[CANCÚN, Mexico] – When battered wives show up at Lidia Cacho’s crisis center, they often come with more than their children and their pain.

They come with men like Alfredo Jiménez Potenciano trailing after them.

Law enforcement officials consider Mr. Jiménez to be one of this city’s most powerful drug traffickers, responsible along with his brothers for overseeing shipments of cocaine that pass through here on the way to the United States.

On a bright morning last December he arrived in a caravan of sport utility vehicles at Ms. Cacho’s refuge, carrying his AR-15 rifle. “Give me back my wife and kid,” he demanded, according to Ms. Cacho. “If not, I’ll jump over the fence and kill you all.”
Most of the local police officers were on strike. The others refused to respond. The federal police arrived an hour later. Mr. Jiménez and his companions got away, but not with his wife and child.

This is the other Cancún. The city better known for its white sand, wet T-shirt contests and all-you-can-drink margaritas is also one of Mexico’s most sinister cities. It is an essential hub of illegal traffic of all kinds, especially drugs, and of the violence that goes with it.

In recent years increasing attention has been paid to the open clashes among organized mafias just a few miles from the Disneysque tourist areas, although very limited progress has been made against them.

Ms. Cacho, 42, fights the violence in their homes. Often she fights on her own.

“In almost all cases when women suffer violence by men, the women feel a deep sense of impotence against the omnipresence of the men,” she said. “In the case of the wives of drug traffickers, that feeling is much, much stronger. These husbands have dozens of men out looking for the women. And they will not stop until they find them, wherever they are.

“One woman told me that her husband said, ‘Even if you crawl under a rock, I will find you.’”

Ms. Cacho and other activists for women describe domestic violence as one of the ugliest byproducts of Mexico’s culture of machismo. But most such violence, the experts lament, has been largely ignored by the police, lawmakers and the human rights community, except for the ruthless murders of women and girls in Ciudad Juárez.

A study in 1993 by the National Women’s Institute found that nearly half of the 19.4 million women surveyed said they had suffered some kind of domestic violence. In another study that same year, the Health Ministry reported that the state of Quintana Roo, whose largest city is Cancún, has the country’s highest reported incidence of sexual, physical and emotional abuse.

Ms. Cacho said that last year more than 70 women were killed in incidents of domestic violence. Her center, she said, serves at least 300 women a month. And during spring break, Ms. Cacho said, at least 30 percent of those women are young American tourists.

In 2002, according to a study done for the Mexican Congress, more than 2,700 women were killed by domestic violence across the country. More recent statistics are hard to find, the officials said, because state attorneys’ offices and municipal police forces do not keep reports of every time their officers pull an enraged husband off his wife.
In more cases than anyone likes to acknowledge, the victims endure their turmoil in silence, sometimes because they are too afraid to go to the police and sometimes because the police fail to answer their calls.

Ms. Cacho, a native of Mexico City who was educated at the Sorbonne and speaks four languages, has been living with death threats for eight years. They started when she began writing newspaper columns against Mario Villanueva, the governor of Quintana Roo from 1993 to 1999; he is currently living in a maximum-security prison cell on charges related to drug trafficking.

Since the release two weeks ago of her book about a child prostitution ring that operated with the complicity of the local police and politicians, the threats have become more frequent.

In 1998, she was ambushed and raped in a bathroom in a bus station, an attack that Ms. Cacho believes was meant to silence her. It didn’t. With a concussion and two broken ribs, she picked herself up from the floor and got herself to a hospital before breaking down briefly in a phone call to her mother.

After the physical wounds healed, she decided to do more than write about the social problems that plagued Cancún. That is when the wives of drug traffickers and corrupt security agents began showing up at her door. And then came their husbands.

Unlike most of the 35 other shelters for battered women across the country, Ms. Cacho’s center is more like a witness protection program. In the three years since it opened, she says, she has helped win asylum in the United States and South America for at least several dozen wives who possess valuable evidence that could help authorities prosecute their husbands.

“Somehow the most difficult cases come to me,” she said.

Among her latest tough cases is that of an army lieutenant’s wife who has fled to different shelters across the country trying to escape her husband. There also is the wife of a pilot for a major trafficker who is on the F.B.I.’s most wanted list. And there is a drug trafficker’s wife who said her husband had links to the killing of nine traffickers and federal police agents here last December.

Ms. Cacho said that in her first interviews with the trafficker’s wife, the woman scanned newspaper photos of the massacre and identified some of the dead as her in-laws.

It is a case that could leave her with another gun pointed in her face.
“I have a very clear perspective on this work,” she said. “We are living in a time when impunity permeates everything. We must either fight with everything we have, even our lives, or we have to leave this work. There’s no middle ground.

“So when people ask me if I am willing to lose my life, I tell them I am not willing to lose my life. But I am willing to give it.”