

Women in Brazil

Edson Sardano

Director, Secretariat of Urban Security, Santo André, Brazil

Summary

While murder has become the main cause of death of women 10-49 years old in São Paulo, far more forms of violence against women are not accounted for by statistics and go relatively unnoticed in society. Cultural emphasis of women's inferiority is a strong contributing factor. Brazilian legislation considers domestic aggression to be a minor crime comparable to a street fight and aggressors are often released quickly by police. Thus key challenges involve empowering women, promoting prevention, and reducing social exclusion. Progress will hopefully come from legislation recently approved in the National Congress that allows judges to order the removal of an aggressor from a victim's house and surroundings, as they can not be arrested on the premises.

Specialized police stations created for women in the 1980s offering services from female professionals have had a minimal impact mainly due to insufficient resources - 77.2% of the stations are not open 24 hours a day and 76.4% are not open on weekends (the most frequent times of violent acts).

Santo André County Hall has developed its own partnerships and activities while pressuring the State to do its part. They obtained Federal funding to build an *Integrated Citizenship Centre* housing a 24-hour police station, Military Police, and a Counseling Centre in a high crime region significantly lacking security services. *Vem Maria* and *Casa Abrigo Regionalizada* are both projects that coincide with other axes of intervention at the municipal and regional level through partnerships with other public administration sectors (education, health, employment, housing, child care).

Murders and violence in São Paulo

Murder has become the main cause of death among women aged 10 to 49 years old in the city of São Paulo. It is the first time that the number of homicides exceeds the number of deaths due to diseases since such figures have been recorded. These are figures from the Capital city of São Paulo however figures for the metropolitan region where Santo André is located are comparable.

Considering the age of most of the deceased (10 to 49 years old) and that two thirds of these murders are committed by people emotionally involved with the victims (husbands, boyfriends, lovers), we have concluded that a sexual component is the main cause of violence against women.

Although murder is the most evident act of violence, particularly in areas of concentrated poverty, there are many forms of violence against women that are not accounted for by statistics and go relatively unnoticed in society. There are a series of factors that contribute to the growth of this violence but the most important is the difficulty of breaking cultural ties that emphasize women's historical condition of inferiority to men, mainly in Brazil. Furthermore, Public Security Politics have had little success in changing the conditions of women.

Statistics show that less than 20% of women spontaneously claim to be victims of violence. However when they are prompted, especially when informed of the several different forms of violence, this number grows up to 43%. From this we conclude that it is not enough that women be aware of the wide range of violent attitudes they face daily but it is also necessary that ways exist for them to discuss this violence and the effects of their victimization.

A common example of the weakness of Public Politics was what happened with the specialized police stations for crimes against women. Created in the 1980s to facilitate women's access to the police station, women were offered attentive service from professionals, most of them properly-trained women. However these stations have had only a very small effect on this social problem because they are not given adequate investments of resources and therefore operate rather poorly.

To give an idea, of all women police stations in the state of São Paulo, 77.2% are not open 24 hours a day and 76.4% are not open on weekends. Meanwhile, these are the periods of time where the incidence of violent acts involving women is highest.

Considering that in most of the cases (two thirds) the aggressor is someone very close to the victim, when a woman waits two or more days to report the incident, the victim has her mind changed, thus giving strength to impunity.

Another reason women give up reporting occurrences of violence is the fact that Brazilian legislation considers domestic aggressions a minor crime comparable to a street fight. The aggressor is released as soon as he goes to the police station to relate the happenings. Back home, he threatens the victim not to denounce him again since his presence is more effective than justice itself.

As to this last scenario, it must be mentioned that legislation was approved this May in the National Congress that might bring significant progress. This legislation will allow judges to order the removal of an aggressor from the house and surroundings of a victim, considering it is not possible to arrest them on the spot.

Santo André realization

Following the road of progress, Santo André City Hall obtained funding from the Federal Government and decided to build a public facility called the *Integrated Citizenship Centre* that, among other things, will house a 24-hour police station, Military Police, a Child and Youth Counseling Centre, and Rights Balcony. It will be built in the region with the highest rate of crime committed against the person and where there is presently no security service available, especially during weekends and at night.

Vem Maria and *Casa Abrigo Regionalizada* are two large projects that coincide with other axes of intervention at the municipal and regional level. Both are coordinated by the Department of Citizenship Rights Defense, through Women Rights Assistance, from the Secretary of Participation and Citizenship.

Vem Maria is a psychosocial project that provides legal support to women subjected to violence, particularly domestic and sexual violence. The project involves:

- 1) Strengthening of the network of services for women facing violence;
- 2) Creating partnerships to respond to and prevent domestic violence;
- 3) Contribution to the assembly of other similar services;
- 4) Participation in regional, national, and international forums;
- 5) Partnership with the Program of Minimum Income and others related to Social Inclusion;
- 6) Promotion of awareness and prevention in the city with meetings and support to the many different initiatives of this type.

Casa Abrigo Regionalizada in Santo André started as an initiative of the Santo André counties. Its goal is to guarantee the integrity, health, and security of women and children whose lives are jeopardized living in a state of domestic violence. The Casa is a well-protected house that can shelter up to 25 people for a period of 6 months. The Casa:

- 1) Supports women during their reintegration to social and economic life as well as their right of defense;
- 2) Serves as an interface with several sectors of public administration such as education, health, employment, housing and child care;
- 3) Offers psychosocial and legal support to women and children;
- 4) Is open to women in the region of ABC (Santo André, São Bernardo do Campo and São Caetano do Sul).

It is not always easy to work in the area of public security in Brazil since all penal legislation is applicable to the entire country yet activity delivery is restricted to the state level. However despite many barriers, Santo André County Hall has been working to develop partnerships and activities of its own to combat the causes of violence and provide support to

women, children, adolescents and all people subject to social exclusion, not forgetting to charge and encourage the State to do its part in the best way possible.

The same has occurred with police surveillance, but this a whole other chapter.