

MEXICO CITY

(...)

A recent survey by the Mexican National Institute of Women suggested that 45 percent of women in the country suffer some form of violence in their lives. Victims' and women's rights groups agree that in the last decade more and more women are speaking out.

The number of groups offering help to victims of domestic and sexual violence has mushroomed. And at the federal level, there have been several recent advances.

On Nov. 16, Mexico's Supreme Court declared marital rape illegal. Also in November, federal authorities announced that they had created a special prosecutor to address violent crimes against women. And they said they will fund another special prosecutor's office that investigates killings and disappearances of women.

But even as the government dedicates more resources to women's issues, women's rights activists say Mexico still has a very long way to go.

"We have made a lot of gains, but women still don't use the laws. Most of them still don't know their rights and we've had trouble reaching them," said Maria Elena Alvarez, the assistant director of the National Institute of Women, the government agency for women's issues. "Some believe violence is their destiny."

Symbol of violence

That women in Mexico are often victims of brutal crimes is no secret. The disappearance and murder of more than 400 girls and women in the last 12 years in Ciudad Juarez and Chihuahua City has come to symbolize the country's culture of violence.

The special prosecutor appointed by President Vicente Fox to look into the Ciudad Juarez killings is Maria Lopez Urbina. She has issued three reports on her investigations. The most recent, in January, said that "notorious inactivity and negligence" had led to "the loss of evidence and inadequate protection of the crime scenes."

Advocates elsewhere in Mexico have tried to demonstrate that killings and violent sexual crimes against women are not limited to the border state.

According to the government's Special Commission on Femicides, about 3 out of every 100,000 women in Mexico were murdered.

Mexico State, which surrounds Mexico City, has the highest rate of female killings about 7.47 killings per 100,000 women, according to the office of Mexican lawmaker Marcela Lagarde. That state also has a rate of 6.3 rapes per day.

National problem

The creation of a special prosecutor to look into violence against women shows that the government sees the issue as serious, said the lawmaker, who sponsored a bill to help pay for investigations of the killing of women.

"Violence against women in Mexico is a national problem, and is not just an issue in Juarez and

Chihuahua. It was a great achievement when the special prosecutor for the Juarez murders was created in 2004, but we feel that the special prosecutor's work there has come to a close and we now need to move on to address the needs of the entire country," Mexican legislator Diva Gastelum said in a telephone interview. "The 150 million pesos (about \$14.4 million) that we have allocated for the new special prosecutor who will specialize in femicides nationwide is a very positive start."

"We also plan to allocate more money so that the state branches of the National Women's Institute can open shelters and expand their violence prevention programs," she said.

In Gastelum's home state of Sinaloa, 25 women have been murdered this year, and 85 percent of the cases were blamed on drug gang violence, according to the state Commission on Human Rights.

Many women remain reluctant to report crimes.

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