

“We’re going to leave you for last because of how you are”: Transgender Women’s Experiences of Gender-Based Violence in Health Care, Education, and Police Encounters in Latin America and the Caribbean

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BACKGROUND

Gender-based violence (GBV) — including physical, sexual, economic, and emotional abuse, and other human rights violations — increases transgender (trans) women’s vulnerability to mental and physical health issues, including the highest HIV prevalence of any key population.

To inform HIV services and policies in the region, trans women worked with LINKAGES (the Linkages across the Continuum of HIV Services for Key Populations Affected by HIV project led by FHI 360 and supported by USAID and PEPFAR), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), The University of the West Indies (UWI), and local organizations in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) to document trans women’s experiences of GBV in health care, education, police encounters, and in other state institutions.

METHODS

Twelve trans women, trained as data collectors, conducted 74 structured interviews in El Salvador (n=15), Trinidad and Tobago (n=10), Barbados (n=5), and Haiti (n=44) in 2016. Study participants were recruited through local organizations serving trans women. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English. Interviews were coded in QSR NVivo, and a qualitative applied thematic analysis was conducted.



Haiti study team

Photograph by Emily Evens/FHI 360



El Salvador study team

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RESULTS

A high proportion of participants reported experiencing GBV in education (85.1%), in health care (82.9%), from police (80.0%), and in other state institutions (66.1%) (Table 1). Across these contexts, **emotional abuse** was the most common form of GBV, including derogatory comments, scolding, gossiping, and inappropriate comments about their appearance and any behaviors perceived as feminine.

Table 1. Percentage of participants experiencing gender-based violence, by context

	Trinidad/ Barbados (n=15) % n	Haiti (n=44) % n	El Salvador (n=15) % n	All Countries (n=74) % n
Education	61.5 13	87.5 40	100.0 14	85.1 67
Health care	66.7 15	83.3 42	100.0 13	82.9 70
Police	73.3 15	75.0 40	100.0 15	80.0 70
Other state institutions	80.0 10	62.5 40	66.7 12	66.1 62
Any of these contexts	93.3 15	97.6 42	100.0 15	97.2 72

Note: Some participants chose to skip some questions; therefore, not all participants answered questions about all contexts.

CONTEXTS

Education

Participants commonly experienced **physical violence** and **threats** of physical violence in school, including pushing, being beaten up, and having water thrown on them. Classmates were usually the perpetrators, but school administrators also threatened violence. Some participants were **sent home from school, received failing grades, were suspended or expelled**, or were threatened with these because of their gender expression or perceived sexual orientation, particularly in El Salvador. Some participants were **insulted or harassed while using restrooms**.



Trinidad and Tobago study team

Photograph by FHI 360

Health Care

Many participants said that health care staff **blamed their health issues on their sexuality, gender identity, sexual behavior**, or lifestyle or assumed that they had HIV because of their gender identity.

The nurse in charge of weighing the patients told me, “Look, we’re going to leave you for last, because of how you are.” So I felt bad when that happened. (El Salvador, age 26)

Participants were **made to wait** or **given lower priority** than other patients, were **denied health services**, received **substandard or neglectful care**, and said providers **did not keep their information confidential**. They said providers were uncomfortable with transgender patients, disdainful of them, or did not consider them worthy of high-quality care.

Police

Participants reported that police **refused to help them** or were **negligent** in their duties. They were treated rudely when they went to the police station to make reports and were blamed for the crimes committed against them. Participants experienced **physical violence** and **threats** of violence, most commonly punches and slaps. Police and soldiers commonly **robbed** transgender women or **demand payment** in the form of money or sex. Trans women also reported **sexual assault and harassment**, including sexual comments, groping, and rape.

Some participants in El Salvador and Trinidad reported intimidation from police in the form of stop-and-searches. Some were **threatened with arrest** for minor or unspecified offenses, and a few participants in El Salvador and Haiti were **arrested or detained** because of their gender identity.

I would like it to be taught at the police academy that they should respect people’s rights, that they should know everyone is a person and everyone is free, they have their own choices. (Haiti, age 29)

Other State Institutions

Participants experienced GBV when they went to get their government-issued identity card or passport because their assigned sex at birth was male but they had a feminine gender expression or were perceived to be homosexual. In addition to verbal abuse, they were **made to wait** longer than other clients. In El Salvador and Haiti, several participants were **forced to alter their physical appearance** or were **refused an identity card**. Participants also experienced discrimination while using their ID card or passport at health care centers, the airport, and the bank.

CONSEQUENCES

Participants said that the GBV they experienced made them feel humiliated, ashamed, and “less than.” They also noted that experiences of GBV caused them to leave or avoid health clinics, police stations, schools, and identification document centers.

CONCLUSIONS

Service providers in these contexts not only failed to meet the needs of this population but also discriminated against them, exacerbating their economic, health, and social vulnerability. These findings demonstrate a need for policies protecting trans women’s rights and interventions addressing GBV against trans women.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To respect, promote, and fulfill trans women’s human rights, governments should:

1. Enact and **enforce anti-discrimination and gender-identity laws and policies** that allow trans women to **self-determine the name and gender that appears on official documents**, including school and medical records.
2. Establish **transgender-inclusive anti-profiling and anti-bias policies** and **training for police and security forces**.
3. Adopt **anti-discrimination and anti-bullying policies** in schools that explicitly include gender identity and expression, as well as **train staff on nondiscrimination** as it relates to trans students.
4. Train HIV and other health service **providers to provide nondiscriminatory, gender-affirming services** and to **screen for and address GBV** among trans clients. Integrated services addressing both HIV and GBV could help increase service utilization and reduce trans women’s burden of HIV.

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