

# OPEN DOORS TO SHELTER

SUPPORT WOMEN ESCAPING  
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN  
VENEZUELA

STOP VIOLENCE  
AGAINST WOMEN

**AMNESTY**  
INTERNATIONAL



**'WHY WOULD SOMEBODY ESCAPE FROM A PLACE WHERE THEY ARE LIVING AND EATING AND HAVING TO PUT UP WITH BEING BEATEN, IF SOMEBODY IS GOING TO GO ONTO THE STREETS, AND REMAIN ON THE STREETS, AND DO NOTHING, OR BEG ON THE STREETS BECAUSE [THEY] HAVE NOWHERE TO GO AT THAT MOMENT?'**

Woman F, interviewed by Amnesty International, July 2007

## DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN VENEZUELA

Domestic violence is a global phenomenon. It is the most common form of violence against women and its effects on survivors, their families and communities are far reaching and profound.

In Venezuela, thousands of women are beaten, verbally abused and raped, or suffer other forms of domestic violence at the hands of their partners or former partners. In 2007 alone, 4,484 women called a helpline set up by INAMUJER (Instituto Nacional de la Mujer) to report abuse. Yet, according to local organizations, only one out of nine women who experience domestic violence report it to the authorities. The vast majority, for various reasons, remain silent.

Domestic violence violates women's human rights, including the rights to life, to physical integrity, to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health and to equality before the law. States, including Venezuela, have pledged to respect, protect and fulfil such rights through a series of international treaties. But every day, these rights are denied to women living in the shadow of violence at home.

The Venezuelan authorities have taken positive steps towards eradicating domestic violence, in particular by introducing the 2007 Organic law on the right of women to a life free of violence. It states that "the State has a binding obligation to adopt all administrative, legislative, judicial and other measures that may be necessary and appropriate to ensure compliance

with this Law, for the purposes of guaranteeing the human rights of women who are subjected to violence" (Article 5). By acknowledging the human rights dimension of domestic violence, the law reinforces the duty of government to protect those at risk and punish the perpetrators.

However, almost two years after the law was passed, there is still a wide gap between the law's promised objectives and its implementation in practice. One significant obstacle to delivering the promised protection is the desperate shortage of shelters for women experiencing domestic violence.

## THE RIGHT TO PROTECTION, THE DUTY TO PROTECT

Domestic violence remains a largely hidden crime with only a fraction of cases reported. The reasons why women are reluctant to report violence are complex, but often relate to unenforced or ineffective protection measures. This lack of adequate protection, in many cases, means having no safe place to go.

Women who experience domestic violence worry about how they will support themselves after leaving an abusive partner. Often, they have been prevented from working by their partners and have become financially dependent on them. Above all, they fear the impact that leaving would have on their children. Many women feel that they have no choice but to stay with their abuser if the alternative is to become homeless and unable to support themselves or their



**'STATES PARTIES SHOULD ESTABLISH OR SUPPORT SERVICES FOR VICTIMS OF FAMILY VIOLENCE, RAPE, SEXUAL ASSAULT AND OTHER FORMS OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE, INCLUDING REFUGES, SPECIALLY TRAINED HEALTH WORKERS, REHABILITATION AND COUNSELLING'**

Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, General Recommendation No. 19 (1992)

**Image: An Amnesty International activist demands protection and justice for victims of violence against women, Caracas, July 2008.**



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The Organic law on the right of women to a life free of violence (Ley Orgánica sobre el Derecho de las Mujeres a una Vida Libre de Violencia) was approved on 16 March 2007. The 2007 law defines violence against women as a human rights violation and reaffirms the responsibility of the state and its officials to eradicate it. It sets out measures to prevent violence against women, to protect women at risk and to punish those responsible.

**Article 32. Shelters.** In order to afford more effective protection to women in situations of violence, the national, state and municipal executive, with assistance, advice and training from the National Women's Institute (Instituto Nacional de la Mujer) and regional and municipal women's institutes, shall establish shelters within each of their dependencies for the purpose of providing refuge to such women in the event that remaining at home or in their place of residence entails an imminent threat to their safety."

Organic law on the right of women to a life free of violence



dependants. As the UN Special Rapporteur on adequate housing stated in 2003, “many women continue to live in violent situations because they face homelessness if they resist domestic violence.”

Shelters play a crucial role in providing an initial place of safety for women and their children. Such emergency housing presents a real opportunity for women to begin to rebuild their lives.

Venezuelan law recognizes the importance of shelters. The 2007 law calls on all national, state and municipal authorities to set up shelters run in accordance with INAMUJER’s standards in each of Venezuela’s municipalities for women fleeing violent relationships.

Yet, at the end of 2008, only two shelters run by the national authorities were known to be operating in the whole country. These shelters are highly praised by women who have stayed there, but there are far too few to meet current needs.

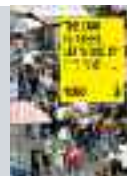
The urgent need for more shelters throughout Venezuela is undeniable. A commitment to provide more shelters requires practical plans for successful implementation. Allocating appropriate resources and prioritizing the creation of and funding for new shelters are both crucial in this respect.

In the longer term, shelters form only one part of a broader solution. Economic security, access to health care, housing and employment remain urgent necessities after the initial respite offered by shelters. In the meantime, the creation of new shelters remains one of the most pressing needs, and cannot be postponed. Thousands of women experiencing domestic violence are depending on the government of Venezuela to honour its commitment to uphold their rights.

‘I ARRIVED AT THE SHELTER, THE FIRST SHELTER, AND I WAS VERY FRIGHTENED, BUT I FEEL THAT IN THESE PLACES PEOPLE ARE VERY WARM TOWARDS YOU, BOOST YOUR SELF-ESTEEM, VALUE YOU AS A WOMAN. WHEN YOU ARE THERE, YOU DON’T FEEL AFRAID, THERE ARE OTHER WOMEN THERE, TOO, YOU CAN REALLY TRUST THOSE SHELTERS’

Woman D, interviewed by Amnesty International, July 2007

**‘THE LAW IS THERE, LET’S USE IT’**  
ENDING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN VENEZUELA  
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Available at: [www.amnesty.org/library](http://www.amnesty.org/library)



*Front cover: A door opens on a courtyard in Venezuela*

## RECOMMENDATIONS

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL CALLS ON THE VENEZUELAN AUTHORITIES TO:

### ■ PROVIDE PLACES OF SAFETY FOR WOMEN FLEEING VIOLENCE

Fund and establish sufficient temporary shelters or other places of safety for women, without compromising their privacy, personal autonomy and freedom of movement. Such places should support and assist women’s physical and mental recovery, and help them to access suitable safe housing in the longer term.

### ■ Condemn domestic violence

### ■ Raise public awareness of domestic violence

### ■ Use the education system to challenge prejudice

### ■ Abolish legislation that discriminates against women

### ■ Investigate and prosecute complaints of domestic violence

### ■ Remove obstacles to prosecutions for domestic violence

### ■ Provide compulsory training on domestic violence for officials

### ■ Provide adequate funding

### ■ Provide support services for women

### ■ Collect and publish data on domestic violence

### ■ Let women know what they are entitled to

These recommendations are based on Amnesty International’s 14-point Programme for the Prevention of Domestic Violence.

STOP VIOLENCE  
AGAINST WOMEN

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Amnesty International is a global movement of 2.2 million people in more than 150 countries and territories who campaign to end grave abuses of human rights.

Our vision is for every person to enjoy all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards.

We are independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion – funded mainly by our membership and public donations.

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