



NO SAFE HAVEN: WAITING IN JUAREZ

Thousands of women and girls in Latin America have fled from violence in their home countries in search of respite farther north. But with the “Remain in Mexico” policy in place and few services for them in Mexico, waiting in Juárez provides no safety.

Mexico has long been plagued by violence from drug cartels and gangs; 2019 was the deadliest year on record in Mexico, with 35,000 homicide victims, or 95 homicides a day, a rise of nearly 2,000 homicides from 2018, which was also a record-setting year.¹ Despite these statistics, thousands have fled north from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras in recent years, searching for safety from war-zone levels of violence in their home countries, hoping to find ultimate respite in the United States. Along the journey, migrant women and girls are at risk of and experience violence, including sexual exploitation, physical assault, rape and murder. As long as a decade ago, women and girls cited violence as a key reason for fleeing their home countries in the Northern Triangle Region, and between 60-80% of women and girls reported experiencing violence while in transit.² Violence in their home countries has risen in the last decade and the route to the United States has not become safer. Once in Mexico, they exist in a country where a woman is murdered every 2.5 hours.³

Despite the known insecurity, particularly on the border, in March 2019, the new “Migrant Protection Protocols” (MPP), commonly known as the “Remain in Mexico” protocol went into effect in Ciudad Juárez. Under the MPP, asylum seekers who attempt to enter the United States at the US Mexico border can be sent back to Mexico for the duration of their US immigration court proceedings. But in a city and country that is unsafe, especially for women and girls, this protocol does not provide safe haven. Instead, it puts women and girls directly in harm’s way.

Welcome to Mexico - one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a woman.

IMMEDIATE ACTIONS

1. **Recognize** the humanitarian crisis within Mexico and **respond** according to need, not politics.
2. Fill the need with urgency and **fill the known \$40 million funding gap**.
3. **Prioritize GBV prevention and response** through case management, medical care, psychosocial support and legal aid.
4. **Invest in data** to ensure critically necessary information on service providers and high-quality needs assessments.



Credit: Andrew Oberstadt / IRC

THE IRC RESPONSE IN MEXICO: The IRC is supporting partners in Ciudad Juárez to meet the immediate needs of primarily female migrants, asylum seekers and deportees in Mexico. We work intentionally through partners to support existing civil society organizations and NGOs providing services to asylum-seekers to increase the quality of their response to meet global best practice. Our response aims to provide asylum seekers with information to make informed decisions about their crossing and access to services. We support 3 local organizations and 7 shelters in Mexico. But the dearth of funding and attention to the crisis of violence against women and girls within Mexico means that, while we would like to not only continue our support but expand and support more women and girls, we are only currently able to guarantee our programs through March 2020.

NO PLACE TO TURN



UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, has recorded a nearly fivefold increase in asylum-seekers arriving to the United States from the Northern Triangle region of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras and a thirteenfold increase in the number of requests for asylum from within Central America and Mexico since a decade ago.⁴ Women and girls flee more than gang violence and insecurity. In El Salvador, 67% of women report having survived some form of violence in their lifetime.⁵ El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras rank first, third, and seventh, respectively, for rates of female homicides globally.⁶ Violence against women and girls is so endemic in El Salvador that a law was passed against “femicide suicide,” which is driving a woman or girl to commit suicide by abusing them. It is the only country in the world with such a law.⁷

With all of this violence, in 2016 alone, some 65,000 women fled gender-based violence in the Northern Triangle and attempted to seek asylum in the USA.⁸ Yet not only have asylum claims based on gender-based violence come under fire,⁹ the “Remain in Mexico” policy in place has turned many of these women back from the US border to stay in Mexico, stranding thousands in unsafe cities and with little support, with over 60,000 returnees registered by January 2020.¹⁰ As of June 2019, the number of asylum seekers in Ciudad Juárez already outnumbered the spaces available in free humanitarian shelters by 11 to 1.¹¹

“Remain in Mexico” does not reflect that Mexico in general, or the border city of Juarez in particular, is a safe place to stay. The US government itself has placed 5 states in Mexico under its sternest “do not travel” advisory, with US citizens advised by the State Department to “reconsider travel” in 11 more states due to crime and kidnappings.¹² In 2020, there have been more murders in Ciudad Juárez than days in the year. Femicide is rampant in the city and reports of sexual assault and mutilation of bodies are common.¹³ Despite laws to try to curb GBV and which require that every homicide of a female be investi-

gated as femicide, only 4% of femicides in Mexico result in sentencing.¹⁴

Being turned back at the border leaves women, often with young children, to unsafe life on the streets. And the number of returnees continues to rise – some days as many as 1,200 people are placed into the MPP and returned to Mexico.¹⁵ People commonly express fear of kidnapping, assault, bribery, and other violence when they are forced to stay in Mexico.¹⁶ This violence is not confined to border cities; increasing rates of increasingly extreme violence have been reported farther south in Mexico.¹⁷

Gender-based violence increases in all humanitarian contexts. In Mexico alone there has been a reported increase in femicide over the last five years that far outpaces the average increase in homicides. Not only do women and girls face staggering lethal and non-lethal violence as the status quo, gender-based violence is also known to be compounded in all humanitarian contexts.¹⁸ And yet support for women and girls – whether asylum seekers, migrants or refugees of violence in their home countries – is hard to come by. As of 11 February 2020, only 35% of UNHCR’s \$61.7 million request has been funded humanitarian response in Mexico, leaving a funding gap of over \$40 million and hundreds of thousands of people without services as they wait.¹⁹ Just 2.5% of requested funding is for GBV prevention and response.²⁰ The women and girls who have survived violence are often too afraid to report their experiences and those who do often find that there are insufficient services - like psychosocial support, medical treatment, and case management – to help them through their trauma.

Though much of the attention to the humanitarian crisis in Mexico has centered around legal aid and asylum seeking, the protection needs of women and girls must also be prioritized as they wait in Mexico. With violence in the Northern Triangle continuing and the MPP still in place, the crisis within Mexico must be met with a robust humanitarian response – and quickly. The IRC recommends these immediate actions:

1. Recognize the humanitarian crisis within Mexico and respond according to need, not politics. Currently, humanitarian response in Mexico is not being treated with the same urgency or coordination as other humanitarian crisis of similar size or need. This means that UN presence is extremely limited, hindering coordination and funding. This lack of coordination has meant even basics, like having one consolidated referral pathway to obtain GBV services, have been delayed. It has also helped ensure that the humanitarian crisis within Mexico, including the violence experienced by thousands of women and girls, remains severely under-resourced. Acknowledging the crisis with such actions as a Humanitarian Response Plan or Appeal for the country or region (which does not currently exist) would allow for a more robust humanitarian response which is based on need and humanitarian principles.

2. Fund the need with urgency. Beyond the substantial delays and overall lack of services in terms of programming for the protection of women and girls, the lack of funding has also led to uncertainty in program continuity. This means that organizations are unable maintain staff or build the capacity for local non-governmental organizations to deliver humanitarian response. When and where funding does exist, it often does not get to local organizations with the ability to operate in this challenging and dangerous contexts due to operational constraints. The Government of Mexico is hesitant to pass along funding to local organizations because of fraud concerns and international NGOs are often only able to partner with local NGOs that are registered and own organizational bank accounts, which is often not the case in Mexico. The Government should reconsider their stance on funding local NGOs and INGOs must, with haste, work to overcome operational constraints so that local organizations can reach those most in need, prioritizing those organizations which support women and girls.

3. Prioritize GBV response. Throughout their displacement – whether while traveling from one of the Northern Triangle countries or waiting in Mexico – women and girls are experiencing astronomically high rates of violence and do not have access to GBV prevention and response services. Throughout humanitarian response mechanisms, the violence women and girls are facing must be prioritized and funded as part of a robust response to the full range of protection concerns in the region and in Mexico specifically. This response must include, at a minimum, case management, medical care (including the clinical management of rape), psychosocial support services, and legal aid.

4. Invest in data collection. Data collection is lacking and, where it exists, is often poor in quality. This, in turn, hinders an appropriate response with appropriate funding. Critically necessary is information on service providers and high-quality needs assessments, which must be disaggregated by gender with women and girls consulted and their voices meaningfully included in the data collection process. Given concerns over security, data collection, storage and use must be undertaken while rigorously adhering to data ethics.

1. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/01/mexico-murder-rate-hits-record-high-2019-200121053841365.html>
2. GBV AoR Helpdesk Research Query; Fleury, A. (2016). Women Migrating to Mexico for Safety: The Need for Improved Protections and Rights. Policy Report No. 03/08. Barcelona: United Nations University Institute on Globalization, Culture and Mobility (UNU-GCM).
3. <https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/english/10-women-are-murdered-mexico-every-day>
4. <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/publications/operations/5630f24c6/women-run.html>
5. <https://time.com/5582894/gender-violence-women-el-salvador/>
6. <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/publications/operations/5630f24c6/women-run.html>
7. <https://time.com/5582894/gender-violence-women-el-salvador/>
8. <https://time.com/5582894/gender-violence-women-el-salvador/>
9. In the "Matter of A-B," then Attorney General Sessions concluded that "Generally, claims by aliens pertaining to domestic violence or gang violence perpetrated by non-governmental actors will not qualify for asylum." Since this decision in 2017, asylum seekers have effectively been unable to argue that gender-based violence/domestic violence alone should be grounds for asylum. The Matter of A-B decision can be found here: https://www.justice.gov/eoir/page/file/1070866/download?utm_medium=email&utm_source=govdelivery
10. <http://reporting.unhcr.org/node/2536>

11. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/07/02/we-cant-help-you-here/us-returns-asylum-seekers-mexico>
12. <https://www.mercurynews.com/2019/12/19/mexico-danger-map-travel-warnings-updated-by-state-department/>
13. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/latamcaribbean/2018/02/15/femicide-in-ciudad-juarez-is-enabled-by-the-regulation-of-gender-justice-and-production-in-mexico/>
14. <https://nacla.org/news/2019/02/04/surviving-one-mexico%E2%80%99s-deadliest-places-women>
15. <https://www.aclu.org/issues/immigrants-rights/immigrants-rights-and-detention/asylum-seekers-stranded-mexico-face>
16. <https://www.texasmonthly.com/politics/im-in-danger-migrant-parents-face-violence-in-mexico-under-new-trump-policy/>
17. <https://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/what-we-do/news-stories/story/kidnappings-and-extreme-violence-against-migrants-are-spiking>
18. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/women-protest-for-their-lives-fighting-femicide-in-latin-america/>
19. <http://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/Mexico%20Funding%20Update%2011%20February%202020.pdf>
20. <http://reporting.unhcr.org/node/2536>