

Expressive Power of Anti-Violence Legislation: Changes in Social Norms on Violence Against Women in Mexico*

Mala Htun[†] and Francesca R. Jensenius[‡]

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Abstract

While a significant amount of research has examined the conditions giving rise to legal and policy reform on violence against women (VAW), there is less understanding of how much and in what ways VAW laws have affected society. Many observers lament the weak enforcement of VAW legislation, while others are skeptical that new laws on violence—and other rights enacted by consolidating democracies—are changing social relations in intended ways. In this paper, we argue that even weakly enforced laws can contribute to positive social change. We theorize the expressive power of VAW legislation, and present evidence for a cautiously optimistic assessment of current trends on violence against women and the ways that VAW laws affect social norms. Focusing on a time of major legal changes related to VAW in Mexico, we explore over-time trends in behavior and attitudes related to violence by analyzing four waves of the national survey on the Dynamics of Household Relations (ENDIREH, 2003, 2006, 2011, 2016), which includes detailed interviews with hundreds of thousands of Mexican women. We find that over this period, the share of women experiencing intimate partner abuse declined, attitudes condoning violence shifted, reporting rates rose, and most women learned about legislation to protect their rights. These changes indicate the emergence of new social norms and are consistent with our expectations about the expressive power of anti-violence legislation.

Keywords: Violence against women, human rights, social norms, public opinion, Mexico, gender equality

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[†]Professor of Political Science, University of New Mexico. E-mail: malahtun@unm.edu

[‡]Professor of Political Science, University of Oslo and Research Professor, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs. E-mail: f.r.jensenius@stv.uio.no

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, democratic transitions, international agreements, and societal mobilization led states around the world to reform constitutions and adopt legislation to expand citizen rights. With the goal of promoting equality and expanding opportunities, many countries (though far from all) advanced women’s rights in the workplace, in the family, at schools and in higher education, and in health care. Reforms intended to combat violence against women (VAW)—a comprehensive concept including intimate partner abuse, rape, harassment, stalking, female genital mutilation, among others—has been an area of intensive legislative activity. By 2018, some 75% of countries worldwide had adopted specialized laws to prevent, punish, and protect women from these forms of abuse.¹

While a significant amount of research has examined the conditions giving rise to VAW-related legal and policy reform,² there is less understanding of the effects of new violence against women laws on social practices.³ To what extent have legal changes been associated with social change? What mechanisms connect legal reform with evolving attitudes and behavior on violence against women?

There are reasons to believe that violence against women legislation, and other rights enacted by transitioning and consolidating democracies, have little impact. States adopted many new laws quickly in order to look good abroad and gain legitimacy at home, without developing the bureaucratic infrastructure required for effective enforcement.⁴ The problem is not just low state capacity. Many social groups lack the resources to compel state actors to enforce the law,⁵ while groups with resources—such as politicians and upper classes—often

¹Analysis of the World Bank’s “Women, Business, and the Law” dataset finds that in 2018, 144 of 189 countries had adopted specialized measures to prevent and punish VAW (Htun and Jensenius 2020b).

²See, e.g., Weldon 2002; Smulovitz 2015; Htun and Weldon 2012; Franceschet 2010; Beer 2017; O’Brien 2015; O’Brien and Walsh 2020; García-Del Moral and Neumann 2019.

³For important exceptions see Beck 2021; Neumann 2017; Walsh and Menjívar 2016.

⁴Levitsky and Murillo 2009; Towns 2010; Brinks and Botero 2014.

⁵Brinks 2008; Brinks and Botero 2014.

have little interest in abiding by legal rules themselves and imposing the law on others.⁶ Sticky social norms that uphold power hierarchies and inequality among groups and individuals also reduce compliance with equal rights laws.⁷ The result is that in much of the Global South there is a large gap between the letter of the law and behavior on the ground.⁸

In this paper, we propose that violence against women legislation, even when weakly enforced and unevenly implemented, may nonetheless change social relations through the mechanism of normative expression. We build on a rich body of theory about the expressive power of the law, which maintains that laws affect society not just through threats and control but also by communicating information about new norms.⁹ By sharing information about norms—standards of desirable and appropriate conduct—laws help to motivate people to act in some ways and not others. People’s desire to conform to norms induces them voluntarily to comply with the law.

Expressive law theory implies that legal changes will be associated with changes in social norms to align with the law. To empirically measure the norm changes associated with legal changes, we operationalize Richard McAdams’s proposed conditions for the emergence of a new norm.¹⁰ We argue that if norm change on violence against women is occurring, we should see it in four patterns: a gradual reduction in experiences of violence, a decline in shares of people with attitudes that condone violence, a rise in shares of women who speak about their experiences to public authorities and people in the local community, and widespread knowledge of women’s rights. We put our approach into practice by analyzing four waves of the Mexican national survey on the Dynamics of Household Relations (ENDIREH, 2003, 2006, 2011, 2016). The survey data are based on detailed interviews with hundreds of thousands of women, and the timing of the four waves coincides with a period of intense

⁶O’Donnell 1998; Amengual and Dargent 2020; Holland 2017.

⁷Htun and Jensenius 2020*a*.

⁸Brinks, Levitsky and Murillo 2019; O’Donnell 1998.

⁹See, e.g., McAdams 1997, 2000, 2015; Sunstein 1996.

¹⁰McAdams 1997, 2000.

societal debate and state action on violence, which culminated in the enactment of the 2007 General Law Guaranteeing Women a Life Free from Violence (henceforth the 2007 VAW Law).

In contrast to skepticism about VAW laws as “window dressing” institutions that look good but are otherwise inconsequential,¹¹ and the view that the problem of violence is getting worse, affirmed by frightful accounts of femicides in the Mexican media and nationwide strikes against violence by hundreds of thousands of women, the data reveal a sharp decline in abuse by intimate partners. Between 2003 and 2016, the two end points of our data, the share of women who say they had experienced some form of domestic abuse during the previous year drops from 40.7% to 27.4%. At the same time, there is a sharp reduction in the share of women saying that a man has the right to hit his partner, that a woman must obey her spouse, and that the violence they have experienced is “unimportant.” The share of women victims who report episodes of violence to the authorities increased, there is growth in the share of women who speak about their experiences with friends or family, and most women claim familiarity with the 2007 VAW Law.

Our findings support a cautiously optimistic assessment of current trends on violence against women in Mexico, the ability of laws on violence to change norms, and the law’s power to undermine societal resistance to the egalitarian principles upheld by consolidating democracies. Our argument does not exclude the possibility that laws affect society in other ways, such as through enforcement and implementation by state actors. Nor do we rule out that economic growth and the global diffusion of ideas contribute to the changes we observe over the four waves of survey data. However, by comparing the empirical implications of our own argument with the implications of alternative explanations, we show that these other explanations do not, on their own, seem to account for the major behavioral and attitudinal changes we see across the survey waves.

¹¹Cf. [Levitsky and Murillo 2009](#).

We contribute to scholarship on law and society, social norms, and the drivers of public attitudes and behavior by theorizing the expressive power of VAW legislation and developing an empirical approach to assess norm change with survey data. Though expressive law theory implies that legal changes will be associated with changes in social norms, little of the extensive literature on expressive law uses public opinion data to relate actual legal changes to changes in society.¹² In addition, we advance discussions about expressive law by theorizing how the law is communicated to the population. Laws do not advertise themselves. Feminist activists, politicians, and journalists work to raise awareness about the need to enact new laws, and then, once adopted, about the law’s normative expressions.¹³ We therefore conceptualize the legal changes that took place in Mexico, and the activism and media coverage accompanying them, as a *bundle* of mutually reinforcing processes occurring over a multi-year period, which together combine to generate expressive power.

The paper proceeds as follows. We begin by describing the expressive function of laws and the norms that VAW laws embody. Second, we sketch a brief history of the legal change-feminist activism-media coverage bundle in Mexico. Third, we introduce the survey data and present our empirical approach to studying changes in social norms. In the fourth section, we explore evidence of shifting social norms by looking at changes in experiences of violence, changes in attitudes towards violence, reporting patterns, and how these trends vary by knowledge of the law. In the last section, we explore alternative explanations for the trends in the data, including GDP growth, non-gender violence, and age-related time trends. We also consider the role of global diffusion and overall change in gender-related attitudes.

¹²Cf. [Scott 2000](#). For an exception, see [Kotsadam and Jakobsson 2011](#). There is more work that assesses the impact of social norms interventions, such as targeted media campaigns, on public attitudes and norm perceptions, including on violence against women (see, e.g., [Arias 2019](#); [Green, Wilke and Cooper 2020](#); [Paluck et al. 2010](#)) and work that examines the effects of public policy changes on mass attitudes (e.g., [Soss and Schram 2007](#)).

¹³[Htun and Weldon 2012](#); [Neumann 2017](#).

We end the paper by concluding that, though severe problems persist, decades of feminist struggles appear to have produced a notable impact on violent cultures and practices.

Social Change and the Law

How do laws affect society, and how do legal changes relate to social changes? Many legal and political theorists historically maintained that the law deters certain behaviors through threats of punishment. Yet it is costly to monitor everyone and to enforce the law. As a result, systems of rule tend to seek voluntary compliance. Max Weber argued that the central motivation behind voluntary compliance is perception of legitimacy, which in the modern world stems from the belief that laws and regulations are just and rational. People obey the law because they believe it is the right thing to do.¹⁴

There is another mechanism by which the law induces compliance, however. Through its “expressive power” and “expressive functions,” the law shares information about societal values and standards of desirable behavior.¹⁵ As Glendon puts it, the law tells a story “about who we are, where we came from, and where we are going.”¹⁶ Sometimes the point of the law is to “make statements,” not just control people. And by using the law to make statements, law makers intend to alter social norms.¹⁷

A crucial way the law shapes behavior, then, is by expressing new social norms.¹⁸ Social norms are “perceptions about what is typical or desirable in a group or situation.”¹⁹ The classic sociological view attributes norm compliance to internalization or habit; others argue

¹⁴Weber 1978; Levi 1997; Tyler 2006.

¹⁵See McAdams 2015, where he argues that the law supplies focal points—mutually salient behavior choices or outcomes—that facilitate social coordination (McAdams 2015). As this suggests, there are multiple mechanisms of expressive power, including supplying focal points and communicating information about norms, risks, and attitudes.

¹⁶Glendon 1987.

¹⁷Sunstein 1996.

¹⁸Hoff and Walsh 2019 argue that an additional way the law shapes behavior is by creating new cultural categories that change how people think.

¹⁹Tankard and Paluck 2016, 184.

that people comply because they otherwise would feel guilty.²⁰ People may also conform to norms because they want to earn and maintain the esteem of others. By complying with norms backed by a broad social consensus, people gain, and avoid losing, esteem.²¹ According to McAdams’s “esteem theory,” norms spread as more people engage in the condoned behavior, since the esteem costs of avoiding the behavior rise for the remaining holdouts. However, losses and gains in esteem are realized only when there is a risk of detection, in other words, when noncompliance is likely to be reported and noticed by others.

Laws can induce people to change their behavior by altering their perceptions of norms, that is, by modifying people’s beliefs about what behaviors are seen as desirable or obligatory.²² Since most people are not social scientists, they do not have data on how many people approve or disapprove of certain courses of actions. The enactment of a new law thus sends a powerful signal about *actual* patterns of public approval and disapproval (provided that lawmakers tend to respond to majority opinion). Put another way, the new law publicizes the extent of societal consensus backing a norm, and may increase perceptions that violations of the norm will be detected.²³ In response to legal changes, people often update their beliefs about standards of respectable behavior.²⁴

As this discussion suggests, laws potentially exert a substantial effect on society by upholding new norms. Even if few people actually get punished, the enactment of a law expresses a growing consensus about the desirability of certain types of behavior and induces people to adjust their actions accordingly, in order to avoid losing esteem and social status. As MacKinnon puts it, “the real point of law is not incarceration or damage awards but voluntary compliance, otherwise known as legal socialization or education.”²⁵

²⁰Lessig 1995.

²¹McAdams 1997.

²²Tankard and Paluck 2016; McAdams 1997, 2000, 2015.

²³McAdams 1997.

²⁴McAdams 2000.

²⁵MacKinnon 2016, 477.

How VAW laws express new norms

Legislation intending to prevent, punish, and eradicate violence against women is a good example of expressive law. Adopted in the wake of global conferences and agreements about human rights, second-generation VAW laws are framed in feminist terms and connect gender violence to principles of equality, nondiscrimination, and human rights, among others. These laws recognize multiple forms of violence including physical, psychological, sexual, economic, institutional, community, and include femicide as well as family violence.²⁶ Contemporary laws acknowledge that violence occurs in multiple sites of women's lives, including the home, the workplace, the street, schools, and public institutions.²⁷

VAW laws build on decades of research that finds that gender violence is not only attributable to individual risk factors like family trauma, aggression, and alcoholism but also to unequal gender relations and women's low social status. Social norms that subordinate women to men are a major factor behind rates of violence. Studies from around the world show that norms condoning male authority are strongly related to societal endorsement of domestic abuse and the perpetration of violence.²⁸

In thirty sub-Saharan African countries, Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) find that geographic variation in the prevalence of women's beliefs that violence is justified when a woman argues with her partner, neglects children, burns food, or refuses to have sex is closely associated to variation in rates of violence.²⁹ In Nepal, perceptions that prevailing social norms endorse male dominance, family honor, and tolerance of violence correspond to perpetration of physical and sexual domestic violence.³⁰ Analysis of the first wave of Mexico's ENDIREH survey (2003) shows that women who say their male partners exert

²⁶Montoya 2013.

²⁷MacKinnon 1991; Weldon 2002; Montoya 2013; Heise 1998; Menjívar 2011; Walsh 2008; True 2012; Manne 2017; Lagarde y de los Ríos 2007.

²⁸Heise and Kotsadam 2015.

²⁹Cools and Kotsadam 2017.

³⁰Clark et al. 2018.

coercive control over their behavior are also more likely to suffer physical abuse.³¹ Qualitative research in Mexico affirms that family members often see violence inflicted by men on women as an acceptable response to women's failure to comply with traditional gender roles.³²

This body of research implies that ending violence involves shifting gender power asymmetries and modifying hierarchical social norms. Laws on violence intend to contribute to such a process. VAW laws signal that society disapproves of violent behavior against women and that even actions that are seen as private or justified are in fact violations that should be reported to public authorities. Violent acts against women should be condemned and called out, not tolerated or hidden. By bringing about changes in norms that endorse men's control over women, VAW laws intend to change the behavior of individuals.

To be sure, VAW laws have other purposes. They create mechanisms to enable women to exit from abuse, such as shelters, and to defend victims, such as protective orders and support services. VAW laws mandate that the state engage in certain behaviors, such as training of law enforcement, gathering of data, and coordinating violence prevention across multiple agency sites.³³ And VAW laws stipulate how perpetrators should be punished, though punitive laws often produce negative and unintended consequences for women.³⁴

In light of the problems with punitive strategies, not to mention chronic underfunding of shelters and support services, the broadest value of anti-violence laws may consist in their expression of new norms. Margela Lagarde, one of the authors of Mexico's gender violence law writes, "the law that we present is not punitive; it's a law that proposes a political reordering

³¹Villarreal 2007.

³²Agoff, Herrera and Castro 2007.

³³de Alwis and Klugman 2015; Weldon 2002.

³⁴In U.S. states, the adoption of mandatory arrest laws in US states is associated with a rise in intimate partner homicides, which implies that such laws deter reporting by victims, but not abuse by perpetrators, Iyengar 2009. Mandatory arrest policies have had a disproportionate effect on the number of women getting arrested for domestic abuse, particularly in situationally ambiguous circumstances when both parties have committed acts of violence, Durfee 2012. These studies build on and contribute to a body of work that raises critical questions about the effectiveness of the criminal justice system in combating domestic violence, see e.g. Goodmark 2017).

to address the causes of violence.” By communicating the idea that intimate-partner violence and sexual violence are not acceptable, laws attempt to shift norms to prevent violence from occurring in the first place.

As we noted in the introduction, the norms embodied in new laws on violence do not communicate themselves to the population on their own. And laws defending citizen rights, especially aspirational laws that attempt to guide, but do not yet align with, dominant societal understandings, may be distant from most people’s lived experiences.³⁵ Feminist activists and other civic groups help to close this law-practice gap, often in alliance with progressive state actors. Activist networks bring the law to bear on society through education, provision of resources and other supports, training of police, judges, and health care practitioners, and by calling attention to enforcement failures, among other work.³⁶ In these ways, societal mobilization often helps to “vernacularize” legal rights, or convert formal law into meanings and practices that are salient and appropriate in local communities.³⁷

Law and Policy to Combat VAW in Mexico

Activism by feminist movements drove the creation of public institutions to combat VAW in countries across the world, including Mexico. Feminist groups worked at the federal and state levels to raise awareness, lobby government officials, and combat opposition, both to get VAW legislation enacted and its legal provisions implemented.³⁸ Allies in the media often helped: through sustained coverage of atrocities, as well as protests, strikes, and lobbying campaigns, journalists kept the public informed and stoked outrage at official inaction to violent crimes.

The pattern of societal organization, media-triggered outrage, and state response is evi-

³⁵Htun and Jensenius 2020a.

³⁶Weldon 2002, 2006; Htun and Weldon 2012; Montoya 2013; Neumann 2017.

³⁷Merry 2009; Merry and Levitt 2017.

³⁸Beer 2017; O’Brien and Walsh 2020.

dent in both “waves” of violence against women legislation in Mexico. The first wave began in the 1970s, around the time of International Women’s Year and the global women’s conference held in Mexico City in 1975. Feminists demanded legal reforms to redefine rape and provide targeted services to victims, and some states established centers to receive victims of violence.³⁹ It was only after the revelation that bodyguards working in the Mexico City Attorney General’s office had perpetrated dozens of rapes that a coalition of feminist NGOs and women in Congress succeeded in achieving changes in legislation, however, including reform of the criminal code to broaden the definition of rape and increase penalties, as well as to eliminate components of the law such as the requirement that a woman be “chaste” in order to be legally raped.⁴⁰

In the 1990s, activist efforts to promote legislation on violence coincided with the emergence of more competition between parties for control of the federal and state governments, which created opportunities as well as obstacles. In the state of Jalisco, for example—home to the country’s second-largest city (Guadalajara) and run by the right-wing National Action Party (PAN)—feminist groups organized around a bill to criminalize and combat domestic violence, but faced opposition from Catholic officials, who argued that the bill’s notions of family contradicted ecclesiastical principles.⁴¹ Feminists eventually prevailed after building alliances with a broader range of groups, such as pro-democracy organizations and academic institutions, gaining 40,000 signatures on a popular initiative petition to compel the state legislature to vote on the bill, and campaigning through the media. In addition, feminist groups made a strategic decision to table a comprehensive bill based on feminist analysis of violence against women and replace it with more narrow proposals for reform of administrative, civil, and criminal statutes to address intra-family violence.⁴²

³⁹Stevenson 1999.

⁴⁰Lang 2003, 75.

⁴¹O’Brien and Walsh 2020.

⁴²O’Brien and Walsh 2020.

Between 1996 and 2006, 29 of 32 Mexican states adopted legislation to combat violence. These changes marked major advances over previous provisions, though—as the Jalisco story shows—controversy motivated activists to refocus most first-generation legal reforms on domestic or intra-family violence exclusively, not the range of phenomena we today think of as “violence against women.”⁴³ The modification of codes in Mexico City in 1997—which criminalized marital rape, affirmed women’s right to be free from violence, and included violence as a ground for divorce—were also controversial, as they confronted the idea that sexual relations were part of a woman’s marital obligation.⁴⁴

The crisis of *feminicidios* (femicides, or murders of thousands of women),⁴⁵ particularly in the northern state of Chihuahua, helped propel the second wave of legislative changes. Feminist activism and the mobilization of victims’ families, combined with coverage of femicides by local and international journalists, brought worldwide attention to the broader problem of violence against women in Mexico.⁴⁶ Global human rights organizations widely condemned the state’s failure to properly investigate crimes, tendency to blame murder victims for their plight, lack of transparency and accountability, and the poor treatment of victims’ families.⁴⁷ Family members of victims appealed to the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights, and then to the Inter-American Court, which found that the government’s negligence contributed to a climate of impunity, which encouraged more violence.⁴⁸

In the early 2000s, multiple state agencies at the federal and state levels began to take more aggressive action to investigate, raise awareness, and ultimately combat femicide and

⁴³Cf. [Weldon 2002](#).

⁴⁴Mala Htun interview with Senator Amalia García, July 2000. Our analysis of the ENDIREH survey data shows that these attitudes are still fairly common.

⁴⁵Lagarde (2006) argues that the appropriate term is *feminicidios* and not *femicidios*. *Feminicidios* refers to violence and murder of women *because they are women*, in a context of, and motivated by, gendered subordination and male dominance. It is not just “women murder” in the way that “homicide” is the murder of men.

⁴⁶[Lagarde 2006](#); [García-Del Moral 2016](#).

⁴⁷[Amnesty International 2003](#).

⁴⁸[Beer 2017](#).

other forms of violence against women. For example, the National Women’s Institute, the National Public Health Institute, and the National Statistical Agency launched studies—including the ENDIREH survey we analyze in this paper—to analyze gender violence, and the national congress created a series of commissions to investigate and reduce impunity for femicides in Chihuahua and nationwide. Thanks to the work of politician-activists in three congressional committees, these efforts culminated in the enactment of a landmark 2007 federal law, the “General Law for Women’s Access to a Life Free from Violence.” The 2007 VAW laws builds on the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, ratified by Mexico in 1981, and the Inter-American Convention on Violence Against Women, endorsed by member states in 1994, and directly responds to more than 40 requests by international organizations and foreign governments for the Mexican state to take greater action to combat violence. The law was approved almost unanimously by both houses of Congress (with only one vote against in the Senate) and signed by the presidential administration of Felipe Calderón of the right-wing Partido de Acción Nacional.⁴⁹

The federal 2007 VAW Law guarantees women the right to a life free from violence as a matter of human rights. It proposes to eliminate underlying causes of gender oppression including inequality, injustice, and gender hierarchies, and states that men who commit violence need to be reeducated and resocialized. The law also lays out a plan to coordinate and support efforts to prevent, punish, and eradicate VAW across different states and local governments.⁵⁰ As Marcela Lagarde, one of the authors of the law, puts it, “The law creates normative conditions for the State to stop being part of the problem and to transform itself into the promoter and protagonist of solutions to violence against women.”⁵¹

The 2007 VAW Law requires states to revise their criminal legislation within a six month

⁴⁹Lagarde y de los Ríos 2007.

⁵⁰Estados Unidos Mexicanos N.d., articles 1–5.

⁵¹Lagarde y de los Ríos 2007, 150.

window and establishes a system to monitor their progress. By 2010, all states had issued new legislation, although far from all had issued implementing legislation (*reglamento*) or revised related bodies of law, such as the civil and criminal codes and codes of civil and criminal procedure, to insure consistency.⁵²

Despite the uneven response from state authorities, activists and the media helped keep violence against women on the political agenda. In the 2010s in Veracruz, for example, media coverage incited public outrage over numerous episodes of gender and sexual violence and the state government's inaction. Feminist groups decided to petition the federal government to issue an *alerta de violencia de género* (gender violence alert), a mechanism created by the federal VAW law to publicly announce episodes of non-enforcement and to put local and state authorities on notice.⁵³ With the Veracruz alert, the federal Interior Ministry (Gobernación) commanded regional authorities to take measures to combat violence, including increasing security patrols in public spaces and public transport, video surveillance, better lighting, more services to victims, and longer term strategies to promote cultural change.⁵⁴ In these and other ways, activists used laws on violence against women to gain legitimacy for, and call attention to, their work, and at the same time raised public awareness of the norms expressed in the law.⁵⁵

Empirical Approach

To see whether VAW-related legislation has been accompanied by changes in social norms, we look at data from the Mexican National Survey on the Dynamics of Household Relations

⁵²Ramírez and Echarri 2010; Gutiérrez 2013.

⁵³Interview by Mala Htun with anti-violence activist in Veracruz, March 2018.

⁵⁴Secretaría de Gobernación N.d..

⁵⁵Cf. Albiston et al. 2011, who find that, under experimental conditions, participants who are made aware of the U.S. Family and Medical Leave Act are less likely to penalize mothers who take parental leave in terms of salary and promotion and less likely to see leave-taking mothers as less competent and less committed than non-leave takers. Albiston et al. 2011 conclude that making the law salient affects perceptions of norms and helps to align behavior with the law.

(ENDIREH) from 2003, 2006, 2011, and 2016. These surveys were designed and implemented by National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) in collaboration with the National Women’s Institute (INMUJERES), to learn more about the prevalence of, and attitudes toward, violence against women in the home, at work, and in the street. The forms of violence covered in the 2011 and 2016 surveys correspond to the different types of violence contemplated by the 2007 VAW Law, including physical, psychological, sexual, and economic violence. We draw on questions that are the same across surveys to explore changes over time.

All four surveys sample households from across Mexico. In 2003, the sample includes 57,230 households from across the country’s 32 states. For the 2006 and 2011 surveys, 128,000 households were sampled (4,000 in each state). For the 2016 survey there are 142,363 households. The samples were chosen to be representative of each state, and also to include urban and rural areas within each state.⁵⁶ In each household, the enumerators identified women aged 15 or older and interviewed at least one of them individually about her work, living conditions, and personal life, with an emphasis on experiences of different forms of violence.

The 2006, 2011, and 2016 surveys categorize women as single, in a relationship, and divorced or widowed, and include responses from women in each category. However, in 2003, the enumerators interviewed only women who were currently living with a husband or partner. To make the data comparable across the four surveys, we therefore reduce the samples from the other three surveys to women who are currently in a relationship—either married or living with a partner. The resultant samples include 34,148 interviewed women in 2003, 80,086 in 2006, 87,169 in 2011, and 70,585 in 2016. We provide further

⁵⁶The data do not include geographic indicators below the state level, meaning that we cannot link the data to administrative data or look at changes across the surveys below the state level. The available data also do not include weights.

information about the surveys and summary statistics of key variables in Section A of the Online Appendix.

Observable implications of changes in social norms

The observational nature of our data, the slow-moving processes we are studying, the latent nature of our main outcome of interest, and the bundling of legal change with feminist activism makes it impossible to cleanly identify causal effects of anti-violence legislation. It is extremely challenging to separate the real-world effects of anti-violence laws from the effects of societal mobilization surrounding these laws.⁵⁷ To increase confidence in our claims, we generate and test as many observable implications of our theoretical argument as possible, and we consider the observable implications of a series of non-legal alternative explanations as well.⁵⁸

Whereas previous papers using the ENDIREH data have focused on accounting for variation in women’s experiences of violence,⁵⁹ our main concern here is to look for evidence of changes in norms around the time of enactment of the 2007 VAW Law and related state laws. Our argument that the “bundling” of legal change, feminist activism, and media coverage accounts for the law’s expressive power implies that we should expect to see changes in norms even *before* the 2007 VAW law is formally adopted. It is not merely the enactment of a new law, but a social process of proposal-making, advocacy, and debate surrounding the law that makes people aware of evolving norms. Since the ENDIREH surveys do not ask women about their perceptions of norms directly, we explore evidence for changes in norms *indirectly* by asking about experiences and attitudes.⁶⁰

⁵⁷Cf. Kotsadam and Jakobsson 2011.

⁵⁸Cf. King, Keohane and Verba 1994. See Table A.3 in the Online Appendix for a summary of our main empirical findings and what theoretical explanations they are consistent with.

⁵⁹Villarreal 2007; INEGI 2013; Liu and Fullerton Jr 2015.

⁶⁰One exception is one part of a multi-part question, when respondents are asked why they did not report experiences of violence in school, the workplace, and public spaces, and are able to reply: “because that is not the custom.”

We first look at changes in how many women respond affirmatively to survey questions about having experienced domestic abuse in the previous year. This is interesting and important in itself, but is a tenuous indicator of social norm change, since experiences of violence could also be driven by numerous other factors (more on this in the final section). To look for additional evidence of norm change we turn to McAdams' three conditions for the emergence of a new norm: a growing consensus about desirable behavior, a growing risk of detection of violations, and more widespread knowledge of the consensus and the risk of detection.⁶¹

We look for evidence of the first condition by exploring aggregate *attitudes* toward violence among the surveyed women, which gives us a good sense of whether people believe that committing violence merits losing esteem.⁶² We examine the second condition—detection risk—by looking at the share of abused women who say they *reported* violence to public authorities, or talked about it to friends and family. Growth in reporting rates increases the risk that violations of the norm will be known by others, including state officials. When women talk about the violence they experience to friends and family, they share information about men's norm-violating behavior, which heightens the chance that violators will lose esteem in the local community.

We assess the third condition for norm emergence through *knowledge* of the 2007 VAW Law and how this is correlated with the other indicators. As McAdams explains, one mechanism through which the law affects behavior is by clarifying actual patterns of public approval and disapproval of certain actions.⁶³ We can therefore infer that, when people know about the Law to Guarantee Women a Life Free From Violence, they are aware of a societal con-

⁶¹McAdams 1997.

⁶²Ideally, we would have data on men's attitudes toward violence as well as women's. Data on women's attitudes nonetheless offers a good picture of prevailing social norms, as women often endorse the patriarchal attitudes which contribute to the phenomenon of violence. For example, DHS surveys from countries around the world show that surprisingly often, a majority of women surveyed believe that domestic abuse is justified for seemingly trivial reasons, such as when a woman burns food (World Bank 2011).

⁶³McAdams 2000.

sensus condemning violence and the risk that violations of the law will be detected. Chwe refers to this third condition as “common knowledge.”⁶⁴

How likely is it that we tap into norm change with these four sets of indicators? There is disagreement among experts on whether we should measure norms with attitudes. Paluck and co-authors advise against using attitudes as indicators of norm perceptions, as the former tend to change more slowly than the latter.⁶⁵ Indeed, the study by Green, Wilke and Cooper of the effects of an anti-violence social norms marketing intervention in Uganda found that attitudes did not change, but violence perpetration and reporting behavior did.⁶⁶ Heise and Fulu, by contrast, argue that aggregate attitudes can be used as a reasonable proxy for prevailing norms.⁶⁷ Our approach of examining a constellation of attitudes alongside observable behavior should thus be characterized as conservative. If we see changes in attitudes as well as behavior, it is even more likely that norms have shifted.

Evidence of changes in social norms

The ENDIREH surveys show that violence is common in Mexico. The 2016 survey finds that 66% of the women interviewed had experienced some form of violence at some point in their lives,⁶⁸ which appears similar to the 67% of women who say they had experienced some form of violence in the 2006 survey, and the 63% saying likewise in the 2011 survey.⁶⁹ These percentages tell us little about whether there has been change over time, however, since they

⁶⁴Chwe 2013.

⁶⁵Paluck et al. 2010.

⁶⁶Green, Wilke and Cooper 2020.

⁶⁷Heise and Fulu 2015.

⁶⁸ENDIREH N.d., 8.

⁶⁹ENDIREH N.d., 9.

are based on aggregates of all the women interviewed and all the questions about experiences of domestic abuse in each survey—both of which differ somewhat across the surveys.⁷⁰

What is more, recollections about experiences of violence over the course of a lifetime, even across surveys in the same country, do not tell us much about whether women’s likelihood of suffering violence has grown or declined within a short period of time. In this paper, we therefore look at how many women say they experienced domestic abuse in the *previous year*.⁷¹ In addition, to facilitate comparison across surveys, we look only at the 28 questions about experiences of physical, sexual, psychological, and economic violence that are worded the same across the four surveys.⁷²

Within these parameters, the data show a clear reduction in the share of women saying they experienced domestic abuse, as shown in Figure 1. In 2003, 40.7% of the surveyed women say they experienced domestic abuse during the previous year. This goes down more than 2 percentage points to 38.5% in 2006. There is a drop of more than 5 percentage points to 33.2% in the 2011 survey, and then another 5 percentage point decline to 27.4% in the 2016 survey.⁷³ As we can see from the narrow confidence intervals at the top of each bar, these are fairly precise estimates and all the drops are highly statistically significant. The gradual drop in incidents before 2007 and the more rapid drop after 2007 is consistent with the argument that the legal change, and discussions surrounding it, produced an effect on norms related to violence.⁷⁴

⁷⁰These figures also cannot be directly compared with prevalence estimates in other countries. Definitions of violence, questions, and survey methodologies vary dramatically (Heise and Fulu 2015). As mentioned earlier, the ENDIREH’s definitions of violence are broad.

⁷¹It has been common to measure the prevalence of domestic abuse by looking at whether women have *ever* experienced it (see, e.g., García-Moreno et al. 2013). However, in their global and Sub-Saharan African studies, Heise and Kotsadam 2015 and Cools and Kotsadam 2017, respectively, adopt an approach similar to ours by using the previous 12 month measure of the prevalence of violence, in part to assess the influence of other factors subject to change across surveys.

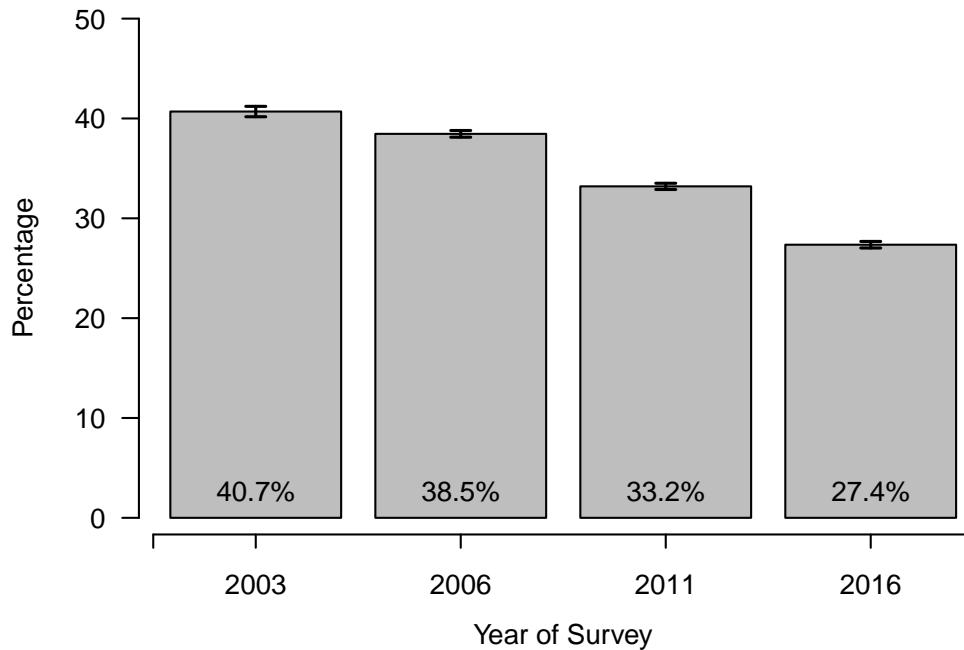
⁷²See Appendix Table A.2 for a full list of questions included.

⁷³There is a possibility that at least some of the self-reported reduction in violence over these years is driven by shifts in social desirability bias because of norm change, causing women to be more or less likely to admit they were abused. These are biases we cannot control for, but it is important to keep them in mind when interpreting the data.

⁷⁴Not giving an answer was not an option in most of the survey questions, but there are still a few instances

Whether or not a woman experiences domestic abuse depends on her position in society. Women are more likely to say that they experienced abuse in the previous year if they have little education, worked in the previous week, are unmarried (but living with a partner), or are living in an urban area.⁷⁵ However, the change over time in the share of women experiencing abuse is not driven by changes in the profile of the women surveyed—which in fact is very similar across the surveys (see Appendix Table A.1)—and the drop is large for women across the socio-economic spectrum (see Appendix Figure B.1).

Figure 1: Percentage of women saying they experienced domestic abuse in the previous year (95% confidence intervals at the top of each bar)



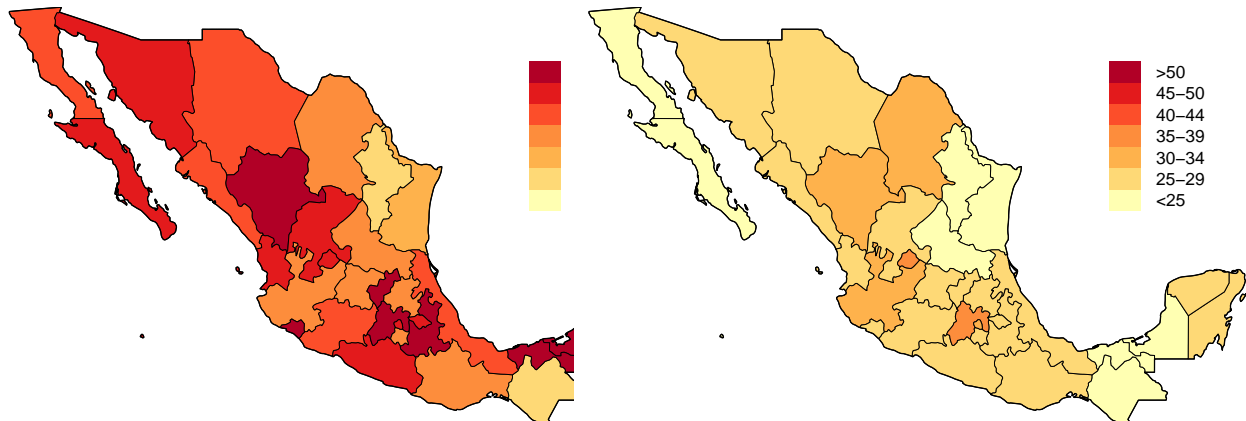
There is considerable geographical variation in the share of women saying they experienced domestic abuse in the previous year. In the 2003 survey, Colima is the state with the

of non response to questions. For the main analysis in this paper we coded these missing responses as “no” so that they are included in the denominator of the percentages we report. To increase our confidence in our results, we also tried coding the missing responses as NA, so that they are excluded from the denominators. There are so few missing responses that the differences in results are inconsequential.

⁷⁵This summary is based on linear multi-level models with random effects for states, run separately for each of the four surveys. The full output from these models is reported in Appendix Table B.1.

highest percentage—59% of women say they had experienced abuse in the previous year—followed by Querétaro, Durango, and Estado de México with 56%. However, by the time of the 2016 survey, the percentage drops across all states, as shown in Figure 2. In the left panel we see the state-wise percentage of women experiencing domestic abuse in the year preceding the 2003 survey and in the right panel we see the same for the 2016 survey. The biggest changes occur in Tabasco and Colima (-31 percentage points), and Baja California Sur and Campeche (-28 percentage points). Since the largest changes happened in some of the states with highest rates of domestic abuse, there is less state-wise variation in the 2011 and 2016 surveys than in the earlier surveys.⁷⁶

Figure 2: Percentage of women saying they experienced domestic abuse during the year preceding the 2003 and 2016 ENDIREH surveys



Data presented in this section reveal a large reduction in intimate partner violence across regions and groups of women. Given that there are approximately 30 million women older than 15 years of age currently in a relationship in Mexico during this period, the 5 percentage point drop in incidents of violence we observe between 2006 and 2011 implies that 1.5 million fewer women experienced intimate partner abuse in the previous year after the 2007 VAW Law was enacted, and a similar reduction by 2016. In the following sections, we present

⁷⁶The state-wise change in domestic abuse is not associated with overall changes in violence in these states, such as the homicide rate (see Appendix Figure B.3)

evidence that these major changes in women’s experiences of violence coincide with changes in attitudes and other practices related to violence, such as rates of reporting to authorities and disclosure to friends and family.

A growing societal consensus against domestic abuse

According to McAdam’s esteem theory, the first condition that implies norm change is a societal consensus that certain behaviors are worthy of gaining and losing esteem.⁷⁷ Consider whether a man should lose respect if he hits his partner. Anti-violence legislation in Mexico, and feminist efforts to raise awareness of these laws and international human rights principles, have made it abundantly clear such behavior constitutes a crime. The 2011 ENDIREH survey asks respondents whether a husband has the right to hit his wife, and, as we see in Figure 3, only 1.8% of the women interviewed for the 2011 survey answer this question affirmatively, which implies that attitudes are almost completely aligned with the law.

Yet larger numbers of women express attitudes which imply less condemnation, and even tacit support for, violence and the conditions conducive to violence, such as marital power and women’s obedience.⁷⁸ 22.8% of women in the survey agree with the statement that a wife should obey her husband and 19% say that a woman is obliged to have sex with her partner. A large share (26.9%) of women also agree that domestic abuse is a private matter that should stay within the family.⁷⁹

The ENDIREH does not ask all of these questions consistently across the four survey waves. Only the first two questions—about a man’s right to hit his wife and whether a woman should obey her partner—also appear in the 2003 and 2006 surveys, permitting us to look at changes over time.

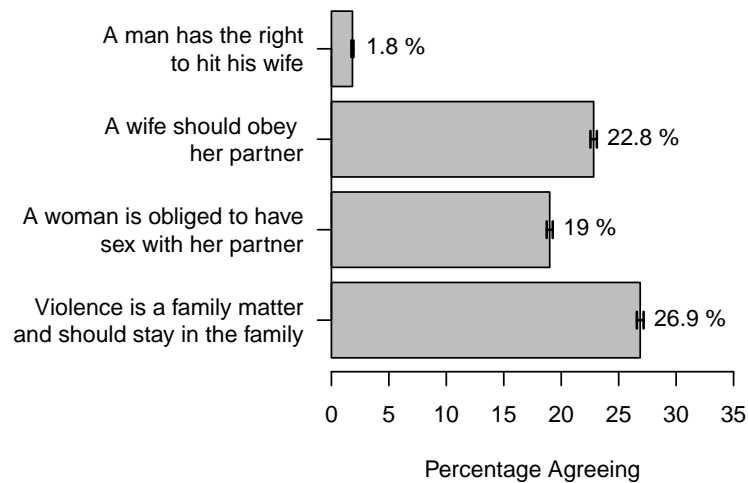
There have been dramatic changes in the responses to these questions, as shown in Figure

⁷⁷McAdams 1997.

⁷⁸Cf. Agoff, Herrera and Castro 2007.

⁷⁹Question 10.1.10: “¿Si hay golpes o maltrato en la casa es un asunto de familia y ahí debe quedar?”

Figure 3: Percentage of women agreeing with statements about male control in the 2011 ENDIREH survey (95% confidence intervals at the tip of each bar)



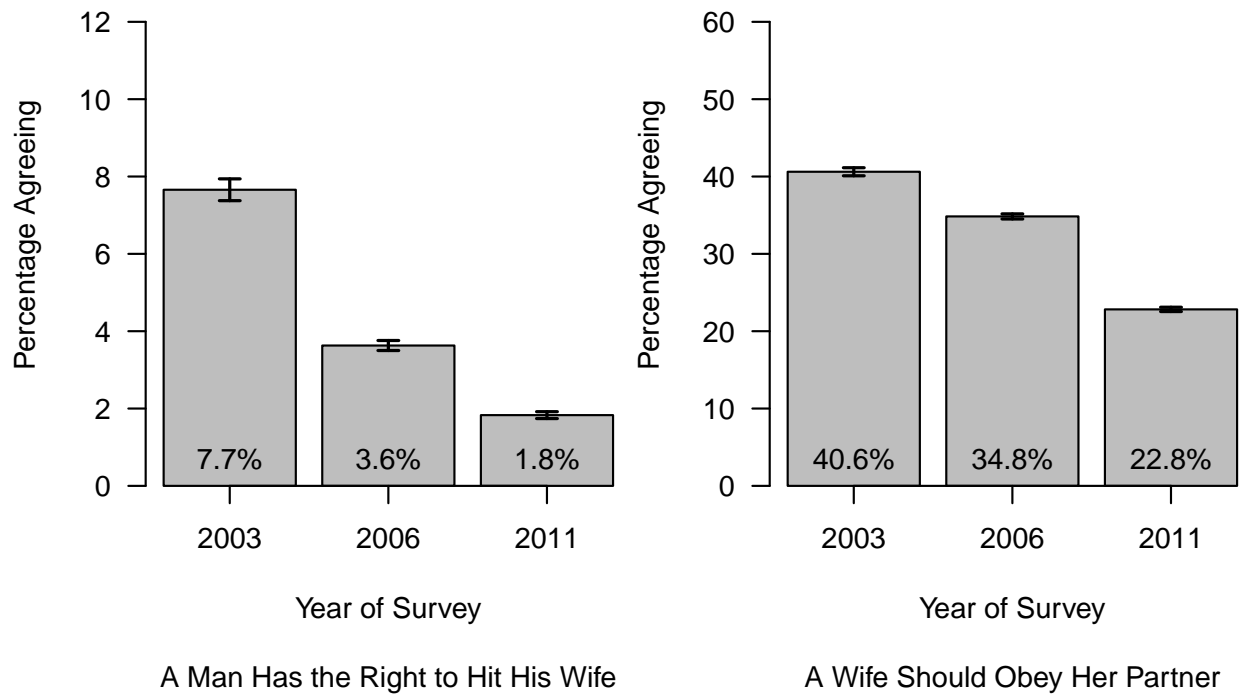
4. The share of women saying that a man has the right to hit his wife declines from 7.7% in the 2003 survey, via 3.6% in the 2006 survey, to 1.8% in the 2011 survey. When it comes to the idea that a wife should obey her partner, 40.6% agree to this in 2003, 34.8% in 2006, and 22.8% in 2011. This is an impressive reduction in the share of women endorsing male control and women’s subordination in marriage during a short period of time.

Increased risk that violations will be detected

The second condition proposed by McAdams implying the emergence of a new norm is the risk that norm violations will be detected.⁸⁰ Since intimate partner violence often happens within the boundaries of the home, it is often hard to know about unless a woman chooses to speak out about her experiences or neighbors overhear the conflict. When women report violence to public authorities, or to friends and family, it is more likely that others in the community will know about violations and who perpetrated them. Women’s tendency to

⁸⁰McAdams 1997.

Figure 4: Attitudes towards male control changing over time, ENDIREH 2003, 2006, 2011 (95% confidence intervals at the top of each bar)



report, alongside evolving public attitudes, thus implies a greater probability that men who abuse women will suffer a loss of social esteem.

The ENDIREH surveys show that only a small share of women report the abuse they experience to public authorities, but that this share is growing. In Figure 5 we show the share of women experiencing *physical* domestic abuse in the year preceding the 2003, 2006, and 2011 surveys, who said they had reported of the abuse in that same year.⁸¹ Here we see an increase in reporting rates from 6.5% and 5.2% in the 2003 and 2006 surveys, respectively,

⁸¹In the 2003 and 2006 surveys, women were asked about their reporting behavior only if they had experienced physical (including sexual) abuse. This includes sub-questions 20-30 of question 6.1 in the 2011 survey of women currently in a relationship. The questions as worded in the surveys are listed in Appendix Table A.2. In each of these surveys the women were asked about the year in which the reported of the abuse. The surveys were held in October or November of each year.

to 7.9% in the 2011 survey.⁸² What is more, a large and increasing share of women who reported say they were treated well by the organizations or institutions they approached.

The 2016 survey changed the format of questions regarding reporting to authorities, which precludes a direct comparison with survey responses in previous waves. For example, the survey adds additional, detailed questions about the types of reports, the reporting process, the response of public authorities, and it also shifts the time frame of women's answers. Notwithstanding these differences, the responses to the most comparable of these questions suggest further increases in reporting in the 2016 survey to approximately 9% of abused women.⁸³

The pattern of increased reporting to authorities is consistent with another observable implication of norm change related to violence: women's greater willingness to speak out about abuse to their local community. Figure 6 shows that women victims become more likely to speak about their experiences with family and friends over time: there is an increase in the share of victims who spoke to family from 33% in 2003 to about 42% in 2016, and an increase from some 10% who say they told friends about domestic abuse in 2003 to about 15% in 2016.⁸⁴

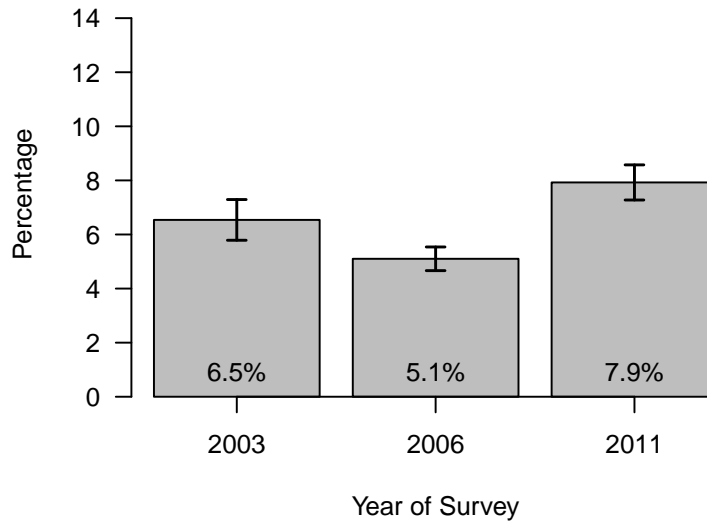
Evidence for norm change can also be found in women's *reasons* for not reporting abuse,

⁸²In 2003 and 2006, the survey asks women if they reported abuse to the prosecutors office, the police, or some other authority. For 2011, the survey adds a few more reporting options, including the Womens Institute, family services, and the municipal government.

⁸³The 2016 survey asks all women who had experienced some form of abuse whether they knew where to get help or support, and 31% answered this question affirmatively (including 35% of women who had experienced physical abuse in the previous year). The survey then asks women whether they contacted any governmental office, health care facility, or civic group to get support because of what had happened to them, whether they (or someone in their family) had filed a complaint or lawsuit against their partner to any authorities, and which aggressions they had reported about. In addition, and unlike in previous surveys, the 2016 survey adds additional question blocks about official responses, such as whether or not they launched an investigation, why or why not, whether they had proposed reconciliation, talked the woman out of proceeding. Out of the women who say they have experienced physical abuse in the previous year, 7% say they contacted a group or organization between 2015 and 2016 and 4% said they filed a complaint or lawsuit during this period. Overall, 9% answered at least one of these questions affirmatively.

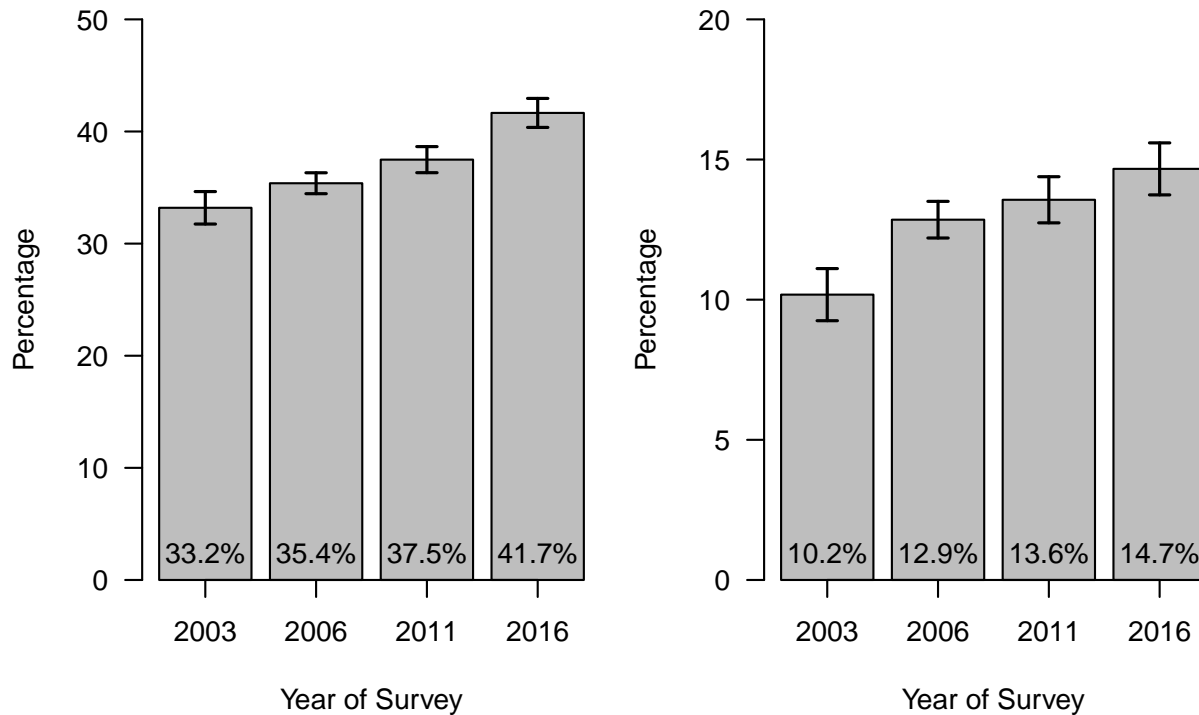
⁸⁴Unlike the official reporting questions, the questions about friends and family are comparable across survey waves.

Figure 5: Percentage of women experiencing physical domestic abuse during the year preceding the survey saying they reported it to the authorities (95% confidence intervals at the top of each bar)



as shown in Figure 7. When asked why they did not report physical domestic abuse in the previous year, a large share of the respondents in the 2006 survey say that it was for their children, out of shame, to keep the incident quiet, or because it was “not important”—signaling the power of beliefs that privatize and normalize violence. In the 2011 survey, far fewer women give “not important”, their children, or that they wanted to keep it quiet as reasons for not reporting. However, a greater share of women say that they chose not to report out of fear, which suggests that many women perceive reporting to incur significant personal risk. These responses are consistent with the patterns in the attitudinal questions reported above.

Figure 6: Percentage of women experiencing domestic abuse during the year preceding the survey saying they told relatives (left panel) and friends (right panel)



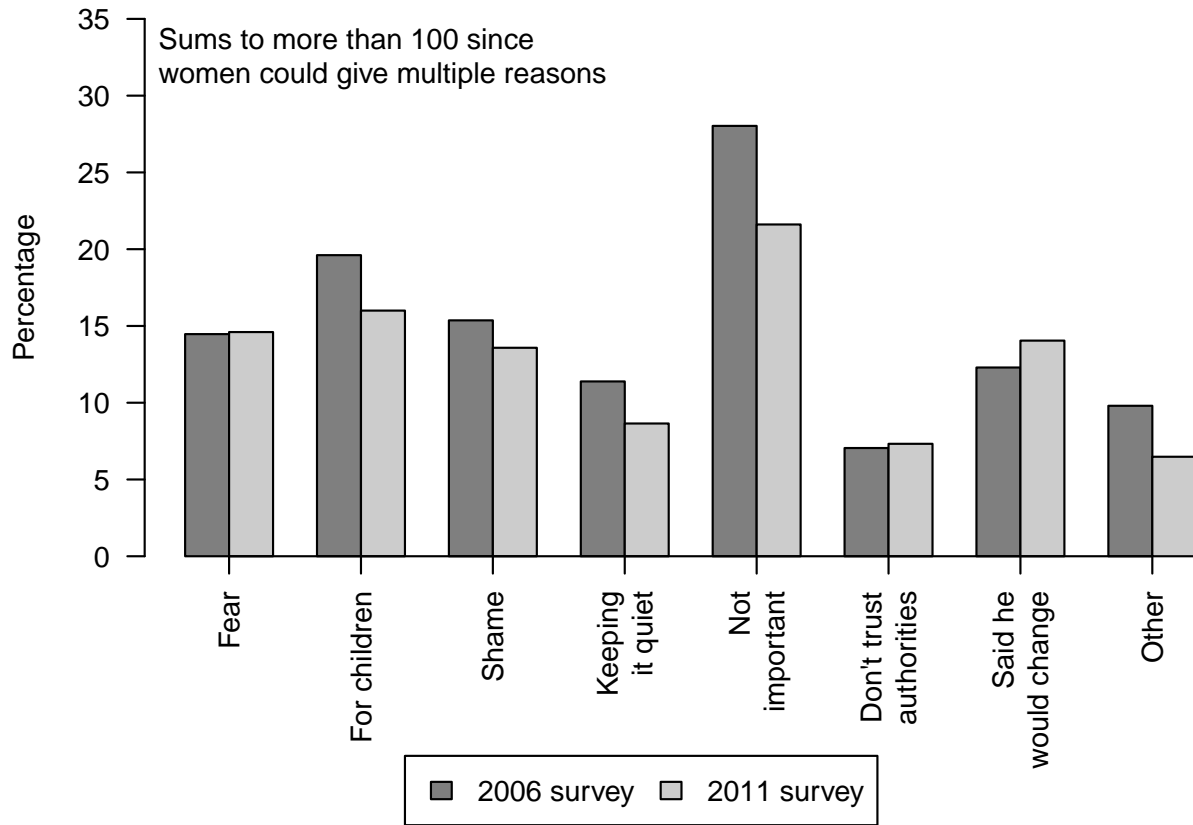
Common knowledge

The third condition of a new norm is the extent to which members of the community are aware of a consensus condemning violence and the risk that violations will be detected,⁸⁵ or what Chwe refers to as common knowledge.⁸⁶ As mentioned earlier, we operationalize this condition by exploring knowledge of the 2007 VAW Law. Among the 87,169 women currently in a relationship interviewed for the 2011 ENDIREH survey, 73,547 (84%) say that they had heard about the law guaranteeing the right to a life without violence. The share is high nationwide, ranging from 78% to 89% at the state level, though with differences among differently-situated women. Women with no education are much less likely to have heard about the law (60%) compared to women with a university degree (94%); women in urban

⁸⁵McAdams 1997.

⁸⁶Chwe 2013.

Figure 7: Reasons given for not reporting domestic abuse in the previous year



areas are more likely to know about the law (86%) than women in rural areas (77%); and women speaking an indigenous language are also less likely to know the law (69%) than women who do not speak an indigenous language (85%).

Knowledge of the 2007 VAW Law is associated with attitudes toward violence, and also with experiencing and reporting abuse. Among women who know about the law, some 19% say that women have to obey their husbands, compared to 43% of those who do not know the law. And only 1.4% of those who know the law say that a man has the right to his partner, compared with 4% among those who do not know it. Knowing the law remains a significant predictor of attitudes, reporting, and experiencing abuse even when we control for other individual and state-level attributes (see Appendix Table B.2).

Not knowing the 2007 VAW Law does not imply that women don't know they have

rights—indicated, for example, by the fact that many women who are unaware of the law say that they have reported abuse. These women may know of older laws, or know that a man is not permitted to abuse his partner without being sure exactly which law says this. However, the fact that we see large differences in the experiences and attitudes of women knowing and not knowing the law—even controlling for many other attributes—provides evidence that the norm changes we observe are indeed driven by the 2007 VAW Law and accompanying societal mobilization.⁸⁷

Alternative explanations for changes in social norms

In the previous sections we presented evidence of large-scale changes in social norms related to violence against women in Mexico between 2003 and 2016, which we argue is evidence of the expressive power of the new VAW legislation. Would these norm changes have occurred regardless of the law? Is it possible that the patterns in our over-time data can be attributed to changes in research design across surveys, overall rates of societal violence, economic growth, generational change, and/or the global diffusion of ideas? In this section, we explore competing explanations. Although we cannot fully rule out the alternatives, we show that our findings are more consistent with our expressive law approach than with rival, non-legal explanations.⁸⁸

As noted earlier, the patterns in our data do not seem to be driven by changes in the profiles of the women sampled and interviewed for the surveys. Social characteristics of the women respondents are very similar across the survey waves (see Appendix Table A.1). Nor are changes in experiences and attitudes associated with overall changes in violence in

⁸⁷Other studies in Mexico affirm the importance of common knowledge for norm change. A field experiment in a Oaxacan village found that a soap opera condemning domestic abuse had a greater effect on participants' perception of anti-violence norms under conditions creating "common knowledge"—listening to a broadcast during a community meeting—than when heard in individual households on a CD (Arias 2019).

⁸⁸See Appendix Table A.3 for a summary of the empirical evidence we present and whether we consider it consistent with our explanation or other, non-legal explanations.

Mexican states, such as the homicide rate (see Appendix Figure B.3). Though the drug war in Mexico has exacerbated certain forms of gender violence such as femicides, it appears to have had little relationship to other, more pervasive forms of gender violence, such as domestic abuse.

What about socio-economic development? Cross-nationally, economic growth tends to be associated with a reduction in women’s economic vulnerability to men. Heise and Kotsadam, for example, show an inverse relationship between GDP per capita and the perpetration of intimate partner violence globally and Inglehart and Norris find a close association between economic development and views supportive of gender equality.⁸⁹ Economic growth may produce mixed effects, however. Though women’s access to jobs may give them greater power to bargain for more equitable relations with their partners,⁹⁰ women’s rising status may also trigger men’s insecurity and produce a violent backlash.⁹¹

In our data from Mexico, there is a negative correlation between growth in state-level GDP from 2005 to 2010 and changes in experiences of domestic abuse between 2006 and 2011, but this association is not statistically significant. And when we look at the change in GDP from 2010 to 2015 and changes in violence from 2011 to 2016, the direction of the correlation is reversed (positive, though also insignificant). What is more, state-level GDP growth is not significantly associated with changes in reporting patterns or in attitudes (see Appendix Figure B.2). Although women with higher social status are less likely to be victims of intimate partner violence—a pattern also reported by Liu and Fullerton Jr.⁹²—the reduction in abuse that we observe, as well as changes in attitudes and reporting, happen among women from across the socio-economic spectrum (see Appendix Figures B.1, B.10,

⁸⁹Heise and Kotsadam 2015; Inglehart and Norris 2003.

⁹⁰Cf. Iversen and Rosenbluth 2010.

⁹¹Cools and Kotsadam 2017.

⁹²Liu and Fullerton Jr 2015.

and B.11). Overall, we therefore find no evidence that the patterns we observe are driven by socio-economic factors.

Often, changes across survey waves reflect a “time trend” of younger generations with more progressive views replacing older generations with more conservative views from one survey sample to the next. However, generational change does not seem to explain our findings. Though our data show that women over 50 hold more conservative views than younger women, our data also evince changes in attitudes within all age groups (see Appendix Figures B.4 and B.5). Furthermore, the fact that we see changes in attitudes within all *birth cohorts* (shown in Appendix Figures B.6 and B.7) implies that patterns are driven by changes at the individual level and not by less-conservative women in their 40s growing older and joining the more-conservative over-50 group. Changes in women’s experiences of domestic abuse and willingness to report it also occur across all birth cohorts (see Appendix Figures B.8 and B.9).

Global diffusion is another important factor affecting social norms. Pierrotti attributes the decline in women’s acceptance of intimate partner violence as a form of marital control in 23 of 26 countries she studies to the spread of global cultural scripts by transnational feminist activists and international organizations.⁹³ However, her work theorizes that global diffusion shapes individual attitudes *through the mechanism of changes in domestic law and other institutions*.⁹⁴ As we noted earlier, the enactment of violence against women laws in most countries resulted from a combination of transnational and domestic civic activism. Feminists mobilized within and across borders to raise awareness, frame violence against women in globally and locally compelling ways, and to build coalitions backing the adoption

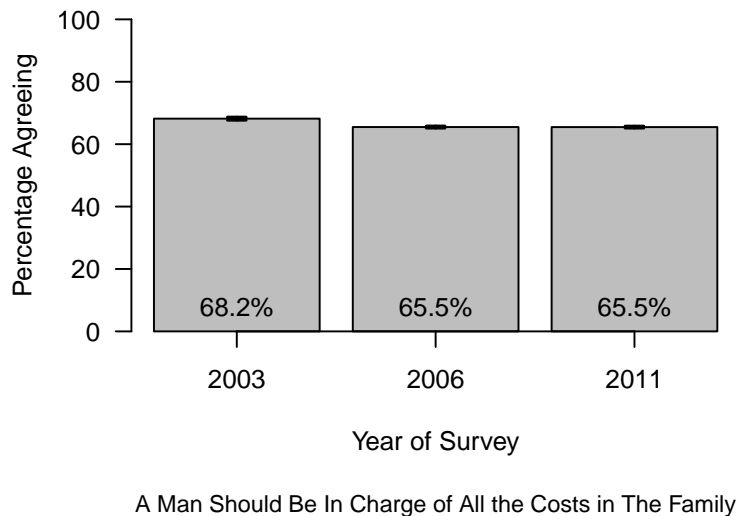
⁹³Pierrotti 2013.

⁹⁴See Figure 1 in Pierrotti 2013, page 242.

of laws to combat violence.⁹⁵ In other words, by studying the effects of a domestic legal change we are already taking the global diffusion of ideas into account.

Still, it is possible that the spread of ideas could produce direct effects on norms as individuals engage with international news media and entertainment, effects not mediated through domestic legislation. We see little evidence for such direct effects in our data, however, as we see similar changes in experiences and attitudes among women from all strata of society, not only or even primarily among more educated women with the best access to international discourses (see Appendix Figures B.1, B.10, and B.11). Furthermore, the fact that knowledge of the 2007 VAW Law is a clear predictor of all of our main outcomes, even when we control for a host of other factors (see previous Section), lends support to our claim that legal expressive power, and not just non-legal global or domestic cultural influences, contribute to norm change.

Figure 8: Attitudes towards non-violence related gender roles over time, ENDIREH 2003, 2006, 2011 (95% confidence intervals at the top of each bar)



⁹⁵See [Htun and Weldon 2012](#). For a study of the variation in the ways that transnational and domestic activism on violence against women interact and the heterogeneity of results, see [García-Del Moral and Neumann 2019](#).

Finally, a critical test of the impact of violence against women laws is to compare attitudes on violence with attitudes on other aspects of gender roles. Inglehart and Welzel find that public opinion has become more supportive of gender equality in recent decades around the world.⁹⁶ Since VAW legislation is likely primarily to affect attitudes related to violence, looking at changes in attitudes related to other aspects of gender relations can be a “placebo test” for effects of the VAW laws.⁹⁷ The ENDIREH surveys ask mostly questions about violence, though answers to a question about whether men should be in charge of all the costs of the family—which indicates adherence to traditional gender roles—may serve as a placebo test. As Figure 8 shows, a large majority of women endorse men’s financial authority and responsibility and there is almost no change on this across the survey waves. This suggests that views on violence are indeed changing faster than views on other women’s rights.

Conclusions

Laws have expressive power. They signal right and wrong, and communicate messages about what is considered socially acceptable. In this paper we developed a theory about the expressive power of violence against women legislation, analyzed various mechanisms through which VAW laws are expressed, and proposed a novel way to operationalize and test our theoretical propositions about norm change using survey data from Mexico. Though the nature of our data does not allow us to cleanly identify a causal relationship between the laws on violence and the norm changes we observe, the trends in the data are consistent with McAdams’s three conditions for the emergence of a new norm.⁹⁸ At the very least, and regardless of its cause, we show that intimate partner violence—the most common form of

⁹⁶Inglehart and Welzel 2005.

⁹⁷Cf. Eggers, Tuñón and Dafoe 2021.

⁹⁸McAdams 1997.

violence experienced by women—has declined, reporting of such episodes has increased, and social attitudes about the acceptability of violence have changed dramatically.

To be sure, there is a long road ahead. Grave problems remain in the area of violence, as physical and psychological abuse of women is still widespread and reporting is uncommon.⁹⁹ Men’s loss of jobs and status due to civil conflicts, globalization, economic changes, and the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbates risk factors for violence.¹⁰⁰ In Mexico, though rates of domestic abuse have declined, a large majority of women still say they experienced at least one form of intimate partner violence, and many also suffer violence and harassment in workplaces, schools, public institutions, and even while giving birth.¹⁰¹ Reporting is still risky and many perpetrators are never investigated nor punished.

Activists in Mexico, and all over the world, have worked for decades to forge global agreements, enact national laws, and create local institutions to reduce violence and help victims. It is easy to get discouraged when viewing headlines about atrocities, and to wonder, exhausted, if all the efforts have been in vain. Our study provides some evidence that feminist efforts have paid off. Our findings strongly imply that the bundling of new anti-violence laws with societal mobilization and media coverage help to propel major changes in women’s experiences of, and attitude toward, violence. Even weakly-enforced VAW laws may contribute to the transformation of norms and a more egalitarian society.

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⁹⁹García-Moreno et al. 2013; Palermo, Bleck and Peterman 2013; de Alwis and Klugman 2015.

¹⁰⁰True 2012; Gamlin and Hawkes 2017; Peterman et al. 2020.

¹⁰¹Castro and Frías 2020; INEGI 2013.

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Supplementary Material

Expressive Power of Anti-Violence Legislation: Changes in Social Norms on Violence Against Women in Mexico

By Mala Htun and Francesca R. Jensenius

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Appendix A Description of data and variables

This paper analyzes data from the Mexican National Survey on the Dynamics of Household Relations (ENDIREH) from 2003, 2006, 2011, and 2016. The ENDIREH was designed and implemented by National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) in collaboration with the National Women’s Institute (INMUJERES). All four waves of the survey sample households from across Mexico. In 2003, the sample includes 57,230 households from across the country’s 32 states. For the 2006 and 2011 surveys, 128,000 households were sampled (4,000 in each state). For the 2016 survey there are 142,363 households. The samples were chosen to be representative of each state, and also to include urban and rural areas within each state.

In each household, the enumerators identified women aged 15 or older and interviewed at least one of them individually, about her work, living conditions, and personal life, with an emphasis on experiences of different forms of violence. Survey enumerators asked one key person in each of the sampled households to respond to questions about all the individuals living in the household, in order to identify all women aged 15 or older. Then, the enumerators interviewed at least one of these women individually. In 2003, they interviewed all women in a household who were currently living with a husband or partner. In 2006, the survey categorized women as single, in a relationship, and divorced or widowed, and interviewed up to one woman from each category.¹⁰² In 2011, they interviewed every woman older than 15 years of age. In 2016, they selected the woman with the date of birth closest to the date of the interview within each household.

The final sample of women, each of whom was individually interviewed, is 34,355 in 2003; 133,398 in 2006; 152,636 in 2011; and 111,256 in 2016. We reduce the sample to women who were currently in a relationship—either married or living with a partner—to

¹⁰²If there was more than one woman in a category, they interviewed the one with the birthday closest to the day of the interview.

allow comparison across the surveys. The samples we look at therefore cover 34,148 in 2003; 80,086 in 2006; 87,169 in 2011; and 70,585 in 2016 (see Table A.1). Further methodological information is available through the INEGI website.¹⁰³

The variables used in the paper all draw on the survey questionnaires designed for women currently in a relationship:

Domestic abuse: A dichotomous indicator for whether a woman has experienced at least one out of the 28 questions about violence in her current relationship that are comparable across the four surveys we look at. See a full list of the included questions in Table A.2.

Physical domestic abuse: A dichotomous indicator which is 1 for women who say they have been pushed or had their hair pulled, been tied up, kicked, had items thrown at them, been hit by hand or with objects, strangled, threatened or attacked with a knife, shot at, or forced into sexual relations against their will by their current partner in the previous year. This covers sub-questions 20-30 of question 6.1 in the 2011 survey (see Table A.2).

Education: An ordinal scale ranging from 1-6, where 1=no education; 2=primary school; 3=middle school; 4=high school; 5=undergraduate studies; 6=graduate studies. The variable is treated as continuous in the models we run.

Age: Numerical variable for the self-reported age of the women.

Working: A dichotomous indicator which is 1 for women who say they worked in the previous week and 0 otherwise.

Indigenous: A dichotomous indicator which is 1 for women who say they speak an indigenous language and 0 otherwise.

¹⁰³See [URL] www.inegi.org.

Non-married: A dichotomous indicator which is 1 for women who say they are married to the partner they live with and 0 otherwise. As all the included women are living with a partner, 0 indicated a non-married partnership.

Urban locality: A dichotomous indicator which is 1 for women living in localities with a population larger than 2,500 people.

Murder rates: A continuous variable based on the dataset “Intentional homicides in Mexico by Municipality from 1990 to 2015” by Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI 2018). This dataset includes the number of murders that occurred in any given year, as opposed to murders that were registered in that year. For the years used (2005 and 2010) we collapsed the total number of murders in a state and divided it by the population in the state. The numbers were then multiplied with 1000, and can be interpreted as the number of intentional murders per 1000 people in the population.

Table A.1: Demographic and socio-economic characteristics of women interviewed in ENDI-REH surveys

	2003 survey	2006 survey	2011 survey	2016 survey
Education level (1-6)	2.7	2.9	3.0	3.1
Age	39.7	40.9	41.2	41.6
Working (%)	36.2	31.5	32.9	34.8
Indigenous (%)	10.3	6.4	6.4	8.0
Non-married (%)	18.2	20.3	24.5	29.3
Urban locality (%)	—	82.5	79.5	73.2
Number of women	34,148	80,086	87,169	70,585

Table A.2: Questions on domestic abuse included in our analyses (question numbers are from ENDIREH 2011)

Question number	Question wording
6.1.1	la ha avergonzado, menospreciado o humillado (le ha dicho que es fea o la ha comparado con otras mujeres)
6.1.2	la ha ignorado, no la ha tomado en cuenta o no le ha brindado cariño
6.1.3	le ha dicho que usted lo engaña
6.1.4	le ha hecho sentir miedo
6.1.5	la ha amenazado con irse, dañarla, quitarle a los hijos o correrla de la casa
6.1.6	la ha encerrado, le ha prohibido salir o que la visiten
6.1.7	ha hecho que los hijos o parientes se pongan contra usted
6.1.9	la ha amenazado con algún arma (cuchillo, navaja, pistola o rifle)
6.1.10	la ha amenazado con matarla, matarse él o matar a los niños
6.1.11	le ha destruido, tirado o escondido cosas de usted o del hogar
6.1.12	le ha dejado de hablar
6.1.13	se ha enojado mucho porque no está listo el quehacer, porque la comida no está como él quiere o cree que usted no cumplió con sus obligaciones
6.1.14	le ha reclamado por cómo gasta usted el dinero
6.1.15	aunque tenga dinero ha sido codo o tacaño con los gastos de la casa
6.1.16	no ha cumplido con dar el gasto o ha amenazado con no darlo
6.1.17	se ha gastado el dinero que se necesita para la casa
6.1.19	le ha prohibido trabajar o estudiar
6.1.20	la ha empujado o le ha jalado el cabello
6.1.21	la ha amarrado
6.1.22	la ha pateado
6.1.23	le ha aventado algún objeto
6.1.24	la ha golpeado con las manos o con algún objeto
6.1.25	la ha tratado de ahorcar o asfixiar
6.1.26	la ha agredido con cuchillo o navaja
6.1.27	le ha disparado con un arma
6.1.28	le ha exigido tener relaciones sexuales, aunque usted no quiera
6.1.29	cuando tienen relaciones sexuales la ha obligado a hacer cosas que a usted no le gustan
6.1.30	ha usado su fuerza física para obligarla a tener relaciones sexuales

Table A.3: Empirical evidence we present and what explanations they are consistent with

No.	Empirical pattern	Where we show it	Expressive of the Law	Non-legal explanations
1	Decline in experiences of domestic abuse	Figure 1	Yes	Yes
2	Fewer women condone violence	Figure 4	Yes	Yes
3	More women report abuse to authorities	Figure 5	Yes	Yes
4	More women tell friends/family about abuse	Figure 6	Yes	Yes
5	Fewer women calling abuse unimportant	Figure 7	Yes	Yes
6	Knowledge of the law	Page 25-26	Yes	Yes
7	Points 1-3 correlate with 6	Table B.2	Yes	No
8	Changes within birth cohorts	Page 29	Yes	No
9	GDP-growth uncorrelated with 1-3	Figure B.2	Yes	No
10	Changes in homicide uncorrelated with 1	Figure B.3	Yes	No
11	VAW-related norms change faster	Figure 8	Yes	No

Appendix B Supplementary Tables and Figures

Table B.1: Linear multi-level models of women experiencing domestic abuse during previous year

	2003 survey	2006 survey	2011 survey	2016 survey
(Intercept)	0.676*** (0.019)	0.584*** (0.014)	0.463*** (0.011)	0.366*** (0.013)
Education level	-0.025*** (0.003)	-0.027*** (0.002)	-0.019*** (0.002)	-0.020*** (0.002)
Worked last week	0.040*** (0.006)	0.010** (0.004)	0.035*** (0.004)	0.036*** (0.004)
Non-married partnership	0.079*** (0.007)	0.065*** (0.004)	0.067*** (0.004)	0.058*** (0.004)
Age	-0.005*** (0.000)	-0.005*** (0.000)	-0.004*** (0.000)	-0.002*** (0.000)
Knows indigenous language	-0.025* (0.010)	-0.030*** (0.008)	-0.053*** (0.007)	-0.027*** (0.007)
Urban locality		0.083*** (0.005)	0.069*** (0.004)	0.047*** (0.004)
N women	33,746	80,023	86,892	70,487
N states	32	32	32	32

Note: Multilevel linear regression models with random effects for states. The outcome variable is binary with 1 indicating that a woman experienced domestic abuse during the previous year. Education level is ordinal ranging from 1 (no education) to 6 (graduate degree), but is treated as a continuous variable; worked last week is coded 1 if the woman said she worked in the previous week and 0 otherwise; Non-married partnership is 0 if she is married to the partner she lives with and 1 if she is not married; age is numeric, ranging from 15 to 104; indigenous is coded 1 if a woman says she speaks an indigenous language and 0 otherwise; urban area is 1 if the woman lives in a locality with a population larger than 2,500 and 0 otherwise.

* significant at $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Figure B.1: Reduction in domestic abuse (2003–16) by the education level of women (95% confidence intervals at the top of each bar)

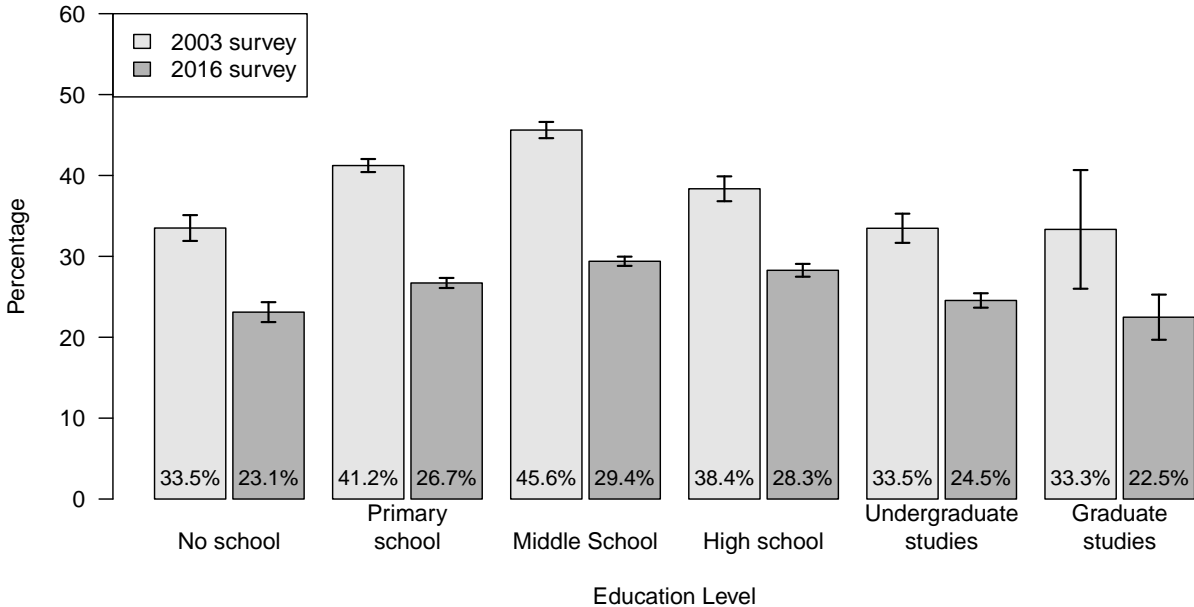


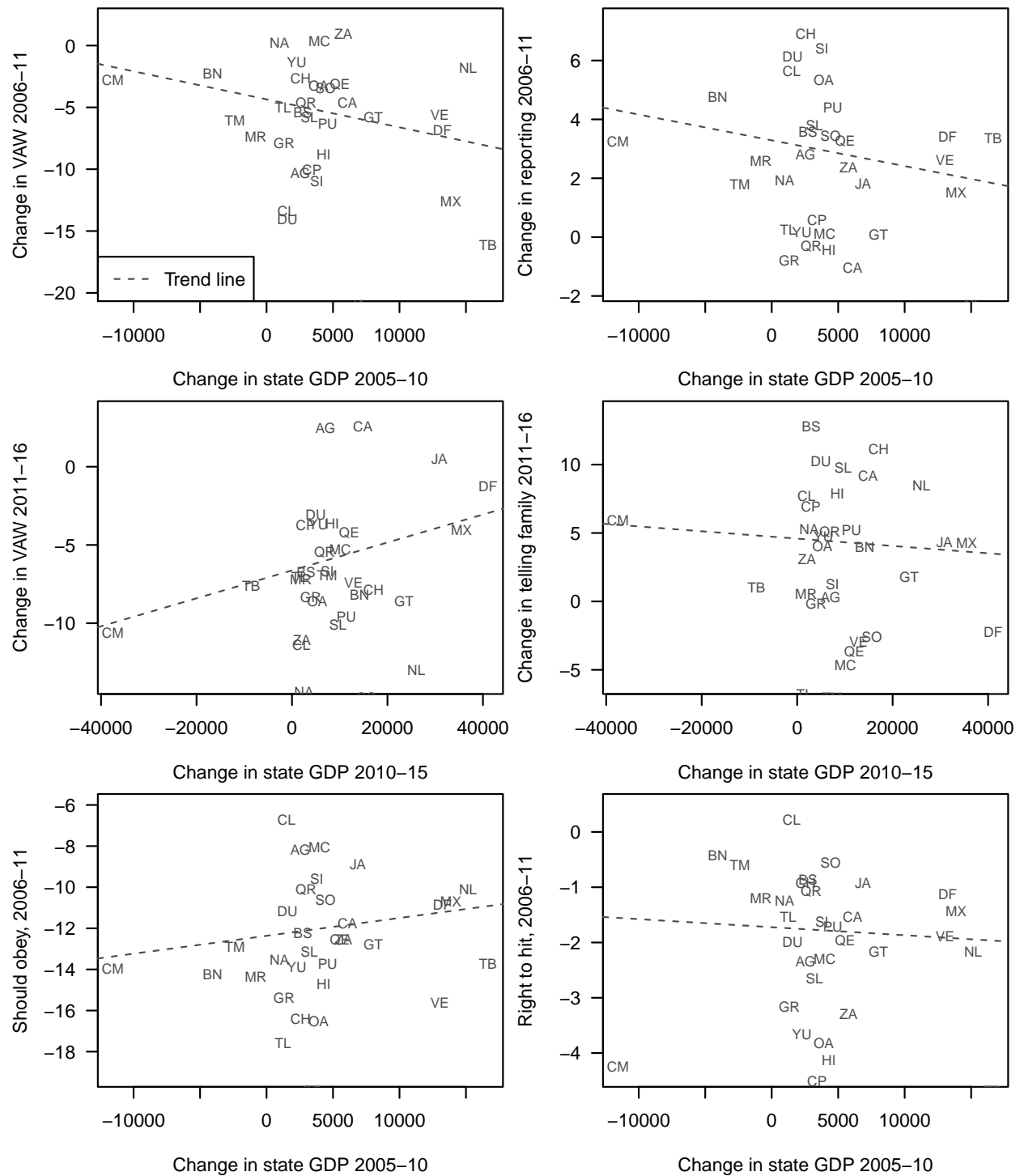
Table B.2: Knowing the law as predictor for experiencing domestic abuse in the previous year, reporting abuse, saying that men have the right to hit their wives, and saying that women should obey their husbands (ENDIREH 2011)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	Experiencing	Reporting	Right to hit	Obey husband
(Intercept)	0.477*** (0.012)	0.181*** (0.024)	0.029*** (0.003)	0.523*** (0.011)
Knowing the law	-0.018*** (0.004)	0.016 (0.010)	-0.020*** (0.001)	-0.137*** (0.004)
Education level	-0.018*** (0.002)	0.000 (0.004)	-0.003*** (0.000)	-0.087*** (0.001)
Worked last week	0.035*** (0.004)	0.023** (0.009)	0.000 (0.001)	-0.042*** (0.003)
Non-married	0.066*** (0.004)	0.004 (0.009)	0.003* (0.001)	0.016*** (0.003)
Age	-0.004*** (0.000)	-0.003*** (0.000)	0.000*** (0.000)	0.004*** (0.000)
Speaks indigenous language	-0.055*** (0.007)	0.014 (0.017)	0.020*** (0.002)	0.142*** (0.006)
Urban locality	0.069*** (0.004)	0.025* (0.010)	-0.008*** (0.001)	-0.113*** (0.003)
State Random Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N states	32	32	32	32
N respondents	86892	6631	86892	86892

Note: Multilevel linear regression models with random effects for states. The outcome variables are binary indicators of experiencing domestic abuse in the previous year, reporting on abuse (conditional on experiencing it), agreeing that the husband has the right to hit their wife, and agreeing that a woman should obey her husband. Education level is treated as numerical, ranging from 1 (no education) to 6 (graduate degree); Working is coded 1 if the woman said she worked in the previous week and 0 otherwise; Non-married is 0 if a woman is married to the partner she lives with and 1 if she lives with a partner but is not married; Age is numeric, ranging from 15 to 104; Indigenous is coded 1 if a woman says she speaks an indigenous language and 0 otherwise; Urban is 1 if the woman lives in a locality with a population larger than 2,500 and 0 otherwise.

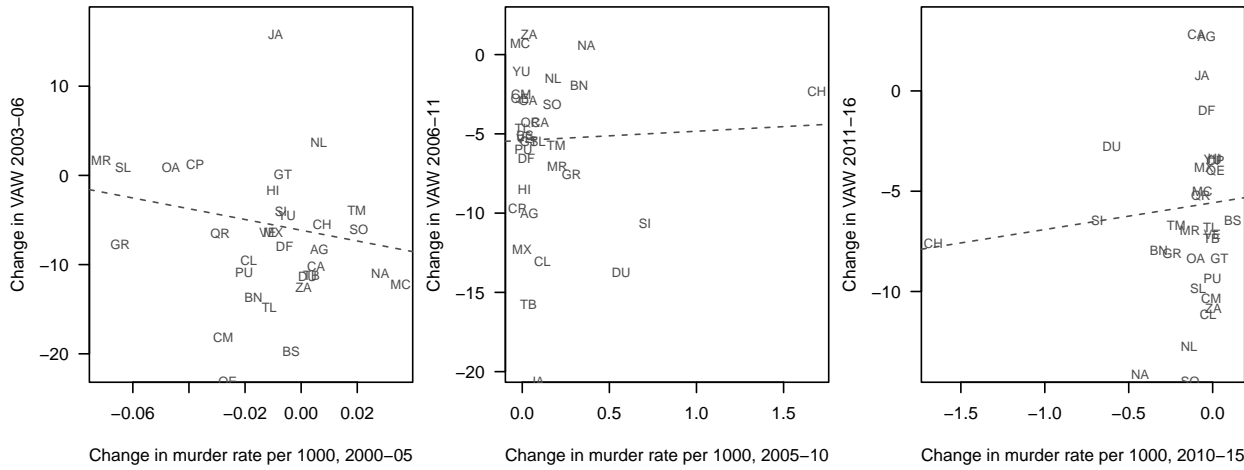
* significant at $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Figure B.2: Association between changes in state GDP and the state-level change in domestic abuse, reporting or telling others of such incidents, and responses to the questions about women having to obey their husbands and men having the right to hit their spouse



Note: Data on GDP are from OECD (millions USD, constant prices, constant PPP, base year 2015). The other variables are from the ENDIREH 2006, 2011, and 2016, as described in the paper, and are aggregated to the state level.

Figure B.3: Association between changing state-level murder rates and the state-level change in women saying they experienced domestic abuse



Note: Data on murders (per 1000 people) are from [INEGI 2018](#), data on the reduction in domestic abuse is based on ENDIREH 2003, 2006, 2011, and 2016, as described in section . The trend lines are based on linear regression models. None of the slopes are statistically significant.

Figure B.4: Changes in share saying a husband has the right to hit his wife, by age group

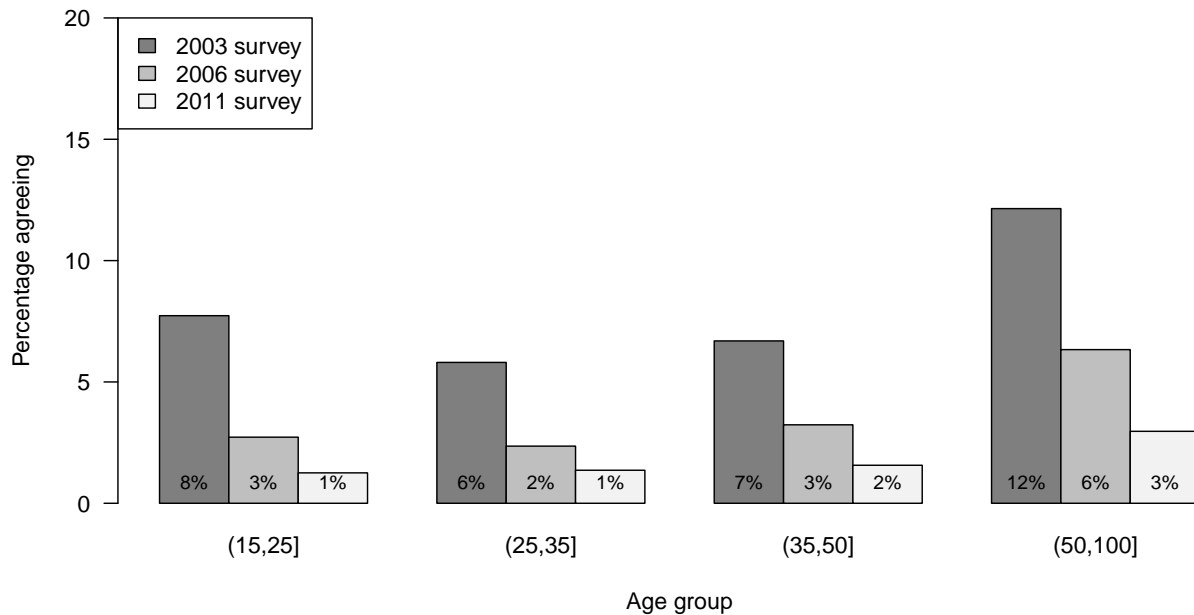


Figure B.5: Changes in share saying a wife should obey her husband, by age group

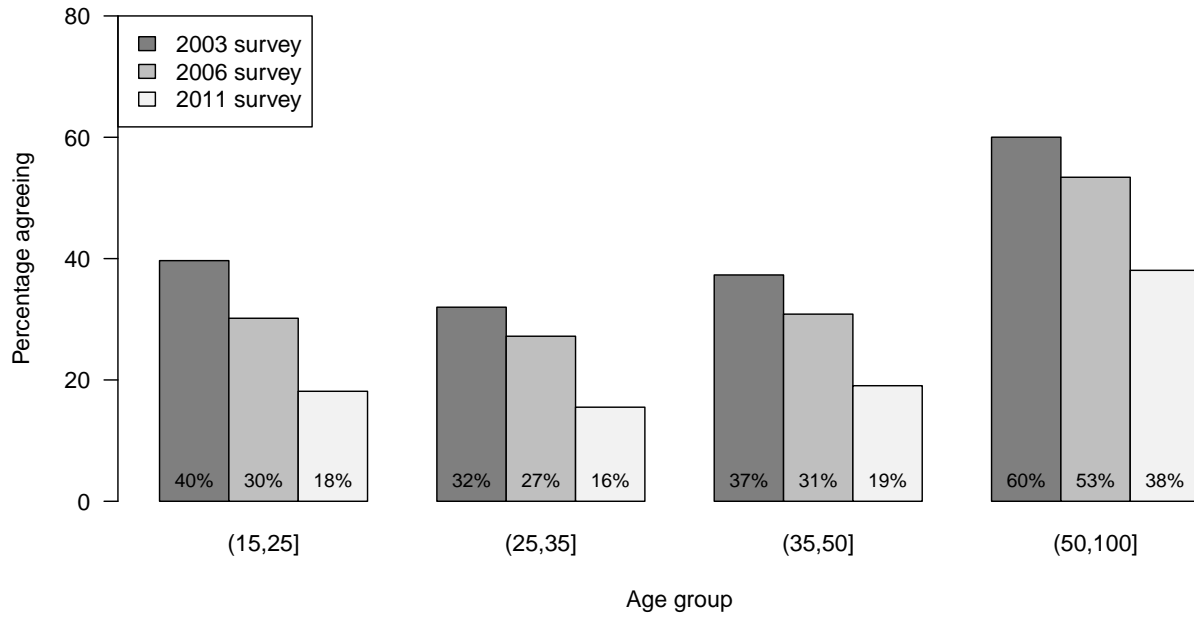


Figure B.6: Changes in share saying a husband has the right to hit his wife, by birth cohort

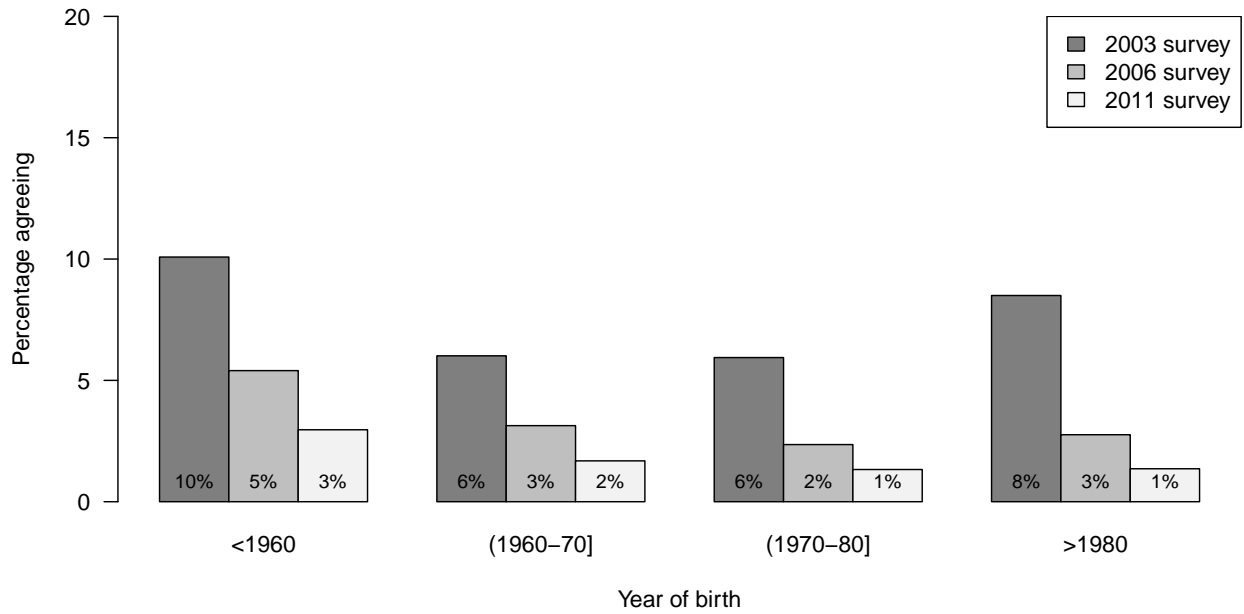


Figure B.7: Changes in share saying a wife should obey her husband, by birth cohort

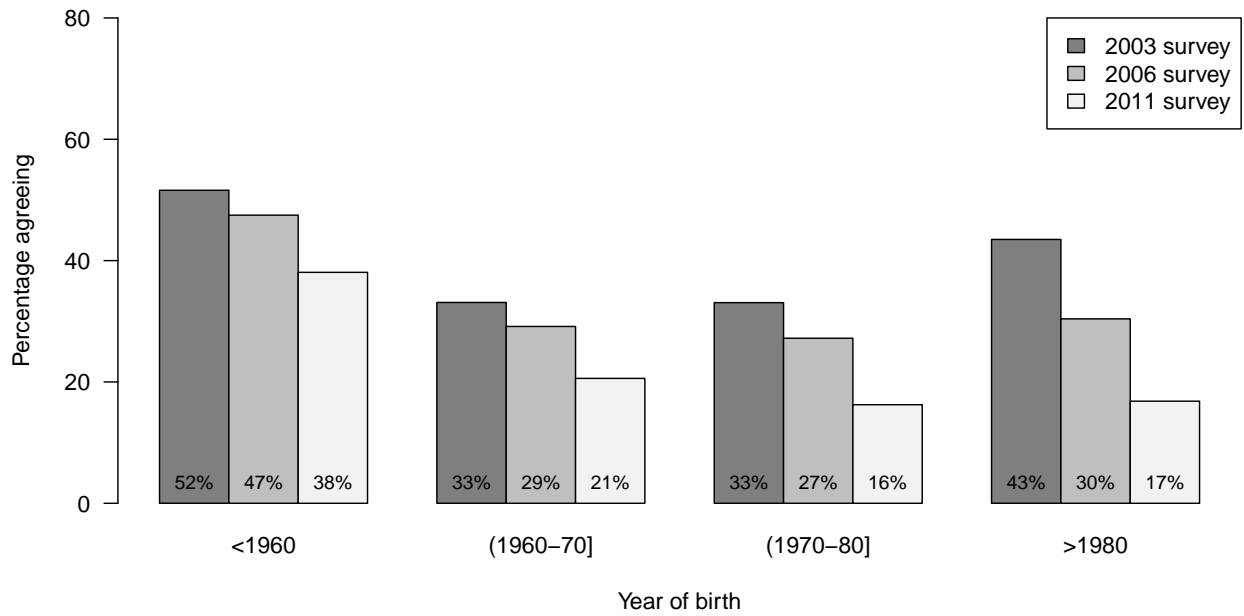


Figure B.8: Changes in experiences of domestic abuse, by birth cohort

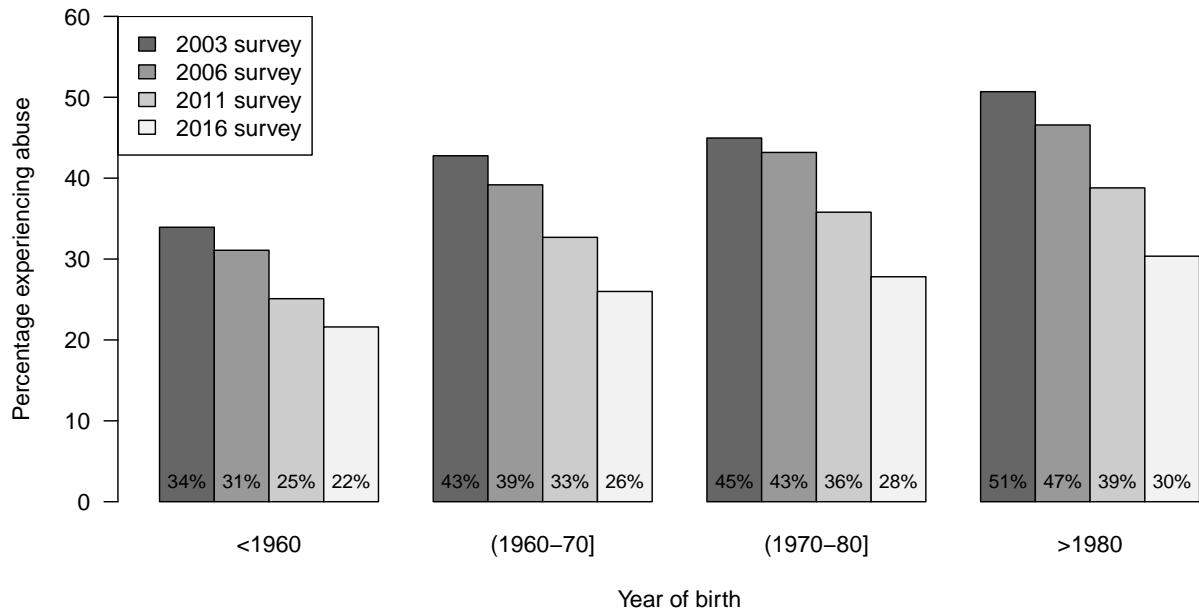


Figure B.9: Changes in reporting, by birth cohort

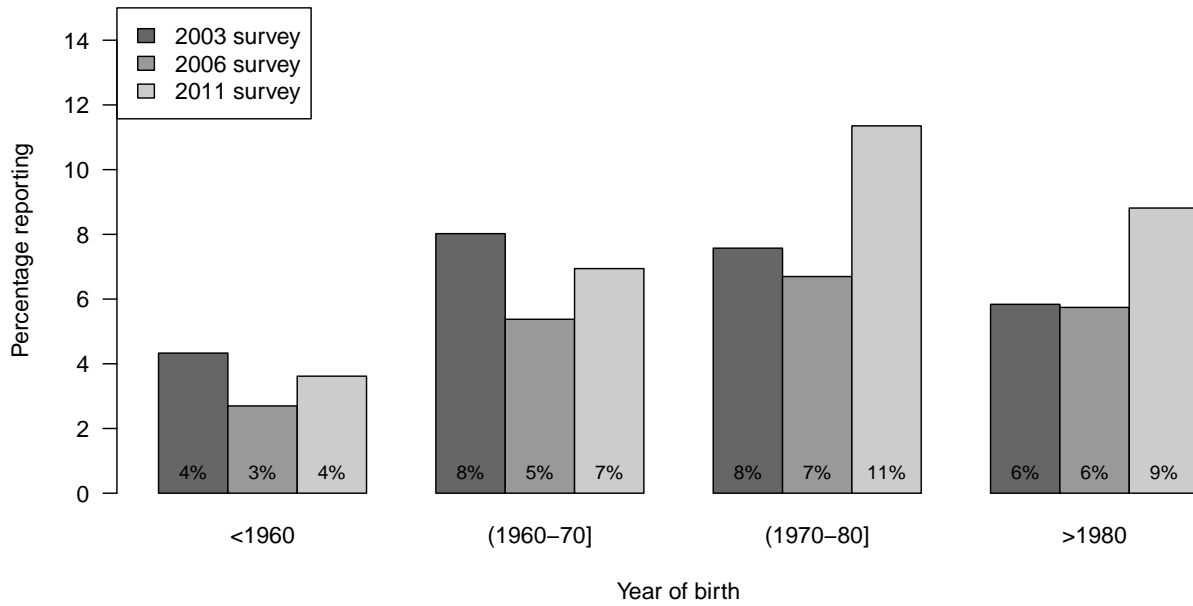


Figure B.10: Change in share of women saying a man has the right to hit his wife, by education level

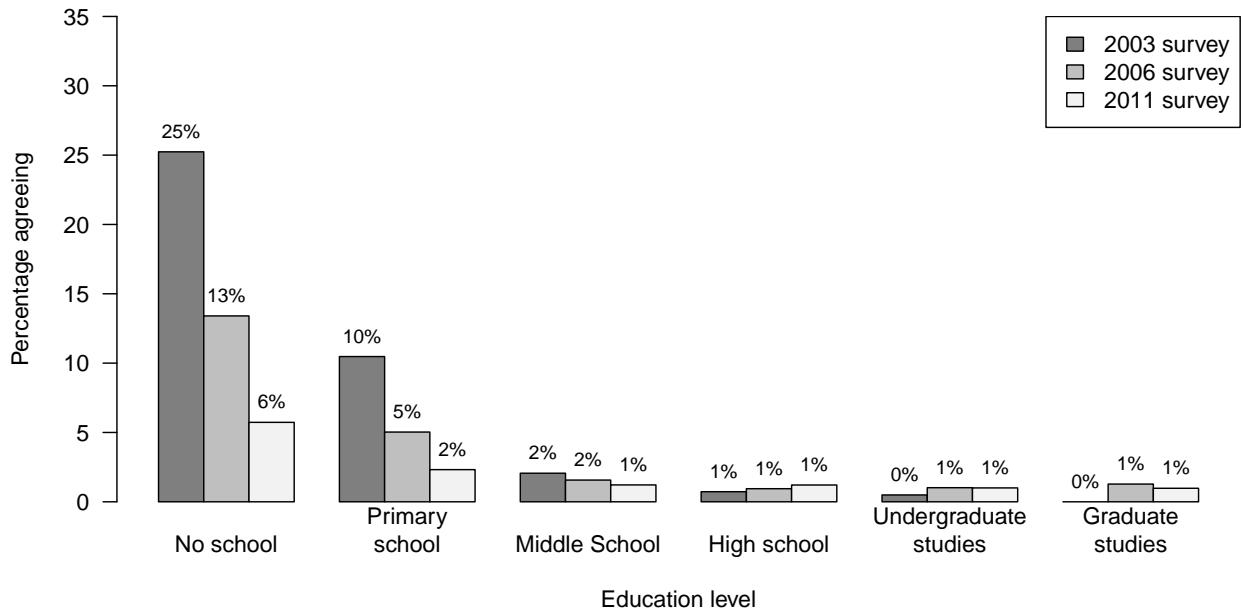


Figure B.11: Change in share of women saying a woman should obey her partner, by education level

