

Improving Gender Wage Equality Reduces Intimate Partner Violence in Brazil: Policy Implications for Mothers

WORLD BANK

Gender Innovation Lab for Latin America and the Caribbean (LACGIL)^a

POLICY BRIEF: May 2021

Highlights

- More wage equality for women reduces violence against women in urban Brazil
- Evidence shows that violence has declined at various levels of severity
- Wage equality may be improved through family-friendly policies such as preschool provision and maternity leave
- Public safety and legal protections are also needed

Intimate partner violence in Brazil

After two back-to-back attempts on her life, one of which left her partially paralyzed, Maria da Penha Fernandes sought legal protection against her husband. It took 19 years, and then he was sentenced to a mere two years in prison. Appalled by the process, Maria da Penha became an advocate for fresh legislation and enhanced services to help women who have suffered violence by their partners. The 2006 Maria da Penha Law, named in honor of her, established mechanisms to prevent domestic violence through reforms in the legal system that should make it easier for women experiencing intimate partner violence (IPV) and other domestic violence to be successful in pressing charges against their abusers.

Though there has been some progress, violence against women remains commonplace in Brazil. At 4.8 deaths per 100,000 women, Brazil had the fifth highest female murder rate in the world in 2013.¹ The rate of female homicides has not declined since then. Women's police stations, which expanded as a result of the law, have helped prevent female homicides in locations where they were implemented.² Yet more widespread changes are needed to confront violence against women.

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Gender Innovation Lab for Latin America and the Caribbean (LACGIL)

The LACGIL supports impact evaluations and inferential studies to find out what works to close gender gaps in human capital, economic participation, social norms, and agency.

Additionally, the Lab disseminates findings to improve operations and policy making in the design of cost-effective interventions that tackle gender inequalities and drive change.

To accomplish this, the LACGIL works in partnership with World Bank units, aid agencies and donors, governments, nongovernmental organizations, private sector firms, and researchers.

IMPROVING GENDER WAGE EQUALITY REDUCES INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

Elizaveta Perova, Sarah Reynolds, and Ian Schmutte use municipal data on urban Brazil to test if economic empowerment can help protect women.^b They find that homicide rates of women ages 15–49 are lower if the wage equality gap is reduced in favor of women. This is especially the case in poorer municipalities, which have higher rates of homicide. This is a promising finding. More wage equality may help reduce homicides among those who need protection the most.

Additionally, the authors find that more wage equality in favor of women is associated with less nonfatal violence on younger women (ages 15–30). This age-group includes many mothers of young children. Impoverished mothers are often financially dependent on their spouses, especially if they must stay home and care for children. An increase in income can allow these women to leave abusive partners. Or, even better, the partner will become less abusive because the threat that his partner will leave has become credible.

This policy brief reviews several Brazilian policies that can help contribute to gender wage equality to benefit young, impoverished mothers and women in general. These policies are generally intended to improve child development or the labor market participation of mothers, but implementation can also benefit wage equality and thus may reduce IPV.

WHY IS THERE GENDER WAGE INEQUALITY? UNDERSTANDING THE MOTHERHOOD PENALTY

In Brazil, women are better educated than men on average. Brazil also has a relatively high female labor force participation rate. However, in Brazil, as in most of the world, women are still paid less than men. Much of the wage gap is driven by an unequal distribution of caregiving responsibilities. Often referred to as the motherhood penalty, this leads to the following:

- **Productivity differences because of employment gaps.** The skills of women who exit the labor market do not grow as much as the skills of women who continue to work. When mothers return to work after a child-rearing hiatus, their wages are lower than the wages they would be receiving if they had not stopped working.
- **Selection into flexible work.** Women may choose jobs that allow them to engage in childcare while their children are young. These are often part-time positions or informal sector work at flexible hours. In Brazil, the informal sector is more egalitarian in wages, but does not pay as well as the formal sector.³
- **Discrimination against women.** Employers may prefer to hire men over women to avoid pregnancy among their workers. If the differences in skills and job selection are accounted for, there is still a 17 percent wage difference between men and women in Brazil.⁴



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^b Does the Gender Wage Gap Influence Intimate Partner Violence in Brazil? Evidence from Administrative Health Data.

POLICIES TO OFFSET THE MOTHERHOOD PENALTY AND IMPROVE WAGE EQUALITY

Brazil's 120-day (3-month) maternity leave requires that employers guarantee women's employment and salary following childbirth. Research on the database of formal sector contracts indicates that maternity leave does provide work stability around childbirth. But three years after the birth, almost half the mothers who had been employed at the time of the birth were no longer formally employed.⁵ This suggests that childcare remains a challenge for working mothers.⁶ Extending the maternity leave may help mothers resolve this issue.

Maternity leave policies are only enforceable in the formal sector; many poor women will not benefit from this program. The rural maternity stipend is a lump-sum transfer provided to impoverished rural women upon pregnancy. Unlike the smaller monthly *Bolsa Família* transfer (family allowance) that is often used to purchase household durables, the sizable maternity stipend is typically used to purchase income-generating assets such as cattle and fields, which men would normally control.⁶ Expanding the coverage of the stipend to urban women in the informal sector may stimulate similar investments among self-employed mothers.

The Constitution of Brazil establishes the right to public childcare, but supply is limited. Two studies explore the impact of the provision of childcare on maternal labor supply in Brazil's largest cities, São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro.^{7,8} Both find that maternal employment increases. The São Paulo study also finds that some mothers who had worked in the informal sector switched to the formal sector after they were provided with childcare. This demonstrates that childcare provision improves women's workforce participation not only through employment, but also by allowing them to obtain more stable jobs that also likely pay better. Childcare provision should be incorporated into local plans for economic development and poverty reduction.

Not all women who take advantage of childcare begin working. Whether or not they are employed, women still take on the lion's share of domestic work. Thus, in low-income settings, the low wages may not be sufficient to entice women to take on additional work outside the household, particularly if their domestic chores are unaided through domestic appliances. The creation of more and better jobs for women, such as entrepreneurship programs, should be supplied in tandem with childcare.

Programs are needed to encourage gender equality within the home and to ease tensions around women taking on the provider role. Promundo originated as a Brazilian organization working to reduce gender violence through initiatives, such as reconceptualizing fatherhood and redefining masculinity, so that violence and control are removed from gender norms. The program has been shown to be successful in reducing family violence in several locations around the globe.⁹ Strategically timing their interventions with the reentry of mothers into the workforce could help couples navigate changes in resources and responsibilities.

GENDER WAGE EQUALITY NEEDS TO BE ACCOMPANIED BY POLICE PROTECTION TO REDUCE INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

Pro-family policies will not completely resolve wage inequality or eliminate IPV. The results of the wage equality and IPV study⁶ of Elizaveta Perova, Sarah Reynolds, and Ian Schmutte differed in municipalities with and without women's police stations. These specialized police stations were initially established because many women felt their complaints were not being taken seriously by traditional police offices. Because of the Maria da Penha Law, even more women's police stations were implemented across the country. Brazil now has over 400 women's police stations to provide women with specialized services to address crimes against them. In addition to emergency response, they refer women to social services. Some stations even undertake employment assistance.

In municipalities with women's police stations, improved wage equality led to a reduction in medically registered incidents of violence against women. In municipalities without women's police stations, the opposite occurred: medically registered incidents of violence rose with more equality. This suggests that pro-women institutions are needed to validate women's gains in the labor market.



⁵ There is also evidence that mothers of young children (ages 0-2) prefer to care for their children themselves, perhaps because childcare for younger children is often more expensive, and it can be difficult to evaluate quality since young children cannot report back on the day's events.

⁶ The size of the transfer is not the only mechanism that pushes women to purchase assets. Because there is a lot of uncertainty around when the transfer will arrive, women cannot use it to access credit, and the transfer itself is perceived as a large, high-risk asset. This leads women to do mental accounting with the transfer in the asset category rather than among household expenditures.

⁹ Does the Gender Wage Gap Influence Intimate Partner Violence in Brazil? Evidence from Administrative Health Data.

CONCLUSION

Wage equality reduces violence against women at various levels of severity, especially among poor, young women in urban Brazil.

These women have children at earlier ages and have more children than average. Active policies to protect them against the motherhood penalty are needed. Policies such as maternity leave, the maternity stipend, and childcare can support mothers in the workforce and improve wage equality. Civil and legal policies—such

as the policies established by the Maria da Penha Law—must also accompany these economic policies to promote women's equality. Directly addressing work discrimination and familial cultural norms will help push these policies more quickly toward the realization of equality.



Measuring intimate partner violence (IPV)

IPV can occur at various levels of physical severity. From a slap to murder, all are classified as IPV. Measuring violence against women is difficult because much of the violence occurs at home. If the aggression is sufficiently severe physically, however, the incidents can be documented within the health care system. Few health reports indicate the perpetrator, but, because the most common perpetrators of violence against women are intimate male partners or male ex-partners, measures of the frequency of women's health visits for violent injury can be a good proxy for IPV even if perpetrators are not specified.¹⁰

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work has been funded by the **Umbrella Facility for Gender Equality** (UFGE), which is a multidonor trust fund administered by the World Bank to advance gender equality and women's empowerment through experimentation and knowledge creation aimed at helping governments and the private sector focus policies and programs on scalable solutions with sustainable outcomes. The UFGE is supported with generous contributions from Australia, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Iceland, Latvia, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, the United States, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

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