

Auto de Resistência¹

The Collective Action of Women Relatives of Victims of Police Violence in Rio De Janeiro

Similar to other countries, such as Argentina and El Salvador, Brazil, and more specifically Rio de Janeiro, has witnessed the mobilization of relatives of victims of gun violence, mainly led by State law enforcement agents. These groups have conducted research, presented complaints, and closely monitored police inquiries and judicial procedures. Generally, mothers, sometimes sisters and wives, are the ones who start the journey on the path of justice in the hope of finding some meaning in what is left to them and in the effort, not always rewarded, to fight against impunity. The aim of this article is to map the challenges and opportunities that relatives of victims of gun violence face both individually and collectively in their struggle to overcome grief and obtain justice and reparation. Through the analysis of a concrete experience—the development of a support program for relatives of victims of police-led massacres—this paper discusses the nature, the risks, the possibilities, and tensions of this type of collective action.

Private Bereavement, Public Struggles

The impact of urban gun violence cannot be understood as merely a logical consequence of violence, nor as a statistic of suffering (Beristain). Urban violence has faces, histories and voices as well as unique and diverse mechanisms of support, organization, and resistance. These need to be made visible in order to avoid a victimized image of the victims and acknowledge their demands and needs for justice and reparation.

This article addresses the issue of how deaths resulting from urban gun violence are at the root of the emergence of activist groups which struggle for justice and violence-reduction and how the so-called indirect victims that make up

these groups (the relatives and friends of the victims of gun violence) perceive and construct themselves individually and collectively in these contexts. It also aims to shed light on the ways in which the initiatives aimed at minimizing, preventing, and transforming of violence, led by women, contradict the trend of women's invisibility and absence as social actors in both peace and war scenarios. In this article, we focus on the trajectories of the relatives of victims of homicide or forced disappearance by law-enforcement agents in the city of Rio de Janeiro on their path from mourning to struggle for justice.

At War: Masculinities and Femininities

The roles and contributions of women have been historically marginalized, both in peacetime and wartime. This phenomenon has its roots in the very process of social construction of the meanings of war and peace stereotypically associated to both sexes.

The stereotypes “violent men” and “men as agents of formal peace” as well as the stereotypes “women victims” and “peaceful women,” which result from perceived female dependency in relation to men and from maternal biological determinism, are a synthesis of a system of hierarchical dualisms rooted in the patriarchal matrix that subordinates women and other marginalized groups.

Departing from the observation that one of the structural and cultural factors sustaining violence is indeed the patriarchal system, and based on the analysis of specific violence experienced by women, some feminists establish a *continuum* between several types of violence (Moser and Clark 31) (domestic, armed, social and economic violence, amongst others). In line with this understanding, the traditional concepts of war and peace are not only questioned for their artificialness and narrowness, but also for their perverse implications. These tend to neglect structural and cultural violence, which operate in the long-run and are at the root of several large-scale violent expressions, hence naturalizing micro violence at play in the interpersonal sphere (not exclusively by women, but mostly by them) but common globally. This, in turn, feeds new violence spirals.

Along these lines, some feminists have contested the analytical separation established between declared war scenarios and other violent practices, namely phenomena of high concentration of gun violence in micro-territories (neighbourhoods, urban communities, suburban zones), within a national context of formal and institutionalised peace, highlighting its constructed and counterproductive character (Pureza and Moura; Moura 2005). By drawing attention to the proximity and connections that these micro expressions of violence maintain with conventional war theatres internationally—namely concerning actors and victims of violence, mobilisation factors, war strategies

and funding sources—these researchers deconstruct the conceptual basis of violence analysis, surpassing its dichotomous and excluding nature, and reveal the implications of its inadequacy in terms of formulation of alternatives to violence (Pureza and Moura; Moura 2005).

Taking cue from the idea that the conventional paradigm of security constitutes in itself a mechanism of insecurity production, especially at the individual level, feminist advocates propose a wider concept of peace and security, which embraces a multidimensional (economic, social, cultural and military) and multi-scale (macro, formal and micro, informal) perspective (Tickner 62), proportional to the expansion of the concept of violence. This conceptual and potentially political expansion corresponds to an attempt to bridge the traditional separation between public and private violence. By refusing to silence private expressions of violence, one contributes decisively to give visibility to the existing articulations between those types of violences.

Surviving Loss and Violence: Activism for Human Rights, Memory and Reconciliation

Alongside with lobbying initiatives for negotiated solutions to traditional armed conflicts and the minimisation of war effects, women's groups have been actively engaged in fighting impunity, defending human rights and advocating for reconciliation, particularly in the Latin America region.

Submersed in a past of civil war, state repression, impunity, and widespread poverty, countries such as Argentina, Chile, Guatemala, and El Salvador witnessed the emergence of groups of mothers, grandmothers and widows, namely the Mothers of the *Plaza de Mayo*, the Chilean Relatives' Association, the National Committee of Widows of Guatemala and the El Salvadorian Committee of Mothers Monsignor Romero. These groups, mostly constituted of women belonging to economic medium/low classes, with very little political experience, soon became symbols of the struggle for social justice, memory and national reconciliation.

War experiences, although traumatic, mainly in the contexts where violence against women was rampant, have not held up women from organising themselves collectively, participating in public protests, leading judicial inquiries or campaigns for truth. Quite the contrary, in many cases it was the very own personal experience of violences and the feelings of loss and grief that prompted women to political activism (Schirmer 35).

One of the key characteristics of these forms of female organisation and protest is the politicisation of the private domain² that is, the use of the domestic roles associated traditionally to women, especially those of mother and wife, and to the “moral capital” underlying these (Bull 3) as a strategy of entering

the public sphere. Some feminist movements of the North, particularly in the United States of America and in Europe, perceiving this as legitimating the traditional gendered labour division, tend to criticise and underscore these forms of activism, classifying them as non-transformative or non-emancipatory (Elshtain 544). While in some cases the appropriation of the traditional roles of women in the domestic sphere can be attributed to strategic considerations only, enabling the penetration of the public sphere and lending legitimacy and protection to these movements, these discourses have also been employed, particularly in Latin America, as a conscientious refusal of the “white, western and heterosexual feminism” (Radcliffe and Westwood 5). Instead of eliminating motherhood as a reference in the construction of femininity, the deliberate use of this discourse aims to bring the feminine perspective of motherhood to the political system. In other words, it aims to “create a political role for motherhood” (Howe 47), thereby challenging the very meaning of motherhood and care and the stereotypes which define women as apolitical and passive.

Moreover, and despite the fact that most of these movements did not aim directly at challenging women’s subordination, associativism and politicization of more immediate needs and experiences can contribute to a greater awareness of subordination and hence broaden the scope of social acceptance of their new protagonism (Safa 367).

It is also important to question whether these women, in addition to contributing to redefine their own identity conceptions, have collaborated in the structural transformation of social roles, namely in the private sphere, paving the way for the redefinition of male roles (including those regarding violence) and, thus, introducing new changes in the public sphere. Along these lines, these forms of protest that emerge amidst violence constitute important peace resources, which need to be made visible and encouraged.

Mothers’ Groups in Brazil: Small Big Steps

Brazil is currently one of the most violent countries in the world, with gun-related mortality rates similar to many war scenarios. In 2006 it registered 35,969 gun-related deaths (Rede de Informação Tecnológica Latino-Americana *et al.* 94), 2,235 of which occurred in the city of Rio de Janeiro, the State with higher prevalence of gun deaths. Also, in the year 2006 alone the Police was responsible for the death of over one thousand civilians (Lira).

The massacres and summary executions, with roots in the military dictatorship, constitute to this day extreme, visible and frequent expressions of gun violence in Rio de Janeiro. And if in the past, they marked the frontier between the civilised world and barbarianism, currently they are spread out, escaping their geographical limits and becoming part of the city’s reality (Alves 16). And

this geographical dissemination is matched by the dissemination of destruction and disruption of ties and lives.

From 1979 to 2000, three hundred to six hundred thousand people survived violent deaths in Rio de Janeiro (Soares *et al.*). That is, gun violence marks, differentially, the lives of the population and goes way beyond the official statistics on firearms-related deaths and injuries, which reveal only the most visible impacts of this type of violence. In the spirals and *continuums* of gun violence that are manifested internationally and are expressed locally in Rio de Janeiro, the ones who die (male and female) do not constitute the sole victims (Moura 2007). Indeed, relatives and friends of direct victims of violence suffer differentiated impacts, physically, psychologically, socially and economically. In addition to experiencing the trauma of losing a loved one and having to cope, on a daily basis, with violence and its effects, these survivors, generally mothers, sometimes sisters and wives, but rarely fathers and brothers, have yet to face the obstacles and slow pace of the judicial system and the absence of social support networks. In face of this scenario, and like in other contexts of overt violence, namely Latin America in the '80s, groups of relatives of victims of gun violence, particularly those victims of police-led massacres, mainly mothers' groups, have been emerging, seeking collectively to cope with violence and its effects. In fact, relatives of victims of police massacres such as the *Acari* massacre (1990), *Vigário Geral* (1993), *Candelária*, *Borel*, and *Via-Show* (2003), have come together and constituted groups such as the Mothers of *Acari*, Mothers of *Vigário Geral*, and Mothers of Rio. More or less organised and institutionalised, these groups have been conducting research, presenting complaints and following closely the evolution of police investigations, as well as judicial proceedings, in the effort of fighting impunity.

The group of mothers and relatives of victims of massacres with which we have been working with constitute an example, albeit embryonic, of this kind of collective activism. Similarly to the Argentinean, San Salvadorian and Guatemalan mothers, they face serious financial and emotional distress, as well as family disruption and often social stigmatisation, whenever they are accused of being a “thug’s mother” and hence required to prove their children’s innocence—a stigma with a similar weight to the “subversive” label, commonly used in the Latin-American contexts of political violence during the 1980s.

In the words of one of the mothers:

People who don't follow closely our reality are oblivious of our difficulties in entering a police station, in meeting the Justice Promoter or monitoring police enquiries. The press doesn't write about this. Apparently, the difficulties we face trying to solve our cases do not sell newspapers (Soares, Moura and Afonso 116).

Also similarly, the mourning of these women, their subjective experience of violence, was transformed, at first spontaneously, into the desire of fighting for justice and non-violence. The objectives of their struggles, namely the search for justice, dignity and memory are also common.

The similarities of their testimonies, the pain lived and re-lived since the tragic event and their own struggle for the accountability of the murderers, hitherto led individually, constitute the keystone for their association, the monitoring of each others' processes and the search for a new meaning of life collectively (Moura 2007). In the words of one of the mothers of the group, "We are driven by our grief and no-one knew. Our pain was transformed into fighting."

Existing groups, such as the Mothers of *Cinelândia*, the Mothers of *Acari*, the Network of Communities and Movements Against Violence, SOS *Queimados*, *Fórum Reage Baixada* and other NGOs, enable, to a certain extent, some connection with the public office and the denunciation of rights abuse. The role of these movements is thus considered essential by the group of relatives. Scarcer, is the connection of these mothers to international movements, such as the Mothers of *Plaza de Mayo*. For these relatives, this type of connection, albeit exceptional, allows them to give visibility to their struggle at the national level and especially at the international level.

In fact, despite similarities in terms of female protagonism, violence impacts and struggle objectives, there are important differences between this mothers' group and the Latin-American counterparts, mainly due to their degree of politicisation and their socio-economic profiles.

Despite the existence of collectively planned and coordinated initiatives, namely public demonstrations and monitoring of judicial proceedings and trials, many problems remain, particularly in terms of joint demand for public policies consistent with the struggle against impunity and police abuse. To great extent, at the origin of these obstacles are the socio-economic profiles of those who make up the groups of relatives. Contrary to other mothers' movements referred above, most victims' relatives in Rio de Janeiro belong to the poorest segments of the population, being not only structurally more vulnerable to violence, but also in a harder position when it comes to mobilisation, due to lack of resources.

The Experience of the "Support Programme for Relatives of Victims of Police-led Massacres"

The Programme, conducted by Cândido Mendes University, Brazil (CESeC), and University of Coimbra, Portugal (CES), has sought to contribute to amplify the voice of the existing women's groups advocating for justice and reparation in Rio de Janeiro, through the promotion of their emotional and psychological

strengthening as well as access to information and to justice.

In order to support the passage from an individual perspective to a collective one, a network of psychologists was set up, which offered free consults to those interested in treatment. Additionally, group meetings were promoted on a monthly basis, in the format of a self-help group, where political and organizational issues as well as personal topics were addressed and discussed. Thus, these were spaces of personal exchange, enabling self-expression, mutual identification, and lobbying.

In this context, and taking into consideration the training needs identified by the mothers of the group during the course of the meetings, a training course of Popular Legal Educators (PLP) was set up, using the methodology developed by the NGO THEMIS, in Rio Grande do Sul. This format, lauded as a success tool in the promotion of access to justice for women in popular communities (Fonseca *et al.*), was then adjusted to the needs and aspirations of the programme's group. Since then, two modules of the course were organized (in 2008 and 2009), with 56 hours each, addressing topics such as human rights, the Brazilian criminal justice system, income generation and public speaking skills. Meetings of psychosocial and psychological support as well as legal advice and leisure activities also took place during the course of the sessions.

During the course of these meetings and training sessions, and for the first time in the history of the mothers' movement in Brazil, the idea of collectively writing a book and preparing a documentary honouring the memory of the loved ones and the daily struggle of these survivors began to take shape. Three years after the initial drafts, the book *Auto de Resistência: Relatos de Familiares de Vítimas de Violência Armada*³ was published and the documentary "Right to Mourn" released.⁴

In the words of one of the mothers,

"This film is an historical document. It addresses a very painful subject, but a necessary one. It portrays what happens after violent incidents, the feelings of the family and friends, the difficulties in fighting impunity. It gives visibility to our struggle and it humanises the victims. It shows that these aren't just statistics. They had a history."⁵

One of the aims of the PLP courses and the parallel activities was to facilitate access to knowledge and contacts necessary to the structuring of the relatives' struggle, namely through the establishment of a collective movement or a consolidated organisation. To some extent, the judicial successes of some of the relatives involved in the group, namely those associated to the Baixada (2003)⁶ and Via Show⁷ massacres can be attributed, not exclusively, to the greater access

to media and information, namely facilitated by the participation in training courses such as the PLP.

However, and despite the will of the majority of the group's members, the aim of structuring the group's struggle has been undermined by several motives. One of them lies in the ambiguity of the subjective condition of victimhood (direct and indirect). If, on the one hand, the massacre contributes to a greater awareness of violence and the public manifestation of justice activism on the part of the relatives, the legitimacy of this demand results from, on the other hand, a social role which is difficult to surpass. In fact, whilst the mothers have unquestionable moral capital, they become partially imprisoned to the condition of victim. This mechanism is aggravated by the fact that public recognition often brings secondary benefits, such as media attention, access to political authorities and celebrities as well as other circles hitherto excluded from their range of opportunities.

Despite the intrinsic contradictions of the struggle for justice, attempts to structure a survivors' organization in the State of Rio as well as signs of mobilization around a potentially national association have recently surfaced. A part of the group has taken on an active role in meetings and conferences on public security regionally and nation-wide, bringing together a network of people (mainly women) willing to engage in activism. This is thus a key moment not only to testify the emergence of a new organisational level in the group and of the constitution of a new social actor, but also to contribute to the reinforcement (and visibility) of this effort. Several factors hinder the opening of social spaces external to the dynamics of violence at play in conflict scenarios (Beristain). Experiences of resistance as those described above, need to open a civilian space amidst a conflict which tends to control all their initiatives.

Conclusion

In Brazil, as in other urban scenarios of armed violence, men are the main victims and perpetrators of gun-related violence. Because of this global trend, often those who survive are the ones that attempt to counter violence, devoting themselves to the development of mechanisms and strategies to restore normalcy and re-establish peace and security. And the face of survival is frequently female.

At first individually and, later on, collectively, women's reaction against violence is normally marked by informality and spontaneity. However, as the time passes, some of these groups begin structuring themselves politically and strategically. Women's collective and organized participation, similarly to men's, is thus a product of a deliberate choice, often made due to and shaped by their personal experience of violences, the macro political context (war, dictatorship,

hybrid scenarios), micro circumstances (namely if they are politicized or not), as well as their social, economic, and cultural backgrounds.

Assuming distinctive forms from traditional political activism, namely concerning the centrality that aesthetic forms of demonstration and demand assume and their preferred *modus operandi*, these constitute political forms of intervention, even if manifested at a micro level.

Often, however, women activism (and especially mothers') is undervalued or even silenced, as a result of being perceived as natural and apolitical. In hybrid contexts of violence, which escape traditional concepts of war (and peace), like Brazil and particularly Rio de Janeiro, this marginalisation appears to be even more evident. In this case, several layers of analytical "formatting" are intersected, expressed in the utilisation of and reference to traditional concepts of politics, power, war and peace, each manifestly insufficient to capture reality and particularly the complexity of the violences and the strategies that are being developed to counter these.

Ignoring or marginalizing these initiatives translates into a waste of potential resources of minimisation, prevention and transformation of violences that arise in particularly difficult contexts.

¹*Auto de resistência* is the legal term used in Brazil by the police when a violent incident is justified on grounds of self-defence (i.e., when someone is killed in the course of a shooting between the police and crime suspects, namely those involved in drug trafficking).

²The political use of motherhood is not, however, exclusive to the Latin-American context nor exclusive to the South, broadly speaking. For instance, the US-Based organization Women Strike for Peace lobbied for a ban on nuclear tests, drawing attention to the its potential risks for the children's health (Swerdlow).

³*Auto de Resistência: relatos de familiares de vítimas da violência armada*. Rio de Janeiro, 7 Letras, 2009. Written by 19 relatives of the group, with the support of the program's technical team.

⁴Produced by Cinema Nosso, Jabuti Films and TV Zero and directed by Luis Carlos Nascimento. Twelve women of the group participated actively in the documentary, namely as screenplay writers, researchers and camera operators.

⁵See <www.lutocomomae.com>, section Testimonies.

⁶On the 31st March 2005, 30 people were shot dead in several locations of the *Baixada Fluminense* by a group of policemen of the battalions of *Nova Iguaçu* e *Queimados*. These killings were retaliation for the imprisonment of nine military policemen from the 15° Battalion, which took place during the

course of operation *Navalha na Carne*, aimed at combatting police corruption and malpractice.

⁷On the night of December 5th, 2003, the brothers Rafael (18 years old) and Renan Medina Paulino (13 years old), their cousin Bruno Muniz Paulino (20 years old), and their friend Geraldo Sant’Anna de Azevedo Júnior (21 years old), went to a concert, at the venue Via Show, in *Baixada Fluminense*. Three days later, their bodies were found inside a well, by the police, in *Duque de Caxias*, with signs of torture.

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