CONCERNING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN, IS THERE A THRESHOLD FOR EMPOWERMENT? THE CASES OF TWO AREAS IN MEXICO

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Abstract:

A rural town (Morelos) and another urban (Cancun) in the state of Quintana Roo, México, have been analyzed, and paradoxically we discovered that women suffer higher degrees of violence by their partners in the environment with a higher level of female empowerment, measured through different indicators. We came to the conclusion that, in underdeveloped societies, there must be a "threshold" from which female empowerment implies a decrease in domestic violence. However, as long as this threshold is not reached, women will pay a price in terms of male violence against them, in the process of gaining more participation in society

Keywords: Empowerment, Gender Violence, Mexico

Introduction:

In Mexico, one third of women are victims of domestic violence. They suffer more violence in their homes, on the part of their male partners, than in the streets. The state of Quintana Roo shows one of the highest rates of reports of domestic violence (INEGI, 2003): in Quintana Roo, 43% of women reported at least one violent incident. Seven out of ten women are victims of violence on the part of their male partners (INEGI, 2003).

These figures show even more clearly the level of violence against women in the state, where the proportion of female violent deaths shows an average of 9.2% between 2002 and 2005, the highest figure in the whole country, where the average was of 5.2% for the same period (INEGI, 2006). Moreover, the First National Survey on Domestic Violence, carried out by the Secretary of Health (SSA, 2003) in health centers and hospitals, showed that Quintana Roo is the state with the highest levels of violence against women.

On the other hand, we saw that violence against women is unevenly distributed in different geographical areas. Statistics shows that women suffer more violence in their homes by their male partners than in the streets by unknown subjects, and that in urban areas women suffer more domestic violence. According to the same ENDIREH (National Survey on Domestic Violence) of 2006, 42.2% of women suffer violence by their partners in urban areas, whereas 33.3% of women are ill-treated by their partners in rural areas. Using these two bases, the rural and urbanized, we examined domestic violence against women in the state of Quintana Roo, Benito Juárez (Cancun) and José María Morelos. They are the most contrasting municipalities in terms of social and economic characteristics.

Even though Quintana Roo ranks fifth in Mexico as regards the Human Development Index, serious regional imbalances exist within the same state, as is shown by the fact that whereas Benito Juárez ranks first in human development in the state, Morelos municipality occupies the last place. In 2008, the daily per capita income in Benito Juárez was 2.6 US dollars, whereas in Morelos was 0.35 cents. These two municipalities show substantial differences not only in the economic sector, but also in their social and cultural dynamics. Benito Juárez, with more than 500.000 inhabitants, is a municipalityof migrant workers who have moved to the north of the state looking for the social well-being brought by tourism. Morelos, with 33.000 inhabitants, is mainly made up of Mayan natives who work as maize growers, just as their ancestors did. The first group lives from tourism, and the second mainly in the primary sector.

Undoubtedly, given the characteristics of both municipalities, women in Benito Juárez play a greater role in the productive processes and have more social presence than in Morelos. Whereas in the first area 10.25% of women over 18 have a technical or professional education, in Morelos this percentage reaches only 2.6 % (INEGI, 2000).

As regards employment, a similar situation occurs: whereas in Benito Juárez 32% of workers are women, in Morelos this percentage drops to 18%. On the basis of other researches on

gender in the Mayan culture, we can hypothetically suggest that in those communities in Quintana Roo where traditional productive patterns related to maize-growing are the norm, as in Morelos, family structures have undergone less violent changes. Mayan women keep on playing their traditional roles, even though male alcoholism, poverty, the media influence, and migration have had an impact on their lives.

The above mentioned elements are part and parcel of the idea of balance and complementarity between genders (Rosado, 2006). Moreover, family relationships in the south of Quintana Roo are still generally communitarian: most families live on the same plot of land which belonged to the family elders. Each couple shares their Mayan room with their children and there they sleep and keep their scarce belongings: they share the porch space, their food and the kitchen space. Elders are respected, and the division of labor between the sexes is rigid: women prepare the nixtamal (maize flour used for preparing tortillas), the tortillas and other food, while men go the maize field and bring firewood.

The cases

According to established traditional roles, women are expected to take care of the house and children, as well as to obey and respect their husbands. If a man feels that his wife or partner/ mistress hasn't fulfilled her duties or has overstepped the mark (including for instance, asking money for the household or highlighting the children's needs), he can respond in a violent way. so, most women in the Morelos municipality don't have strong conflicts with their men,since they play their traditional roles in a society where relationships are still communitarian. Fewer rights are given to these women than to those living in Benito Juárez, since they respect the role imposed on them. The violence they suffer is more symbolic, muffled and invisible; it is inherent in their behavior, it is a permanent feature and tends to be seen as normal or natural (Bourdieu, 2000).

However, in the urban areas in the north of Quintana Roo, such as Cancun, women started working in the tourist sector, mostly taking lower-paid jobs as compared to men. They work as chambermaids or receptionists, and are overexploited, though a certain repositioning has been observed. So, within an economy which tends to personalize social relationships, women can find it possible to handle their resources independently and to rebel against male violence. On the other hand, community and family control in daily life, respectful relationships between generations, as well as gender complementarity have no place in these tourist areas. These areas present a particularly violent scenario especially when legal or

judicial controlsinherent to a "modern society" seem to be absent. Moreover, the increase in alcoholism and drug addiction also threatens people's lives (Rosado, 2006).

Furthermore, migrant workers who leave situations of extreme poverty and arrive with low levels of human capital are marginalized compared to settled urban dwellers. As Anderson (1965) wrote, the city labor market is always saturated by unprepared rural job-seekers who are forced to precariously earn a living during this migratory process (Anderson, 1965:25).

The social context in which women in Benito Juárez try to make their way is contradictory and uneven since most people in the municipality are migrant or indigenous workers, concentrated mainly in the tourist strip of the region. They move to the northern part of Quintana Roo looking for the promise of a job allowing them to survive. 1 This migrant population with traditional communitarian rural lifestyles tries to adapt and frequently clashes with the lifestyle of a city geared to tourism.

As the migrant population grows, jobs are temporary, low-paid, hard to find and keep for both men and women, and consequently, these workers don't show willingness to defend their rights (Santana, 1997:108). Researches on social attitudes towards indigenous cultural behaviors show that natives living in the cities perceive and suffer from considerable discrimination against them, which decreases the value of their cultural rules (CIESAS, 2005).

This economic and social disparity brings with it a certain attitude of hostility towards tourists but, on the contrary, when residents aspire to reach the status of the visitors, they start to imitate both their language and their lifestyle (Santana, 1997:99). So, some local inhabitants tend to behave as tourists, living in a transitory play-and-leisure situation.

The tourists' easy-going behavior stems from their conditions of anonymity and lack of any compromise with local society. In a reversal of roles, local people try to imitate the excesses allowed for tourists. For them these imply social, individual and collective costs, both for themselves and in their relationships amongstlocal inhabitants. The significant participation of young and adult people and single youngsters without a family in the migratory influx to Cancun and the Mayan Riviera contributes to the development of this behavior (Jiménez and Sosa, 2006).

The consequences on the family structure become visible, since it changes from the extended and nuclear 2 family, where its members live in the same place, to a family with fewer children 3, where both parents work.

One must keep in mind that in the tourist sector, the working day is considerably longer than the usual 8-hour day, and that the activities are geared to the market, due to the dynamics of tourist activities. This affects living together within the family. Couples don't see each other so much, because their working days are incompatible.

This especially affects children in Cancun where they are faced with the phenomenon of loneliness, disorientation and lack of protection. Their parents abandon them in a framework of poverty where each individual spends his energy trying to eke out a living and because in middle-class neighborhoods both parents work, lacking time to take care of their children.

In this framework, relationships among couples living under the same roof are difficult: there's no face-to-face relationship, since there isn't enough time to be devoted to the partner or the family. The absence of time and private space to relax brings about stress and a sense of oppression in any human being. All the more so if one lives in a market economy, where individualism and competition are rampant:thus greater frustration ensues. Moreover, the laxness of the residents, as a consequence of the imitation of the tourists' roles, leads them to prefer spending their spare time dancing and drinking with friends than staying with their families. Relationships within couples are temporary and living together is preferred to marriage. 4 In most cases, these relationships are created to avoid loneliness and to feel safe and protected in a big city like Cancun.

In this context, domestic violence against women is more frequent in Benito Juárez, as men and women work in an impersonal and competitive environment, where traditional families don't exist anymore. Traditional social roles have faded away and moral values have declined. Furthermore, all this develops within the social and gender inequality which is a feature of Mexico.

Women living with their male partners suffer from a conflict of roles, since, on top of working in the tourist sector, they have to work at home and men keep on delegating most household chores to women.5 In the fieldwork carried out in Benito Juárez in order to know

the extent of domestic violence against women, we discovered that working women suffer more ill-treatment (49.50%) than those who stay at home (25.10%).

Moreover, if a woman doesn't work (even if most of them were working before living together with their male partners), living in a cosmopolitan urban area and knowing other ways of life causes in women rejection or criticism against male domination. This creates problems with their male partners who require that they fulfill their traditional roles.

So, we see that those women who deviated from traditional patterns and engaged in the workforcerun greater risks of being mistreated, and not those who live in a traditional situation where roles are clearly set.

In our survey we found that most of these women in a traditional role don't have a job – only 13.5% do – whereas in Benito Juárez 49.5% of them work, and these working women suffer more from domestic violence on the part of their partners. Moreover, the violence rate is higher for those women who have finished junior high school (23.74%) in both municipalities. Getting out of the house and achieving greater empowerment implied a high cost for women, namely mistreatment by their male partners.

When we measure the process of the empowerment of women through human development and inequalities between men and women, and taking into account indicators such as life expectancy, literacy rate and pro capita GDP (allowing us to know women's participation, their access to professional opportunities, decision-making and use of resources), we find great differences between the two municipalities.

On the one hand, the municipality of Benito Juárez shows the highest Gender Development Index (GDI) rate in Quintana Roo (0.8142), whereas Morelos shows the lowest rate among all the municipalities of the state (0.6537). As a consequence, in terms of GDI, Benito Juárez ranks 63rd among the 2.418 municipalities for which we have information available, while Morelos occupies the 1.485th position. If we compare the situation of women in the two municipalities in terms of literacy rates, level of studies, income and jobs, we find that women in Benito Juárez fare much better than those in Morelos.

We also took into account another official index in Mexico, the Gender Social Power Index (GSPI) which compares participation and social power between men and women through measuring the percentage of men and women working as legislators, top-level and executive officials. In this case we found results which are similar to those related to GDI: the

municipality of Benito Juárez shows the highest GSPI rate (0.6615), whereas Morelos has the last but one rate in the state (0.5708) (UNDP, 2003). An example is the number of women working in the Benito Juárez City Council: 21% of workers at directive, vice-directive, coordination or alderman levels are women, while in Morelos this percentage is 14%.

Therefore, women in Benito Juárez show greater empowerment than those in Morelos, but this has led to more troubles with their partners, within a social environment of a city like Cancun, where the role structure has collapsed and new dynamics have taken its place, implying different risks but offering more promisefor women.

Specific characteristics of violence against women

Violence involves the use of force. The objective is to exert power, to dominate and intervene in other people's lives. Another goal is to deprive the human being of something essential for a person, such as physical, psychological or moral integrity, as well as rights and freedoms. What is generally understood as violence means a physical or psychological aggression. This is a visible, direct kind of violence. However, there's another violence belonging to the cultural sector, linked to those symbolic aspects which are used to justify or legitimize direct mistreatment: those arguments which make us perceive deeply violent situations as "normal" ones. Actually, direct violence is justified by the cultural one.

It is difficult to acknowledge or to accept this culturally-justified violence. So much sothat, in the fieldwork carried out in the municipalities of Benito Juárez and Morelos inorder to discoverthe type and extent of domestic violence against women on the part of their husbands, it was difficult for us to get answers to questions related to their having been objects of violence, above all in the second municipality where traditional roles prevail: a man beating his wife because she doesn't fulfill her obligations is still considered by some women as something "normal".

These roles have prevailed throughout mankind's history. They are part and parcel of the "reality of things" and keep on reproducing themselves owing to the formal social control by the state, the Church and the educational system. Laws, theories and doctrines can be found which justify and legitimize violence and dominance of men against women.

The kind of violence we tried to detect through the questionnaires we distributed in the abovementioned municipalities referred to any behavior within a personal relationship provoking psychological, physical or sexual damage. This behavior includes:

- Psychological mistreatment: for instance through constant intimidation, denigration and humiliations;
- Physical aggressions: for instance, slapping, hitting with fists, kicking;
- Forced sexual relations, or other forms of sexual harassment;
- Economic mistreatment: not giving her money for the household and forbidding her to work;
- Different domineering behaviors: for instance, isolating a person from her family and friends, watching her activities and limiting her access to information or assistance.

In both municipalities, the results showed emotional violence in the first place, followed by the economic one, with sexual violence in the last place.

Actually, different kinds of mistreatment coexist within the same relationship. In general, we found out that when a woman has endured psychological violence, she'll be suffering physical or sexual violence thereafter. Once the first episode of mistreatment occurs, the likelihood of new such episodes is higher and higher, despite evidences of repentance on the part of the aggressor. That is to say, once respect for the other person is lost, the use of violence as a conduct-control strategy becomes more and more frequent. The sufferings of a woman, far from increasing the aggressor's awareness, make him more irritable (Echeburúa, 1994).

Most women interviewed in the municipalities of Benito Juárez and José María Morelos highlighted that they had been attacked not only verbally, but also physically, and everything was accompanied by serious threats:

"When he was telling me things, he said that I was really ugly and that he would marry my mum and my sisters, and he wouldn't let me go and see them, not even talk to them. He said that he would kill my family, would kidnap one of my little brothers, and threatened me with a knife. He assaulted people with a knife or a gun, he stole, killed, prostituted and raped, he didn't care".

When exerting violence, men are trying to control their female partners, make them feel that they are alone and that nobody can help them since men are allowed to hit them, "up to a certain point".

In every case, psychological ill-treatment is always present. In different researches it is frequently noted that for many women, mistreatment and psychological degradations turn out to be even more intolerable than physical violence. Psychological ill-treatment carries with it serious consequences for the health and the emotional well-being of women and takes different forms: continuous degradations, such as sharp criticism and humiliations; threatening stances and gestures; imposition of degrading conducts; intent to limit freedom, such as control over friendships, restrictions on money and mobility and so on; destructive conducts against economically or affectively valuable objects, or even against pets; and lastly, blaming women for the violent behavior of men (Echeburúa, 1994).

Many women go as far as committing suicide. According to data from INEGI, between 2002 and 2005 in the state of Quintana Roo, the number of suicides increased by around 50%, from 64 to 91 people, who took their lives. Some institutions, such as the Desarrollo Integral para la Familia (DIF) (Integral Development for the Family) in Benito Juárez, consider the increase in domestic violence as one of the causes for this situation. The field study revealed that 40.8 % of women in both municipalities declared that their male partners scared them.

In its turn, it's very complicated to measure sexual violence: few women dare report it, and it's still considered as a private matter. Sexual violence includes incest, sexual violation, child sexual abuse, sexual trade, forced prostitution, violent pornography, and harassment in the workplace or in public spaces. These types of violence against women do not happen just in the lowest social classes; however, poverty, overcrowding and the needs of low-income-level women seem to exacerbate them (Lara y Salgado, 1999:276). Women of different ages are victims of sexual violence, but in young women the highest incidence is reported.

During detailed interviews carried out in a shelter for mistreated women in Cancun for immigrant, low-income women between 13 and 16, we found that most of them started their sexual lives at 12 without using any contraceptive method, and thatthis brought unwanted pregnancies and family rejections. Some of these mistreated women wereabout to

have their second child, at an age of 15. Forced sexual relations, with a total lack of consideration, are reported as a common occurrence.

A serious and increasingly frequent kind of violence is characterized by several forms of mistreatment, intimidations and threats, linked to possessive conducts and a progressively dominant behavior on the part of the aggressor. Data coming from a wide range of countries show that domestic violence is the cause of a significant number of murders of women. The victims were assassinated by their husbands or fiancées, often in a situation of constant ill-treatment. The highest proportion of violent deaths of women is reported in the state of Quintana Roo (10.6% of the total number of deaths of women, as against 3.5% in the Federal District, the lowest figure in the country) (INEGI, 2003).

Even though we cannot indicate direct reasons leading men to act violently against their female partners, there are certain circumstances or facts which, on certain occasions, can unleash ill-treatment. For instance, poverty in itself doesn't necessarily lead to violence However, poverty gives rise to stress and frustration; it can initiate violent feelings if it's accompanied by unemployment (economic exclusion) and overcrowding, in recently created urban neighborhoods.

The survey showed that in both municipalities, 19% of women suffering from violence were between 35 and 39. That is to say that age, as well as poverty, is not a direct cause of mistreatment, but we can infer that those women denouncing ill-treatment by their male partners belong to that age group. Similarly, we found out that women with a higher literacy rate have suffered more violence from their male partners, which can be explained by the fact that these women rebel against traditional roles, generating troubles within the couple, and also because they dare denounce violent acts.

Undoubtedly, alcohol and drug consumptionsare related to violence. So, women living with alcoholics and drug-addicts run greater risks of being physically assaulted, and violence can get to serious levels when the partner is drunk. In the Cancun tourist area alcohol and drug consumptions have increased considerably, and the easy-going, tourist-like behavior, especially if linked with overwhelming, non-motivating jobs can explain this increase. Most women interviewedwho had suffered or were suffering mistreatment were living with alcoholic male partners who tended to beat them more when they were drunk.

On the other hand, domestic mistreatment can emerge as an aggressive conduct, internalized by the children as an imitative behavior which is passed on to future generations. The fact that they repeatedly observe the violence exerted on women by their male partners tends to recreate this behavior in the couples of the following generations. Hence they learn that violence is an effective and accepted resource to cope with family frustrations. In their turn, little girls come to know that they have to accept it and learn to live with it, at least up to a certain level.

Different factors can lead women to tolerate a violent relationship. Prominent among them are: fear of punishment; lack of economic alternatives; worries about children; emotional dependence; lack of support by their own families and friends, and the hope for a change in their male partners. There are many immigrant women in Cancun, and it is there that they have met their partners. They form partnershipsdue to loneliness and even when mistreatment is present, rejoining their families is shameful for them for they are afraid of their family's rejection, and of being seen as losers.

Actually, women who endure violence don't usually discuss the problem because they are afraid of and insecure about their male partner's behavior, or because they are ashamed. So, 45.25% of the women interviewed in both municipalities, who endured ill-treatment by their husbands or partners, declared that they didn't turn to any institution in order to denounce their mistreatment, above all because they had no faith in the judicial system.

Crime-related research shows that a low confidence in the system leads to fewer reports of illegal actions (Carranza, 1997:27). Women think that reporting violent behaviors against them doesn't solve the problem: on the contrary, it can make it worse.

We wouldnormally think that women in Benito Juárez suffer from lower levels of violence by their male partners, as a consequence of their empowerment process. However, we discoveredthat they endure a much more intense and visible violence than their counterparts in Morelos. Women in Morelos are still dominated by male roles and suffer a form of violence inherent to their roles. This kind of violence is seen as normal or "natural", is culturally justifiable and is basically exerted through communicative and symbolic pathways. It is therefore, invisible even to women, since it is an element of a lifestyle, of a way of being.

Conversely, those women in Benito Juárez who rebel against their traditional roles in an imbalanced and entangled social context suffer a more visible and intense violence. They live in communities where male dominance is rampant and are mistreated when they dare challenge this power. Consequently, they run higher risks than the women in José María Morelos, but gain more space for personal development.

So, as women in Benito Juárez reject their traditional roles and change their perspectives, they run considerable risks, but have brought to the fore a traditionally "private" problem, have reported it and are looking for other women to follow suit.

Conclusion:

In this paper we criticize the commonly accepted theory whereby women, through higher levels of empowerment in society, endure less gender violence against them: the results we obtained show an opposite trend.

We considered two very close towns with deep differences in the level of empowerment of women. One of them showed higher women empowerment, which can be considered in a broad sense as consisting of higher levels of participation in the decision-making process in local government, higher literacy rates and greater presence in the job market.

Taking into account both official statistics and the fieldwork we carried out in the two towns, we can affirm that the results obtained indicate that women with a higher level of empowerment suffer more domestic violence by their male partners.

This research leads us to conclude that higher levels of female empowerment imply a cost for women, in terms of increased violence by their male partners.

However, we admit that empowerment for women leads to less domestic violence.

These two statements are valid but seem to imply a contradiction. Therefore, we suggest the existence of a threshold, of a breaking point from which the situation changes. In other words, in an underdeveloped society, women will reach greater empowerment but will have to pay the price of greater male violence. Somewhere along the pathway of development for a society, more empowerment will entail less violence against women. Measuring this threshold is, therefore, a future challenge for researchers in gender violence.

Notes

Even if in Quintana Roo one out of three women migrate to look for a job, many more do it for family reasons, unlike men. Most immigrants are married: however the percentage of single migrant men is five points higher than that of migrant women (INEGI, 2000).

The municipality of Benito Juárez shows the lowest percentage of nuclear households (71.8%) in Quintana Roo, even below the national average (73.7).

On the contrary, José María Morelos has the highest percentage of nuclear families in the state (78%), which is above the national average.

In the urban municipality of Benito Juárez women have fewer children than those in José María Morelos. For instance, between 1993 and 1997 the average yearly birth rate was 2.33% in Benito Juárez, whereas in the same period in José María Morelos the birth index was 26.8%. In general, urban birth rates are lower than those in rural areas (Anderson, 1965: 183).

On the other hand, in the municipality of José María Morelos 56% of women married in a church and in a civil ceremony, whereas in Benito Juárez only 34.3%, as shown by the fieldwork.

On average, men devote 45.3 hours a week working away from their homes, whereas women 37.5 hours a week. If we consider the average number of hours devoted to household chores, we find the opposite situation: on average, men devote 10.6 hours and women 27.1 hours a week to these occupations. Another significant piece of information is that around 100% of womenmarried or living in common law participate in domestic activities; conversely, men in the same situation show a participation rate of only 50.3%.

According to information collected by the Centro Integral de Atención a la Mujer (CIAM) – Integral Center for Women – in Cancun, and the Desarrollo Integral para la Familia (DIF-CAVI) – Family Integral Development Center – taking care of women who have suffered domestic violence, women who turned to these Centers after enduring mistreatment by their male partners have an average literacy rate corresponding to junior high school.

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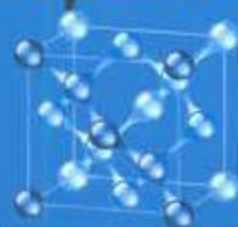
European Scientific Journal

2012 / January

European Scientific Institute

with support from „Egalite" – Society for equal opportunities

Reviewed by the „European Scientific Institute" editorial committee *2012.*

January edition vol. 8, No.1

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