

GENDER VIOLENCE: AN APPROACH BASED ON THE CUBAN
REALITY



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THE COMPLEXITY OF THE ANALYSIS OF GENDER VIOLENCE AS A WORLD PROBLEM WITH EPIDEMIC CHARACTER AND THE CONSEQUENCES ON HEALTH AND THE LIFE INTEGRITY OF MILLIONS OF VICTIMS AROUND THE WORLD, PARTICULARLY IN OUR REGION, ARE DISCUSSED.

THE OBSERVATION OF THE SURVIVAL OF THIS SOCIAL ILLNESS IN CUBA, AS WELL AS MANY OF ITS CHARACTERISTICS AND PECULIARITIES, ARE EXPOSED FROM THE RESULTS OF CUBAN STATISTICS AND STUDIES SHOWING CHANGES UNDER WAY AND LINGERING CONTRADICTIONS THAT SET BARRIERS FOR CULTURAL CHANGE WHICH IS ESSENTIAL TO BREAK DOWN THE SEXIST PRACTICES OF PATRIARCHY AS A CRITICAL PREMISE TO END GENDER VIOLENCE.

SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE ROLES PLAYED BY THE STATE AND CUBAN INSTITUTIONS ARE ALSO PRESENTED. THEY ROUGHLY DESCRIBE THE SCENERY ON WHICH CARE SERVICES AND VIOLENCE PREVENTION ARE ESTABLISHED, AS WELL AS THE STRENGTHS AND GAPS OF SUCH INSTITUTIONS.

AS CONCLUSIONS, THE AUTHOR GIVES SOME IDEAS ABOUT THE FORWARD-LOOKING CHALLENGES AND THE ENGAGEMENT WITH THE VICTIMS, IN ORDER TO ACHIEVE A PROPER STRATEGY FOR CARE THAT CONTRIBUTES TO END VIOLENT GENDER-RELATED PRACTICES.

KEY WORDS: GENDER VIOLENCE, MANIFESTATIONS AND CHARACTERISTICS OF GENDER VIOLENCE, STRATEGIES FOR CARE AND PREVENTION

INTRODUCTION: GENDER VIOLENCE, A GLOBAL EPIDEMIC

Recently, I read an article on the problem of violence against women published by our media. The author was wondering whether this is an endemic evil or not. Though it was an opened question, the analysis was confined to Cuba. In an attempt to answer this question, we could agree on the fact that, certainly, gender violence is an endemic evil of the patriarchal culture at global level, if we refer to one of the meanings of this term found in the dictionary of the Spanish Royal Academy defining it as "the negative thing or deed frequently repeated and greatly extended," since there is no region in the world, social class, creed, rich and poor country exempt from this scourge. This is not a problem affecting whites or blacks, and there is no single country that can affirm it has eradicated violence against women. There are several forms of expression, but

they are all harmful, either in countries experiencing female homicide or sex-selected abortion, or countries showing gender social achievements favoring equity. This is a global problem: a universal challenge that we are all forced to face.

However, there is another term that better defines gender violence: its epidemic nature. In June, this year, the first global report findings on gender violence published by the World Health Organization (WHO), acknowledged the pandemic nature of this problem in its very title, "Violence against women is a global problem of epidemic proportions." The Director General of this world organization confirms that 38% of all dead women were assassinated by their partners. It also shows that gender violence is not associated with economic status, since the percentage of assassinations committed by their partners accounts for 45% in the United States and 54% in the United Kingdom, just to mention some examples. The report goes on stating that one out of three women above 15 years old has endured this kind of violence by her husband, boyfriend, lover or former partner. In some regions, this percentage surpasses the global 30%, reaching the figure of 38% of the female population, approximately 920 million women. According to this conclusive report—compiled with data collected from 141 studies in 81 countries—"these homicides are often the final outcome of an ill-fated social, sanitary and penal response to couple violence" (1).

In our region, data are not more encouraging. According to the report on gender violence published by the Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO) in early 2013, entitled "Violence against women in Latin America and the Caribbean: A comparative analysis of data from populations in 12 countries," between 17% and 53% of women in

Latin America and the Caribbean have endured physical or sexual violence by their partners. Besides, the study reports that between 41% and 82% of women who endured abuses from their partners showed physical wounds, from cuts and bruises to broken bones, involuntary abortions and burns. Despite this, between 28% and 64% of them did not seek for help or revealed this experience to others (2).

Trafficking in women, adolescents and girls is another form of gender violence in the region. According to a report published by ECLAC, trafficking in women and girls in Latin America and the Caribbean is carried out by resorting to ways similar to the ones used in other parts of the world. Extensive criminal networks deceive vulnerable girls and women, intimidate them or, otherwise, abuse them. Frequently, these gangs use violence with impunity. Traffickers increasingly use false employment offers, arranged marriages and adoptions to treacherously take women away to other countries where they are victimized (3).

Though gender violence is expressed in all its forms in Latin America, it is worthwhile mentioning that female homicide is the bloodiest form in the region.¹

According to a report submitted in 2012 by the Small Arms Survey organization, more than half of the 25 countries showing the highest incidence of female-sex murders (femicidio) and female homicides (feminicidio) are found in Latin America and the Caribbean. Meanwhile, in 2011, the United Nations Human Rights Deputy High Commissioner, Kyung-wha Kang, pointed out that the impunity rate for these crimes was around 77% in El Salvador and Honduras (4).

The emphasis placed on these crimes serves to strengthen awareness on the most serious violence against women. According to the 2012 Report by ECLAC Equality and Gender Observatory in Latin America and the Caribbean, 1,139 homicides of women for the sake of being women were reported in 2011 in eight countries of the region alone.

In any case, we should not forget that systematic researches in violence against women in the region began in the second half of 1980s, and have contributed with a wealth of information and analysis, thus acknowledging the magnitude of this problem and turning this issue into a public and governmental concern, though the awareness level differs among social sectors. However, studies have usually some limitations: in general, they present biased approaches, most of them are simply descriptive or fact-finding studies, and do not respond to an adequate coordination or common methodological criteria, thus hampering comparisons and outcome projections.

Besides, while important advances have been made in estimating the prevalence of domestic violence, there are no official statistics of the region revealing the true dimension of all gender violence manifestations (1).

The root cause of this problem lies in the power unbalance between men and women which perpetuates the subordination and devaluation of females against males under patriarchy as the domination system, which is still in effect despite the several and significant achievements of women in the world. Their domination, not only de facto but also symbolic, determines a set of concrete daily practices undermining women's rights and reproduces the unbalance and inequality between sexes. The difference

between this kind of violence and other forms of aggression and coercion stems from the fact that, in this case, the risk factor or vulnerability lies in just being a woman.

As described by the specialized literature, gender violence ranges from symbolic maltreatment to death, including the psychological, sexual and physical violence, sexual harassment, rapes, forced prostitution, trafficking in women and girls, female homicide, incest, sexual violence against detained or imprisoned women, violence against rootless women, genital mutilation, female infanticide, and discriminated food access, as well as the coercive reproductive control both by individuals and the State, among others, which affect billions of women throughout the world, just because they are women.

Therefore, it is indispensable to demystify the stereotypes which, in the collective memory throughout history, have successfully managed to adopt and legitimize gender violence as a key social mechanism to perpetuate women's subordination, since power is considered as a generic heritage of men (5).

That is why, the struggle against gender violence demands cultural changes leading to the transformation of the different ways of thinking, feeling and acting on power relations between genders so as to contribute to eradicate the universal validity of androcentrism and its increasingly dangerous male hegemony, for it includes the linguistic and cultural ownership, thus entrenching itself in the social fabric through sexism. As Bourdieu states:

Male domination is so enrooted that needs no justification: it just exists and is manifested in habits and discourses describing the being in

accordance with evidence, thus contributing to accommodate discourse with facts [6].

During the last decades, gender violence has become an issue under universal debate, bringing up the pressing need to visualize its impact not only on the victims but also on the society at large.

Likewise, during the last decades, important transformations have been achieved in inter-gender relations. "Seemingly, the strength of recent transformations lies not only in the spaces conquered by women, but in the fact that such consolidating process is generating a crisis in the legitimacy attributed to gender oppression for centuries" (7). However, this does not mean that subordination has been eliminated, nor its expression as gender oppression.

Of course, this legitimacy crisis of male domination is not homogeneous and does not have the same expressions in the different societies, since its manifestations depend on the different contexts and specificities.

In an analysis of this reality, the Cuban society does not escape from the tentacles of this scourge. In this context, it is worthwhile analyzing the specificities of this social problem.

THE CUBAN CASE—SOME CHARACTERISTICS

Gender violence is even found in the Cuban society, with all the implications it has for women across the world. Its manifestations display the same nuances, from an omitting silence to death, because the patriarchal social structure, though less

monolithic due to changes experienced at social level, is still the foundation of male domination. However, specificities lie not only in the absence of some forms of violence, but in the magnitude of the phenomenon and other characteristics documented by social practices and studies—though not conclusive, since they show the same abovementioned deficits in the region—pointing out a significant fact that cannot be ignored when analyzing gender violence in the country: the direct incidence of transformations that have taken place in the social situation of Cuban women concerning inter-gender relations.

The development of the female political subject in Cuba—with an unquestionable co-prominence in every social sphere and an increasing gender awareness in the different social groups—is not yet enough to eliminate the patriarchal sexual policy which is reluctant to any social change and strives to preserve itself, thus generating new contradictions. Undoubtedly, however, changes reported have left an imprint in the forms in which gender violence is expressed in the country.

The Cuban society, under transformation, is a social lab in which new values are promoted against old customs and powers. The struggle to denature the evil of gender violence is barely starting, though it is already showing its first results. The social policy launched by the Cuban State has been crucial in efforts aimed at modifying the historical situation of marginalization and subordination of women. The prominence attained by women results from this endeavor.

Specialists, social actors and all those interested in addressing and preventing gender violence insist on the need to conduct prevalence studies in our country in order to

gain a more accurate knowledge of the real dimension of this problem, with the purpose of taking actions and formulating policies to address and prevent it in accordance with reality, since most of the research is based on partial samples and different regions, thus lacking an homogeneous criterion.

The scientific evidence shows that preventing violence against women is possible. Though women from all settings endure violence, its prevalence varies a great deal, thus indicating that the high levels of violence constitute an inevitable characteristic of human society [2].

However, we cannot lose sight of the complexity of this phenomenon and its recent scientific study in Cuba and abroad. In this regard, the above-mentioned study entitled "Violence against women in Latin America and the Caribbean: A comparative analysis of data from populations in 12 countries" indicates that there are many researches in violence against women in Latin America and the Caribbean, but these studies have defined and measured violence in so many different ways that making any comparison of regional results is often difficult. This statement is also applicable to Cuba (2). That is why I will only outline some characteristics and specificities identified by several Cuban studies.

Understanding that violence against women is a social problem that cannot be ignored constitutes an inescapable need, and its care and prevention should become the basic objective of all institutions and social stakeholders involved. The eradication of patriarchal cultural values and their social practices is a process demanding wisdom

and will to change. In this regard, gender perspective, as a tool we have inherited from feminism, has an essential role to play.

Cuban studies report some changes and contradictions still prevailing in the country—still hindering the indispensable cultural change—in order to eliminate the sexist practices of patriarchy as the domination system. Therefore, following we present a summary of some of these elements found on gender violence in the country (8).

ON THE CHARACTERISTICS AND MANIFESTATIONS

1. Cuban researches confirm the presence of violence against women in all its manifestations, even beyond socio-economic, age, educational and other differences.
2. According to information provided by available statistics and research findings, the most common violence found in the country is family violence against women and girls, in all its forms, especially the psychological and emotional violence. Reportedly, women's injuries, homicides and assassinations are linked to gender violence, and female victimization takes place mainly within couples and in domestic settings.
3. Regarding differences in violence manifestations among the Cuban geographic areas, comparative results provided by recent researches and those previously analyzed in some other provinces, besides information received from the capital, show that family violence is present in every region of the country, though it seems to be higher in the eastern region, mainly psychological violence at home in most

cases and, to a lesser extent, physical violence. The main victims are women (and their husbands as the main aggressors) and children.

4. The effects of female maltreatment can have very harmful short- and long-term consequences, thus affecting her physical and mental integrity, even her own life. Children suffer similar consequences, though even higher since there are great possibilities for them to become violent.
5. Several surveys found numerous women in different regions of the country and from different social groups who are victims of gender violence in its different manifestations, as well as prevailing deficiencies by social actors in charge of supporting them.
6. Several studies have indicated that women manage to devise strategies to end maltreatment. Some of them are not effective and reinforce submission, but many succeed in breaking the bonds of maltreatment and adopt attitudes that distance them from playing the role of irremissible victims. A significant element in the attitude adopted by ill-treated women included in some studies lies in their conviction that they are not responsible for the maltreatment they endure or have endured, and this effectively helps them to put an end to this violent circle. These elements reflect some peculiarities of women's behavior against violence, which are different from the traditional "learned defenselessness syndrome."
7. The survival of gender violence in the Cuban collective memory as a result of a patriarchal culture anchored for centuries in gender identities, is now being visualized and faced by the social work of vanguard women and of many men,

institutions, specialists, formal and informal leaders, governmental organizations and groups of people who are convinced about its illegitimacy.

8. Researchers dealing with subtle violence manifestations confirm the insufficient knowledge women have of issues associated with violence and the prevalence of patriarchal stereotypes perpetuating female subordination and inferiority. Likewise, they evidence that there is no in-depth and conscientious knowledge of symbolic violence and its multiple mechanisms. Something that calls the attention is the contradiction between what women state in their discourse and behavior, since they continue reproducing patriarchal stereotypes in their daily life.
9. This spider web that traps women in the violence circle includes inequalities in sharing household chores, money, power, and options for personal development. These are all latent forms of violence; therefore, they are very efficient to undermine female autonomy with all the implications entailed.
10. Women and girls account for the overwhelming majority of victims from violence. When they become authors of these acts, they are reacting, inter alia, to the striking violence they had to endure.
11. As in the rest of the world, many women who were beaten during childhood reported having endured violence in adulthood by their partners, representing a significantly higher percentage compared to those who did not experience violence during childhood.
12. By all accounts, women are supposed to find reasons legitimated by others in order to escape from a violent relationship. Women attach a great importance to

social supporting networks when facing violence, but the search for help by women studied in Cuba results from a process which is not exempted from contradictions, advances and setbacks. They all acknowledge the key role played by the family as an informal network, whose material and emotional support is indispensable under these tragic circumstances. They have also realized the poor support received by formal networks and, in many occasions, the informal ones.

13. Several studies recognize that children are not used in legal confrontations of parents when the couple's bonds dissolve. This is an element that enhances the importance attached to childhood by the Cuban State, unlike findings provided by other international enquiries.
14. People recognize more the physical abuse than the psychological or sexual abuse. Consequently, many Cuban women do not consider they are ill-treated because they associate maltreatment with physical aggression. The lack of knowledge and the learned relationship rules turn harmful and denigrating behaviors into acceptable conducts, namely, the psychological or subtle violence; however, the understanding of this kind of violence as a social problem is now increasing.

NOTES ON THE ROLE TO BE PLAYED BY THE STATE AND THE INSTITUTIONS

- The existence of a social policy ensuring the exercise of rights and providing opportunities for women to achieve inter-gender equality as a requirement for the elimination of gender violence.
 - As part of the State political will to achieve gender equality, conditions have been created to support gender-violence attention and prevention through a) the signing
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and commitment with the CEDAW Convention and other international agreements, b) the creation of the Governmental Platform to comply with agreements adopted at the Beijing Summit, c) the creation, in 1997, of the National Group to Address and Prevent Family Violence, among others, to include the recognition of gender violence as an obstacle to achieve equality in Cuba in the Party policy documents. The significance of these actions is confirmed by the increasing number of activities in favor of No Violence taking place in the country, both by organizations and institutions and by the population at large.

- The steady progress in addressing and preventing gender violence in the society, as a result of a gender-approach research conducted by the Cuban academia and organizations and specialists from institutions of the country.
- The launching of a number of action initiatives to fight gender violence in different institutions, non-governmental organizations and agencies which are contributing with the diaspora in this field, with novel initiatives to be taken into consideration to improve the strategy addressing gender violence.
- The creation and work of the National Group to Address and Prevent Family Violence, coordinated by the Federation of Cuban Women, promoted the recognition, at social level, of gender violence as a social problem to be addressed and prevented by social institutions and State bodies, and contributed to include gender violence in the social debate, thus increasing awareness among broad sectors of the population and political decision-makers.
- The legal protection enjoyed by Cuban women, even though there is no special law in place dealing with violence, equal opportunities in all sectors of society and, as a

result of this, a steady increase of women's social involvement, contributes to prevention and protection against gender violence. Women know that they are not helpless at the mercy of luck or fate, since they all know, even those who are not conscious of their situation, that they are supported by an assurance system that does not exclude them for their social or gender condition. Besides, as they increase their autonomy and self-valuation as part of a system of social justice, they have more tools for inter-gender relations.

- There is a wide range of institutions whose social responsibility is directly or indirectly associated with violence prevention and/or care of victims in any phase of this cycle, but there is no specialized protocol guiding their actions and defining their functions and responsibilities in this regard.
- Relations among the different institutions and organizations preventing violence and helping victims of violence at community level are not systematic. They are not guided by objectives or planned tasks. They are more guided by specific demands or needs than by a coherent intention to take action.
- Since it has not been yet recognized by the population at large, the institutional approach to violence against women becomes difficult, especially when people in charge of this issue lack the knowledge and the theoretical-methodological tools, as well as the indispensable gender perspective to record positive results.
- Undoubtedly, significant sensitization and dissemination actions have been taken by Cuban agencies, institutions, governmental and non-governmental organizations. Training workshops have been held as well as many other initiatives promoting the prevention and address of this social problem. However, the creation

of specialized services to assist gender violence victims could contribute to provide social care with more coherence and effectiveness than the one currently provided which is still dispersed and non-systematic.

CHALLENGES TO OVERCOME

All these characteristics indicate the many challenges we have to overcome in order to improve care and prevention of violence against women. Putting an end to impunity for violence against women is one of the goals proposed by the United Nations Organization. The 2006 study entitled "To put an end to violence against women" by the United Nations Secretary General refers to the effect impunity has on women's life: "Impunity for violence against women worsens the effects of this violence as a control mechanism of men over women."

The range of actions contributing to this end should be indispensably widened in order to put an end to impunity.

A crucial initial element is the implementation of comprehensive researches aimed at the collection and analysis of empirical data from settings providing poor information, and an in-depth analysis of gender violence by combining empirical data with social and gender theories including different actors and using different methodologies promoting the creation of prevention strategies and the application and evaluation of laws, policies and programs. A national prevalence study could contribute to improve knowledge of gender violence characteristics and manifestations in the country as a way to improve care and prevention of this social problem.

It is crucial to face the “social and cultural factors of acceptability” and, above all, to work with children, since we all know that those living under violence during childhood will recreate those patterns during adulthood. Therefore, it is essential to educate children at an early age and include it in school programs of those specialties associated with care and/or prevention of this social evil. Likewise, mass media have an essential role to play in this task.

An aspect to bear in mind is the inclusion of gender violence in the legislation, since this will facilitate actions within a legal framework against impunity for abusers. In this regard, however, it is important to know that a law in itself cannot promote efficient actions. In our country, we have a wide range of legal bodies contributing to the protection of women, and they all have a preventive role if adequately played. Likewise, as confirmed by the experience of a number of countries, law becomes dead letter if law enforcers do not have adequate gender-approach awareness and the specific preparation required to serve justice on this issue.

We must work with the community and for the community and take intervention actions involving victims at the level of institutions or organizations, not as a distractive palliative but as concrete actions promoting women’s empowerment.

A vulnerable element in preventing and addressing this social problem is the poor inter-institutional links with a national strategy to define, coordinate, follow-up and evaluate a set of systematically planned actions aimed at a coherent and interconnected work from the national to the local level.

Likewise, the lack of specific preparation of those in charge of implementing actions to deal with this social problem does not expedite inter-sectorial plans, programs and agreements for a less disjointed work and efficiently enough to reach victims.

As has been internationally documented, we can interrupt the violence cycle and restrict its impact on women's health and identity if adequate interventions are implemented to allow violence victims to recover their self-management capacity to build their violence-free life project.

It is extremely important for mistreated women to be acquainted with their rights and the procedures to be followed, as well as the supporting institutional resources available for them. Besides, social, sanitary, emergency, police and legal assistance professionals should be fully trained and formed to follow the adequate care protocols in keeping with the specificities demanded when dealing with this problem so as to provide a comprehensive assistance, outcome and intervention.

Institutional interventions should be aimed at reinforcing women's autonomy to escape from a generalized violence, and the initiatives contributing to recognize the victimization of victims.

Though not simple, we must devise strategies to deactivate the social mechanisms "teaching" humans how to establish asymmetric power relations based on the control of the strongest over the subordination of the most vulnerable (namely, male domination) and settle differences of opinion and conflicts through negotiation without resorting to violence.

An indispensable consideration that cannot be ignored in this proposal is the pressing need to improve and/or create specialized services providing a comprehensive care to violence victims aside from the urgent palliatives to be provided in certain circumstances.

When speaking about the comprehensiveness of services we refer, in the first place, to a set of actions which, from a strategic point of view, can provide women with the required support and tools to battle with violence and recover their status once and for all. However, such comprehensiveness cannot be achieved if this strategy does not include prevention as the main objective, since it will help dismantling our culture of concepts naturalizing and hiding gender violence in society. Efforts will not be completed without the involvement of the society at large in this awareness and mobilizing process to reject violence.

NOTES

. Though indistinctively used and in the absence of a consensus, the term femicidio refers to women murdered by men due to either disdain, hatred, pleasure or a sense of ownership over them. Feminicidio refers to the act of assassinating a woman merely on the ground of being a woman, bearing the political nuance of denouncing the State incompetence to comply with international conventions.

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FECHA DE RECEPCIÓN DE ORIGINAL: 1 de diciembre 2013

FECHA DE APROBACIÓN PARA SU PUBLICACIÓN: 20 de enero 2014
