to see themselves as rights-holders, whether at the WPS or through another institution or service. The purpose of their subsequent visits was usually to file a formal complaint and follow the entire judicial process. A small number of women wanted to file a formal complaint during their first visit.
- Women's paths are long, complex, and difficult. The types of obstacles that arise can be personal, social-cultural, institutional (see 'lessons learned'), and structural. The main factors that influence their experiences are: the intensity of the violence; women's perceptions of the violence and their rights; their idealization of marriage and whether they end the relationship with the perpetrator; responses from members of their personal network; socio-economic factors; race/ethnicity; age; religious beliefs; access to information; and the dual and mutually reinforcing paths of receiving information about and exercising their rights (external) and believing in and owning them (internal).

## **Results**

- The WPS are more visible in their communities than any other specialized institution or service, and women of the general population are more familiar with them than the national law on violence against women. More than 98% of women surveyed in Brazil, Ecuador, and Nicaragua had heard of the WPS, and 85% in Peru.
- The WPS have created an entry point for accessing justice. Previously, women who wanted to press charges were often ignored or even ridiculed by police officers and others; they were often blamed for the violence they suffered or revictimized.
- Many women users consider that WPS contributions are greatest in regards to their role of listening to survivors so they feel supported and understood.
- WPS contributions to improving access to justice, such as formal protection measures, is greatest in Ecuador, where between 2005 and 2007, 87% of WPS users at the national level received at least one such measure almost immediately (National Gender Directorate statistics). No official data exists on the effectiveness of the measures, and the experience of the users who were interviewed was mixed. Women highly value both the immediate access as well as the penalties applied, the latter in cases in which an effective response is provided to the aggressor's violation of the protection order. No official data is available in the other three countries.
- As regards applying a penalty, in Ecuador between 2005 and 2007, 12% of all WPS cases reached a verdict, and 8% were convictions. In Nicaragua in 2007, WPS statistics noted that 16% of complaints were investigated and sent to the appropriate judicial authority. In Peru, 2006 Ministry of the Interior statistics show that 15% of all family violence cases were remitted, whether from a WPS or regular police station. The number of cases in Nicaragua and Peru that reached a verdict is likely much lower.
- The rates of impunity are very high in all four countries studied, despite the improvements made thus far.
- WPS have contributed to a perceived reduction in violence against women. While no statistics are available, this was the opinion of women surveyed from the general population (77% in Brazil, 77% in Nicaragua, 64% in Ecuador, and 58% Peru). Interviews with WPS users revealed that the violence had stopped for all of them in Ecuador; and just over half reported the violence had ended or decreased in Brazil and Nicaragua, but a few women also reported that the violence had increased.
- As women learn more about their rights – through visiting the WPS and other specialized services – they are more willing to file a formal complaint and follow the judicial process. They also become committed to helping other women leave a situation of domestic violence and seek access to formal justice.
- Since women visit various services and institutions in order to gain access to justice and leave a situation of violence, the direct effects of the WPS on achieving these results cannot be measured.

## Lessons learned

- **Strengthening women's police stations requires a national governing body to effectively design, implement, and monitor policy and protocols.** Several Women's police stations have benefitted from the establishment of a high-level national body dedicated to the stations. For example, the national police body created for the stations in Nicaragua in 1998 was granted a higher institutional ranking and autonomy in 2006. In Brazil, the Special Secretariat on Policies for Women has been able to advance the implementation of standardized technical regulations it designed in 2005 (SPM, 2005). Advocacy carried out in Peru in response to the research findings led to the creation of governing body for the WPS of metropolitan Lima in 2010.
- **Coordination among service providers improves women's knowledge and exercise of their rights and access to justice.** A protocol in the site studied in Brazil ensured that women in grave danger who went to the WPS were transferred to the women's shelter. In all the sites, the psychological and legal services provided by women's centres often led to users going or returning to the WPS to exercise their rights and/or facilitated their process to live without violence. Local networks in all the sites contribute to coordination for service delivery and prevention, especially in Ecuador, where closer collaboration was reflected in that most WPS users were transferred to other services.
- **Community human rights defenders provide information and accompaniment that is vital for survivors.** Networks of defenders in Nicaragua organised by both the WPS and women's centres facilitate women's processes. They accompany women in their neighbourhood or community to the WPS and other agencies and services, as well as inform them of their rights. All of these defenders have received specialized training and some are survivors themselves.
- **Service quality is fundamental to ensuring timely and effective access to justice.** Women who reported receiving good quality services continued with the procedures and considered that this contributed to them receiving justice. Poor service quality turns women away, making their paths more difficult and putting them and their dependents at greater risk of violence. Service quality can be measured in terms of privacy, adequate infrastructure, specialized training of WPS operators, as well as treating women as decision-makers and the agents of their own processes.
- **Multiple services provided under one roof facilitates women's paths.** In all the sites, women used the other services provided in the same building as the WPS, whether they were given a referral or not. Women's paths were shortened and more women accessed those services.
- **Laws, policy, and service protocols that reflect regional and international human rights frameworks are necessary to guarantee and implement them, but achieving these reforms is a complex process.** In 2006, Brazil passed the Maria da Penha law, the only violence against women law in the four countries that closely reflects the [Convention of](#)

Belém do Pará. Operators in Brazil more consistently implement a formal legal/institutional approach to justice. New forms were recently created so that WPS operators consistently ask women whether they want to apply for protection measures, a new procedure introduced with the law. However, there is no protocol to ensure that operators adequately explain the measures to users, leaving some confused and as a result they do not always benefit sufficiently from them. In 2009, an advocacy campaign in Ecuador linked to this project led to amendments to a bill for the creation of new specialized institutions.

- **WPS have contributed to an increase in access to justice in general, but women still face significant limitations to exercising their rights.** For example, the WPS are only open 24-hours a day in Peru, while women in urgent need of protection or other services elsewhere must rely on unspecialized police units. In all 4 countries, most WPS are located in and serve urban areas, making them challenging for rural women to access. Indigenous and Afro-descendent women have limited access because few operators come from or understand those cultures and few speak their languages. There is also a lack of provisions to guide the stations in ensuring the rights of women who seek judicial support through informal mechanisms.
- **An all-female staff does not necessarily guarantee better service quality.** In Nicaragua and Peru, where only female WPS operators take users' statements, some of the users interviewed felt more confident; however, a few said their expectations were not met. In Brazil and Ecuador, where there are related policies, observation and interviews found no difference among operators based on sex; instead, better service quality was related to the training received by specific operators or their values, attitudes and level of sensitivity.
- **Operators still have a considerable margin of discretion regarding the application of laws, policies, and service protocols.** On the one hand, a few operators provide strategic and compassionate support to users, a higher standard of service quality that is praised by users and contributes more effectively to women accessing justice and eliminating violence. On the other hand, this results in the WPS often not ensuring due diligence. One example is that some operators impose a family values perspective on some users, encouraging them to negotiate with their partners or not file a complaint. It was also found that poor and less educated women are sometimes ignored in the WPS. Also, despite psychological violence being illegal in all four countries, operators frequently prioritise those cases in which women have severe visible physical injuries, and may resist accepting complaints of psychological violence.
- **In general, WPS operators require more specialized training and need to learn self-care practices.** WPS operators in the sites studied had received little specialized training, while none had been taught self-care techniques. Training needs to reflect the formal legal/institutional framework and human rights standards. This contributes to counteracting myths on violence against women and so-called "family-values" attitudes and may improve due diligence and service quality (Bates, 1999). Self-care practices enable operators to cope with the stress of their work and can have a direct effect on improving how they treat survivors.
- **Delays in the police-judicial system are a significant barrier to gaining access to justice and put women at greater risk of violence.** In the judicial model in Ecuador, the maximum length of the process identified in users was three months (although the mandate

only covers lesser offences); a few users interviewed in Brazil in Nicaragua had been waiting for justice to be served for over a year.

- **Women generally receive inadequate information about their rights, legal procedures, and other community services in the WPS.** Some users were satisfied with the information they received from WPS operators, yet in general they received limited guidance when interviewed by WPS operators and no written information produced by the WPS and/or other actors was given to users, despite its availability, in any of the WPS studied.
- **Existing information systems generally provide limited data on the situation of violence and results of seeking access to justice.** Only in Ecuador is there a unified information system that provides data on the results of the judicial process, but not the application of protection measures. No official data is available in Brazil from the WPS. This lack of data contributes to reducing the visibility of violence against women and decreases the possibility of knowing the results and the long-term impact of the WPS and other specialized services and institutions. It also hinders monitoring efforts that can inform improvements in service delivery.
- **There are currently no civilian or joint state/civil society oversight bodies of the WPS in any of the four countries at the national level,** although there are organizations in all four countries that do advocacy and related activities. This absence limits the accountability of the WPS and reduces their due diligence and the consistent application of laws, policies, and protocols.
- **Limited resources in the WPS create an obstacle to guaranteeing quality services for all women.** One example is poor infrastructure, which contributes to lack of privacy; another is limited personnel, which can lead to increased wait times and reduced information and guidance provided to users. WPS operators sometimes blame limited material resources as the reason for passing costs on to users, for example, they may be charged for some paperwork or transportation to arrest a perpetrator.
- **There is inadequate coordination among the WPS and other police units.** Beat officers do not often coordinate effectively with the WPS, for example some users complained they were told to serve notifications to their perpetrators themselves. In other examples, the police at non-specialized delegations did not provide adequate information to women or apply appropriate procedures.
- **Institutional obstacles in the WPS and elsewhere, along with the lack of comprehensive services, limit women's ability to leave situations of violence and gain access to justice.** Although state service providers often blame women for not wanting to file a complaint, the WPS, in coordination with other state and government institutions, do not provide adequate services in fulfillment of the [Belém do Pará](#) and [CEDAW](#) conventions to support women. There is a general lack of social programs to support women to provide job training, economic alternatives, independent housing, and even transportation so they can continue their processes. Positive exceptions are a government-run centre in the Peruvian WPS studied that offers job training services; and in Brazil, public transportation subsidies provided by the local council to WPS clients in need.
- **Consistent application of the law against perpetrators is essential to stopping violence.** In all four sites, users' experience demonstrated that when penalties were imposed, either through sentencing or the application of protection measures, perpetrators ceased being aggressive. In cases where the police-judicial process was not concluded

satisfactorily and the perpetrator was not held accountable, he continued to exercise violence and/or the woman lived in fear.

### **Essential elements in establishing Stations**

- The WPS are part of a specialized institutional structure, headed by a national specialized governing body. It is responsible for the design, implementation, supervision, and monitoring of the following: policies, regulatory framework, guidelines, protocols, etc.; human resources policies; education and training of personnel; and local WPS and their personnel. It has sufficient resources to implement its responsibilities. It coordinates with other divisions of the same institution and other state and social actors. Its responsibilities are designed based on international standards for access to justice and the prevention and eradication of violence against women.
- Laws on violence against women and WPS are introduced and/or reformed to provide timely and effective access to access to justice – including protection, penalties for aggressors, and *reparations* – for all forms of violence against women, including violence motivated by gender, race, sexual orientation, and other power relations. The legal and institutional mandate must reflect international and regional human rights standards.
- A gender audit of the WPS is conducted as part of a broader gender mainstreaming process of the entire institution. The purpose is to ensure due diligence and the effective implementation of regional and international standards as regards women's rights for both gender-based violence survivors and aggressors in all WPS by the WPS and all departments involved.
- Performance protocols need to be designed, implemented, and monitored. They must reflect human rights conventions, gender justice, and the intersectionality of gender with other social structures, in accordance with the area of jurisdiction of the WPS. These will ensure standards that provide quality services, through which women are treated as subjects of rights.
- The WPS mandate includes participation in multisectoral coordination bodies at the local and national levels in order to contribute to improved direct services, prevention, and oversight as defined by the WPS mandate.
- Sufficient human, resource, and budgetary resources are allocated to all WPS and the national governing body to fulfill their responsibilities.
- Accountability mechanisms for the WPS are designed and implemented. In addition to institutional procedures, the WPS also need to be accountable to the community in general and women in situations of violence and their advocates in particular.
- Internal investigation mechanisms and administrative penalties are applied for perpetrators of violence who are part of the police institution's and WPS personnel. WPS authorities are involved in their design, implementation, and monitoring.
- Information regarding WPS performance is produced and disseminated on a regular basis. Data is disaggregated by sex, age, and other relevant criteria. The WPS participate in the creation and operation of unified information systems to produce and distribute information on the outcomes of the police-judicial process. Where possible these are also unified with the health system.

- Mechanisms and protocols are designed, implemented, and monitored to enable close and ongoing coordination of the WPS with other police divisions, judicial and security sector institutions, other specialized services, including human rights defenders, and traditional and religious authorities.
- All WPS authorities and operators are given mandatory initial and continuing specialized education and sensitisation. Programs must be based on a human rights, gender justice, multisectoral, and empowerment perspective.
- All WPS personnel and authorities are taught self-care practices and are provided with counselling programs.
- All WPS services are provided free of charge to women in situations of violence.
- Adequate access is provided to all women. Access is defined according to various parameters, including location, hours of operation, languages, interculturalism, costs, and infrastructure, etc. For example: there are sufficient quantities of WPS located to serve urban and rural women; operators represent or know local cultures, languages; access to women with disabilities; travelling/itinerant WPS provide services in remote locations; direct and indirect costs (such as transportation, child care) are eliminated or subsidised for poor women.
- The WPS provide information to all users and the general public about women's rights, legal procedures to gain access to justice, and multidisciplinary community services.

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Source: Extracted and adapted from Jubb et al. 2010. "[\*Women's Police Stations in Latin America: An Entry Point for Stopping Violence and Gaining Access to Justice\*](#)" CEPLAES, IDRC. Quito. This research studied the WPS in 4 countries in 3 stages: a historical mapping of WPS models nationally; a representative survey with adult women; observation at a WPS and in-depth interviews with WPS users, operators, and representatives of other specialized services and institutions. The 4 sites of the latter two stages were: Belo Horizonte (Minas Gerais), Brazil; Cuenca, Ecuador; Ciudad Sandino, Nicaragua; and Villa El Salvador, Peru. For ease of reading, only the name of the country is used in the text.