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Citizen security balance sheet: increase in femicides, massacres and a prolonged state of emergency and remilitarization in Honduras

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Citizen security balance sheet: increase in femicides, massacres and a prolonged state of emergency and remilitarization in Honduras.
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I. Introduction

Expectations of change for the citizenry opened when Xiomara Castro assumed the presidency of Honduras on January 27, 2022, with the promise that she would fight for the defense of human rights. *“The re-foundation of Honduras begins with the re-establishment of the human being, the inviolability of life, the security of citizens, no more death squads, no more silence in the face of femicides, no more hired killings, no more drug trafficking or organized crime. We want Honduran men and women to feel the presence of the State guaranteeing their rights, where they can live in peace”*¹.

However, faced with a complex scenario of demands for responses to social scourges such as extortion, the Castro government intends to counteract this problem by emulating strategies applied by neighboring El Salvador; the adoption of extraordinary measures to combat crime by declaring a state of emergency; the displacement of the Military Police of Public Order (PMOP) to the streets and the return of control of prisons to the military.

Despite these measures (some of which have been in place for decades), the high homicide rates that keep Honduras in the highest rankings of violence persist. Also, massacres and the increase in femicides continue to alarm citizens, who perceive the lack of capacity of state institutions to fulfill their basic functions of providing security. Likewise, there continues to be a dire perception of the erosion of security and justice institutions due to corruption and drug trafficking.

In this context, the following questions arise: what are the violent acts that mark the security crises in the country; why do measures such as the state of exception persist despite the scarce results and the profound repercussions on the democratic state; are we facing old or new strategies to confront criminality and crime; and how effective is the Castro government in confronting a criminality that generates a high perception of insecurity among the citizens?

1 Hondudiaro, 29 de enero del 2023. <https://hondudiaro.com/portada/aqui-estan-las-promesas-de-la-presidenta-xiomara-castro-que-ha-cumplido-durante-un-ano-de-gobierno/#:~:text=La%20refundaci%C3%B3n%20de%20Honduras%20comienza.m%C3%A1s%20narcotr%C3%A1fico%20ni%20crimen%20organizado>.

II. The violence that has the greatest impact on citizens' perception of insecurity and democratic institutions

A. High homicide rates

The years 2011 and 2012 were critical in terms of homicidal violence in Honduras, with figures of 86.5 and 85.5 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants, respectively. From 2013 onwards, a decline began to be experienced, as a result of the implementation of “mano dura” strategies and militarization, without transformations in the conditions of deep social inequality and the institutionality of the State, particularly the justice system.

Despite the significant drop in homicides, Honduras continued to face enormous problems in terms of citizen security, with the highest homicide rates in the Latin American region. In 2022, the country had the second highest homicide rate, second only to Venezuela; between 2019 and 2021, it held third place in homicides, and in 2018 it was in fourth place (See Table No. 1).

From January to December 2018, the homicide rate was 40 per 100,000 population, which represented a small decrease from 42.8 per 100,000 population in 2017. This meant that after the significant decline in the rate to a 50% reduction in 2017, homicide declines in subsequent years have been less dramatic.

The decline is mainly attributed to “mano dura” (iron fist) strategies and the militarization of public security. But, on the other hand, the dismantling of criminal gangs and their recomposition have led to multiple deaths in the streets, gang violence that continues unabated and the presence of other criminal gangs resulting from the expansion of drug trafficking, due to high levels of impunity and corruption. All this impedes progress in the drastic and sustainable reduction of violence.

According to data presented by InSight Crime, in 2022 Honduras continued to be the most violent country in Central America, with a homicide rate of 35.8 per 100,000 inhabitants. Compared to 2021, the country experienced a 2.8% reduction in the homicide rate. Many of the deaths were due to the impact of micro-trafficking, extortion, massacres and femicides.

Table 1: **Countries with the highest homicide rates in Latin America 2019-2022**

Year	Top Highest Homicide Rates in Latin America 2022
2022	Venezuela (40.4) Honduras (35.8) Colombia (26.1) Ecuador (25.9)
2021	Jamaica (49.4) Venezuela (40.9) Honduras (38.6) El Salvador (17.6)
2020	Jamaica (46.5) Venezuela (45.6) Honduras (37.6) Trinidad and Tobago (28.2)
2019	Venezuela (60.3) Jamaica (47.4) Honduras (41.2) Trinidad and Tobago (37.3)
2018	Venezuela (81.4) El Salvador (51) Jamaica (47) Honduras (4)

Source: InSight Crime. Balance of Homicidios 2018-2022.

Table 2: **Central America homicide rate 2018-2022**

Country	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Honduras	40	41.2	37.6	38.6	35.8
Guatemala	22.4	36	19.7	17.6	17.3
El Salvador	51	21.5	15.4	16.6	12.2
Costa Rica	11.7	11	11.2	11.5	7.8
Nicaragua	s/d	7.5	4.4	5.7	6.7

Source: InSight Crime. Balance of Homicides. 2018-2022.

Young people and minors are among the main victims of homicidal violence. According to the Coordinator of Private Institutions for Children, Adolescents, and Youth and their Rights (COIPRODEN), in 2023, the number of deaths of people under 30 years of age was 713, a figure that represents an increase of 25.3% compared to 569 deaths registered in 2022. Of the total, 138 homicides corresponded to children and young people under 17 years of age. Meanwhile, 578 were between 18 and 30 years of age; 581 of the cases correspond to men and 132 to women. June was the most violent month for the young population².

B. Multiple deaths (massacres)

Multiple deaths are one of the most recurrent expressions of violence. According to figures presented by the National Commissioner for Human Rights (CONADEH), from 2010 to 2023, the 18 departments of the country were the scene of multiple deaths. In 14 years, nearly 1,200 massacres have been registered, leaving around 4,450 people dead, crimes that, in more than 95% of the cases, remain unpunished. Between 2021 and 2023 alone, around 150 massacres have been recorded, an estimated average of 4 multiple deaths per month³.

At least 51 massacres have been registered since the state of emergency went into effect: 5 in December 2022, 44 in 2023, and 2 so far in 2024. These multiple deaths, according to CONADEH, left around 230 people dead, including men, women, girls, and boys. In total, 14 of the country's 18 departments were at the scene of multiple murders⁴. Most of the cases remain unpunished, which further aggravates the crisis in the respect for human rights.

The massacre of 46 women in the Women's Penitentiary for Social Adaptation (PNFAS) who were under state custody (23 with firearms and knives; 23 burned), attributed by authorities to a confrontation between two criminal gangs, is an unprecedented event in a women's prison in the Central American region. The brutal attack by women from one gang on women from another rival gang (June 20,

2 Proceso Digital. 28 de enero de 2024. <https://proceso.hn/crece-un-25-la-violencia-homicida-contramenores-y-jovenes-en-honduras-en-2023-segun-ong/>

3 Proceso Digital. 7 de enero, 2024. <https://proceso.hn/casi-medio-centenar-de-masacres-dejaron-mas-de-220-muertos-en-medio-de-estado-de-excepcion-conadeh/>

4 Proceso Digital. 21 de enero, 2024. <https://proceso.hn/insuficiente-el-estado-de-excepcion-para-detener-la-violencia-delincuencial-en-el-pais-dice-el-conadeh/>

2023), laid bare the violence, corruption, and ungovernability in Honduran prisons. The viciousness and disproportionate use of violence against the victims (use of firearms, bladed weapons, and gasoline), starkly showed the endemic problem of corruption in prisons, where organized criminal groups control internal security.

To commit the crimes, the women involved obtained firearms from abroad: 11 pistols of different calibers, prohibited weapons (rifles, submachine guns, etc.), and several other firearms⁵. The Undersecretary of Security, Julissa Villanueva, revealed that the 9mm bullets, recovered at the scene of the crimes, coincide with the casing of sub-machine gun type pistols (IMI-17PN), ammunition that is assigned to police agents. For CONADEH, these statements could be interpreted, legally, as a tacit acceptance by the State of Honduras of the participation of its law enforcement agents in the commission of illegal acts that result in serious situations of human rights violations and potential executions of women in its custody⁶.

C. Violent deaths of women and femicides

Women and girls in Honduras face extreme levels of gender-based violence daily, a situation that is aggravated by the weakness of State institutions and the impunity that protects the perpetrators.

The First Specialized Survey on Violence against Women, conducted by the National Statistics Institute (INE) in 2023, shows that Honduran women are exposed to violence, regardless of their age, level of education, social status, belonging to an indigenous or Afro-descendant people, and disability status, facing situations of violence in different areas throughout their life cycle. The results of the study show that 1 out of every 2 women aged 15 and over has experienced violence at some point in her life; 1 out of every 5 women aged 15 and over has experienced violence throughout her life by her partner (psychological, physical, sexual, patrimonial and/or economic); 9 out of every 10 women did not report or did not seek help in situations of violence; 1 out of every 5 women aged 15 and over has experienced violence by her partner (psychological, physical, sexual, patrimonial

5 Proceso Digital. 18 de enero 2024. <https://proceso.hn/presentan-requerimiento-fiscal-contra-nueve-pandilleras-por-crimen-de-46-privadas-de-libertad/https://proceso.hn/presentan-requerimiento-fiscal-contra-nueve-pandilleras-por-crimen-de-46-privadas-de-libertad/>

6 Swissinfo. 7 de enero, 2024. https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/honduras-violencia_honduras-registr%C3%B3-220-muertes-en-48-masacres-en-el-marco-del-estado-de-excepci%C3%B3n/49105714

and/or economic); 9 out of every 10 women did not report or did not seek help in situations of violence⁷.

Table 3: **Violent deaths of women and femicides in Honduras 2005-2023**

Years	Number of violent deaths and femicides	Rate of violent deaths of women per 100,000 inhabitants 2005
2005	175	2.7
2006	202	5.7
2007	295	7.7
2008	313	8.0
2009	363	9.1
2010	385	9.4
2011	512	12.3
2012	606	14.2
2013	636	14.6
2014	526	11.9
2015	478	10.9
2016	468	10.5
2017	388	8.6
2018	383	8.3
2019	401	8.5
2020	326	6.8
2021	330	6.8
2022	308	6.3
2023 (Tasa proyectada)		7.9

Source: Violence Observatory of the UNAH. January to October 2023. Violent Deaths of Women and Femicides in Honduras.

7 INE. 2023. Informe Ejecutivo, Primera Encuesta Nacional de Violencia contra Mujeres y Niñas. <https://ine.gob.hn/v4/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/InformeEjecutivoENESVMN.pdf>

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) states that Honduras is among the five countries with the most alarming femicide figures worldwide. With a rate of 6.47 per 100,000 inhabitants, the country holds the fifth position in femicides, after South Africa (9.02), Jamaica (8.70), Botswana (7.63) and Namibia (6.80)⁸.

Femicides are a flagrant violation of women's fundamental rights and freedoms and a clear manifestation of persistent gender inequality and discrimination in the country. Honduras has shown progress in the visibility of violence against women. However, these modest advances have not been enough to stop the high rates of violence that affect the physical, psychological, labor, and political integrity of women.

Around 402 women died violently between 2023 and 2024. In the first fifteen days of 2024, 6 women lost their lives violently. This is equivalent to one violent death every 23 hours⁹. The most tragic event of the past year, in terms of the number of victims, occurred on June 20, 2023, when a brutal massacre of 46 inmates took place in the women's prison of Tamara.

Many of these deaths occurred in the immediate environment. The main aggressor was a man with sentimental ties to the victim. The Women's Rights Center (CDM) has declared that an immediate response mechanism to the disappearance and violent death of women is urgent and calls on the government to approve the Comprehensive Law against Violence against Women, presented in November 2022.

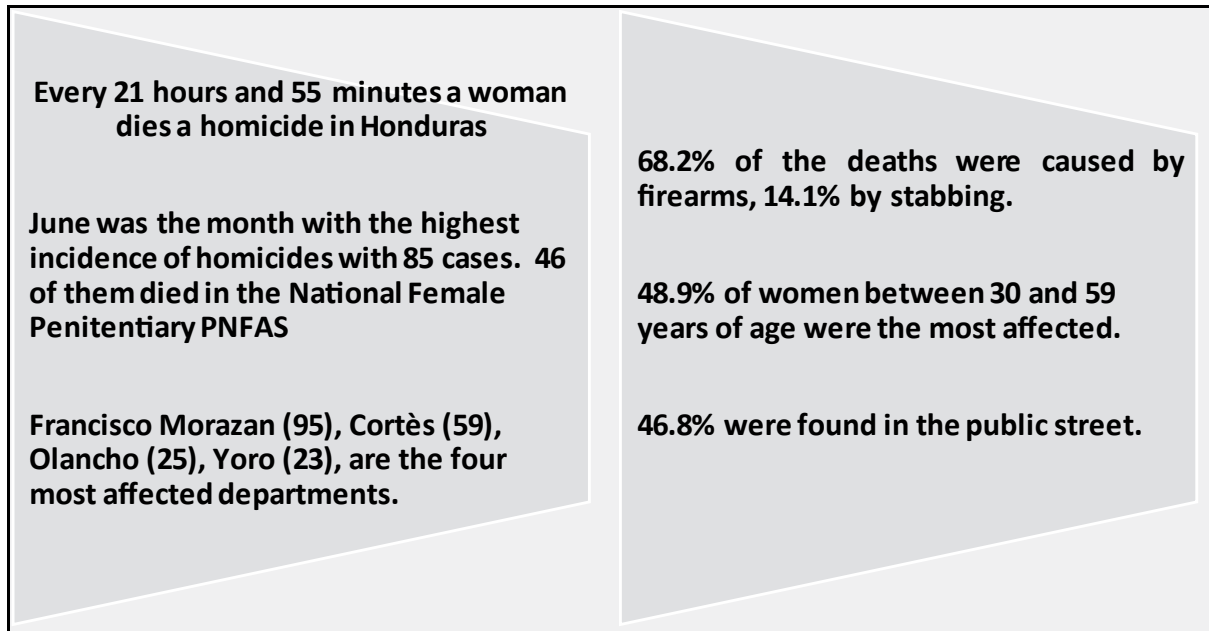
In most cases, the killers remain at large. It is estimated that 90% of the perpetrators go unpunished. Impunity is the factor that allows crimes to continue. This pattern of rising violent deaths and high impunity continued in 2023 and will continue in 2024 if the necessary preventive measures are not taken¹⁰.

8 Diario Tiempo. 4 de enero 2024. <https://tiempo.hn/honduras-entre-los-cinco-paises-con-mas-feminicidios/#:~:text=En%20la%20cuarta%20y%20quinta.es%20decir%2C%20unas%20133%20diariamente>.

9 Swi.Swissinfo.ch. 17 de enero, 2024. https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/honduras-violencia-machista_denuncian_muerte_de_402_mujeres_en_honduras_entre_2023_y_las_dos_primeras_semanas_de_2024/49136898

10 <https://criterio.hn/autoridades-del-mp-no-priorizan-investigacion-de-muertes-violentas-de-mujeres/>

Relevant indicators of violent deaths of women and femicides in Honduras / January-October 2023



Source: Violent deaths of women and femicides, January to October 2023. Violence Observatory, UNAH.

D. The extortion

In Honduras, in 2022, extortion increased by 153% compared to 2021, with 1,824 complaints. 62% of extortion complaints were concentrated in the municipalities of the Central District and San Pedro Sula, areas that together accounted for 62% of complaints nationwide¹¹. On December 6, 2022, the state of exception came into effect as part of the Extortion Treatment Plan in the country.

The state of exception and the anti-extortion plan was the government's response to the demands of the Honduran Council of Private Enterprise (COHEP) and the transport sector, which denounced that extortion had gotten out of hand. This coincided with the presentation of the report of the Association for a More Just Society (ASJ), "War Tax: the phenomenon of extortion and the state response in Honduras", a study which records that in Honduras more than 200,000 families, representing 9% of the population, were being affected by extortion¹².

11 INFOSEGURA. 2022. <https://infosegura.org/noticias/analisis-sobre-la-situacion-delito-de-extorsion-honduras-durante-el-ano-2022>

12 ASJ. Diciembre 2023. https://www.expedientepublico.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/PPT_-Informe-Avances-en-lucha-contra-la-extorsion.pdf

The measure has generated controversy between the government and human rights organizations. While the National Police affirms that since the state of exception was implemented, until February 21, 2023, 4,233 arrests had been made, the National Commissioner of Human Rights (CONADEH) showed that 95% of the arrests were for minor offenses such as scandal on public streets and only 36 arrests were for extortion. Also, the transport sector has denounced that the murders of transport workers do not stop and that at least 38 public transport workers were murdered in the first six months of the year 2023, according to data from the Observatory of Violence of the National Autonomous University of Honduras (UNAH).

The ASJ, after one year of the state of exception, presented the results of the Extortion Victimization Survey 2023. The study states that extortion reached its highest level in the last 5 years and that the most affected departments are Cortes (16%), La Paz (15%), Colon (14%), Yoro (14%) and Francisco Morazan (13%).

Human rights organizations have urged the Castro administration to suspend the state of exception due to lack of effectiveness. However, the government defends the measure, arguing that homicides have been reduced in 2022 because the government's policies and strategies yielded results.

III. “Extraordinary” measures adopted by Xiomara Castro’s government

The prolonged state of emergency

On December 2, 2022, President Castro decreed a state of emergency, a measure limiting constitutional guarantees, initially in 162 neighborhoods, mostly in Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula. Since the state of exception was approved, the government has focused on security policies based on restrictions of constitutional guarantees to sustain the drop in the homicide rate. However, the measure has caused controversy because, in addition to being unsustainable over time, it is a palliative when the structural causes of violence and insecurity are not addressed and hurts human rights and democracy.

The state of emergency suspends the rights to personal liberty, freedom of association, assembly, and movement, among other fundamental rights. In addition, it

grants police powers to carry out searches and arrests without warrants. To date, the state of emergency has been extended on several occasions and was extended to 17 of the country's 18 departments. The measure has been ratified in the National Congress at least 5 times, with limited debate on the results, its effectiveness, and controls; the other extensions of this measure have not been ratified¹³.

One year after the implementation of the state of emergency, CONADEH has reported having dealt with more than 360 complaints against state security forces. Since the approval of the measure, in December 2022 until November 2023, an average of 33 complaints per month were received from people who reported being victims of human rights violations. The complaints were filed against agents and officers of the National Preventive Police (PNP), the Police Directorate of Investigation (DPI), the Anti Maras and Gangs Police Directorate against organized crime (DIPAMCO).

The reasons for which the complaints were filed against the State security forces are framed as follows:

- the disproportionate use of force during raids without warrants
- damage to private property
- incrimination without verifiable motives or with apparently false evidence
- disproportionate use of force at the time of apprehension
- complaints of violations of the right to life, especially in situations of armed confrontation.

Another of CONADEH's concerns is the lack of protection of women in the context of searches without a warrant, as there are complaints of physical, verbal and even sexual aggression. For this institution, the state of emergency should be the last resort used to contain crime, as established by international standards of international human rights law, however, the government continues to use it as a first resource¹⁴.

13 OACNUDH. Diciembre 2024. https://oacnudh.hn/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/06.12.2023-Estado-de-excepcion_COMUNICADO.pdf

14 Hondudiario. 6 de diciembre del 2023. <https://hondudiario.com/uncategorized/estado-de-excepcion-tiene-un-fuerte-impacto-en-los-derechos-humanos-senala-el-conadeh/>

Similarly, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has stated that it has information on some cases that occurred in the framework of the implementation of the state of emergency, which could constitute human rights violations: illegal detentions, excessive use of force, abuses during house searches without a warrant and forced disappearances, especially committed against young people from low-income social strata.

The OHCHR has also expressed its concern, more than a year after the state of emergency has been in effect, about the prolonged duration of the suspension of constitutional guarantees, urging the government to reconsider the exceptional measures.

Reversal of the demilitarization process

The state of emergency strengthens militarization. When the government approved the measure, declaring war on gangs, and suspending constitutional guarantees to curb violence and crimes such as extortion, it endorsed the involvement of the military in public security. This was a measure contrary to what Castro promised in the political campaign.

Executive Decree Number PCM 29-2022, in its Article 3, states:

“The Secretariat of State in the Office of Security, through the National Police, The Directorate of Investigation and Intelligence (DNII), the Secretariat in the Office of Defense, The Armed Forces and the Military Police of Public Order (PMOP), will coordinate actions to comply with this Decree and maintain order, peace and national security, as well as the control of land, air and maritime borders.”

In June 2023, the Armed Forces, through the Military Police of Public Order, again took command of the prisons after the murder of 46 inmates in the women’s prison.

One of the controversial issues of the strategies adopted by the Castro government is the implementation of the Bukelian model to contain criminality with measures such as the state of exception, the strengthening of the military role in public security, and the application of the iron fist in prisons (prisoners who have been publicly shown in scenarios like what happens in prisons in El Salvador).

According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner in Honduras, the militarization of prisons should be subject to internal and external oversight, as well as command and control of the penitentiary system. Military operations in prisons indicate that inmates, particularly those allegedly associated with maras and gangs, have reportedly been beaten with batons and kicked by the Military Police. They were also subjected to sleep deprivation and food and water rationing. The UNHCHR has told the Honduran government that the penitentiary system should be under civilian control, within the framework of a comprehensive security policy. Furthermore, the use of states of exception and military participation in public security and in the command and control of prisons should be exceptional, limited in time and restricted to what is strictly necessary¹⁵.

IV. Channeling, changing security strategies

1. Faced with an upsurge in violence and insecurity, at the end of 2022 and in 2023, the government of Xiomara Castro decided to adopt emergency measures, like those undertaken by the government of Nayib Bukele in El Salvador: the implementation of the state of emergency (extended on several occasions and has been extended to most of the departments of the national territory). The strategy favors the exit of the Military Police of Public Order to the streets and the militarization of prisons.
2. Despite these measures, the Castro government continues to face enormous challenges in reducing the high rates of violence and crime, particularly in the face of the spiral of femicides and multiple deaths (massacres) that occurred in 2023 and during the first weeks of 2024. These events often take place in environments controlled by drug trafficking and organized crime. They also occur in the private sphere of family, community, and intimate partner relationships, and remain in impunity due to weak criminal investigation and lack of prosecution of cases.
3. The government, distancing itself from the promises made in the electoral campaign and the Government Plan to Refound Honduras, has replicated the old repressive-reactive schemes that have predominated to confront crime, such as the prolonged state of exception, the militarization of public security, and the increased budget for military and police, measures that have

15 OACNUDH. 7 de julio de 2023. <https://oacnudh.hn/07-de-junio-honduras-briefing-note/>

not managed to stop Honduras from occupying the first places as the most violent country in the Latin American and Central American region. Nor is it guaranteed that short-term measures, such as the state of exception, can have a lasting or long-term effect.

4. Violence and crime are complex social phenomena that cannot be tackled with a single strategy. The comprehensiveness of citizen security policies requires coordinated inter-institutional work and involves actions in the areas of prevention, deterrence, and reaction, as well as actions related to the social, cultural, contextual, and institutional conditions in which violence and crime occur. Improving crime levels requires comprehensive measures on the part of the government, within the framework of respect for human rights, avoiding the use of disproportionate measures such as states of exception, which entail the suspension of constitutional guarantees, citizen rights and freedoms.
5. The government should take up the recommendations made by the OHCHR, stating the need for a comprehensive security policy, with a human rights approach and emphasis on prevention, which addresses the structural causes of violence and insecurity. In addition, it urges the competent authorities to ensure accountability and transparency of the actions of the authorities in charge of the state of emergency to facilitate auditing and control, as well as to ensure judicial guarantees.
6. Measures other than a state of emergency should be taken. Prolonging this measure without obtaining the expected results and without strengthening the institutional capacity of the State makes the strategies adopted by the government to improve citizen security unsustainable (in time).
7. Impunity is the great Achilles heel of Honduran justice. The lack of effective investigation is at the core of impunity in cases of crimes, mainly those that threaten the lives of people and leave them without access to justice. The capacity to investigate and prosecute cases of violence, particularly violent deaths of women, multiple deaths, and deaths of minors, must be improved.
8. To address the alarming numbers of violent deaths of women in the country, it is necessary to strengthen institutional and community capacities to prevent and protect women living in situations of violence. It also requires the adoption of measures to reduce poverty and inequality as structural problems that affect social violence and criminality, some of the underlying causes of crime.
9. The government should open spaces for the participation of organized civil society and academia in the formulation, monitoring, and evaluation of citizen security policies. Likewise, to stop gender violence and femicides.