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Violence, Risking Writing About It

What is written in a country where, on average, every day, ten women are the victims of femicide for being women?

Ten women silenced by death. Ten men who murder ten women, showing, once again, the risk it is to be a woman and not do what is expected of them in a country where the levels of impunity and social complicity allow and reproduce normalized and naturalized violence.

We hear and talk more and more about concepts like patriarchy, machismo, misogyny, femicide. We reveal statistics to show the dimension of a problem considered a pandemic long before Covid-19. However, do we know what we're talking about? What the conditions are that make the manifestations of violence possible? What lies at the root of what we know as the patriarchal system and how it relates to our lives?

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The concepts, statistics, and data help us to point out, name, and see the size and complexity of a phenomenon present in our country and the world. These are not easy issues; talking about them creates discomfort, resistance, and pain.

However, we cannot lose sight of the fact that behind every number and every percentage there is a person, a woman, and a little girl with dreams, projects, and attachments, with a history made vulnerable by macho aggressions.

Violence against this part of the population is an ever-present mechanism of domination, control, and oppression due to the gender condition, which fits into an unequal, hierarchical system known as the patriarchal system. It does not respect nationality, age, socio-economic level, degree of schooling, culture, race, ethnicity, or territory. It is violence exercised based on certain stereotypes, roles, and mandates linked to gender; that is, from before a baby is born and it is known whether it will be a girl or a boy, a series of expectations are constructed about what it will be or do in life. Violence due to the gender condition is

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that which is exercised because people do not fulfill those mandates, roles, and stereotypes, or precisely because they do.

From the logic of the patriarchal system, each of the genders is assigned specific characteristics, grouped in the feminine and the masculine, placing what is considered masculine on top, linked to men, and associating what is feminine with women. Social, legal, political, cultural, ideological, and educational systems have been constituted based on these hierarchical distinctions, giving rise to unequal relations that give the advantage to certain groups over others.

Traditionally, productive labor has been valued as superior and assigned to men, while reproductive labor, care and child-raising work in the home has been assigned to women, categorizing the former as superior to the latter. This is the case to the degree that today, in many places the latter is considered as part of women's supposed essence, something natural that one is born with and that, therefore, involves practically no effort. This annuls this kind of work and its economic and social value, making it invisible; work that mainly women carry out in the home, and which represents 26.3 percent of national gross domestic product according to the 2021 survey by the National Institute for Statistics and Geography (INEGI). But, well, that topic alone would be the subject of a whole other article.

It seems fundamental to me to go more deeply into the roots and conditions that have made possible—and continue to make possible— violence against women, problems that have an individual as well as a collective dimension. In this sense, we can understand what Carol Hanisch said in 1969: “The personal is political, and the political is personal,” as Marcela Lagarde said a few years later.

Violence against women and little girls is a grave problem that demands immediate, urgent attention. We must

also not forget that we're dealing with a structural phenomenon that we must eliminate at the root since its different manifestations have been socially naturalized and normalized in interpersonal relations.

This is the case of couples' relations, emotional and love relationships, as part of what we know as “romantic love,” which chains women to subjection, submission, and control, disguised as supposed care, protection, and love, turning homes into jails with invisible padlocks and bars.

When I say normalization, I mean all the behavior and acts that justify violence as something usual, using phrases like “it's always been that way; in my family, people have always related to each other that way; things have always functioned like that.”

Naturalization, on the other hand, refers to the justification of violence by thinking that it is a response to natural conditions linked to people's sex. We see this reflected in phrases like, “This is what women do, think, or feel because they were born that way; that's in their nature; that's how men relate and solve problems because they're born men.” However, we know that gender is a socio-cultural construction of the sex-gender system, which can be questioned and modified. In Mexico, different actions have been taken for the prevention, attention, punishment, and eradication of violence. However, since it is structural, it requires a profound modification of the system of beliefs and the social paradigm.

I will take advantage of the opportunity to say that, according to its etymological origin, “eradicate” means “to eliminate at the root,” or “root out.” This means we have to know what that root is made of, what its origins are, and how it has developed over time.

Having a robust national and international legal framework in this area has not been enough. One of the national legal instruments is the General Law of Women's Access to a Life Free from Violence, which clearly describes what violence against women means and makes a distinction between types of violence. It also puts forward some of the mechanisms for dealing with and eradicating it, including the existence of specialized shelters, public centers for attention, and the “gender alert.”

The law points to different kinds of violence: psychological, physical, against women's property, economic, against their reproductive rights, obstetric, symbolic, sexual, vicarious,¹ and feminicide. Feminicide violence refers to the systematic violation of women's human rights

both in public and in private in a context of social and state impunity. It is the form of extreme violence rooted in misogynist behavior that can culminate in death, murder, femicide.

However, why do we call it femicide and not just ordinary murder? Why make the distinction? To understand this, first I would like to say what misogyny means: it refers to all the hateful behavior and attitudes toward women that are at the center of all the forms of violence. Although the term “femicide” was developed by Diana Russell and Jill Radford in the United States, and defined as a hate crime against women, in Mexico, Dr. Marcela Lagarde pointed to the state’s responsibility for the conditions that make it possible. Thus, she adds a syllable to make the distinction: “femicide.” For that reason, “femicide” is a category of analysis coined by Lagarde, who also promoted its classification in the Federal Criminal Code and the creation of the aforementioned General Law for Women’s Access to a Life Free of Violence. Femicides are committed the world over, the result of misogynist aggression taken to the extreme.

Among the kinds of violence are family violence, aggressions by fiancés or boyfriends, on the job, at school, by teachers, in the community; institutional violence, in the media, and in politics. Today, we have three very valuable instruments that help us make visible, identify, and recognize violence and the way it operates: the Iceberg of Violence, the Violentometer, and the Power and Control Wheel.

These three tools show us how expressions of violence go from subtle forms, such as a seemingly inoffensive joke, sexist advertising that objectifies women’s bodies, or emotional blackmail in the name of romantic love, to the more explicit and extreme forms, like femicide. However, it is important to point out that different kinds of violence crisscross and do not necessarily escalate in an orderly fashion, from lower to higher intensity: they can jump from one kind to another. This article is an open invitation to rethink the issue, seeking a reflection and critical thinking that allow us to reveal the violence that little by little profoundly affects women’s self-esteem and constructs and strengthens conditions of vulnerability that spark, among other things, what we know as the acquired or learned defenselessness syndrome, which makes it very difficult to leave the violent relationship that many women find themselves in. To understand

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why it is so difficult to leave this kind of relationship, we’ll talk about the Power and Control Wheel developed by Leonor Walker in 1989. It explains how the toxic relationship originates, its dynamic, and its operation; it tells us that violence against women is cyclical, increases periodically, and has three phases:

Phase 1: Accumulation of tension: Some incidents of aggression occur that create a climate of fear and insecurity. Arguments, manipulation, and behavior that regularly occur in private.

Phase 2: Explosion of the violent event. Accumulated tension is released, producing different actions that cause harm, such as hitting, shouting, or throwing or breaking things. In this phase, the aggressor thinks the victim has taken his control away and takes no responsibility; he tends to blame the other person for his actions. The person who receives the aggression feels guilty for not have been able to contain the violent event.

Phase 3: Reconciliation or “honeymoon” phase. The aggressor expresses remorse, apologizes, and promises not to do it again; he performs compensatory actions such as exaggerated signs of affection or gift-giving. The person who received the aggression, on the contrary, is confused and thinks that somehow she is responsible for what happened. She hopes that everything will now go back like it was in the beginning, that is, in the falling-in-love stage.

However, as time passes, these stages or phases become shorter and shorter; it will begin again with phase one and the cycle will repeat, but the violence does not diminish; on the contrary, it escalates and becomes ever more present and harmful, sparking depression, a feeling of being invalid, mistrustful, and insignificant in the victim. It becomes a perverse cycle; no one knows how or when it started or how to escape it. This causes the learned or acquired defenselessness syndrome in the victims, who think there is no alternative, that it is not possible to leave that relationship, and that she is the toxic one.

An intentional dependent relationship is created, cutting off all the victim's support networks, leaving her without links she can trust. The person who has been abused begins to doubt herself and believe the constant belittling of her abuser: that she is worthless; that her opinion doesn't count; that without him, she's nobody; that she doesn't know how to think; that nobody takes her—or will ever take her—seriously, among other things. And, he also is probably charming and affectionate in public, making her look exaggerated, crazy, and impossible to please.

Sometimes, when the abused person dares tell someone and are not listened to with respect, without judgment, openly, she regrets having spoken out, isolates herself even more, and deepens her feeling of being worthless and defenseless. The aftereffects of the violence are multiple and diverse. Often, they cannot be seen at first glance and can be difficult to identify. Getting out of the cycle of violence and recovering completely takes time and requires warm, close, professional accompaniment. First, the violence experienced must be identified and everything that happened understood so that, later, a process can begin that leads to giving life a new meaning and making informed decisions. This will make it possible to recover autonomy and a concept of self, a painful process that requires a great deal of courage. A specialized accompaniment makes it possible to foresee a life project or plan that is free from violence.

Spaces of prevention, attention, and protection for women and their children who are experiencing violence are professional spaces where women's lives and safety are guaranteed and their human rights can be restored, thus providing, among other things, full exercise of citizenship. They operate under a model of multidisciplinary

attention, with specialized personnel trained in human rights, a feminist gender perspective, and intersectionality.

It is fundamental to reflect on these issues and realize that violence is not normal. For this reason, all the efforts aimed at rethinking, making visible, and questioning the beliefs and traditions associated with romantic love and the patriarchal system are fundamental. They are actions that lead to the eradication of violence and to dismantling roles, stereotypes, and mandates that create each of the padlocks that symbolically turn houses and homes into prisons, making them some of the most unsafe places for women, little girls, and little boys to be. At the same time, streets and public spaces are high-risk for women, significantly affecting their full development.

It is urgent that one of the most excruciating, cruel problems of public health and social justice be taken completely seriously. We should deconstruct it and ourselves to make way for a world in which there is a place for each person to fully develop, exercise his/her citizenship, and live a decent life free of violence.

Thus, perhaps, it is worthwhile to run the risk of speaking out and writing our own story, jumping in to be heard and establish an invisible dialogue that will allow for other ways forward and another way of relating to each other. Writing, then, as a road, a way of owning our own destiny, of forging our own bodies and way of existing. A way of not dying, of living free, safe, and strong. ■■■

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Notes

1 Vicarious violence is the kind of violence that seeks to harm women through their loved ones, mainly their children.

Espacio Mujeres para una Vida Digna Libre de Violencia, A.C.

We are a civic association that more than fourteen years ago created a space that would allow us to have an impact on building a society that would include a gender perspective, human rights, inter-culturalism, and intersectionality to favor the free development with dignity of women, little girls, little boys, and teens. Since we opened, our group has received more than 28,500 women and, in many cases, their children, who are at risk because they are experiencing violence. We have three spaces to care for them, where we carry out activities aimed at re-signifying the violence experienced, accompanying their process of becoming autonomous and empowered to fully exercise their rights.

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