

Research Line

Violence against Women:
Victims' Perceptions and Social Explanations

**No Peace, No Truce for Women in El
Salvador**

**A study of the meaning of domestic
violence from the perspective of women in
one of many invisible communities of San
Salvador**

Noemy Molina

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The Violent Research and Development Project series of papers documents the preliminary results of a pilot project that was established to integrate higher education training in social science research with cross-regional comparative research on violence. The overall aims of the project, which has been generously supported by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), is to empower young academics in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East, so that they can contribute to international violence research, publish their findings both nationally and internationally, and ultimately develop scientifically grounded political and civil-society responses.

For that purpose, the Bielefeld University's International Center of Violence Research (ICVR) entered into cooperative agreements with five partner Universities in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East: the American University in Cairo (Egypt), the Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas in San Salvador (El Salvador), the University of Benin City (Nigeria), the University of the Punjab in Lahore (Pakistan), and the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru in Lima.

The empirical research carried out in the pilot project was structured in five research lines: "Parties, Passion, and Politics", "Justifications and Legitimacy of Police Violence", "Violent and Non-Violent Neighborhoods", "Violence in the Twilight Zone", and "Violence against Women". These topics were chosen to cover intra-societal conflict and violence by looking at aspects such as political violence, violence perpetrated by state institutions, violent events, violent and non-violent locations, violence and gender, and forms of self-defense and vigilantism.

This chapter documents research that was conducted in the Research Line "Violence against Women: Women's Perceptions and Social Contexts of Legitimation". The aim of the research is to analyze the following question in Peru, El Salvador, Egypt, and Pakistan: 1) How do women who have experienced domestic violence perceive it, explain it and, in some cases, justify it? Do some women believe that such violence is legitimate, while other consider it illegitimate?, 2) How do they define violence and how does this perception of violence influence the strategies women choose to cope with it?, 3) What is the role of the social context and public institutions in dealing with domestic violence? Do they combat it, prevent it, or contribute to, legitimate and reproduce it?

Bielefeld, March 2015

Rosario Figari Layús, Sebastian Huhn, Boris Wilke, Ciaran Wrons-Passmann

Research Line

Violence against Women: Victims' Perceptions and Social Explanations

No Peace, No Truce for Women in El Salvador**A study of the meaning of domestic violence from the perspective of women in one of many invisible communities of San Salvador**

Noemy Molina

ABSTRACT

In a country where violence has become part of everyday life for its citizens, certain forms of violence appear to be silenced by the enormous weight of the social context. In particular, violence against women (VAW), VAW, seems to have been sidelined by the importance of violent murders of young men and gang violence. Thus, VAW receives less attention in the mainstream social and political discourses. Given this vacuum, the focus of this research is to understand "How do women perceive their experiences of domestic violence, and react to these, in a violent community of El Salvador". By approaching institutional authorities and women who have suffered violence and using in-depth interviews, I sought to explain how VAW is understood in a small marginalized community of the Metropolitan Area of San Salvador; and how these women explain, justify, and respond to their realities. At the same time, I explored how the community and political contexts influence how these realities are seen in El Salvador.

Keywords: Violence against women, domestic violence, perceptions, justifications, coping strategies, proximity of violence, Salvadoran gangs' truce

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El Colegio de la Frontera Norte in Baja California, Mexico. In late 2008, El Colegio de la Frontera Norte distinguished her with an honorary mention for her Master's thesis. In late 2009, she was honored by the Universidad Centroamericana Jose Simeon Cañas (UCA), through the Human Development and Migration project, and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) with first place in the first edition of the award for a thesis that addresses the phenomenon of international migration of Salvadorans. Since 2004 Noemy Molina has worked for 10 years as a volunteer in educational projects with youth with the aim of contributing to building a culture of peace in El Salvador. Currently, she works as an independent consultant for various organizations in her country.

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1. Introduction

This paper analyzes how women perceive and explain their experience of domestic violence and react to this within a community with a very violent history in the capital of El Salvador. The idea behind this work is to make visible the importance of social and community contexts when analyzing women's decision-making processes in relation to their experiences of domestic violence; and in a country where violence against women (VAW) remains an issue for the private sphere, rather than a public problem.

Nowadays, organized crime and gangs are the main triggers of murders and countless other expressions of violence afflicting Salvadorans (Villalobos, 2012). A recent opinion survey showed that 8 out of 10 Salvadorans believe that insecurity is the country's main problem (IUDOP-UCA, 2014). And in this scenario, VAW is a subject that receives little

attention from the media, social scientists; in fact, it is only recently that this topic has received attention from national authorities¹.

Studies have shown that in El Salvador 1 in every 2 women suffers, or has suffered, one of the forms of violence recognized by Salvadoran laws². And, even when there have been advances to protect women after the signing of the Peace Accords in 1992 (mostly at normative and institutional levels), VAW in Salvadoran society persists in many ways, including the highest expression of this problem: femicide³.

In El Salvador, studies that address the issue of VAW have been largely carried out by international agencies and civil society organizations, and few studies conducted by academic institutions and scholars have explored the roots of this social problem. Also, very few studies include the context, measuring the importance of socio-community dynamics in the reproduction of violence in the domestic sphere, connecting it with the experience of street violence.

Using a qualitative methodology, between February and March 2014, I observed, recorded and analyzed the stories of 18 women who have experienced domestic violence; in fact they have been living most of their lives exposed to violence in a daily basis. This article is based on their stories and perceptions, and documents how they explain violence and how they react to their experiences, in a social and community environment that seems to favor the use of VAW. The results of this research are discussed in the light of other studies concerning the justifications of violence in the private sphere and show how rarely women justify violence against them, suggesting that the few options they have is what keeps these women trapped within the cycle of violence.

2. Violence and Women in El Salvador

2.1 Women in a Violent Society

From the cruelest forms of state violence exerted by military dictatorships that followed the post-independence movements to the high incidence of criminal violence associated with street gangs nowadays, El Salvador has a long history of blood and injustice. For decades, violence has been a constant issue in Salvadorans' lives (IUDOP-UCA, 2010).

¹ During the government of Mauricio Funes (2009-2014), attention to women in vulnerable conditions became more visible on the public agenda, especially with the enactment of a new legal framework and some national programs.

² The Special Integral Law for a Life Free of Violence for Women is advanced legislation that recognizes and punishes seven different forms of violence against women: economic, physical, psychological, patrimonial, sexual and symbolic violence, and femicide.

³ The Special Integral Law for a Life Free of Violence for Women punishes the crime of femicide in El Salvador as follows: "Whoever causes the death of a woman based on motives of hatred or contempt for being a woman shall be punished with imprisonment from twenty to thirty-five years."

In 1992, El Salvador ended twelve years of armed conflict that took over 75 thousand Salvadorans' lives. With the signing of the peace accords, the country ended one of the most violent episodes in its history and the period called "post-war" formally started. However, as Hume points out *"the post-war period has seen a dramatic rise in crime, youth violence and the so-called "social violence" (Hume, 2009: 5).*

In this context, VAW is one of those issues that have been sidelined; there are not enough statistics, there is little academic research on the topic, and in general still not enough attention is paid to this phenomenon in Salvadorian society. As noted by the Public Opinion Institute of the Central American University IUDOP-UCA (2010):

"[...] women are also frequently victims of brutal forms of violence, that are sometimes less public (although when violence is not restricted to the private space) or have been normalized or deliberately muted, especially compared to the 'rumble' of violence in the public sphere" (IUDOP-UCA, 2010: 14)

Moreover, continuous proximity to a violent context has an effect on how Salvadoran women perceive and explain violence to which they are exposed in a daily basis.

In order to understand women's perception of violence, it is important to take into account the context in which they grew up. Although there is not enough information, it is well known that in the previous years of the armed conflict and during civil war, thousands of women suffered multiple forms of human rights violations and abuse. During the war, thousands of women were forcibly disappeared, murdered and raped in a context of widespread inequality and impunity (CLADEM, 2007).

On the other hand, in relation to the post-war period, the United Nations special rapporteur on VAW said in her follow-up visit in March of 2010, that after the signing of the peace accords in the nineties, El Salvador has made some good advances, mostly regulatory and institutional, to recognize the various forms of violence suffered by Salvadoran women (Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights, 2011). Unfortunately it seems as if these advances have changed little in the vulnerability to violence of this population.

At the normative level, it should be noted that the Salvadoran State is a signatory to the most important international instruments on women's rights. And besides, in 2012, an Integrated Special Law for a Life Free of Violence against Women was approved, becoming the first special legislation in the country to protect women who are vulnerable to violence. In addition, there is also a Law for Equality and Elimination of Discrimination against Women, approved in 2011, to implement mechanisms for equality and to sanction discriminatory actions and attitudes (ISDEMU, 2012).

At the political level, the first government of the “Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional” (FMLN party), elected in 2009, highlighted the purpose of “zero tolerance” to VAW. This policy had as priority to progress in protecting women’s rights in conditions of greater vulnerability. And in this framework, programs such as “City of women”⁴ appeared as one of the most recognized government’s achievements in this field in the current decade.

However, despite all the advances, much remains to be done because VAW is far from diminishing. In the same vein, Hume says: *While this legislation is progressive, a number of issues still undermine women’s access to justice, namely weak state capacity and the need to challenge norms and values that fail to recognize VAW as a pressing human rights concern.* (Hume, 2012:50)

Regarding the phenomenon nowadays, in 2012, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime published in the Global Study on Homicide that El Salvador was first in feminicides worldwide in 2011 (UNODC, 2012). That same year, the Salvadoran Institute for the Development of Women, ISDEMU, estimated that the rate of violent deaths of women (due to various causes) in 2011 was 21 violent deaths per 100,000 women (ISDEMU, 2012).

These numbers show a worrying tendency, which appears to be increasing (IUDOP-UCA, 2010; Hume, 2012). According to official statistics, in recent years the death rate of women in El Salvador has increased significantly (IUDOP-UCA, 2010: 23). Even though the violent murders of men are higher, the number of femicides in recent years is alarming.

Regarding other forms of violence against Salvadoran women, many of the events occurred in the domestic sphere are not registered in official statistics. The official numbers of domestic violence should be considered with caution, because it is highly underreported by the victims and their families (IUDOP-UCA, 2010).

However, despite insufficient official data, the Salvadoran Observatory of Gender Violence against Women⁵ of the NGO of Salvadoran Women for Peace (ORMUSA) provides some information in relation to domestic violence. During 2013 each day at least 8 women reported to the police that they had been victims of some form of violence. During that year, the police registered a total of 3,052 complaints of domestic violence and intimate partner violence (ORMUSA, 2014). Throughout the first quarter of 2014, 511 cases of domestic violence were reported, 70.3 percent of those victims were between 18 and 40 years old and 18.2 of these women were between 40 and 60 years old (ORMUSA, 2014).

Therefore it seems that there are two parallel realities, in relation to the phenomenon of VAW in El Salvador. On the one hand, the alarming number of events of VAW; and on the

⁴ This is a government program designed to guarantee the fundamental rights of Salvadoran women through specialized services (sexual and reproductive health, integrated care for gender-based violence, economic empowerment and promotion of their rights). <http://www.ciudadmujer.gob.sv/>

⁵ <http://observatoriodeviolencia.ormusa.org/presentacion.php>

other, discourses and state policies that don't seem to be having the desired effect in women's lives, at least in short term.

As mentioned by other authors: There is certainly a gap between the rhetoric of the law, and the reality of how – and when the law is applied... and enforced by respective public institutions. (Ramisetty and Muriu, 2013:495).

In order to understand this gap between policies and practice, between laws and daily lives of women, this study analyzes how women interpret and respond to their realities of domestic violence in adverse circumstances. To address this gap it is vital to understand and explain how violence is reproduced in women's lives from one generation to another. So, this study has been developed from below; I came closer to the daily lives of actual domestic violence victims, in those spaces in which the state – for many years – did very little.

2.2 Studying Violence against Women against a Background of Silence

Closely related to the lack of visibility of the phenomenon of VAW, few studies have been conducted from the victim's perspective in El Salvador. Most available studies have been carried out by international organizations, state agencies, which primarily seek to influence policy and legislative changes to create a better regulatory framework for women. In this regard, Mo Hume points out that in El Salvador:

"(...) it becomes so conventional to speak about (public) violence in terms of murderers, gang members and so on, that the gendered character of the violence merits no scrutiny and is not subject for research" (Hume, 2009b:78)

One of the greatest contributions of Hume in the case of El Salvador is the use of the category of "silence" as a key of analysis on the phenomenon of VAW. It seems as if this social problem has been deliberately silenced, favoring at the same time the routinization of violence in interpersonal relationships (Hume, 2004, 2009, 2009b, 2012).

Previous studies have shown that the normalization of violence in the country on a daily basis influences the meanings ascribed by women to domestic violence. In the context of El Salvador, women perceive violence as deeply connected to being female and, even if they accept it or not, they think that it is somehow inevitable (Hume 2004, 2009b).

Another important conclusion is that the existence of strong stereotypes in relation to the role of women in the family and society influences how VAW is perceived. Behind the explanations of violence, images of ideal women and traditional families appear to be important. According to these ideas, women are responsible for fitting into this pure and helpless woman image, and also expected to tolerate everything to maintain a united and

happy family. Women can be blamed for being abused if they deviate from these ideal models (Hume, 2004 and 2009; Landa, 2011).

"The social mandate of motherhood and the good woman establish that a woman must tolerate whatever it takes to make her home go ahead; and at the end of the day, she is responsible not only to take care of everything at home, but also to preserve the family stability." (Landa, 2011: 85)

Historically, these ideas of "ideal women, wives and/or mothers" have had the social function of maintaining disparate power relations between men and women, promoting female subordination to men, and justifying at the same time the exercise of violence to maintain this social order.

Regarding women's responses to domestic violence, the authors have agreed that strategies are deeply influenced by the context. In some case studies of femicide Landa (2011) found that the experience of these women has been extremely influenced by their own contexts, where a series of unfortunate events contributed to put them at major risk of being maltreated and even killed.

3. Theoretical Approaches: Researching Violence from the Perspective of Women

3.1 Perceptions, justifications and coping strategies

There are enough studies and information to assert that VAW in private relationships is a serious phenomenon worldwide, and even although many women die every year because of domestic abuse, there is widespread underreporting due to a lack of complaints to the competent authorities (Pispa, 2002; Rusbult and Martz, 1995).

It is well known that domestic violence is not exclusively against women, but it is well documented that women are most vulnerable to this phenomenon. Moreover, women with fewer resources and those who are exposed to patriarchal practices and groups are most likely to be victims and tolerate violence against them (Heise, 1998; Yount and Li, 2009).

At the international level, VAW has been defined by the United Nations as

"any act of gender-based violence that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life" (Declaration on the Elimination of VAW 1993).

This definition includes various forms of this phenomenon: physical, sexual, psychological, and patrimonial violence; by act or omission, in the public or the private sphere; and from various types of aggressors: sentimental partner, relatives, coworkers, individual and collective authors, and personal and institutional, including the state itself (ISDEMU, 2011). According to Heise (1998) this phenomenon is closely connected with the interaction of a number of factors of personal, situational and sociocultural dimensions, and she proposes "an integrated and ecological framework", which puts order to a lot of indicators that she calls "*predictive of abuse at each level of social ecology*" (Heise, 1998: 262). The factors that gather the Heise ecological model suggests that it is important to analyze the victim's and the offender's personal history, the family dynamics (situational or microsystem factors), and social structures factors (exosystem). And, finally, she analyzes factors related to the macro system, which she defines as "*broad set of cultural values and beliefs that permeate and inform the other three layers of the social ecology*" (Heise, 1998:277).

According to many scholars, the prevalence of VAW has to do with a society's value systems and the way masculinity and femininity are socialized and internalized. In deeply patriarchal societies, such as those in Latin America, relationships between men and women are fundamentally unequal, prone to male superiority and domination (Bourdieu, 2009; Komter, 1989; Liu and Chan, 1999; Piispa, 2002). In this topic Bourdieu notes that "*the social order functions as an immense symbolic machine tending to ratify the masculine domination*" (Bourdieu, 2009: 9)

According to several authors (Bourdieu, 2001; Cockburn, 2004; Heise, 1998; Hume, 2009; Imbush, 2003; Komter, 1989), the exercise of any kind of violence, and especially domestic violence against women, is deeply related with power structures and domination, having a direct influence in violence perceptions, justifications and responses. In the domestic sphere, violence can assume various patterns, which have been studied by several scholars. Kelly and Johnson (2008) subdivide domestic sphere violence into four categories or predominant patterns: Coercive Controlling Violence – exercised according to power and control patterns –; Violent Resistance – exerted in response to repeated use of Coercive Controlling Violence –, Situational Couple Violence – that arises when a conflict escalates to the exercise of violence, without control or coercion-patterns –, and Separation-Instigated Violence – which originates exclusively from a separation or rupture.

Piispa (2002) also divides the types of domestic violence into four patterns: short histories of violence, partnership terrorism, mental torment and episodes in the past. Both studies agree to classify these violence types according to the moment they occur, their persistence and the level of control over the victim's lives, and are related with power relationships. It is important to point out that the forms of violence based on greater control and domination (Coercive Controlling Violence and Mental Torment and Partnership Terrorism) are most

dangerous due to the consequences they have for the physical and psychological health of the victim.

As I show later in the stories of the participants in this research that often, even if violence in the private sphere can be extremely harmful to women's physical and mental health, their most common strategies are to endure and stay in those violent relationships. And, while many women who suffer domestic violence at some point decide to leave their abusive couples, there are many who choose to return (Rusbult and Martz, 1995). It seems as if toleration is the constant in their lives (Liu and Chan, 1999).

A common question in these kind of studies is "What makes a woman stay in an abusive relationship?" and what factors contribute to her tolerating violence. Several studies have attempted to explain the associated factors with staying in an abusive relationship (Kalmuss and Murray, 1982; Komter, 1989; Liu and Chan, 1999; Piispa, 2002; Rusbult and Martz, 1995; Yoshioka and Choi, 2005; Yount and Li, 2009). Most of these authors have said that women's tendency to remain in those relationships is associated with the dependence that the victim perceives and lives, in relation to their offender.

Liu and Chan (1999) have identified four types of reasons why women stay in abusive relationships: "a) they accept the fact of being beaten, b) the adoption of a positive attitude in life, c) the disadvantaged position of control of the resources, and d) the coping strategies largely effective." (Liu and Chan, 1999: 1487). Meanwhile Rusbult and Martz (1995), in their study of non-voluntary dependence, argue that women feel committed to stay for three reasons: (1) they have poorer quality alternatives outside marriage; (2) they feel that they have important investments in their relationships; and (3) they experience little dissatisfaction for the circumstances. In this sense, Kalmus and Murray (1982) estimate that women are very often trapped in abusive marriages because of an objective or economic dependence (low education, unemployment, children to support), this doesn't allow them to see or have alternatives outside their marriages; and also because of a subjective or emotional dependency, defining it as the investment that women have made in the ideals of marriage and motherhood, that they are not willing to sacrifice.

Closely associated with these ideas, there are several contextual factors (familiar, social and structural) that contribute to a woman remaining within a violent relationship (Yount and Li, 2009). As Rusbult and Martz (1995) point,

"when a woman has not a better place to go, it is understandable that she might feel committed to a relationship, even if the relationship is not very satisfying" (Rusbult and Martz, 1995:560).

It must be said that among various studies in relation to these explanations of "why a woman stays in an abusive relationship" it is very common to find some confusion of the reasons for her to stay, with justifications of the use of violence, as if the act of tolerating it is in fact an act of legitimation. However, even when in action could be considered partly as an act of legitimacy (Jost and Major, 2001), for many women, to stay in these relationships means a choice between staying alive or not. As Piispa says:

“Staying in a violent partnership has been considered a failure, whereas leaving has been seen as active agency on the woman’s part. What has not been recognized [...] is that not leaving is sometimes the only possibility for these women to stay alive.” (Piispa, 2002: 885)

Therefore, in relation to these misinterpretations of the reasons to stay and the justifications, it’s necessary to be aware that to remain in a violent relationship is usually a coping strategy and doesn’t necessarily imply a justification. A justification implies a process in which an individual categorizes, re-categorizes or perceives as morally acceptable and rational, something that can be unacceptable for others, and may even go against established standards and norms (Jost and Major, 2001). To Kelman (2001) the legitimation is the moral basis of social interaction, then, to legitimize or to justify involves the categorization of something as fair or right. Therefore, it is vitally important to explore from women’s perspective what are those situations in which violence is morally acceptable.

There are few studies that explore what legitimizes domestic violence from the perspective of someone who is disadvantaged in a violent relationship. In relation to the above, asking women directly, Yount and Li (2009) have pointed out that

“most often, women agreed that wife hitting or beating was justified for certain acts of disobedience (going out without telling her husband, 41%) and for violations of specific, expected domestic roles (neglecting the children, 41%)” (Yount and Li, 2009:1133).

In conclusion, in their study of non-voluntary dependence the same authors added that this process of justifying violence or reclassifying it as acceptable is linked to three main reasons:

“In sum, a woman’s social learning, resource and constraints in marriage, and exposure to norms about women’s family roles may shape her views about domestic violence against women (...)” (Yount and Li, 2009:1129)

Returning at this point to the beginning of this section, the system of values feeding the men and women's socialization into gender are vital to understand what's behind the acceptance of violence by women in a particular context.

3.2. Domestic violence in a violent context: The continuum of violence in space and time

Regarding the social context, and connected with the fact that the assigned meanings and responses to the victim's experience are linked to what happens in the environment, Hume (2009) describes how in El Salvador, where people live with violence in a daily basis, they tend to generate hierarchies between what happens in the house and what happens on the street, reinforcing the historical subordination of the private to the public, she *"proposed that gendered violence, rather than a private matter, is a public secret"* (Hume, 2009:46).

Much work feminists have tried in the past decades to place the issue of VAW as a matter of public interest (ECLAC, 2010). However, the traditional gender roles so rooted in Latin American cultures and the realities that live women who experience violence, still promote silence, as a strategy *"to negotiate and survive the hostile world around them"* (Hume, 2009:16). Therefore, not only what it is but also what isn't said must be addressed, and the various hierarchies and weights that women give to the various forms of violence to which they are exposed in various spaces.

In the temporal dimension, in relation to domestic violence in societies with a recent history of armed conflict, such as El Salvador, Cockburn (2004) concluded that women's lives seem to be a "continuum of violence", where the abuse is always going to reach them: in the pre-war, war and peace processes and in the post-war and reconstruction periods. Women have to fight every day and everywhere for their own integrity in a permanent battlefield. As she said

"a gender analysis suggests it is meaningless to make a sharp distinction between peace and war, pre-war and post-war. (...) we saw gendered phenomena persisting from one to the next." (Cockburn, 2004: 43)

This continuum is as a common thread that links what happens in the house and on the street, in various relationships at various historical moments, at any time and place in women's lives (Cockburn, 2004). In this sense, it was important for this work to observe the extent of violence throughout women's lives, and analyze how the continuous proximity in time and space, has an effect in the way these women understand it.

4. Methodological Approaches to Domestic Violence in a Violent Community

I used a qualitative methodological strategy to approach stories of women who have been subjected to the use of violence at home, which is deeply related to the community and social environment in which they live.

Two age groups were defined before the fieldwork: a group was between 20 and 40 years old, and a second group between 40 and 60 years old. The idea behind the age ranges was to analyze the speech differences according to the cycle of violence experience in two generations. The statistics presented in this paper showed that younger women are more exposed to violence than older ones, so I considered a transgenerational perspective to analyze how the phenomenon is understood and faced differently according to age.

During fieldwork between February and April 2014, I conducted 21 interviews: 3 with experts in institutions working on gender-based violence in El Salvador, and 18 with women. Among the 18 women, nine were between 17 and 40 years old, 7 between 41 and 60 years old, and one interviewee had 77 years old. Most respondents had little education and only one participant had the chance to go to college (but without completing the course). Regarding employment status, 8 of the interviewees were employed (5) or self-employed (3), while the rest worked at home.

All the women in this study came from a community with a high level of insecurity and marginalization of the Metropolitan Area of San Salvador. "La ilusión"⁶ as I call it in this paper was selected because violence is experienced there on a daily basis by women, both in public and in private sphere. On the one hand, there is a long history of criminal violence due to the presence of gangs. And on the other, many women are subjected to violence perpetrated by acquaintances, relatives or partners. In this community, violence is literally a continuum; it is experienced on a daily basis and in all spaces. "La Ilusión" is one of the many marginalized communities of the Metropolitan Area of San Salvador (AMSS). It is an irregular settlement established in the 70s and early 80s, mostly with people escaping from some troubles due to the civil war. The houses in the beginning were made with very poor materials and, three decades later, most of them are almost the same. There are 480 families, a total of 1,872 inhabitants.

The community is dominated by the Mara Salvatrucha, MS 13 gang, apparently "calm" nowadays in the area because of the "truce"⁷ process. In "La ilusión" the MS-13 gang dominates, the inscriptions on the walls of the improvised houses make their presence impossible to forget. Over a year has passed since the truce began in the community. The

⁶ To avoid the possibility that the participants of this study could be identified in the future, a fictitious name was used for the community and pseudonyms to refer to the participants, to not put them at any risk.

⁷ The truce is an agreement between the main gangs in El Salvador (with government intervention), to reduce violent murders and other criminal activities for certain benefits, from March of 2012.

inhabitants report a remarkable shift in the perception of violence, but the reality is that fear and uncertainty are still there.

Nowadays, in communities like "La ilusión" there is a double social reality. On the one hand, there has been a change in safety conditions for the inhabitants (e.g. people talked about a reduction in sexual violence against women, common crimes, and forced disappearances); but on the other hand, the intimidating presence of gangs is still intact, controlling, mediating, dominating what happens in "their" territory. This proximity and interaction, as can be seen below, have an effect on the way women perceive violence.

Within the selected community, the strategy was to contact and establish trust with a first group of women – leaders that functioned as gatekeepers – who would facilitate contact with other participants, by applying the "snowball technique", which is very useful to work with hard-to-reach populations due to their specific characteristics (Atkinson and Flint, 2001).

I used a semi-structured interview approach. Specifically, I explored the perceptions of physical violence, such as psychological and sexual violence that women have suffered throughout their lives in the domestic sphere. During the first part of the interview, women were asked to talk about their childhood and birth family, adolescence, transition to married life, life as mothers, and even grandmothers; and, in the second part, they talked about their community and national context on VAW. The results presented below were extracted from the analysis of the whole literal transcripts of the interviews, what was part of the verbal and nonverbal language, and were enriched with fieldwork notes.

Finally, it should be noted, that during the development of fieldwork, the risk level and background of the selected community, makes it necessary to take some security measures⁸, seeking to protect both the researcher and the participants. For the same reason, all names that appear in this paper are pseudonyms, and the name of the community is fictional.

5. Life Stories in the Community "La illusion": Explanations, Justifications and Responses to Violence

Inherited paradigms of violence: the weight of social learning

To analyze these women's perceptions in relation to their experience of domestic violence, it is important to examine the past and understand that many of them come from families where violence was part of everyday life. It seems that this exposure from an early age has an effect on the way these women see violence in family relationships.

⁸ Although in the selected community the gangs are apparently controlled by the process of the truce, in this study it became evident that gang members still control the life of the community. Therefore, to avoid any danger a security protocol was followed for visits to the community and contact with the participants, and all interviews were carried out outside the neighborhood.

These women began to share their memories about their families and childhood. At this point, almost all of the interviewees in both age groups reported overwhelming stories of large families, where there was a lot of necessities and few resources, besides the presence of a lot of domestic violence between the parents, absent fathers and mothers, abuse of alcohol and drugs by one or both parents, heavy work at an early age and recurrent use of violence as a method of child-raising: *"My two sisters and I have a scar here on the leg, because sometimes she hit us with a big knife and she wounded us..."* says Dolores (45) remembering how her mother used to punish her and her seven siblings, in the middle of the abandonment of her father.

Looking back on their childhood recreates a painful past that many of them prefer not to remember. *"Sometimes one would say, if I could be born again, I would not go through what I went through..."* recalled Magdalena (45), who lived in a home full of violence with an alcoholic father and an absent mother. It is important to point out that, in most cases, they describe their childhood as the starting point of a sequence of long suffering for almost the rest of their lives.

However, while they reject the violent parenting/child-raising methods that were used with them, they also have some contradictory discourses. They express the notion that being a good parent means, when necessary, discipline with severe violence as a method to child-raising, because in that way children become good people in the future: *"My dad [...] beat us, but we [my brothers and I] think that because of that [beatings] we are what we are now"* told me Belén (46) remembering the corporal punishment from her father, administered to her and her 23 siblings, when they lived in the countryside in the wartime.

On the other hand, when they talked about the discipline methods they use on their own children in the present it is possible to identify some differences in relation to the two age groups. Most of the younger women stated that they didn't want to use violence with their children, because they do not want to repeat what they experienced at home. Older women showed lower resistance to violent discipline and said that, when it is necessary, they beat their children, but not in the severe way their parents did with them.

In both age ranges the discipline issue is very important to them, since in most cases the responsibilities for the children's care and education are mostly theirs, and that's why they think they are allowed to use violence or to permit their partners to use it with their kids. In this sense, as shown in the literature, women have internalized the social mandate about motherhood, making them primarily responsible for the care of the home and the children (Piispa, 2002).

In some cases, I interviewed women from the same family but from various generations (grandmothers, mothers, daughters, aunts) and, from one generation to another, the stories seem to be repeated. Analyzing the reproduction of violence across various generations of

women in one family, it seems that paradigms related to violence are almost an inexorable heritage, which is transmitted from mother to daughter through the reproduction of child-raising methods. In the end, it is evident that the traces of normalization and naturalization of violence are rooted from early age.

This is consistent with the influence of "social learning", as it is known in the literature (Yount and Li, 2009; Liu and Chan 1999; Komter 1989) in relation to the perceptions and justifications (and also responses) that women give to violence, when they have experienced it since the beginning of their lives. At this point Yount and Li argue that

"(...) exposure to corporal punishment, violence in childhood, or domestic violence may teach women to view experiences of domestic violence as normal (...)" (Yount and Li, 2009:1126)

and in these women's case, sometimes it can also be seen as something that is morally justified or accepted.

Finally, even if the use of violence as a form of discipline seems to be normalized as an inexorable heritage from one generation to another, this research shows a clear generational difference. Younger women seem to have more resistance to the use of violence as a form of discipline in their homes, which could point to the conclusion that the justification for the use of violence as a child-raising method could be decreasing generationally.

Changing aggressors

For most of the interviewees, the transition from her violent birth family life to marital life hasn't involved many changes in relation to the violence to which they have been exposed, because it has meant simply a change of aggressors. Almost none of the interviewees began their couple life without conflict, having problems both with their family and their partners and in-laws'. Some became pregnant when they were teenagers and were forced by their parents to formally start a life with their first intimate partner: *"And the first time I had sex with him, I got pregnant..."* said Debora (22), who at age 16 became pregnant with her first boyfriend and was forced to start a marital life even if she didn't feel ready; leaving her mother's house to her in-laws', being maltreated there too.

Many of them, due to lack of information or negligence, or because – as they said – they never received sexual education, became pregnant unintentionally. And with this news came the reproaches and they were even beaten by their parents, contempt from her brothers who had been defrauded because "she behaved badly" and, sometimes also the abandon from their partners, who declined to take any responsibility for their children. Many of them were

still very young when they had to face the responsibilities of caring for their own children, their house and their marriage, that they didn't had time to choose, thereby limiting their chances of education in almost all cases.

This early marriage factor (as it is the case for most of the respondents in both age groups) has been considered by the literature as a factor limiting future access to resources. Yount and Li (2009) have pointed out that women who marry too young depend more on their partners, because they can barely see alternatives for independent living outside their relationships (as was observed in most of the participants in this research), and eventually this could constrain their ability to leave violent relationships.

Perceptions of everyday domestic violence and control

After a rough start in marital life, those women have experienced a lot of episodes of physical, psychological and, also sexual violence (although to a lesser extent). From the analysis of the interviews, it can be noted that women in both age groups associate and perceive as domestic violence the episodes of physical and psychological aggression; sexual violence is usually hidden and not referred to.

Sexual violence in the domestic sphere is the subject that these women speak less spontaneously. However, two of the interviewees said that they had children from unwanted sexual relationships; one of them was abused by her partner and the other one, was sexually assaulted by a family friend, when she was just a girl; among other cases of rape or sexual abuse attempts in childhood. Regarding the age groups, older women tend to talk about sexual violence with a little bit more confidence than younger women, who did not talk about it at all.

With regard to the forms of violence women have suffered, the interviewees described many forms of abuse, from subtle forms of coercion and threats, to episodes of extreme and severe violence against them and their children. For instance, one of the interviewees, Soledad (39) talked about one of many episodes in the beginning of her relationship, when her husband hit her with extreme violence (even though she was pregnant):

"When we came into our house, he (my husband) put music on when he was hitting me, he left me unrecognizable, my face was all purple, my tongue was swelled, I couldn't speak. He also slapped my little girl and she fainted. I thought to myself that this child will not be born, I was 3 months pregnant." (Soledad, 39)

For some women, as Soledad's case, these episodes were more frequent at the beginning of their relationships, and over the years these memories of a past violent episode have served

to their husbands to maintain control over them, under the threat of doing it again. As some authors pointed out, the memories of a violent event in the past can be enough to exercise control over a woman (Kelly and Johnson, 2008).

The interviewees agree that the most often forms of violence are those that do not involve physical aggression, such as shouting, humiliating, excessive jealousy and controlling decisions, lack of value to them and anything they do – like the work at home, for example–, lack of communication, resources limitations, ban on acquiring a job, damage to household goods, and threats of any kind.

Thus, the most common patterns of violence experienced by women in this community are what Kelly and Johnson (2008) call Coercive Controlling Violence, or what Piispa (2002) called partnership terrorism or patriarchal terrorism and mental torment; these are patterns of violence based on male domination and the view that men have the right to control women (Piispa, 2002). In general, the interviewees described their relationships based on control by their partners or male relatives, where violence becomes a tool for the aggressor to perpetrate their superior position, reproducing the mainstream gender norms.

With regard to common perceptions associated with the forms of violence these women suffer or have suffered, apparent contradictory feelings and discourses were found. In most cases, they disapprove of the violence they experience – against them or other women in their community – but it is common for them to assume a posture of passive resignation (Liu and Chan 1999), considering this as something natural in marital life. *"One day he will die"* Esther (40) told to her children, resigned, when they ask her to leave the house and abandon their dad, who has beaten her for 19 years and whom she cannot leave because they have nowhere to go.

Namely, it is quite common to hear that, although most of them recognize that VAW should not happen, at the same time, they talk about their experiences as something inexorable, something that always happens and, in in some situations, something that is justified. *"I've lived through bad experiences and I think all men are the same, liars, false"* said Belén (46) when she thinks of her marriage (in which she says she is not happy) and her daughter (who was abandoned by her own partner when she was pregnant), as being accustomed to that way of living as a couple, which in most cases is all they have known.

Why does domestic violence exist? And, in what circumstances do they justify it?

Regarding the perceived causes, when I inquired how conflicts in interpersonal relationships scaled to the point of aggression, the women interviewed repeatedly mentioned the abuse of alcohol or drugs as a reason. Many of the most severe episodes of violence against them or

their children – and the destruction of property – have taken place while the men were under the influence of alcohol or drugs. As one of the participants said, "(...) *while he [my father] was not drunk, he was a responsible person, but he totally changed when he was drunk, he was someone else.*" (Dina, 27), speaking about her father, who had been a violent alcoholic since he married her mother.

Many of the interviewees perceive that the use of alcohol or other substances inhibits the ability of their partners to control themselves and they become aggressive, as if they have temporarily lost their mind. One of them said about her partner who has used multiple forms of violence against her for nearly two decades, and who keeps her (under threat) at his side: "*I feel he was like that because of the drugs, I mean [...] when they [men] are detoxing, they get violent, [the woman] must understand and help them...*" (Soledad, 39)

In this case, this woman estimates that when men are under the influence of alcohol or drugs, or detoxing, it's normal that they behave violently. They narrated these events as exonerating men of the responsibility for their violent behavior against them in these particular and exclusive circumstances. And, in this case, the interviewee estimated that women are even mandated to help men to overcome this situation, in order to avoid being hit. Going deeper into the reasons behind this kind of argument, they seem to be linked to the mandates that women have accepted within marriage (Piispa, 2002; Landa, 2011), where they appear to be responsible for maintaining the stability and union of the family.

It is important to add that in this regard, on the contrary, some of the interviewees think that alcohol is often a perfect excuse for violence, but they don't consider that it inhibits full consciousness and understanding. In particular, they stated that there have been occasions when they called the police and immediately her father or partner got calm. This indicated that alcohol, which appears as a factor that explains violence, must – as it is also exposed in other studies, e.g. Heise, 1998 – be taken with some reservations as an explanation, since in many cases it seems to be an excuse.

Regarding the triggers of violence, the interviewees described a series of situations perceived as the main causes of conflicts, ending up in violence against them. Some of the causes they mentioned are related to the women's lack of fulfillment of the home obligations that have been attributed to them (dirty clothes, food not cooked on time, the house is dirty or messy, they do not take care of the children). According to them, when they fail in their assigned role of housewives, this often involves being abused, often resulting in being blamed for being abused (when violence is generated for these reasons).

Also, jealousy and control over them appear to be other triggers to violence (arriving home late or being out alone for a long time, or because they want to work), problems related with things that happen in community (problems with neighbors because of the children, or gossip

related to partners), and economic problems and facing material problems (stress from lack of work and money).

Related to explanations of violence, the question arises: *what justifies it and how often these women value the use of violence in the domestic sphere as something reasonable or acceptable*. At this point, very few women believe that violence itself is justified, even when they often choose to tolerate or deal with it indirectly, as is discussed in the section on coping strategies. When the interviewees talk about their experiences, almost none of them categorized violence as something reasonable or morally acceptable; in almost every described situation they categorized violence as something that should not happen to them or to any woman, so it isn't justified even when they often tolerate it.

However, it is evident that interviewees tend to displace the responsibility to another person than the perpetrator, or they even blame themselves or other women in their family or community for the violence suffered. At this point, the results are consistent with those reported by Yount and Li (2009) in relation to specific situations where violence is justified. Failing to meet their obligations at home, doing things their partner disapproves, and in general "to provoke them", could justify acts of violence, blaming the victim and not the aggressor.

"He (my husband) is jealous, because he has seen other cases [...], I tell him that I have some female coworkers that tell their husbands that they are going to work at night, and they go to another place"

said Soledad (39), accepting as natural that her partner does not let her stay out for a long time without the company of their children, except to go to work.

In many cases it was also quite clear that women have a tendency to minimize their husband's faults.

"He's always angry but he is responsible, thank God"; "He has changed, it was worse before"; "He is very rude, but I already met him like that"; "He is rude, but he is loving with us"

are examples of common phrases of this tendency to minimize, to find something good to make their situations understandable and endurable. At this point, some authors have argued that minimizing a violent experience or memory it is related with the "coping strategies" (these are discussed in the next section) of some women (Piispa, 2002), and explain how some of them can legitimize injustice against them even when it is extremely harmful (Jost and Major, 2001).

Dealing with violent experiences

Consistent with the literature on "coping strategies", (Kalmus and Murray, 1982; Liu and Chan, 1999; Rusbult and Martz 1995) the interviewees' responses tend to endure violence and remain in their relationships. Their strategies for dealing with violence are, in most cases, step-by-step strategies (attempting to promote change in a gradual way) to transform the situation that they disagree with (Komter, 1989).

The most common answers from both age groups can be clustered in three types of actions: endure, avoid (taking distance from conflict), and keep quiet. Most of them chose silence as a strategy (Hume, 2009), as they knew that confronting their partners could bring worst results. For example, Soledad (39) said *"I've told myself to be friendly with him, I don't provoke him, I always pay attention to what he says to me"*, because she has been nearly two decades learning how to manage conflict with her aggressive partner, and she knows that if she faces him he can become extremely violent with her and their children.

And in the younger women's cases (or in the older women's cases when they talk about their past experiences) leaving their homes also appears as a recurrent strategy, but only for a short time, using this as a tactic to change the behavior of their partners. Mostly the younger said that nowadays, when things get tough, they turn to leave for a while. For example Dina says (27) *"He cheated on me, so one day I decided to leave him [...] I left for 3 months, I went to my mom's house, but then we, [me and my 3 year old daughter] returned"*; she has left her house several times looking for her family's support, because of her partner's violent conduct towards her, and she is now pregnant with his second child. Some have the possibility to use the strategy of getting away for a while, which in most of the cases is largely more effective than to confront their partners and asking to change their behavior (Liu and Chan, 1999).

Overall, among older women there were more experiences in which they had definitely broken a violent relationship in the past, leaving their partners once and for all or making things that made them leave. *"I just stopped taking care of him [...] he goes or he goes"* said Dolores (45), talking about her older daughters' father, her first sentimental partner and to who she told him to leave because she was tired of the abuse and his lack of responsibility.

In the case of older women, it was observed that the kind of strategies they use to deal with violence change with time. In the past some of them, in similar circumstances, decided to break a violent relationship, but nowadays they tend to tolerate or to avoid the conflict situations. This is probably related to the elements of non-voluntary dependence described by Rusbult and Martz (1995), when they say that as time passes, women perceive fewer alternatives outside marriage and this increases the likelihood of them tolerating violence and

trying to maintain the relationships they have, because the cost of leaving their partners is very high and because they perceive that the probability of finding another partner reduces with age.

For example, one interviewee told me that she left her first partner because she couldn't tolerate more violence; however, nowadays she advises her daughter to tolerate her violent partner, and in her own relationship she preferred to endure it, as she said *"I tell my children let your dad's anger pass"* (Dolores, 45) often trying to avoid conflict and advising their children to do the same and don't disturb her partner. In the case of older women, these changes in strategies could be associated with that over time they perceived that they have increasingly smaller alternatives outside of their current relationships (to find another couple, to find work), besides that they already lived the drama of being alone and unsupported with their children in the past, and do not want to relive those situations.

Another strategy used by these women, although to a lesser extent and mostly by older women, is to denounce their aggressor. Of the 18 women that were interviewed for this study, only three of them asked for police help, and only one of the three has made a formal complaint in court. *"I've put him in jail like 3 times"* said Magdalena (45), who has lived with her abusive husband for over 10 years and who began denouncing him only four years ago. Tired of the beatings, she filed a complaint for the first time, and currently lives with him even though she has a "restraining order" issued for six months by a court. *"If he continues with his drinking problem, I'll leave,"* (Magdalena, 45) she says, while she checks the cellphone in which she has received a dozen calls from her husband while we were talking, because he wanted to know where she was.

The fact that some of the older women decide to denounce their partners when conflicts escalate to episodes of extreme violence, while younger women rarely do, might be associated with the fact they do not receive or have no other alternative (different from younger women, who tend more to ask their mothers for help). This could therefore be the last alternative for the older women to be safe.

In this last case, it seems as if Magdalena is not satisfied with her partner, but she said that she has decided to stay due to the moral mandate imposed by important social referents such as the church, which assigned to married women (as discussed in the next section) the obligation to bear whatever it takes to preserve the "sacred" family bond formed by marriage. In cases like hers, the reasons which constrain women to stay are very subjective and related to social learning factors and the amount of resources invested in the idea of marriage (in this specific case sponsored by her religious leader and her attorney), described as 'patterns of non-voluntary dependence' by Rusbult and Martz (1995).

In this point, it should be noted that the social and institutional contexts don't help these women to choose something other than to endure violence. When women who complain to

the authorities don't have alternatives to rebuild their own lives, most of them are trapped in these relationships and then don't ask for any other help. Many of the interviewees said that they and other women in the community don't want to leave their current partners, and much less of them dare to make a complaint, perhaps because the social context in which those women live makes them think that asking for help makes no sense.

In this regard, it is important to add that almost all respondents already believe that there are government efforts to support women in vulnerable situations. Those women identified the programs and authorities, but they perceive that the services are too far from them. It seems as if they feel that this kind of help it is not an option for them, either because they did not have enough information about the specific services, or because they did not have enough resources to go to these places to get information or ask for help, or because they thought that the options available couldn't actually help them to overcome their situations. In these women's perspective, there are also some important reasons to endure violence and to stay in a violent relationship, which are: fear of what might happen if they leave their partner and denounce him, emotional attachment, and the hope that their partners can change. And, behind these discourses powerful paradigms of ideal woman and traditional families can be seen, for example "... I would never have a stepfather for my children" several of them said in both age groups. Almost all the reasons they gave to remain in their relationships are connected with the dependence of women on their aggressors, either economic or emotional, objective or perceived, and also with the social factors and cultural paradigms that keep them tied to this relationships and don't allow them to leave.

What peace? What truce? A context that supports normalization of violence

It is important to highlight that the findings of this study may not be fully understood without the analysis of social and community contexts in which these women live, which often contribute to the reproduction of the cycle of violence in their lives.

On the one hand, in relation to the relational context, one important factor in this decision-making process is the influence of authorities within the community. *"I left, but some people from the church told me that, as we are married, I couldn't leave him"* says Magdalena (45) about her decision to remain in her relationship because many people of her church advised her to bear her partner's abuse (even when everyone in the neighborhood knows that he has spent 10 years beating her). Or for example, Magdalena (45) said *"...the prosecuting attorney told me to give him another chance"* (even though she has denounced her partner three times after episodes of extreme violence), she was advised by a state lawyer in her case in court, not to leave her husband.

Importantly, these social referents who motivate women to stay in violent relationships, based on the idea to keep family together at all costs, are extremely dangerous; since the legitimization of certain behaviors (in this case domestic violence) can be sponsored by them, permitting violence and injustice to become acceptable for those who suffer it (Kelman, 2001). At this point, all the normative progress and all the government programs seem insufficient, since within the same institutions are actors who help keep violence rooted in women's lives.

On the other hand, during the fieldwork, the structures of power and domination and the exercise of violence on the street turned out to also be closely linked to the answers that these women give about what happens at home. These women live in a community that has been classified in the past as extremely dangerous because of the presence of gangs, who are the highest informal authority there, and there are many ways in which they have victimized the population of "La Ilusión". Apart from all the problems that the community usually has (deficiency in infrastructure and services, problems with neighbors, land disputes, poverty), the inhabitants of the community have had to deal with the brutal violence that "los bichos"⁹ used before the truce and the control of community life that they still exercise. *"There were seventeen cipotas [young girls] missing"* tells Belén (46) who has lived in this community since the beginning, recalling the days when girls were bullied by gangs in the neighborhood and where many women did whatever was necessary to protect their daughters (send them to live in another city, sending them to school and not allowing them to go out, or asking the gang boss not to bother her). Sexual violence was the main form of intimidation of women in the neighborhood *"...look, there's another cipota [young girl] (...), they [the gang members] took her out her womb by beating her"* told Dolores (45) horrified, about the things gang members were able to do, just before the truce. When asked how they would describe the community nowadays, they spontaneously said *"Before, we could not get out because of the gangs, we were repressed, now we are free, with the truce"* Dina (27) said, who lived through the harassment by gang members when she was in high school. However, it is enough to hear the change of tone in their voices to see that they are still afraid. Most of these women over the course of the interviews were getting more and more comfortable, however when talking about community and gangs, body posture, tone of voice and answers show that fear is still there. Only few of them were able to admit that

⁹ "Bichos" is a way to refer to young people in El Salvador, and in this case is the way that people in the community used to refer to gang members

"... everything is [apparently] peaceful, but I don't want to rely on it, I don't go out much" (Soledad, 39) or "Before it was worse, but they always dominate more than anyone, the police do not do anything (...)" (Carina, 18).

Actually, it seems as if these women are always afraid, afraid of a possible break of the truce, afraid that gang members will start to terrorize the community again.

This constant tension has had a constant effect on the decisions these women make in relation to violence at home. First, the proximity to the acts of violence committed with extreme cruelty and threats in a daily basis, seem to have an effect on getting people to get used to live in that context, as normal, as natural, as inevitable. And this tension also has an effect that generates hierarchies in the various forms of violence (Hume, 2009a), for example when someone of them said *"...it is worse being raped by ten gang members, than to be beaten by my husband"* (Amelia, 22). In summary, when the street is so hard, comparing, usually what happens in the house takes a second place that subordinates the private to the public sphere.

Besides, gangs have crossed the border between what happens on the street and what happens at home. During the course of the interviews with these women, something that was very revealing is that many of them said they were afraid to ask for help and call the police, because gang members get upset when other authorities reach the community. Even during the "truce", they prefer to be silent or not to report because of the fear of upsetting gang members.

Because of these dynamics in the community, where the gangs are the ones with the monopoly of violence, women prefer above all to be quiet. *"If you want to enjoy this world, see, hear and keep quiet"* several of them said, recalling a phrase used by gang members. Here, silence is still the safest option, not only inside but outside home.

"The thing is that they support more men, he might have beaten his woman, but the woman will not talk to the police, they have threatened the woman, saying 'you'll die because police will not enter here'"

Dolores told me (45), who has 30 years of living in this community, in which she has learned that silence is the best option.

Related to the section above, the absence of denounce and the tendency to remain silent, women can be for so many reasons: because of children, as they say, or because of fear that the gang members get upset because of the presences of police in the community. And, behind all the reasons, it is possible to note the presence of strong paradigms related with

the social mandate of woman as mother and wife, closely combined with social and community environment that legitimizes violence and feeds these paradigms.

In the case of "La Ilusión", where violence is part of everyday life and where various figures of authority either legitimate the use of violence against women or prevent them for asking for help (gang members, religious and legal authorities), it is clear that the options these women can see to break the cycle of violence in their lives are extremely influenced and mediated by the context in which they live, which in this small community of the capital of El Salvador seem to be prone to perpetuate violence in women's lives. Returning to the concept of continuum of violence from Cockburn (2004), for these women violence has been and is a constant that doesn't distinguish between time (not war, not peace, neither before nor after the truce) and space (the street, the house). They have been and are always vulnerable to violence and their perceptions and responses to it are mediated by alternatives that seem safer.

6. Conclusions

The results of this research help to understand "how women perceive their experiences of domestic violence, and react to these in a violent community in El Salvador", demonstrating the importance of several personal, situational, familiar, and community factors in the way these women perceive, justify and tolerate violence in the private sphere.

These women, whose environment makes them very vulnerable, are exposed and often accustomed to many forms of violence. These forms – in which they are subjects or witnesses – range from the cruelest forms of physical aggression to subtle forms of domination and symbolic violence, which in many cases go unnoticed.

To understand women's perceptions and behavior it is important to analyze the weight of a violent past and a violent tradition in family relationships. Having the opportunity to work with women of various generations in the same family during this research, it became possible to identify paradigms and situations that repeat and are "inherited" from mothers to daughters.

Concerning the importance these women ascribe to their experiences, I could clearly see that they recognize, as Hume (2009a) suggests, hierarchies in the various forms of violence that they have suffered or witnessed. In their context, where there are so many forms of violence, they cannot avoid comparing and assessing them and developing strategies based on these judgments.

To deal with violence, it was very clear that these women tend mostly to "be silent, bear, and avoid" it every day. The reasons they gave for enduring violence are varied; some of them minimize their experiences and assume some of the responsibility for being abused

(perhaps because they are accustomed to it, and also because of the paradigms of images of ideal women and traditional families that they have learned); and in other cases, silence is a way to survive. Silence becomes for these women, in many cases, a calculated strategy to avoid suffering further damage.

Regarding the coping strategies, it is also very important to understand that there are community actors in their environment who influence their decisions and attitudes to violence. In the stories it was clear how religious figures of authority, or even representatives of the state, defend the traditional patterns of family and marriage, appealing to them to encourage women to stay in violent relationships. The influence of these actors in many cases supports the legitimacy of acts of violence.

Regarding the justifications, the research revealed that just few women categorize violence as justified or morally acceptable in the private sphere. What tends to happen is that women used to justify the reasons for staying in their relationships, but not the violence itself. In connection with other studies in relation to the justifications, the few women who said they justify violence, or understand it as acceptable in some circumstances, associate it with what Yount and Li (2009) have called "social learning" and "exposure to norms about women's family roles". Ultimately, the reasons for staying revealed several symptoms of "non-voluntary dependence", as Rusbult and Martz (1995) refer to a condition in what a person is trapped in a relationship, even without being completely satisfied and, moreover, at risk of injury or death.

It is important to add that these results cannot be read independently of the social and community contexts. Throughout the time of the work in "La Ilusión", the role of gangs as community actors was becoming increasingly important. At first, gangs were not supposed to be a very important actor in the stories of these women. However, now when there is much talk about the "truce" and "sanctuary municipalities", what was revealed in this research is that in these spaces, within the territorial domain of the gangs, they hold a monopoly of violence and arbitrarily cross the border between the public and private sphere.

An important contribution of this work is to have built these responses from women's perceptions, instead of just assuming explanations from the circumstances that surround them. It is vital, as Rusbult and Martz (1995) suggest, to ask what social and contextual factors constrain women from breaking the cycle of violence, instead of asking them why they don't leave (blaming women implicitly). The challenge for future research is to examine the perceptions of violence in other social contexts in El Salvador, as well as incorporating the vision of the same perpetrators of violence, to have a more comprehensive understanding of where violence is rooted.

Finally, these findings are interesting in the light of two junctures of Salvadoran reality: the truce between gangs and the recent developments in public policies focused on women. At

this point, it is noteworthy that at the national level there is much talk about gang truces and social violence, but little is known about the impact these events have on women's lives. Moreover, at the legal level there have been great advances, but in some communities women aren't even allowed to go to the police, they cannot go to court, and do not know what the government is offering them. Because, in "La ilusión", the peace, the truce, and the government programs are still a distant reality for most women.

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