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## FEATURED Q&A

# Will Tougher Penalties Reduce Mexico's Femicides?



The recent killings of a 25-year-old woman and a 7-year-old girl have led to outrage in Mexico. A demonstration against femicides in Mexico City last November is pictured. // File Photo: [Thayne Tuason](#) via Creative Commons.

**Q** The lower house of Mexico's Congress this month approved tougher prison sentences for crimes of femicide and sexual abuse of minors, following the public outcry after a 7-year-old girl was murdered in Mexico City. Legislators voted to raise the sentence for femicide by five years, to between 45 and 65 years in prison, and to increase penalties for sexual abuse of minors to 10 to 18 years, up from six to 13 years currently. The proposals now go to the Senate. How far would raising prison sentences go in terms of reducing the number of femicides in Mexico? What else can the government do to curb violence against girls and women? To what extent can the root causes of femicide be addressed through policy?

**A** Lisa Sánchez, general director of Mexico United Against Delinquency (MUCD): "Mexico is living an undeniable crisis of gender violence and femicides that must be resolved urgently. According to data from the executive secretariat of the national public security system (SESNSP) and the national statistics institute (INEGI), in our country, 10 women are murdered daily. In accordance with the Mexico network for children's rights (REDIM), one of every 10 femicides is committed against girls and adolescents younger than 17 years old. The national survey on the dynamics of household relations (ENDIREH) shows that of the women who live past 15 years old, 66 percent of them suffer incidents of aggression, be they domestic (34 percent), emotional (49 percent), economic (29 percent) or sexual (41.3 percent), and that these are suffered at the hands of both known and unknown attackers, in both private and public spaces. Unfortunately, in

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## TODAY'S NEWS

### POLITICAL

## El Salvador Assembly Passes War Crimes Bill, Bukele Vows Veto

El Salvador's Legislative Assembly approved a law aimed at allowing the prosecution of war crimes, but President Nayib Bukele vowed to veto it, calling it a "disguised amnesty."

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### ECONOMIC

## Mexico Cuts Forecast for Year's Economic Growth

Mexico's central bank lowered its forecast for economic growth this year, citing the rapidly spreading coronavirus.

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### POLITICAL

## Killings of Female Activists Rise in Colombia: U.N.

The number of female activists killed last year in Colombia rose by nearly 50 percent, the United Nations said. President Iván Duque has been criticized as not doing enough to prevent violence against social leaders.

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Duque // File Photo: Colombian Government.

## POLITICAL NEWS

## El Salvador Assembly Passes War Crimes Bill, Bukele Vows Veto

El Salvador's Legislative Assembly on Wednesday passed a controversial law aimed at allowing the prosecution of crimes committed during the country's bloody civil war, Reuters reported. Soon after, President Nayib Bukele on Twitter said he would veto it, arguing that the law does not abide by a ruling by the country's Supreme Court, the Associated Press reported. "A true reconciliation law cannot be a law of disguised amnesty," he wrote. The law was approved by 44 of El Salvador's 84 deputies. Eleven lawmakers voted against it, one abstained, and the rest did not attend the session. Supporters of the legislation argue that it is intended to ensure that nobody receives an amnesty or pardon for their crimes during the war, but opponents, including human rights organizations, have argued it will result in the opposite, Reuters reported. Bukele has called the bill, which covers compensation, reparations, history and access to military and police archives, "an amnesty law that protects war criminals." The law would also make it illegal to praise disgraced figures for their role during the civil war. The main point of criticism is that it would allow judges to significantly commute sentences for reasons of health or age, or because alleged perpetrators collaborate, Reuters reported. El Salvador's civil war lasted from 1980 to 1992 and left nearly 75,000 people dead and 8,000 missing.

## Killings of Female Activists in Colombia Rise by 50%: U.N.

The number of women activists killed in Colombia increased by nearly 50 percent last year, according to United Nations figures released Wednesday. Last year, 108 human rights defenders were killed, 15 of them women,

according to an annual report on the situation in Colombia produced by the Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights. "We are alarmed," Alberto Brunori, the U.N. human rights chief in Colombia, said in reference to the numbers, Deutsche Welle reported. Colombian President Iván Duque's administration has been criticized for not doing enough to prevent violence against social leaders in the country.

**President Iván Duque blamed the killings on ELN rebels and FARC dissidents.**

The president told journalists on Wednesday that the number of activists killed has dropped overall since he took office in August 2018. "There is a reduction, but the figure should be zero," he said, blaming the killings on rebels of the National Liberation Army, or ELN, as well as dissidents of the former FARC rebel movement and criminal gangs involved in drug trafficking and illegal mining. The U.N. report urged the government to redouble protection efforts, Reuters reported, and it cited a lack of sufficient protection from the state as one of the reasons behind the increase. [Editor's note: See related [Q&A](#) in the Jan. 24 issue of the Advisor.]

## ECONOMIC NEWS

## Mexico Cuts Forecast for This Year's Economic Growth

Mexico's central bank on Wednesday cut its forecast for the country's economic growth this year and also raised its view for inflation, saying the quickly spreading coronavirus has caused uncertainty about global growth, Reuters reported. The Banco de México said it now expects the economy to register growth of between 0.5 percent and 1.5 percent for 2020, down from its previous estimate of between

## NEWS BRIEFS

## Cuban Dissident Faces Trial in Controversial Case: Supporters

Supporters of leading Cuban anti-government dissident José Daniel Ferrer said he was due to go on trial on Wednesday on charges of abducting and assaulting another man, in a controversial case that is being closely watched by European officials, Amnesty International and the U.S. Embassy in Havana, Reuters reported. The Cuban government has not confirmed if Ferrer was going on trial, but it did say he was arrested and in jail. Ferrer is the leader of the Patriotic Union of Cuba (UNPACU), one of the biggest and most active opposition groups in the country.

## Mexico Allows Docking of Cruise Ship After Negative Results for Coronavirus

The Mexican government on Wednesday allowed a cruise ship with more than 6,000 people aboard to dock in Mexico after being denied entry in two Caribbean ports due to concerns over coronavirus, said MSC Cruises, the ship operator, Bloomberg News reported. The cases were later disproven, as the crew members suspected of being infected with the fast-spreading virus were found to have the flu. Jamaica and Grand Cayman had previously barred passengers from disembarking there.

## Hard Currency Used in More Than 50% of Buys in Venezuelan Cities

More than half of all basic goods sold in major cities in Venezuela are bought using hard currency, economic consultancy Ecoanalitica said Wednesday in a report, according to Reuters. Approximately 52 percent of goods including food and clothing are bought with U.S. dollars or euros, a figure that is closer to 90 percent in cities closer to Colombia, such as San Cristóbal and Maracaibo, the report said.

0.8 percent and 1.8 percent. “There is a high degree of uncertainty regarding this outlook, as the Mexican economy is expected to continue facing a complex environment ... especially uncertainty regarding the possible effects of the coronavirus outbreak on world economic activity and, specifically, on global value chains,” the central bank said in a statement. The more dim view came a day after revised government data statistics showed that the country’s economy contracted 0.1 percent last



López Obrador // File Photo: Mexican Government.

year, its first contraction since 2009. Mexico is a large exporter of products, including cars, that rely on imported components and raw materials, and the coronavirus outbreak has disrupted global supply chains and demand. “This outlook anticipates a more gradual recovery of domestic demand throughout the forecast horizon, in a context in which the global economy continues showing weakness and U.S. industrial production expectations have been revised downwards once again,” the central bank, known as Banxico, said. The bank also increased its outlook for annual headline inflation for this year’s fourth quarter to 3.2 percent, up from a previous estimate of 3 percent. The government’s decision in December to increase the daily minimum wage by 20 percent, the second major minimum wage increase in two years, has also put upward pressure on inflation. Mexico’s weakening economy has presented challenges for President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who took office in December 2018, promising 4 percent annual growth. López Obrador plans to publicly present a plan to revive the country’s economic growth by the end of the month, his chief of staff, Alfonso Romo, said earlier this week, Bloomberg News reported. [Editor’s note: See related [Q&A](#) in the Feb. 11 issue of the Advisor.]

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the face of such a phenomenon, governmental responses are scarce, and when they do appear, they are far from appeasing. Meanwhile, the urgency and indignation have accumulated and have given way to new forms of demand that circumvent the traditional political routes. Today, the youngest women organize, and they do so from the streets, from social media and women’s strikes. The demand is clear: the Mexican state must recognize the magnitude of the violence against us and change accordingly. Can it?”

**A** **Caroline Beer, professor of political science and director of Latin American and Caribbean Studies at the University of Vermont:** “While this type of reform may give members of Congress an opportunity to claim that they are doing ‘something’ to confront the crisis of gender violence, increasing prison sentences is unlikely to actually

“**The problem is that femicide and other types of sexual violence are not being investigated or prosecuted.**”

— Caroline Beer

do much at all to reduce rates of violence. The problem in Mexico is not that convicted murderers and sex offenders are spending too little time in jail; the problem is that femicide and other types of sexual violence are not being investigated or prosecuted. Only about 5 percent of all murders in the country lead to a conviction. Investigators and prosecutors are poorly paid, poorly trained and overworked. A genuine effort to address gender violence would start with public officials treating it as a serious crime and establishing institutions that can competently address the crisis. The government should construct specialized units of investigators and prosecutors who are trained specifically

to address gender violence. The government should also invest in fully staffed hotlines, more shelters and legal advocacy for women experiencing violence. Good public policies can reduce gender violence, but first the government needs to prioritize the lives of women.”

**A** **Julia Escalante, regional coordinator at the Latin America and the Caribbean Committee for the Defense of Women’s Rights (CLADEM):** “At the Latin America and the

Caribbean Committee for the Defense of Women’s Rights, we believe that the use of criminal law and an increase of penalties for crimes that primarily affect women do not diminish violence against them. The penalty, or increase of penalties, while launching a message of zero tolerance is frankly ineffective in reducing high rates of violence against women, girls and adolescents. All this given that the problem facing the Mexican state is the high rates of impunity for the vast majority of crimes—impunity that undoubtedly affects crimes with a significant gender burden in a different manner. One thing that the women’s movement demands from the Mexican government is for it to give relevance to the issue of violence against women, starting with public discourse that does not banalize, minimize or stigmatize it. Therefore, clear and forceful statements are necessary regarding the application of the law, the implementation of public policies and the strengthening of institutions for the prevention, care and punishment of all forms of violence; as well as an approach that shows political will through the allocation of sufficient, labeled and transparent public budgets. Civil society must also be allowed to monitor government actions. The U.N. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) establishes an obligation for the state to generate all the necessary actions to motivate cultural changes that affect sexist practices that prevail across the world. This can

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only be carried out through effective public policies, where the subjects of such policies participate in their design, implementation and evaluation. Likewise, it is important to transform and strengthen the mechanisms of access to justice, incorporating a gender approach at all stages and strengthening the capabilities and skills of human resources.”

**A** **Tania Reneaum, executive director of Amnesty International Mexico:** “Increasing sentences does not solve social problems.

The Mexican state must train those who seek and deliver justice to administer justice with a gender perspective. Likewise, it must fulfill its duty to prevent, and for this it must have programs with measurable and quantifiable goals, which it should be possible to evaluate.”

Editor’s note: The Advisor requested a commentary for this Q&A from the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, also known as U.N. Women, and received the following statement: “We consider it a positive sign that Mexico’s Congress places violence against women and girls (VAWG) as a priority on the public agenda and strives to take measures to stop femicides in the country. VAWG is a complex phenomenon that

requires multidimensional approaches and the improvement of the legal frameworks is certainly important. However, there’s no reliable evidence of increasing the severity of punishment having a substantial deterrent effect, whereas strong findings indicate that variation in the certainty of punishment has a large deterrent effect. We strongly encourage authorities to focus the political discussions and institutional efforts on improving women’s access to justice as a core strategy to end VAWG, including: 1.) Strengthening of prevention and attention to VAWG root causes; 2.) Improving legislative frameworks and policies that are gender sensitive and effectively applied; 3.) Strengthening state institutions to better prevent address and sanction VAWG; 4.) Generating quality data and information for evidence-based decision making; and 5.) Providing quality and accessible essential services for victims which disrupt the continuum of VAWG. In the same regard, the CEDAW Committee made four recommendations to Mexico in order to improve women’s access to justice, which we believe should also be at the center of the legislative discussions that are taking place right now.”

*The Advisor welcomes comments on its Q&A section. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta at [gkuleta@thedialogue.org](mailto:gkuleta@thedialogue.org).*

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# Q&A

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LATIN AMERICA ADVISOR

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