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RESEARCH ARTICLE



# Pathways to change: Three decades of feminist research and activism to end violence against women in Nicaragua

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## ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results of nearly three decades of partnership between feminist researchers and activists to prevent violence against women and girls (VAWG) in Nicaragua. A household survey conducted in 1995 in León, the country's second-largest city, revealed that 55 per cent of women had experienced lifetime physical intimate partner violence (IPV), and 27 per cent had experienced IPV in the last 12 months. The study results were instrumental in changing domestic violence laws in Nicaragua. A follow-up study in 2016 found a decrease of 63 per cent in lifetime physical IPV and 70 per cent in 12-month physical IPV. This paper examines possible explanations for the reduction, including the policy reforms resulting from feminist advocacy. We compare risk and protective factors for physical IPV, such as changes in women's attitudes towards violence, their use of services, and knowledge of laws, using data from both the 1995 and 2016 surveys, as well as three waves of Demographic and Health Surveys. We conclude that the decline in IPV can be partially attributed to the efforts of the Nicaraguan women's movements to reform laws, provide services for survivors, transform gender norms, and increase women's knowledge of their human rights.

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## Introduction

Since the landmark Fourth World Conference on Women was held in Beijing in 1995, international commitment to ending violence against women and girls (VAWG) has increased; nevertheless, VAWG remains widespread. According to the most recent data from 152 countries, about one in three women globally experience sexual and/or physical intimate partner violence (IPV) or non-partner sexual violence at some point in their lives (WHO, 2021). VAWG has been recognised in the Sustainable Development Goals as a violation of human rights, as well as a significant barrier to public health and economic development (Homan & Fulu, 2021). Despite its pervasiveness, there is growing evidence that VAWG is preventable. Rigorously conducted evaluations of interventions from diverse settings, including low- and middle-income countries, have shown substantial reductions in the prevalence of intimate partner violence within only a few years of implementation (Ellsberg et al., 2015).

The evidence suggests that the most effective interventions generally include multiple components involving different stakeholders and community members, and address the structural

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drivers of VAWG, including discriminatory policies and norms. Cross-national research has shown that attitudes condoning VAWG, are common globally and constitute one of the strongest predictors of high IPV prevalence at a national level (Heise & Kotsadam, 2015; Sardinha & Catalán, 2018). Nonetheless, the evidence base on how to transform gender norms and prevent VAWG on a large scale through structural interventions remains limited.

Bringing VAWG and women's human rights more broadly 'from the margin to the centre' of the global agenda has largely been achieved through the efforts of transnational feminist organisations and networks over several decades (Bunch & Fried, 1996). The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), drafted in 1979 and ratified by 189 countries to date, did not even refer explicitly to violence as a form of discrimination (Merry, 2009, p. 133). However, over the following two decades a series of international conferences, including the Vienna Conference on Human Rights (1994), the Cairo Conference on Population and Development (1994), and the Fourth World Conference on Women (1995) established VAWG as a core feature of the global women's rights agenda (Bunch & Fried, 1996; Merry, 2006).

The United Nations Declaration on Violence against Women (1993) reframed violence against women as a human rights violation, regardless of whether the acts are carried out by private citizens in the home, in public, or perpetrated by states (UNGA, 1993). The impact of these global events reverberated around the world and led to far-reaching changes in national laws and policies. Currently, at least 155 countries have legislation criminalising domestic violence (World Bank, 2017, 2020). However, implementation of the laws is very uneven, and impunity is still the norm in many countries, due to lack of resources, weak enforcement, and local resistance to the new policies (IDLO, 2019).

The role of the women's movement in bringing about these changes has been well documented. A landmark study of 70 countries over four decades found that the greatest predictor of progressive policies and legislation on VAWG was the existence of strong autonomous women's movements (Htun & Weldon, 2012), as opposed to GDP or leftist parties. However, more research is needed to understand the process by which these global human rights concepts have been translated, adapted, and put into practice in local contexts, or what Merry refers to as the 'vernacularization' of global values (Merry, 2006). Moreover, few studies have been able to measure the direct impact of these changes on the daily lives of women.

### ***Feminist organising to end VAWG in Nicaragua***

Although the Sandinista revolution of the 1980s proclaimed equality between men and women as a core revolutionary principle, in practice this was expressed mainly through increased educational and professional opportunities for women rather than challenging the pervasive and deeply entrenched culture of *machismo* (Ellsberg et al., 2000; Kampwirth, 1996; Molyneux, 1985). Women were encouraged to subordinate their specific interests to the national interests of strengthening the revolution through defence and economic production. In the wake of the electoral defeat of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) party in 1990, feminist organisations and Casas de las Mujeres (women's houses) began to flourish throughout the country, providing sexual and reproductive health services, legal and psycho-social counselling for IPV, and consciousness-raising programmes around women's rights. Whereas domestic violence had formerly been considered a private issue and was rarely discussed in public, improving responses for survivors of violence quickly emerged as a key demand for women's rights activists.

The Nicaraguan women's movement both contributed to and was greatly influenced by global events promoting women's human rights. Nicaraguan activists participated actively in the International Conferences in Vienna, Cairo, and Beijing, both as members of official delegations as well as in the civil society forums. In the year leading up to the Beijing Conference, local and national meetings were held throughout Nicaragua as in many other parts of the world to ensure grass-roots participation in shaping what became the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

The Latin American and Central-American Feminist Encounters were also a key source of networking and inspiration for Nicaraguan feminists.

The National Network of Women against Violence (*Red de Mujeres contra la Violencia*) was established in 1992 in order to advocate for increased access to services and justice for survivors of violence (Ellsberg et al., 1997). The Network carried out yearly campaigns demanding improved laws and policies to end VAWG and to encourage women to exercise their rights as citizens.

The Network played a key role in the creation of specialised women's police stations, or *Comisariías de la Mujer y la Niñez*, with female police officers and social workers. As of 2014, there were at least 162 *Comisariías* in Nicaragua, providing women and children who experienced IPV or sexual violence with a unique entry point into the police and justice system (Medie & Walsh, 2019; Neumann, 2018). Municipal committees and referral networks were set up to improve coordination between the police, courts, health system and local women's organisations. A study found that over 98 per cent of women surveyed knew of the *Comisariías* and 77 per cent believed they had reduced levels of VAWG (INIM, 2000; Jubb et al., 2008).

In addition to grass roots organising, several Nicaragua organisations produced 'edutainment' TV and radio shows, also known as 'social soaps' in order raise awareness around VAWG and women's rights. The award-winning shows *Sexto Sentido* and *Contracorriente*, produced by the NGO Puntos de Encuentro, explicitly addressed IPV, rape, and child sexual abuse. A longitudinal evaluation of 4500 young people aged 13–24 over three years showed that the show was effective in improving restrictive gender norms, raising awareness about the VAWG laws, and increasing the use of services for survivors (Solorzano et al., 2008).

Feminist research also played a key role in changing public opinion and laws in Nicaragua. The first population-based study in Central America to provide robust prevalence estimates on physical and sexual violence against women by intimate partners was conducted in León, Nicaragua in 1995. The research was carried out in partnership with the Nicaraguan Network, UNAN-León and Umea University in Sweden, with the aim of providing evidence to support proposed reforms to criminal code. The study revealed that 55 per cent of ever-partnered women had experienced physical violence by a current or former intimate partner during their lifetime, and 27 per cent of women had experienced violence in the 12 months prior to the interview (Ellsberg et al., 1999, 2000). The Network disseminated the result in national meetings, newspapers, radio and television interviews, and reprints in local journals, helping to garner political support for the first Family Violence Law (Law 230), which was passed unanimously by the National Assembly in 1996 (Ellsberg et al., 1997). This law criminalised 'psychological injuries' in addition to physical injuries, and introduced restraining orders that women could apply for to protect themselves from violent partners.

In 2012, the women's movement lobbied successfully for the passage of a comprehensive Violence against Women Law (Law 779) in line with international human rights standards and 'second generation' legislation being passed throughout Latin America. Law 779 expanded the definitions of violence against women, including femicide, increased carceral penalties, established new protective measures for women victims and specialised courts, and eliminated the practice of informal mediation (Neumann, 2018; Sudduth & D'Amico, 2014, p. 779). The law was celebrated by local women's organisations, but faced immediate backlash from conservative and religious sectors, who argued that it was an attack on 'family values' and discriminatory against men. Over the next two years, Law 779 was subsequently weakened through a series of legislative reforms and executive decrees. Mediation was restored and neighbourhood 'Family Councils' led by religious and political leaders were created under the Ministry of the Family as a first step to resolving 'family conflict' before women could report cases to the police. In 2016, the Women's Police Stations were eliminated altogether and their functions were transferred to the judicial assistance branch of the police as part of the increasingly conservative social policies of President Daniel Ortega and his wife and Vice-President Rosario Murillo, who were elected in 2007 and re-elected in 2011, 2016, and 2021 (Medie & Walsh, 2019; Neumann, 2017).<sup>1</sup>

In 2016, the authors of the 1995 prevalence study on IPV in León conducted a second round of data collection in the same municipality to measure changes in the prevalence and characteristics of IPV over the 20 years period. Multivariate logistic regression modelling on a pooled data set of women found a 63 per cent reduction in lifetime physical IPV and a 71 per cent decrease in physical IPV during the previous 12 months (Ellsberg et al., 2020). Similar decreases were found in lifetime and 12-month emotional IPV, but not in sexual IPV. The greatest decrease in both lifetime and 12-month IPV was seen among younger women (controlling for education and residence), indicating a cohort effect. At the same time, differences were found between the two surveys on other indicators that could also influence the prevalence of violence, such as women's use of services and attitudes around the acceptability of violence.

The aim of this paper is to identify explanatory pathways for the reduction in physical IPV between 1995 and 2016. If the change were primarily driven by changes among young women, we would expect to see very different patterns between younger and older women with regard to known risk and protective factors. On the other hand, if other external forces such as legislative and policy changes, services, and awareness campaigns contributed to the decrease, we would also expect to find changes in the attitudes and responses of older women to violence in 2016, as compared to their 1995 counterparts. The paper also seeks to contextualise the analysis within the broader debates about violence against women as a human rights violation and the current challenges in Nicaragua as many civil rights are being eroded.

## Materials and methods

### *Sampling and data collection*

The results presented in this paper are based on analysis of the 2016 dataset, with the exception of two tables that are described below. We conducted a household survey using the WHO Multi-Country Study on Women's Health and Domestic Violence Against Women Instrument (Version 12.2) (World Health Organisation, 2016). Detailed descriptions of the sampling methods and a description of the questionnaire are provided elsewhere (Ellsberg et al., 2020). The WHO Instrument provides quantitative measures of physical, emotional, sexual, and economic violence, and controlling behaviour by partners. In addition to general information about the respondent, her partner, and her family, the WHO questionnaire includes questions about sexual violence experienced by non-partners, and women's responses to violence (who did she tell, access to social support, access and utilisation of support services, including medical, legal, mental health; satisfaction with services). It also asked women whether they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements regarding gender norms, as well as whether they thought it was justified for a husband to beat his wife under certain circumstances. Additional country-specific questions were added to the WHO Instrument to assess respondents' knowledge of services for women living with violence, as well as their awareness and opinion of Law 779. They were also asked whether they remembered having heard or seen messages about violence from national campaigns or television and radio shows that address VAWG.

Data from the 1995 León study are used in Table 7 comparing women's responses to violence, as the changes in these variables are key to understanding pathways to change in the prevalence of violence. Also, results regarding women's attitudes towards violence were used from four waves of Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) that were carried out in Nicaragua between 1998 and 2011–2012 (INEC, 2008, 2013; Rosales et al., 1998). Although these surveys were not completely comparable among themselves, or with the 2016 León study, they provide additional insights that contribute to understanding of changes in social gender norms over the 20-year period and are used for comparative purposes with the León studies.

Two key outcome variables were selected for analysis: lifetime exposure to physical IPV and help-seeking behaviour among women who experience physical IPV. The previously conducted

**Table 1.** Definition of key outcome and independent variables.

Measure	Items	Coding
Physical IPV	Seven items, including: slapped or thrown something at her that could hurt her; pushed or shoved or pulled her hair; hit her with his fist or with something else that could hurt her: kicked, dragged or beat her up; choked or burned her on purpose; threatened to use or actually used a gun, knife or other weapon on her.	Dummy variables for lifetime and current physical IPV: 1 = experienced one or more acts ever or in 12 months prior to the interview
Controlling behaviour by partner	Seven items about whether partner did the following: stopped her from seeing female friends or contact with her family; insisted on knowing where she is constantly; makes her ask permission for getting health care; gets angry if she talks to another man; accuses her of being unfaithful; stopped you from getting health care; monitors her mobile calls and texts.	Dummy variable: 1 = one or more controlling behaviours
Traditional gender norms	Eight items denoting dimensions of gender inequality: women's submission to men, whether violence in the family should be kept private, and endorsement of rape myths.	Dummy variable: 1 = endorses 4 or more statements
Property ownership	6 questions on ownership (alone or with others) of the following assets: land, businesses, home, large animals, small animals, or crops	Dummy variable: 1 = owns 2 or more assets (alone or with others)
Sexual violence by non-partners before the age of 18	5 items for any sexual acts by a non-partner before the age of 18, including: forcing or attempting to force her to have sex when she did not want to, or when she was too drunk or drugged to refuse; touched her sexually or made her touch their private parts against her will.	Dummy variable: 1 = any non-partner sexual violence <18
Severity of violence	Composite indicator based on three dimensions of severity; severe acts of physical violence, children witnessed violence, and injuries sustained as a result of violence.	Categorical indicator with low, medium, and high severity.
Machismo	Latent variable based on 5 observed variables regarding partner's characteristics or behaviour: partner is controlling, couple argues frequently, respondent fears partner, partner drinks alcohol, partner fights with other men.	

analysis of the pooled 1995 and 2016 datasets was constrained by the limited number of variables that were included in both data sets. The multivariate models only included women's age, education, residence, and partnership status, and only women 15–49 from each study were included (Ellsberg et al., 2020). In this analysis of the 2016 dataset, we included women aged 50–64, and explored a broad range of potential risk and protective factors for IPV based on findings from international research as well as previous research in Nicaragua (Abramsky et al., 2011; Ellsberg et al., 1999; Heise & Kotsadam, 2015). These included: partnership status; attitudes towards violence; family support; ownership of property, childhood experiences of violence; disability; and partner's characteristics. Disability was assessed using the Washington Group on Disability (Amilon et al., 2021) and poverty was assessed using a multi-dimensional poverty index that has been adapted for use in Nicaragua (Peña et al., 2008). Table 1 presents the key outcome and independent variables included in the analysis.

### Data analysis

Analysis was primarily conducted in Stata 16. Median age at first partnership (marriage or cohabitation) was calculated on the sample of all women using Kaplan-Meier life table analysis, using current age or age at first partnership as the time variable and ever-partnered as the censoring event. Descriptive statistics were presented on the sub-sample of ever-partnered women



comparing the primary outcomes (experiencing physical IPV and help seeking) and potential correlates were stratified by age groups. Pearson's Chi-Square statistics assessed bivariate correlations between each of the outcome variables and potential explanatory variables. Intra-cluster correlation was estimated at 0.034, which is below the recommended cut-off of 0.05 for carrying out multi-level analysis (Sommet & Morselli, 2017), so variables that were significantly correlated at the  $p < 0.1$  level were included at the individual level in the binary logistic regression models. We conducted backwards elimination of variables, consecutively removing variables not making statistically significant contributions to the model, while controlling for age, education, and urban–rural residence. We tested for interactions and confounding among the explanatory variables and then re-estimated the model. We continued the process until all adjusted odds ratios (AOR) were significant at the  $p < 0.05$  level with a 95 per cent confidence interval that did not include 1.0. In order to estimate indirect and mediating effects, we conducted generalised structural equation modelling (GSEM) and tested structural pathways for each of the key outcomes. Unlike structural equation modelling (SEM), which is based on linear regression equations, GSEM can fit binary as well as continuous outcomes and includes binary and multinomial logistic regression equations. We fitted a hypothesised model based on our initial analysis and informed by literature, and removed pathways that were non-significant at the  $p < 0.05$  level, as well as removing observed variables that did not contribute any pathways towards the outcome of interest. We assessed covariance between observed variables and tested for mediating and indirect effects as well as interaction among the explanatory variables. Confirmatory latent class analysis (CFA) was used to construct a latent variable to represent the theoretical construct 'machismo', based on five observed partner characteristics that were positively correlated with IPV. Goodness of fit of the overall model was improved by comparing the Akaike information criterion (AIC) and Bayesian information criterion (BIC) scores on similar models until we achieved the models with the best fit that included the key variables (lower scores indicate better fit).

### **Ethical considerations**

Measures were taken to minimise any potential distress or harm to either the research team or the participants as a result of disclosing violence and are described in detail elsewhere (Ellsberg et al., 2020; Ellsberg & Heise, 2002; Ellsberg et al., 2001). The research adhered to the WHO safety and ethical guidelines (WHO, 2002), including ensuring complete privacy and confidentiality, interviewing only one woman per household, and providing information and referrals to all participants. The study received approval from the Institutional Review Boards of the George Washington University and UNAN León.

## **Results**

### **Characteristics of ever-married women and their partners**

Table 2 presents respondents' characteristics by age groups. Statistically significant differences ( $p < 0.05$ ) were observed between the three age groups on most variables. Using life table analysis on the sample of all women (including never-partnered women) the median age of women when they started their first partnership (defined as marriage or co-habitation) was higher among younger women (20 years), compared to the older two groups (19.5 and 19 years respectively). Among ever-partnered women, the younger women (15–29) were more likely than older women to have a secondary or university education, to have started their partnership at age 18 or younger, to live with hers or her partner's family, to report being able to count on family support, and to report that her household's main source of income came from family members (as opposed to her or her husband's income). With regard to the characteristics of her partner and the relationship, they were

**Table 2.** Characteristics of ever-partnered women and their partners by age group in León, Nicaragua, 2016.

		Age Group			
		15–29	30–49	50–64	Total
		<i>n</i> = 530	<i>n</i> = 578	<i>n</i> = 287	<i>n</i> = 1395
Respondents' characteristics (all women)					
Median age at first partnership*		20.1	19.5	19.0	19.5
Respondents' characteristics (ever-partnered women)					
		<i>n</i> = 337	<i>n</i> = 539	<i>n</i> = 279	<i>n</i> = 1155
		%	%	%	%
Residence***	urban	56.1	70.3	75.3	67.4
	rural	43.9	29.7	24.7	32.6
Current partnership status***	currently partnered	89.3	84.2	64.5	81.0
	formerly partnered	10.7	15.8	35.5	19.0
Education***	none/primary	25.8	35.8	63.1	39.5
	secondary	49.9	42.5	21.9	39.7
	university	24.3	21.7	15.1	20.9
Has a disability***		16.9	42.7	64.9	40.5
Main occupation***	works outside the home	38.0	59.4	45.5	49.8
	works in the home	53.7	39.0	47.7	45.4
	student/unemployed	8.3	1.7	6.8	4.8
Main source of income***	own work	24.6	41.7	41.2	36.6
	partners work	55.5	45.5	21.1	42.5
	family	12.8	7.4	22.6	12.6
	other	7.1	5.4	15.1	8.2
Community is supportive		44.8	48.1	46.2	46.5
Concerned about crime ***	not at all	54.0	39.9	37.6	43.5
	Somewhat	28.5	32.7	35.8	32.2
	Very	17.5	27.5	26.5	24.3
Family supports her*		92.6	87.9	84.9	88.6
Ownership of assets***	no assets	52.5	37.8	26.9	39.5
	one or more assets	47.5	62.2	73.1	60.5
Poverty status***	not poor	38.0	42.3	27.2	37.4
	poor	40.7	41.9	36.6	40.3
	extremely poor	21.4	15.8	36.2	22.3
Insulted/humiliated as a child		19.3	18.7	14	17.7
Beaten in childhood		21.4	25.4	26.5	24.5
Relationship characteristics					
Current partnership status***	currently partnered	89.3	84.2	64.5	81.0
	formerly partnered	10.7	15.8	35.5	19.0
Ever married***		35.0	53.2	59.1	49.4
Age at first union*	19 or older	40.7	51	48.7	47.4
	18 or younger	59.3	49	51.3	52.6
Age difference between woman and her partner	same age or older	22.6	38.6	34.4	32.9
	1–5 years younger	47.2	33.6	36.9	38.4
	6 or more years younger	30.3	27.8	28.7	28.7
Couple communicates well		78.3	71.6	69.9	73.2
Couple argues often		14.5	16.1	15.1	15.4
Partner is controlling		44.8	46.4	45.5	45.7
Afraid of her partner***		10.4	16.7	17.2	15.0
Lives with her family***		27.0	19.3	15.4	20.6
Lives with partner's family***		36.8	20.2	19.7	24.9
		<i>n</i> = 118	<i>n</i> = 287	<i>n</i> = 165	<i>n</i> = 570
Marriage was forced (among ever married women)		6.8	6.6	11.5	8.1
Partner's characteristics (reported by ever-partnered women)					
		<i>n</i> = 337	<i>n</i> = 539	<i>n</i> = 279	<i>n</i> = 1155
Partner's education***	Primary	28.5	39	56.6	40.2
	Secondary	49.9	39.7	29.4	40.2
	University	21.7	21.3	14.0	19.7
Partner is employed***		86.4	87.0	71.0	82.9
Partner drinks alcohol***		16.3	20.0	31.9	21.8
Partner fights with other men		12.8	10.9	9.7	11.2
Partner is involved with other women***		22.8	47.1	58.4	42.8
Partner has other children		6.8	18.9	33.0	18.8
Partner was hit as a child**		18.7	23.2	13.3	19.5

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .



**Table 3.** Women's attitudes towards violence between 1998–2016 based on data from Demographic Health Surveys and the 2016 León Survey.\*

A man is justified in hitting his wife/partner for the following reasons	1998 DHS <i>n</i> = 675	2001 DHS <i>n</i> = 695	2006/7 DHS <i>n</i> = 1613	2011/12 DHS <i>n</i> = 1728	2016 León <i>n</i> = 807
	%	%	%	%	%
If she goes out without telling him	13.9	4.7	n.a.	n.a.	2.4
If she neglects the children or housework	14.5	6.4	1.2	0.6	5.0
If she argues with him	n.a.	2.0	n.a.	n.a.	2.3
If she refused to have sex with him	5.5	1.6	1.1	0.3	2.1
If he suspects she is unfaithful	20.9	n.a.	7.9	2.8	n.a.
If she disobeys him	n.a.	n.a.	4.1	0.9	n.a.
If she burns the food	n.a.	2.5	n.a.	n.a.	1.7
Agrees with at least one reason	27.9	9.6	6.1	4.3	7.9
Disagrees with all reasons	72.1	90.4	93.9	95.7	92.1

\*Per cent of ever-partnered women aged 15–49 living in León who believe that a man is justified in hitting his partner for specific reasons (DHS figures for León recalculated by authors).

more likely to be living with their partner rather than married, and less likely to report being afraid of her partner. Their partners were more likely to have a high school or university education, and to be employed than the partners of older women. Younger women also reported less drinking and concurrent relationships among their partners.

Older women (age 50–64) were more likely to live in the urban zone, to have a primary education or less, to report having a disability, to have been married to their partners, and to be currently single (separated, widowed, or divorced), compared to younger women. They were more likely to live in extreme poverty, to own some form of property, and to report that their work was the primary source of the family's income. Their partners were more likely to drink alcohol once a week or more, to have less than a secondary education, and to have other concurrent relationships. Women in the oldest group were the most likely to say that they were afraid of their partners and to report being concerned about neighbourhood levels of crime,

The characteristics of the middle age group (30–49) generally fell between the youngest and the oldest, with a few exceptions. This group was better off economically, with more women working outside the home, and living in households that were not poor than either the youngest or oldest group. No difference by age groups was found with regard to whether the respondent was beaten, humiliated, or sexually abused during childhood, whether she believes that her community is supportive, how often she and her partner argued or communicate positively, age differences within the couple, or whether her partner fights with other men.

### **Women's acceptance of violence and traditional gender norms**

A comparison of data from the four waves of DHS studies conducted in Nicaragua, as well as the 2016 León study suggests that women's acceptance of IPV decreased sharply between 1998 and 2016 in León (INEC, 2008, 2013; Rosales et al., 1998). In 1998, almost 28 per cent of women living in León agreed with at least one reason that men had a good reason to hit his wife, compared to nearly 8 per cent in the 2016 survey (Table 3). Although the figures are not completely comparable due to differences in wording and items included, the steepest decline occurred between 1998 and 2001, when acceptance of violence for any reason decreased from 27.9 to 9.6 per cent. Thereafter, the per centages vary between 4 and 6 per cent with a slight increase in 2016.

A comparison of women's acceptance of violence by age groups in the 2016 data set showed that overall acceptance of violence was reduced in all age groups compared to 1998 (Table 4). Statistically significant differences by age were found in only two scenarios (if she argued with him or went out without telling him). However, the broader gender norms scale, which included many items

**Table 4.** Agreement with justification for IPV and restrictive gender norms among ever-partnered women by age group in León, Nicaragua, 2016.

	15–29	30–49	50–64	Total
	<i>n</i> =	<i>n</i> =	<i>n</i> =	<i>n</i> =
	337	539	279	1155
	%	%	%	%
Justifications for IPV				
If she goes out without telling him***	1.8	2.8	5.7	3.2
If she neglects the children	5.9	4.5	5.7	5.2
If she argues with him***	2.4	2.2	3.9	2.7
If she refused to have sex with him	1.5	2.4	1.8	2.0
If she burns the food	2.1	1.5	1.8	1.7
Agrees with at least one reason	8.6	7.4	11.5	8.7
Disagrees with all reasons	91.4	92.6	88.5	91.3
Agrees with traditional gender norms				
It is a wife's obligation to have sex with husband***	9.5	11.5	18.3	12.6
A woman's most important role is to take care of her home*	57.3	53.1	62.7	56.6
It is natural that men should be the head of the family**	45.7	47.5	54.5	48.7
A wife should always obey her husband, even if she does not agree with him***	19.3	22.6	33.0	24.2
Violence between husband and wife is a private matter and others should not get involved	60.5	58.4	54.8	58.2
A woman should tolerate violence to keep her family together	8.3	6.1	11.5	8.1
If a woman is raped, she has done something careless to put herself in that situation**	6.8	16.7	20.4	14.7
If a woman does not defend herself, it is not rape.	26.6	28.8	31.9	28.6
Less traditional (agrees with 0–3 statements) ***	73.3	67.2	54.9	67.0
More traditional (agrees with 4 + statements) ***	26.7	32.8	45.1	33.0

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

indicating support for women's subordination to men, showed greater disparity among the age groups. Younger women were significantly less likely to endorse traditional attitudes than the middle or oldest age groups. The majority of women in all age groups endorsed the item 'A woman's most important role is to take care of her home', and 'violence between husband and wife is a private matter and others should not get involved', and nearly half of women agreed that, 'it is natural that men should be the head of the family'. Interestingly, less than one in ten women overall agreed that 'a woman should tolerate violence to keep her family together'.

### Exposure to feminist organising

Over 80 per cent of all women had watched at least one of the Nicaraguan produced 'edutainment' TV programmes addressing gender issues and VAWG. *Sexto Sentido* was the most watched show, viewed by 70 per cent of women, followed by *Loma Verde*, viewed by nearly half of women. About one-third of women remembered having heard a campaign message about VAWG. The slogan most frequently mentioned (by 18 per cent of respondents) was, 'I have a right to live without violence'. Younger women were more likely to have seen one of the TV programmes, whereas the two older groups were more likely to have heard an anti-violence campaign message. Over 80 per cent of women had been exposed to either a social soap or campaign message and knew about at least one place that women who had problems with violence could go to for help, and nearly 90 per cent of women were aware of Law 779. Of these, more than 70 per cent said that they thought that the law helped protect women (Table 5).

### Prevalence and characteristics of violence

Table 6 presents the prevalence lifetime and current (within the last 12 months) physical violence by partners as well as controlling behaviours by partners, and non-partner sexual violence before the age of 18. Almost half (46 per cent) of ever-partnered women experiencing at least one controlling behaviour by a partner, and one in five women experienced 3 or more controlling behaviours. No

**Table 5.** Proportion of women who have knowledge of anti-VAWG laws, services, or campaigns, among ever-partnered women by age group in León, Nicaragua, 2016.

	15–29 <i>n</i> = 337 %	30–49 <i>n</i> = 539 %	50–64 <i>n</i> = 279 %	Total <i>n</i> = 1155 %
Remembers at least one anti-violence campaign message***	27.9	37.3	30.1	32.8
Has seen a 'social soap' programme***	89.3	87.2	72.7	84.1
Exposure to campaigns and social soaps				
Neither campaign nor social soap***	8.3	10.2	23.3	12.8
Either campaign or social soap ***	66.2	55.1	51.6	57.5
Both campaign and social soap***	25.5	34.7	25.1	29.7
Knows about Law 779	88.4	90.9	88.5	89.6
Knows at least one place where woman can go for help with violence***	72.7	85.0	84.2	81.2

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

significant differences were found between age groups with regard to controlling behaviour by partners, with the exception that younger women reported more control over cell phone use than older women (17 per cent among the youngest women compared to 5 per cent among the oldest group of women). There was no difference in experiences of sexual abuse by non-partners before the age of 18.

With regard to experiences of IPV, the youngest age cohort (15–29) reported significantly less physical IPV ever in their lifetimes, compared to the middle and older cohorts. Regarding IPV in the last 12 months, both the youngest and middle age groups reported similar levels of physical IPV, but among older women (50–64), there was a steep drop, with less than 1 per cent of women reporting physical IPV.

Overall, 46 per cent of women who ever experienced physical IPV reported injuries, with no significant differences by age group, although younger women reported more injuries during the last

**Table 6.** Experiences and characteristics of violence experienced by ever-partnered women by age group in León, Nicaragua, 2016.

	15–29 <i>n</i> = 337 %	30–49 <i>n</i> = 539 %	50–64 <i>n</i> = 279 %	Total <i>n</i> = 1155 %
Acts of controlling behaviour by partner				
No acts	55.2	53.6	54.5	54.3
1 or 2 acts	23.4	24.3	23.3	23.8
3 or more acts	21.4	22.1	22.2	21.9
Intimate partner violence				
Lifetime physical violence ***	20.5	32.1	34.8	29.4
Current physical violence (last 12 months) ***	8.3	8.3	0.4	6.4
Non partner sexual violence				
Child sexual abuse (<18 years)	14.8	18.6	14.3	16.5
Severe violence and injuries among women who ever experiences physical IPV				
Severe physical violence	<i>n</i> = 69 66.7	<i>n</i> = 173 71.1	<i>n</i> = 97 80.4	<i>n</i> = 339 72.9
Ever injured	36.2	48.6	49.5	46.3
Injured in the past 12 months ***	13.0	7.5	0.0	6.5
Type of injury among ever-injured women				
Moderate injuries (cuts, bites, bruises, sprains, dislocations)***	<i>n</i> = 26 93.3	<i>n</i> = 85 68.2	<i>n</i> = 50 64.0	<i>n</i> = 161 70.8
severe injuries (deep cuts, eye, ear and internal injuries, fractures) ***	7.7	31.8	36.0	29.2
Other characteristics of violence (among ever abused women)				
Severity of violence				
Moderate*	<i>n</i> = 69 27.5	<i>n</i> = 173 20.2	<i>n</i> = 97 11.34	<i>n</i> = 339 19.17
Severe	59.42	56.7	61.9	58.7
Very severe	13.04	23.1	26.8	22.1
Children frequently witnessed violence ***	<i>n</i> = 60 30.0	<i>n</i> = 168 41.7	<i>n</i> = 96 49.0	<i>n</i> = 324 41.7

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

**Table 7.** Women's responses to violence among women who ever experienced physical IPV, León, Nicaragua, 1995 and 2016.<sup>^</sup>

	1995	2016			Total
	15–49	15–29	30–49	50–64	
	<i>n</i> = 188	<i>n</i> = 69	<i>n</i> = 173	<i>n</i> = 97	<i>n</i> = 339
	%	%	%	%	%
Left home to escape violence					
Ever left home	41.0	43.5	34.7	27.8	34.5
Sought help					
Ever sought help from any formal institution**	18.0	15.9	37.6	38.1	33.3
Sought help with police or courts**	14.0	15.9	34.1	30.9	29.5
Ever went to hospital or health centre**	7.0	1.4	8.7	9.3	7.4
Women's organisation**	6.0	0.0	5.8	2.1	3.5

<sup>^</sup>Shows the proportion of ever-abused women in 1995 and 2016 who left home or sought help for violence. Data from the 2016 study are disaggregated by age-group.

\*  $p < 0.05$  \*\*  $p < 0.01$  \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

12 months (Table 6). The middle and older women were more likely to have experienced more severe acts of physical violence, and to have suffered more severe injuries than the youngest women, including broken teeth, eardrums and eyes, fractures, and internal injuries. With regard to other measures of severity, the older two groups of women were more likely to report that their children often witnessed the violence and reported more severe acts of violence.

### Seeking help for violence

In the 1995 study, 18 per cent of women who experienced physical IPV reported the violence to a formal institution (Ellsberg et al., 2000). In the 2016 study, the proportion of women who sought formal help rose to one third (Table 7). The proportion of women who went to the police (usually a *Comisaria de la Mujer*) more than doubled, whereas attendance to health facilities or women's centres was roughly similar. The two older groups of women were more than twice as likely to seek help, compared to the youngest cohort. About a third of women reported having left their home at least once to escape the violence, although the great majority returned eventually. Younger women reported leaving home more frequently than older women.

### Direct and indirect pathways for physical IPV

Bivariate and multivariate logistic regression modelling was performed to identify risk and protective factors for lifetime physical IPV. Through generalised structural equation modelling (GSEM) we tested for mediating and indirect effects, as well as interactions between variables. Table 8 presents adjusted odds ratios for direct and indirect pathways. In the final GSEM model, younger women, women who lived in the rural area, owned some property, started their first unions later (after 18 years), and were married (compared with informal unions) had lower odds of experiencing IPV. Women who reported child sexual abuse had five-fold increased odds of IPV.

A positive interaction was found between gender norms and residence, such that positive attitudes were predictive of a lower risk of violence overall, but for rural women, endorsing positive gender attitudes increased the odds of violence more than three-fold. A latent variable called 'machismo' was created to represent abusive partners behaviours related to IPV, based on the logistic regression models. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used to select the variables with the best fit for the latent variable.

In bivariate analysis, having a university degree, being able to count on family support had decreased odds of IPV, but no direct effect was found in the multivariate models. Also, the odds of IPV were higher for women with disabilities and women who had experienced physical abuse during their childhood in the bivariate analysis, but not in the multivariate model. No significant

**Table 8.** Generalised structural equation model (GSEM) for direct and indirect pathways for lifetime physical IPV among ever-partnered women aged 15–64 in León, Nicaragua, 2016 ( $n = 1115$ ).

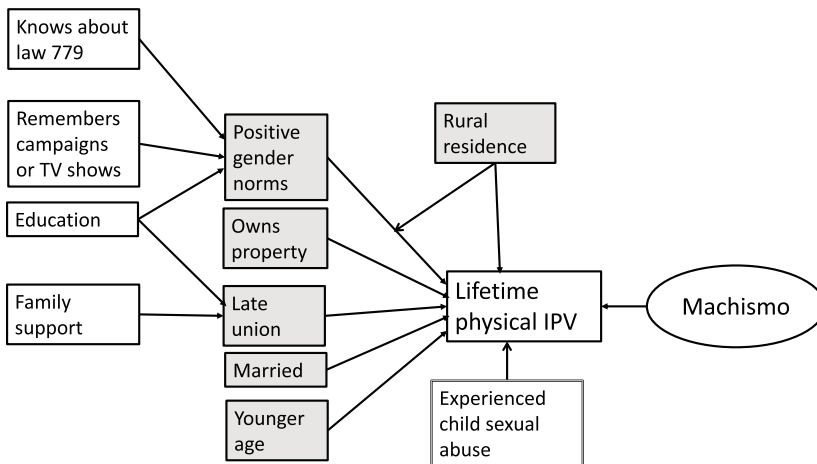
Direct Pathways	AOR (95%CI)
<i>Physical Intimate Partner Violence</i>	
<-Age group	
15–29	0.31 (0.16–0.59) ***
30–49	0.78 (0.47–1.30)
50–64	1.0
<-Residence	
urban	1.0
rural	0.23 (0.10–0.51) ***
<-Gender related norms	
traditional	1.0
non traditional	0.76 (0.46–1.2)
<-Non-traditional norms*rural	3.69 (1.37–9.93) **
<-Owns property	0.57 (0.37–0.89) **
<-Late union	0.39 (0.25–0.62) ***
<-Married	0.54 (0.35–0.85) ***
<-Child sexual abuse	5.13 (2.94–8.96) ***
<-Machismo (latent variable)	11.49 (6.27–21.04)***
<b>Indirect Pathways</b>	
<i>Late union</i>	
<-Can count on family support	2.17 (1.91–3.30) ***
<-Education	
primary	1.0
secondary	2.50 (1.80–3.14) ***
university	7.30 (5.10–9.10.44)***
<i>Positive gender norms</i>	
<-Is aware of Law 779	2.67 (1.76–4.07) ***
<-Exposed to media campaigns or programmes	1.59 (1.08–2.34) **
<-Education	
Primary	1.0
Secondary	3.00 (2.23–4.00) ***
University	7.04 (4.57–10.86) ***

associations were found between physical IPV and poverty, income or employment status, perceptions of community support or crime, or residence with birth family or in-laws.

Figure 1 shows the final model including all pathways with significant regression coefficients at the  $p < 0.05$  level. In addition to the direct pathways already identified through the logistic regression modelling, indirect pathways were mediated by progressive gender norms and late initiation of unions. Women who endorsed positive gender norms were more likely to be aware of Law 779, to have a secondary or university education, and to have been exposed to violence prevention media campaigns or programmes. Women who started their first union later were more likely to be educated, to have family support, and to believe that violence against women is never justified.

### **Direct and indirect pathways for women's use of services**

Through GSEM we tested direct and indirect pathways to seeking help for violence (Table 9). The greatest predictor of help seeking was the severity of violence, followed by whether she knew of a place that could help women who had problems with violence (Figure 2). Older women (30–49) and those living in the urban area, where services are more accessible, as well as women who did not believe that violence between a couple was private affair, could not count on family support, and who had left their home at least once due to the violence were more likely to seek help. Exposure to campaigns and the belief that violence is never justified had a positive indirect effect on seeking help by increasing women's knowledge of available services.



**Figure 1.** Generalised structural equation model with direct and indirect pathways for experiencing lifetime IPV among ever-partnered women aged 15–64 in León, Nicaragua, 2016 ( $n = 1115$ ). Shaded boxes indicate negative correlations and unshaded boxes indicate positive correlations. The latent variable ‘machismo’ is indicated by an oval shape. Interaction is indicated by the arrow that intersects a direct pathway.

## Discussion

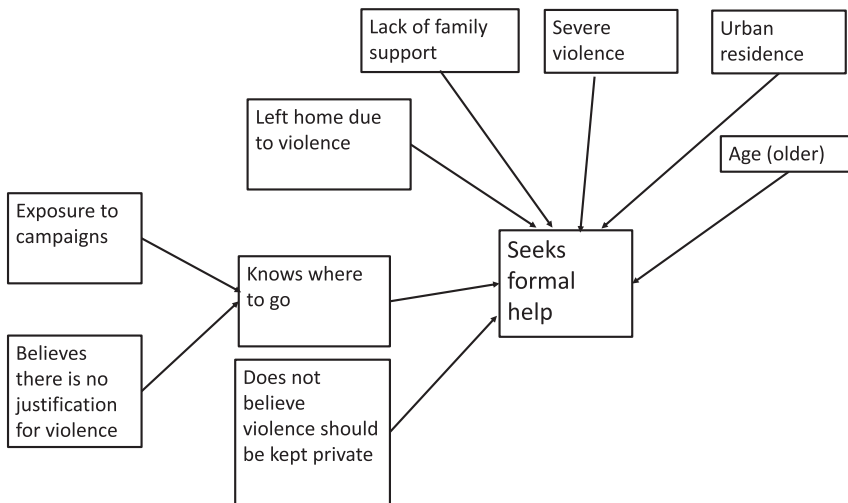
The results of this study indicate that there are at least two related, but independent pathways explaining the overall reduction in physical IPV in the last two decades in Nicaragua. Our findings support the initial hypothesis that the decrease could be attributed in part to a cohort effect among younger women who, in addition to having more education than their earlier counterparts, also reported more gender equitable norms, and less ‘machista’ behaviour among their male partners. The evidence also indicates that these patterns, in turn, were influenced by the intensive advocacy efforts and media campaigns carried out by Nicaraguan feminist organisations to increase women’s

**Table 9.** Generalised structural equation model (GSEM) with direct and indirect pathways for seeking help among women aged 15–64 who have experienced physical IPV in León, Nicaragua, 2016 ( $n = 339$ ).

Pathways	AOR (95%CI)
<b>Direct pathways</b>	
<i>Seeking help</i>	
<-Urban residence	2.66 (1.32–5.36)**
<- Does not believe that violence should be kept private	1.74 (1.04–2.94)*
<-Severity of violence:	
less severe	1.0
severe	2.35 (1.04–5.34)*
extremely severe	6.81 (2.72–17.08)***
<- Does not receive family support	2.26 (1.19–4.28)**
<- Knows somewhere women can go to for help	3.31 (1.24–8.83)*
<-Ever left home because of violence	1.72 (1.03–2.90)**
<-Age group	
15–29	1.0
30–49	2.40 (1.10–5.22)*
50–64	2.07 (0.88–4.85)
<b>Indirect pathways</b>	
<i>Knows somewhere women can go to for help</i>	
<-Exposure to anti-VAWG messages	
no exposure	1.0
either social soaps or campaigns	2.51 (1.0–6.32) *
social soaps and campaigns	8.38 (2.47–28.37) ***
<-Believes there is no justification for violence	3.11 (1.29–7.48) **

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .





**Figure 2.** Generalised structural equation model diagram with direct and indirect pathways for seeking formal help among women aged 15–64 who have experienced physical IPV in León, Nicaragua, 2016 ( $n = 339$ ). Unshaded boxes indicate positive correlations.

access to justice and comprehensive services for survivors of violence, as well as to raise awareness of women’s rights. Younger women reported similar levels of quarrelling among couples as older women and similar amounts of positive communication, but they were much less likely to report being afraid of their partners.

It makes sense that younger women should have a greater sense of their rights than their mothers and grandmothers, given that they were born in the mid-1990s and early 2000s, when feminist organising was flourishing (Jubb, 2014; Kampwirth, 1996). VAWG was already against the law when they were growing up, even though the laws were not always enforced. In addition to having greater educational opportunities, these young women, together with their brothers and boyfriends, grew up surrounded by public messages affirming women’s rights, and gender equality. The high levels of exposure to edutainment programmes (84 per cent), and to anti-violence messages (33 per cent) is an indicator of the extensive reach of feminist organising in Nicaragua. Research in other settings has found that edutainment programmes can have a positive impact in changing viewers attitudes towards VAWG (Banerjee et al., 2019; Ellsberg et al., 2015).

However, our results indicate that older women also benefited from the societal changes, as evidenced by their knowledge of the laws, decreased tolerance for violence, greater access to property, and increased use of police services for survivors. It is noteworthy that violence during the previous 12 months was virtually non-existent among the oldest group of women. Since we did not have data from 50 to 64 year olds in the 1995 study, we do not know whether this pattern would have been the same twenty years ago. However, it seems likely that at least part of the decrease can be attributed to changes in social gender norms, particularly around the acceptability of violence, laws, and services.

Our findings regarding the predictors for women seeking help for violence are consistent with the 1995 study results, when the main factors predicting whether a woman sought help was the severity of the violence she experienced, as well as living in the urban zone, where services are more accessible. Leaving home temporarily and seeking formal help were associated with a greater likelihood of eventually leaving a violent relationship (Ellsberg, Winkvist, et al., 2001). This is consistent with international research suggesting that going to the police or any other formal institution is almost always a last resort for women, taken only when all else has failed, and they are afraid for their lives or the lives of the children (Palermo et al., 2014).

Unlike many studies in other countries, rural women reported less IPV than their urban counterparts. This finding is consistent with the 1995 study. Although endorsing equitable gender norms had a positive overall effect in reducing physical IPV, rural women with more equitable views were an increased risk for violence, compared to rural women with traditional views. Given the collinearity between traditional norms and residence, and the interaction between them, a possible interpretation is that women in more traditional communities who conform to the normative behaviour of obedience to their husbands, including having sex whenever he wants, are less likely to have conflict with their spouses or to be beaten (Sudderth, 2020). In the 1995 study, women were often told that the way to avoid violence was to be a better wife, and avoid upsetting their husbands (Ellsberg et al., 2000).

It is disheartening to note that the reductions in physical IPV were not accompanied by similar reductions in sexual violence. According to the 2016 data, around one in six women reported having been sexually abused before the age of 18 and nearly half of women reported sexual violence and harassment by partners and non-partners (Ellsberg, 2021; Ellsberg et al., 2020). More research is needed to understand the reasons for this discrepancy and how sexual violence can be better addressed in the future. Emerging research from other settings indicates that interventions that engage couples to improve communication and transform gender norms may contribute to preventing sexual IPV (Stern & Heise, 2019).

A strength of this research is that it includes comparable data spanning over two decades, including women's perceptions of and exposure to key historical changes in the country. This is the first population-based study that we are aware of that presents evidence of the impact of feminist organising on the prevalence of VAWG.

A limitation of the study is that it is not nationally representative, and because of the cross-sectional study design, caution must be used in inferring causality. However, the trends described in this paper are consistent with 3 waves of national Demographic and Health Surveys, as well as other studies carried out in the intervening years between the 1995 and 2016 studies, lending additional credibility to the findings.

Our findings suggest that multi-sectoral coordinated actions of governments and civil society can contribute to large-scale reductions in VAWG. It is unlikely that the 70 per cent reduction in physical IPV would have occurred without the efforts of Nicaragua women's rights activists to increase women's access to justice and services, and knowledge of their rights. With the increasing donor investments in VAWG prevention this case study provides a timely reminder of the importance of funding women's movements and human rights defenders so that they can continue to play this critical role.

Unfortunately, the positive results of the 2016 study have been undermined by recent political events in Nicaragua. The re-election of the FSLN party leader Daniel Ortega in 2006, after 16 years out of power, marked the beginning of the erosion of many of the achievements of the earlier years. Shortly before the elections, as part of an alliance with conservative religious sectors, the FSLN-dominated National Assembly voted to criminalise all forms of abortion, and adopted a public discourse of 'reconciliation and family values' as opposed to defending women's rights (Jubb, 2014; Kampwirth, 2008). During his first years back in office, Ortega and his wife Rosario Murillo (who eventually became his Vice-President in the elections of 2015 elections) expressed open hostility to the women's movement, who had supported his step-daughter Zoila-America Narvaez in her efforts to seek justice for having been sexually abused by Ortega over many years.

A setback for women's rights and civil rights in general in Nicaragua occurred in April 2018, when the national police opened fire with live ammunition on students protesting social security reforms. Over the course of a few months 325 individuals were killed, and over 2000 wounded, most of them unarmed protesters. Hundreds of protesters were jailed for several months, and at least 40,000 Nicaraguans are still in exile due to threats against their lives (Agren, 2018; IACHR, 2019). The crisis continues to the present, with the ongoing imprisonment of opposition leaders, and a series of new laws restricting freedom of expression and assembly.

Women's rights defenders have been prominent in the opposition movement calling for fair elections and justice for those who were killed or arbitrarily detained. They have warned of an increase in IPV and femicides, due to the generalised impunity and social violence that currently reigns in Nicaragua, which has only been exacerbated by the covid-19 pandemic (IACHR, 2019; IM-Defensoras, 2020; Romero, 2020). According to a Nicaraguan feminist activist, 2018 was the last year that women rights activists were able to openly protest government policies, or to carry out violence prevention campaigns:

Today there's unprecedented institutional violence in the country. The rights of women and girls continue to be violated with legal loopholes, making data on violence and femicides invisible and manipulating cases. We've lost all confidence in the institutions, especially the Police, who don't respond to complaints. Many of our organizations have had to close due to economic problems or because of threats and pressure from the government and to this is added the pandemic, which forces women to spend more time at home with their abusers. Homes today are even less safe for many women and girls. (Ellsberg, 2021)

Despite the fragility of political and social advances, and the ever-present threat of conservative backlash, our research provides reasons for optimism. A Nicaraguan activist, upon hearing the results of the study, commented, 'What those numbers show is that our work wasn't in vain. We will continue to work, to regain what we have lost, and to rebuild what has been destroyed' (Ellsberg, 2021).

## Note

1. Some Comisarías were reopened during 2021; however, multi-sectoral coordination, particularly with women's organizations has not been reinstated.

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## Availability of data and materials

The datasets used and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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