

*“Women fear the law more than perpetrators”*: Trust in  
the health and legal response to Violence Against  
Women in Brazil

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# Brazil

- Public trust in government plays a critical role in the success or failure of policies that require the cooperation and compliance of citizens.<sup>1-2</sup>
- In Brazil, an ongoing corruption scandal is negatively impacting trust in government.<sup>3-5</sup>



Photo credit: Silvia Izquierdo/Associated Press

# Brazilian Violence Against Women Laws

Brazil passed federal legislation to codify and criminalize Violence Against Women (VAW)

**2006:** Maria da Penha Law on Domestic and Family Violence defines domestic violence and establishes punitive mechanisms for perpetrators<sup>3</sup>

**2015:** Femicide Law defines femicide and stiffens penalties for extreme violence against women (VAW)<sup>4-5</sup>



*Maria da Penha  
Maia Fernandes*



# VAW in the Legal and Health Sectors

- 95% of Brazilians are aware of the law's existence.<sup>6</sup>
- Half (50%) of Brazilians believe that the way the justice system punishes perpetrators does not reduce VAW
- 85% agreed that women who denounce an abusive partner are at greater risk of murder<sup>6</sup>
- Only 1 in 5 who experience VAW seek health care<sup>6-8</sup>

DATA POPULAR  
PESQUISA · INOVAÇÃO · MARKETING

INSTITUTO  
PATRÍCIA  
GALVÃO

Percepção do aumento de crimes contra as mulheres nos últimos 5 anos (%)

93% Crimes em geral

89% Crimes em geral contra as mulheres

89% Agressão de mulheres por atual ou ex-marido/namorado

88% Assassinato de mulheres por atual ou ex-marido/namorado

87% Estupro

81% Assassinato de mulheres por desconhecidos

# Community

- Santo André, Brazil – socioeconomically diverse municipality of roughly 710,000 in Metropolitan São Paulo
- Suspected and confirmed cases of VAW increased by over 100% between 2009-2013<sup>9-10</sup>
- Municipal government recognizes VAW as social issue and is a research partner



Photo: Vitor Mazuco - <https://www.britannica.com/place/Santo-Andre>

# Purpose

The aim of this study was to examine the relationship between women's perceptions of federal VAW laws and their trust in health and legal sector response to VAW in Santo André, Brazil.

# Methods

- Original in-depth interview guide developed for qualitative data collection
- Convenience sampling used to recruit women meeting inclusion criteria: aged 18 or over; visiting public health post; and currently residing in Santo André
- 30 in-depth interviews conducted with women at three public health posts
- Women asked about community and individual experiences with intimate partner violence (IPV), health care access and quality, and federal VAW legislation purpose, effectiveness, and impact
- Coding using MAXQDA12 and grounded theory

# Results

- All women knew of the Maria da Penha law, few remembered the anti-femicide law
- 30% of participants reported personal experiences with IPV consistent with prior global Brazil-specific population-based studies<sup>11-12</sup>
- Interaction with legal sector: some women reported that close family members attempted to use federal VAW laws after experiencing IPV with little to no success

# Qualitative Themes

- The government is not trusted and the legal system is ineffectual
- VAW laws don't protect women and may exacerbate violence
- Satisfaction with health sector services is mixed

# The government is not trusted & the legal system is ineffectual

*“Also, the government, so far I always voted, I’m never going to vote for anyone ever again. I don’t believe in politics, it gets worse and worse. I don’t believe in politics, it gets worse and worse, when I vote now I’m going to void my vote.”*

*“It’s like people say: ‘In Brazil, what law?’ There is no law for more serious things, but you are going have one to protect women?”*

*“Today it has turned into, ‘Oh, you got a Maria da Penha charge, so what?’ You know?”*

# The government is not trusted & the legal system is ineffectual

*“The Maria da Penha law captures them [perpetrators], the justice...legal system frees them.”*

*“There are many women who nowadays no longer trust in the justice system, and there are women who end up killing their husband in order not to die.”*

# VAW laws don't protect women & may exacerbate violence

*"It ends up that women are intimidated by the law. Because she knows that a lot of times...the man that is inside the house is extremely aggressive, vengeful, and that if she goes to make a report then she has to come back home. And then what? Who will be there to support her? The law doesn't do it, the law is there in the police station, and when she comes home?"*

*"Sometimes the man beats on the woman and they give a paper [restraining order], and a little while later he is beating her again. What good does it do?"*

# VAW laws don't protect women & may exacerbate violence

*"People know the laws, right, but it seems like women fear the law more than the perpetrators."*

*"Oh, I have my doubts because, like that, we see a lot of cases where the woman goes, reports, and the police do nothing, and two, three months later you receive the news that the person was murdered by the husband, understand? But she went back, she tried, she reported it, but no..."*

# VAW laws don't protect women & may exacerbate violence

*"It doesn't work because...the guy gets locked up, then when he gets out he goes there and kills the woman."*

*"And why do they kill? Because after he gets locked up he gets more aggressive. So much so that he goes and kills the woman, right? The truth is that."*

# Satisfaction with health sector services is mixed

*“SUS (Brazilian public health system) is terrible. It gets worse and worse.”*

*“They do not ask anything. You go to the doctor, you're dying of pain, you're running a fever...they look at you, but don't really look.”*

# Satisfaction with health sector services is mixed

*“She has a lot of kids, time to close the factory, you here having all these kids here and there.’ I was wearing this outfit, shirt. She said ‘see if you have any clothes’ as if I had walked to the health post naked. ‘Wow, she is wearing shorts, it’s too much.’ And I stayed there in the health post, I started crying there in the health post...I do not like to talk about the [health] post because it offended me a lot... what this girl did to me, humiliated me a lot...She humiliated me worse than a dog.”*

*The doctors here, the nurses, are very nice, understanding, and very attentive, too; the problem itself is the delay of the service. If you are making an appointment it takes two or three months. That is the difficulty.*

# Satisfaction with health sector services is mixed

*“The problem that the post has is not a problem of the post itself, it is a problem with Santo André. The administration of Santo André is a failure. You do not even have basic equipment at the post’s pharmacy, so it's not the fault of the unit, right?”*

*I was ashamed of the aggressions and the situation, you know? There are people who think we're in [a violent relationship] because ...he says: ‘you are a bad woman, why don’t you leave this guy?’ But, people have to see what is happening in the woman's head, what she is thinking, what she is feeling... in my case, I would have thought it better not to have this question, because I would be ashamed.*

# Transfer of Distrust



# Discussion

- Widespread lack of trust in government. This lack of trust may be based on a history of—and current—political corruption.
- Likewise, women do not trust the legal sector or believe it is effective in reducing VAW. Negative views of police observed though not discussed here.
- VAW laws and their punitive mechanisms seen as having minimal impact in protecting women.
- Counterintuitively, VAW laws perceived as exacerbating violence—specifically via retaliatory action. Similar perceptions observed in other Latin American countries.<sup>13</sup>

# Discussion

- Disdain for health sector was less prominent than legal sector. Yet women were not enthusiastically receptive to health sector response to VAW.
- Since both legal and health sectors are government institutions, lack of trust in one sector (legal) transfers to another sector (health) and vice versa when it comes to VAW.
- The transference of distrust undermines the ability to protect women by delegitimizing two major pathways for survivors of violence to disclose and seek support; these results also point toward intersectoral and multifaceted approaches to addressing VAW in Brazil.

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