

A Lifetime of Violence: Results From an Exploratory Survey of Mexican Women With HIV

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Despite recognition that traditional Mexican gender norms can contribute to the twin epidemics of violence against women and HIV, there is an absence of published literature on experiences of violence among Mexican women with HIV. We conducted a cross-sectional survey with 77 HIV-infected women from 21 of Mexico's 32 states to describe experiences of violence before and after HIV-diagnosis. We measured lifetime physical, sexual, and psychological violence; physical violence from a male partner in the previous 12 months; and physical and psychological violence related to disclosing an HIV diagnosis. Respondents reported ever experiencing physical violence (37.3%) and sexual violence (29.2%). Disclosure of HIV status resulted in physical violence for 7.2% and psychological violence for 26.5% of the respondents. This study underlines the need to identify and address past and current gender-based violence during pre- and post-HIV test counseling and as a systematic and integral part of HIV care.

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Gender inequality, in its multilevel and culturally diverse manifestations, contributes to violence against women and is a driver of the HIV pandemic among

women and girls (Heise, 1998; Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS [UNAIDS], 2010b; Krishnan et al., 2008). These twin epidemics interact synergistically and are important public health issues for women internationally (Campbell et al., 2008; UNAIDS, 2010b). Traditional Mexican gender norms prescribe male dominance and female submission, and include related cultural constructions of sexuality that encourage male risk-taking (including having multiple sexual partners) while dictating female monogamy and sexual passivity (Herrera & Campero, 2002; Kendall, 2009a). These dominant Mexican gender norms are hypothesized to contribute to both violence against women and women's vulnerability to HIV infection (Herrera & Campero, 2002; Wiedel, Provencio-Vazquez, Watson, & Gonzalez-Guarda,

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2008). Yet our literature review did not identify any studies that looked specifically at the relationship between violence against women and HIV in Mexico or that documented experiences of violence among Mexican women living with HIV.

Several international studies have linked sexual and physical violence from a male partner to higher rates of HIV infection among women (Dunkle et al., 2004; Silverman, Decker, Saggurti, Balaiah, & Raj, 2008). In the Latin American context, a Brazilian study found that women with HIV were more likely to report severe and recurrent experiences of violence than women without HIV but couldn't identify whether experiences of violence were related to living with HIV or occurred prior to diagnosis (Barros, Schraiber, & Franca-Junior, 2011). A Chilean study found that low-income women who experienced intimate partner violence (IPV) were more likely to report risk behaviors for HIV acquisition than those who didn't experience IPV, primarily unprotected sexual intercourse and intercourse with a partner of unknown HIV-status (Miner, Ferrer, Cianelli, Bernales, & Cabieses, 2011). These Latin American results echo international findings that violence increases women's risk for HIV infection through both indirect and direct relationships. Indirect relationships between violence and increased risk for acquiring HIV include the associations between experiencing violence as a child or an adult and subsequent substance abuse and multiple sexual partners (Campbell et al., 2008). Additionally, men who perpetrate IPV exhibit increased HIV-acquisition risk behaviors (Campbell et al., 2008; Gonzalez-Guarda, Peragallo, Urrutia, Vasquez, & Mitrani, 2008; Raj et al., 2006; Silverman, Decker, Kapur, Gupta, & Raj, 2007). Direct pathways include the greater biological risk of HIV infection during violent or forced sex, decreased ability to negotiate condom use among women (suggesting condom use is a feared or actual trigger for violence), and the decreased likelihood of condom use among men who perpetrate IPV (Campbell et al., 2008; Manfrin-Ledet, & Porche, 2003). Finally, women with HIV report higher rates of physical, sexual, and psychological violence than the general population, and may suffer violence as a result of disclosing their HIV status (Campbell et al., 2008; Gielen, McDonnell, Burke, & O'Campo, 2000; Semrau et al., 2005).

HIV and Violence Against Women in Mexico

In 2009, there were an estimated 220,000 Mexicans living with HIV, of which 59,000 were women (UNAIDS, 2010a). While men who have sex with men are the population most affected by HIV in Mexico, the evolution of the epidemic is characterized by an increasing proportion of infections attributed to heterosexual transmission and steady growth in AIDS cases among women, particularly young women from rural areas and indigenous women (De Luca et al., 2010). Mexican women acquire HIV almost exclusively through heterosexual contact (Centro Nacional Para la Prevención y el Control del VIH/SIDA [CENSIDA], 2009b). Existing research suggests most women were exposed to HIV as a consequence of the sexual behaviors and/or drug use of their stable male partners, especially men who have sex with men as well as women (Kendall, 2009a).

Violence against women is common in Mexico. A large nationally representative sample of women using public health care services ($N = 26,042$) documented at least one act of physical, sexual, or psychological violence as a child or an adult among 60.4% of respondents, 34.5% reported some form of IPV in their lifetimes, 17.3% reported sexual violence in their lifetimes, and 9.8% reported physical IPV in the previous 12 months (Olaiz, Rojas, Valdez, Franco, & Palma, 2006). Another nationally representative household survey ($N = 21,631,993$) found that 19.2% of women reported physical and 9.0% reported sexual violence from the current or most recent male partner, and 10.2% reported physical and 6.0% reported sexual IPV within the previous 12 months (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía [INEGI], 2006).

Research Gaps

Despite the prevalence of violence against women in Mexico and the increasing numbers of Mexican women living with HIV, our literature review did not identify studies on violence experienced by Mexican women living with HIV or, indeed, any studies from Latin America that specifically addressed violence against women as a consequence of an HIV diagnosis. The present paper addresses this research gap.

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