SOCIOLOGY

Micropolitics in a Caracas Barrio: The Political Survival Strategies of Mothers in a Context of Armed Violence

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Venezuela has one of the highest rates of homicide in the Americas. Those who are dying are mostly men, and most are shot. Based on ethnographic research in poor, urban neighborhoods in Caracas, where guns are abundant and the state is absent, this article focuses on the repertoire of responses of mothers of armed young men toward violence. How are mothers responding to meet the extreme challenges of safeguarding the survival of their families? In what ways do they participate in the containment but also in the dissemination of violence? We describe the safeguarding practices deployed by women, which we interpret as political survival strategies. Drawing on women's narratives, we have identified four strategies that contribute differently to the containment and reproduction of violence: submission and taking refuge, collaborating, resisting, and negotiating or forging of pacts.

Venezuela tiene una de las tasas de homicidio más altas de América. La mayoría de las víctimas son hombres que han recibido disparos. Basado en una investigación etnográfica en barrios pobres caraqueños, donde hay abundancia de armas y ausencia del Estado, este artículo se enfoca en el repertorio de respuestas a la violencia de madres de hombres jóvenes armados. ¿Cómo responden las madres a los desafíos extremos de cuidar y procurar la sobrevivencia de sus familias? ¿De qué maneras participan tanto para contener la violencia como para estimularla? Describimos las prácticas de salvaguarda utilizadas por las mujeres que interpretamos como estrategias políticas de sobrevivencia. Utilizando las narrativas de las mujeres hemos identificado cuatro estrategias que contribuyen de manera distinta a la contención ya la reproducción de la violencia: someterse y refugiarse, colaborar, resistir y negociar o forjar pactos.

Caracas, the city that we inhabit, has been reported to be the "world's most violent city.[1] People here live with intense fear, constantly seeing themselves as potential victims (Rotker 2000). Some of the particularities of this violence are, on the one hand, a sharp increase over the past fifteen years in violent crimes, especially homicides, and on the other hand, the fact that these deaths resulting from armed confrontations between men and between men and police officers take place mostly in the poor barrios.[2]

Amid this bleak scenario we learned of a remarkable case in which the mothers of victims brokered a cease-fire. This negotiation took place in the community of Carache, a barrio near the Miraflores Presidential Palace in the center of Caracas, after the murder of a young man by another young male from a rival area

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[1] Venezuela Investigative Unit (January 27, 2106). Caracas World's Most Violent City: Report. Insight Crime. http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/caracas-most-violent-city-in-the-world-2015-report.

[2] Caracas, like other Latin American cities, has notorious divisions. Barrios are areas, spaces of self-construction and daily struggles, where those excluded from urban areas engage to achieve better life conditions despite their relegation to the margins. Current estimates are that 50 percent of Caracas residents live in barrios. In this sense, Caracas is part of a broader process of exclusionary urbanization in which "informal cities" expand in the southern countries, creating permanent insecurity and survival strategies (Rodgers 2007).

of the same barrio.[3] The mothers of these historically antagonistic sectors, determined to avoid further deaths of their young sons, agreed to a groundbreaking cease-fire. The pact resulted in the creation of peace commissions formed by women in each sector to mediate between armed men and avoid further clashes. Upon learning of this extraordinary case, we were compelled to systemize the particularity of this experience in a research project that reveals a long history of collaboration within this community (see Zubillaga et al. 2015).

Very briefly, in Venezuela most killings take place in cities where there is the greatest social inequality and in which young men in working-class areas experience persistent exclusion (Zaluar 1997; Zubillaga 2007). This lethal violence is determined by the excessive availability and use of arms. The violence is also characterized by its widespread scope, as it is not a central conflict in specific areas but rather is expressed in a set of expanded microregimes of armed conflicts in many barrios of the city (Moser and McIlwaine 2004; Rodgers 2007).

During the 1990s, as in some other countries in Latin America (e.g., Brazil, Ecuador), the homicide rate in Venezuela increased from thirteen homicides per hundred thousand inhabitants in 1989 to twenty-five homicides per hundred thousand inhabitants in 1999. A decade and a half later, in 2016, Venezuela has the highest rate of homicides in the Americas after El Salvador. Our country recorded a rate of seventy homicides per hundred thousand residents; those who are dying are mostly men (90 percent) who are being shot: in 87 percent of the homicides a firearm was used (Ministerio Público 2016).

This substantial increase is related to a multiplicity of factors and processes occurring within the framework of what is known as the Bolivarian Revolution.[4] Among these is the sharp political polarization that has produced significant deinstitutionalization and fragmentation of the state, all of which has found expression in the deterioration of basic spheres of social life, such as the system of administering justice, the police (involved directly in killings and organized crime), and the collapse of prisons. These trends correlate with the strengthening of criminal networks and simultaneously with the fact that there is an intense competition among them for control of territories and illicit economies (see Antillano, Zubillaga, and Ávila 2016).

In this context, the state has become a major actor of violence by spreading a discourse of war and enacting the systematic killing of poor men. From our perspective, this excessive violence is associated by default with the actions of a privileged actor such as the state. On the one hand, the state has been unable to ensure public security and enforce justice, which citizens experience as abandonment. On the other hand, different agencies of the state have committed excessive force (e.g., police, judicial branch, prisons), thus becoming the source of abuses, as they are often directly involved in killings and organized crime (Jelin 1996; Zaluar 1997; Briceño-León y Zubillaga 2002; Wacquant 2007; Arias 2006; Auyero and Burbano de Lara 2012).

Based on ethnographic research developed in Carache, this article emphasizes a gender perspective and focuses on the experience of women, particularly mothers. In a country where men are dying to the extent aforementioned, we look to what mothers are doing to protect their children and ask, how are they responding to meet the extreme challenges of safeguarding the survival of their families? In which ways do women, specifically mothers, participate in the containment but also the dissemination of violence?

Our research found that women, particularly in their social role as mothers, are fundamental actors in local dynamics that govern barrio life, which is strongly intertwined with the logic of armed violence. Consequently, we believe that a gendered approach that examines the specificities of the role of women in these dynamics is relevant, as proposed by authors who argue in favor of studying similarities and differences between male and female perspectives of war and peace (McKay and Mazurana 2001). Being mothers, godmothers, or aunts of armed young men, they participate in very diverse ways—subtly or explicitly—in the prevention but also the exacerbation of violence. We must pay attention to the complex participation of these key figures to understand a barrio's social dynamics and to unearth their possibilities as sources of violence prevention.

Our findings deepen and diversify a sociological literature that predominantly focuses on male actors. Our goal is to contribute to the emerging understanding of urban and armed violence—its patterns and its forms of reproduction—that takes into account the perspective of women from popular (i.e., working class) sectors and their cultural practices (Gay 2005; Wilding 2010; Swidler 1995; Lamont, Small, and Harding 2010; Auyero and Kilanski 2015).

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[3] We have changed the name of the barrio and all names of our interviewees.

[4] The year 1998 marks the onset of a period of accelerated transformations and conflict escalation known in Venezuela as the Bolivarian Revolution with the beginning of Hugo Chávez's government. In this process, Venezuela was renamed the República Bolivariana de Venezuela.

The complexity of women's experiences in popular sectors of the city—their relationship with the exercise of violence in a context of chronic violence and neglect—has only just become visible in recent research (Wilding 2012). Specifically, Auyero and Kilanski's (2015) work reveals how teaching violence as a defense strategy, as well as mothers' own practices marked by cruelty toward their children and young sons, make up the ethics of care of women who lack solidarity networks and who are desperate to protect their loved ones from vortices of violence. This article seeks to make a contribution in this direction, focusing on the position and strategies of women in their community settings.

Context and Methods

Our ethnographic research took place between November 2009 and May 2014. We went to Carache on a weekly basis, and sometimes twice a week, between 2010 and 2012. Carache is an atypical barrio in the Caracas urban fabric. Even though it is composed, as other barrios, mainly of precarious low-income, self-constructed housing, known as *ranchos*, its geographical location, near the center of the city, has resulted in connections with health centers, educational institutes, churches, markets, and transportation, among other services.

Historically, Carache has been characterized by its community activism along with the presence of universities and social and religious organizations that have transformed the neighborhood. This spatial transformation included replacing some precarious homes with more solid constructions, strengthening the barrio's integration with the city, and sustaining continuing education programs for children. Although community centers were set up as meeting places for the implementation of community development programs, they also served as spaces for dialogue and negotiation during the forging of the cease-fire. We had many encounters with women in these community centers. Even though the barrio's residents no longer maintain the forms of activism that defined the community's past, they still share the memory of what they have achieved together. Nowadays, Carache is growing in the same way as other barrios: neighbors are building their homes by themselves in the context of state abandonment.

During our research, we recorded more than a dozen group discussion sessions with the thirteen women who took part in negotiating the cease-fire pact. Most of these women are also mothers of young men who carry arms; they live in Carache, and some of them work outside the barrio. We thought it was important to include all of them in the research; we also did in-depth individual interviews with each woman, as well as with four young men who carried arms who took part in the cease-fire (two of these men were the women's sons). We gathered interviews with community residents as well, and we had daily conversations in Carache with a female community leader, Darielis, who was a main mediator in the cease-fire pact. Darielis runs an educational organization that works with children in the barrio; she was our initial contact with the community, so we discussed our research proposal with her before interviewing the women. She acted as our first intermediary and eventually became our fieldwork coordinator. Darielis has been with us throughout this reflective journey and has validated our interpretive insights. All the group discussions and interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded following the main principles of the grounded theory method of qualitative data analysis (Charmaz 2006).

And precisely after our initial fascination with the cease-fire, as we furthered our research, we began to notice the complexity of women's experiences and the roles they played, in suffering, restraining, and also reproducing violence (see Zubillaga, Llorens, and Souto 2015). In this text we want to focus on the repertoire of responses of women, mothers of armed young men, to violence. In the context of urban poor neighborhoods in Caracas, we describe women's safeguarding practices, which we consider political survival strategies related to the abundance of guns in their neighborhoods as well as to state abandonment or/and state abuses represented by the excesses of police in their barrio. On the basis of systematic analyses and emergent categorization of women's narratives, we identified four strategies that contribute differently to the containment and reproduction of violence: submission and taking refuge, collaborating, resisting and negotiating, and the forging of pacts.

Survival Strategies in Contexts of Armed Violence: The Micropolitical Turn

In the face of helplessness and the recurrent armed conflict that we have described, we noticed how women's time was consumed by practices marked by the urgency to preserve their lives and the physical integrity of their loved ones. Their routines were marked by these practices; this is why the notion of survival strategies (Adler de Lomnitz 1975; Cariola 1989; Hintze 2004), understood as the course of collective actions, coordinated and deployed in time, in response to conditions that threaten life itself,

seemed essential to give meaning and contextualize their experiences, particularly from a gender and cultural perspective (Lamont, Small, and Harding 2010; Wilding 2010).

The strategies narrated by these women can be understood as part of survival strategies deployed by disadvantaged groups of the population to confront abandonment and vulnerability, theorized in Latin America (Adler de Lomnitz 1975; Cariola 1989, Gonzalez de la Rocha 1999). However, the particularity here is that this vulnerability arises from the direct threat to life experienced in the face of armed violence that has arisen in the region, as a result of easy access to weapons, the illegal drug economy, and widespread distrust of the police (McIlwaine and Moser 2007; Briceño-León 2010).

Traditionally, a concept such as survival strategies has emphasized the economic dimension of the reproduction of daily lives of the urban poor, defined as the set of practices implemented by the popular sectors to obtain the necessary income and additional resources to ensure biological and material reproduction of everyday life in the absence of institutional sources of solidarity (Adler de Lomnitz 1975; Cariola 1989).

Undoubtedly, a political dimension is implicit in survival strategies: the concept highlights the state's shortfall in meeting social rights involved in the notion of citizenship, especially as such a privileged political actor for vast sectors of the population in Latin America (Adler de Lomnitz 1975; Jelin 1996; Caldeira 1996; Braun and McCarthy 2005). Nonetheless, in this new context of the state's retreat from the pacification of social life (Elias [1939] 1999; Wacquant 2007; Auyero and Burbano de Lara 2012) and regarding the lethality of this violence, the concept acquires an imminent political dimension that is necessary to highlight. This holds true if we understand politics in its more primal sense, as a condition of social life or the possibility of living among humans, of being together while being different (Arendt 1997).

By emphasizing this political turn and underscoring the need to speak about political strategies of survival, we want to stress again that amid scarcity in Latin America, specifically in Caracas, the poor are obliged to privatize responses vis-à-vis the most basic individual, civil, and human right: the right to life (Caldeira 1996; Jelin 1996).

Furthermore, Ruth Lister's (2005) notion of micropolitics helps us clarify women's experiences. Lister, aiming to establish a feminist theory of citizenship, speaks of micropolitics to describe women's small-scale political action at local level in their communities; the informal policy developed locally that is forged outside the formal structures of political parties but nonetheless might be involved with these structures (Lister 2005). With respect to the practices of these women, indeed it is this neighborhood micropolitics, now dealing with a basic attribute of the state—the pacification of social relations and the preservation of life—that must "stretch" social and psychological resources to the extreme in order to ensure care and preservation of their families.

Research shows that new coping strategies and self-help responses by Latin American residents to manage exposure to gun violence include assimilating military vocabulary and outlining practices similar to those developed in war zones. Ana Villarreal (2015) writes about the logistics of fear to describe the practices of reorganizing all activities of daily life of people from the upper classes and the urban poor to deal with fear against the exacerbated violence and crime. In her words: "The term logistics, a military term in its origins, is particularly adequate to encompass the new strategies documented here given that these are military strategies down-scaled and extended into civilian life, e.g., armoring spaces and vehicles, camouflaging wealth and professions, caravanning, and regrouping" (Villarreal 2015, 136).

Thus, in response to the new challenges posed by the threat associated to the widespread use of weapons and state neglect, these survival strategies, predominantly feminine, operate to protect and preserve family life in the face of armed conflict. This is therefore another area of informal practices to which the urban poor are forced to deploy in the ambit of citizen security (Moser and McIlwaine 2004). The practices are another layer in the accumulating disadvantages of the poor, which expand from the traditional social and economic sphere (highlighted in the original theory) (González de la Rocha 2004; Adler de Lomnitz 1975) to the most basic political sphere of preserving life, which extends to the core of subjective life and emotions.

Micropolitics in Armed Contexts: Women's Political Survival Strategies in a Caracas Barrio

We must understand the political survival strategies developed by these women from two perspectives: structural and situational. From a structural perspective, they can be understood as part of the survival strategies deployed by the urban poor against helplessness and vulnerability (Adler de Lomnitz 1975; Cariola 1989) in this specific case, with regard to preserving life. From a situational perspective, we can comprehend these women's strategies as practices resulting from a creativity of urgency against the

imminent risks of death by the occurrence of armed clashes in daily life. In this context, this refers to the fabric of everyday actions in which meanings, discursive resources, dramatic and theatrical efforts, and a series of cultural tools available to these women are put into play (Goffman 1975; Swidler 1995) to contain and control young men in their armed confrontations.

We then draw from a perspective that understands cultural practices as responses to the material conditions of adversity in which large sectors of the population live, specifically addressing the intersection of structural and interpersonal violence with social subjectivities (Bourdieu 1977; Bourgois 1995; Moser and McIlwaine 2004; Lamont, Small, and Harding 2010; Wilding 2010; Auyero and Kilanski 2015). It is another expression of a habitus of urgency developed by the urban poor in the face of helplessness.

In the women's narratives we can identify four strategies that contribute differently to the containment and reproduction of violence. They relate to the complex micropolitics these women maintain with young men (being their mothers or aunts, for example), the social networks at their disposal, and the cultural tools at hand.

We can grasp strategies ranging from practices of safety and subjection, typical of armed conflict settings, such as sheltering and displacement of children in anticipation of armed confrontations, also, in daily life, resigned cohabitation (submission and taking refuge). In the face of the menacing context in which they live, we can identify practices in which collaborating with violence and the threat of its use, as in a Hobbesian order, is the main resource for preservation in a situation that is perceived as a struggle of all against all. In this sense, we have the women's direct participation and support to their youth during the armed clashes; some mothers resort to using their sons' capacity for violence as a mode of threat (collaborating). Also, in the everyday life of the barrio, we can understand the women's gossiping and motherly behavior as microacts of resistance (Scott 1985), which operate alongside more open and confrontational practices, such as the threat of a formal complaint to the police, in their enormous efforts to safeguard the preservation and survival of their children (resisting). Nonetheless, these women were also able to achieve a cease-fire, in which mutual recognition of suffering and mourning is the basis of an agreement that restored the use of speech and embodies the difficult work of local micropolitics to bring back the possibility of living together (negotiating and forging a cease-fire).

These strategies also demonstrate different expressions of agency that women develop (Emirbayer and Mische 1998) in relation to different forms of collective micropolitical action. Such strategies respond to temporary shifts in the local order and include submission, defense, and protection. They also include using violence as a resource, particularly in situations of direct confrontation; appealing to the state to limit the threat of young armed men; and working toward a possible political restitution through a recognition of collective victimhood. It was this last strategy that opened up the possibility of a cease-fire.

Submission and Taking Refuge

Taking refuge includes a set of practices that represent a response to a keen sense of vulnerability in a warlike situation. It encompasses a set of actions intimately linked to the temporary cycles of armed violence, such as taking refuge in one's home, sending away male children in anticipation to armed confrontations, and enduring a resigned coexistence with armed young men amid their helplessness in daily life. Taking refuge implies experiences of subjugation and relinquishing vis-à-vis the downward spirals of armed violence.

Taking refuge

Taking refuge in one's home involves isolating oneself from social and community life, which they expressed as having "our home as jail." María explained: "We used to be locked up at home, you couldn't look out the window because [there were] shots all over the place, you weren't safe even at home, we heard shots and ran to take cover."

Everyday life trajectories were marked by uncertainty, and, as in states of emergency, information must be gathered before moving around: "Do you know what it is to have to call from work to see how things are before coming home?" The temporal flow of everyday life is interrupted by the need to be informed before every single movement. Life is out on a limb: "We were going out, 'No wait! Go that way! No! Go the other way!'"

As in wartime, they had to take cover during shootings, as María mentioned: "Last night, last night, last night! … Everyone ran, my brother and I turned off the lights. I turn them off whenever I hear shots. We have to walk in the dark."

Inside each home it becomes necessary to keep low, to hide under the beds and crawl on the floor. If the house is exposed directly, one must count on neighbors and their solidarity to take refuge in their homes, as

Xenia said: "All of the sudden all those women with mattresses appeared. 'Just make yourself comfortable in the room,' [and] we would sleep bunched up. Because my house was real small."

Sending away male children

One of the most painful strategies is that of mothers sending away their own male children who face fatal threats: "What also happened was that the people downstairs didn't let their children go outside even to go to school, they were getting desperate. That's why we decided to meet, everyone was sending away their kids far from here. I sent mine to Ciudad Bolívar, I was always crying because I was so afraid." Another explained: "I sent mine to Los Teques, because I was scared." This phenomenon has been reported in local Venezuelan newspapers and has been compared to the displacement of war (González 2009).

For single mothers, for whom motherhood is an essential element of their identity and for whom their young sons are their central focus in their lives (Moreno 2012), the temporary loss of them is devastating. These displacements constitute another loss and injustice in their lives. Their male offspring are often the central masculine presence in their homes and provide these single mothers with a key support in daily life (help with other children, favors, economic help). This absence contributes even more to the vulnerability that brings grief to their lives.

Resigned coexistence

The helplessness due to the lack of institutional protection and peace, along with a chronic experience of injustice, have led to a resigned coexistence with armed youngsters. This coexistence is expressed in forced tolerance of the youngsters' violent activities, but also the establishments of certain limits imposed by the women. These limits are referred to as respeto (*respect*).

Xenia, for example, explained the subtle rules and accords that regulate the use and sale of drugs in the area: "We respect their lives, because everyone has their own life, but they have to respect ours, because we live here and it's not right for you to come sell drugs in front of us and the children, that's going too far." When we asked her why their kids did not tend to transgress these informal agreements, she answered: "I think it's the pressure. You know that it's not easy to be selling and having to check to see if no one is going to come and shoot you. It's not easy to be having to deal with shots every five minutes, because shots call the police.… I think it's the security they have, because it's security for us and for them also, that makes things easier for them, you understand. I think that's why they accept a lot of things." It is the establishment of difficult and fragile agreements, a negotiated tolerance that tries to deal with the impotence generated by the circumstances.

Collaborating

The experience of vulnerability is so consuming that it serves to legitimize and sometimes lead to the use of violence as a defensive strategy (see similar practices described in countries in armed conflict, such as Colombia and Guatemala; McIlwaine and Moser 2007). Therefore, women's narratives include experiences of direct support during armed confrontations as well as taking advantage of being mothers of the armed young men to threaten in order to prevent others' aggressions.

Support during armed confrontations

Like men who resort to violence as a way of coping with vulnerability, revenge, and the loss of a loved one (Rosaldo 2004), women also report having participated in helping during violent confrontations. The feeling of defenselessness is inverted through their support of armed conflicts, handing men ammunition and helping them to take cover, as we can observe here in this conversation with María:

JOHN: And the kids here had guns to defend themselves also?

MARÍA: Of course, they had to have them, because there were many [invaders from the other sector] and they had to protect us. It's not to say anything bad, but there was a time here in this sector, that the same family, all of us, had to help them [everyone nods]. You understand? Because if not they would have come and killed us all. We bought ammunition and, I'm not ashamed to say it! If not, we would have all been killed, because they were too many and the kids stayed up protecting us. We gave them food. I'm not lying, I'm talking about the realities of life.

In this way, groups that were traditionally nonviolent, like the women, were recruited by these voracious dynamics. The women actively participate in violent confrontations in these no-win circumstances of pure antagonism—a desperate response to a situation of helplessness.

The privilege of mothering an armed young man

To be the mother of a respected arms-carrying young man in the barrio, a thug, implies having a unique privilege of protection secured by the retaliatory threat of her son. On one occasion we spoke with Laura and her sister Virginia. They were very agitated because of a falling-out with a family from the neighboring sector:

> LAURA: And then, they came with the same thing, the same family screwing us, it's not that they get into trouble in another sector, they bring trouble here, they want to screw us, like we aren't the ones who defend them.

> VIRGINIA: They don't mess with me because my son is, … you know, the boss around here, everyone listens to him. Because if I tell my son, he'll stop them right away. But you're right, they want to be messing with everybody.

Virginia's experiences reveal the complexity of being the mother of a *malandro* (armed thug): on the one hand, she can contain and regulate him, but on the other, she has a prerogative that stems from being the mother of a violent young man. Virginia counts on the resource of having a son she can use as a threat to protect herself. In many conversations she repeatedly described how, in the face of any confrontation, she could use her son to get what she expected. A mother's order can ignite a son's vengeful fury, and this privileged position generates tensions among women and neighbors because of the injustice and arbitrariness that it represents in the micropolitics of the barrio.

Resisting

In their effort to preserve their lives and those of their loved ones, the women we interviewed mobilized a set of meanings and social resources in an asymmetrical struggle. The expressive resistance of a mother's confrontation and the microresistance of gossip are gendered strategies in which women manipulate information to contain young men and set up dramaturgical performances associated with their role in the rare interactions when they dare to confront young men. But also the threat of formal complaint is an extreme strategy whereby women appeal to the coercive power of the state through the police.

The expressive resistance of a mother's confrontation

Alejandro Moreno (2000) characterized Venezuelan popular culture as profoundly mother-centered. The influence of a mother on a son is exercised throughout the whole lifetime. In this sense, as Moreno proposes, in the culture of the popular Venezuelan family, men can be many things, but they will always be sons (Moreno 2000). As a consequence, the respect that a son owes his mother is integrated into the daily community dynamics (Zubillaga, Llorens, and Souto 2015). Laura revealed how this logic operates in a story about her nephew:

> My nephew, with the age that he has, and as bad as he is supposed to be, my sister hits him in front of everybody. The other day he was with a group of friends and she came down and slapped his face! And one of those thugs, one of his friends said: And that old witch can hit you! And my nephew answered: That's my mom, don't mess with her, she's my mom! The respect that he has, you understand, independently of whatever he is, he said: that's my mom, and don't ever mess with her.

Being a mother grants women the cultural authority to question the armed young men, to get their attention, and to play the role of the mother with all the drama this entails. Motherhood offers them a suitable vocabulary of motives to restrain young men and thus represents an extraordinary toolkit for achieving a cease-fire. When Jennifer talked about confronting the youth, she said: "As if they were your own children … call their attention: 'Hey, you come here, we have rules, and norms.'"

One of the fundamental dramatic strategies is a way of talking, forcefully demonstrating one's intentions. Let us underline the importance of the performance and dramatization of power relations, translated as metaphors of vertical authority that establish hierarchy and superiority on the scene of interpellation:

> CELIA: For example, when you have to be clear about what you're saying, even if it hurts, if it's your family or not. That's why we talk with each other beforehand and then we let them talk. Not because they are family are we going to shorten our stance. No, we have to talk louder to make them see, you understand….
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> JOHN: What does talk louder mean?
>
> CELIA: You know, to keep our level, that you can't lower it because he's family or try to say things delicately.

The performance of a scene of fury that threatens to be devastating is reflected in the intensity of the emotions experienced. Fear is always present: "el susto," "los nervios," as they call them, are repeated continuously and make up the vocabulary of emotions that fill the narration of encounters with the youngsters. Part of the effort is to hide the fear in these situations. It is a dramatic act, as Goffman (1975) has stated; in this case, managing the fear of losing one's life when faced with that possibility. Darielis said: "Every time that I personally have to find a solution to a situation like that, a little fear [sustico] appears. One is always afraid. But, I'm not going to show it, I'm not going to show that I'm nervous, but my heart is…. And the trust I have in God."

The importance of this speech act is evident for women when they find that it can lead to expected results: in the heat of the confrontation they experiment with the effects of power exercises, through the control of the youngsters who have to abide by their demands. Therefore, the youngsters "refrain from doing it again." According to Jennifer: "I mean, I think if we talk to them delicately, they think we're only warning them and nothing else. But if we talk like Celia says, directly, they know that they have to be on alert. They're going to say, 'This isn't a game,' and they'll refrain from doing it again."

The microresistance of gossip

One strategy of control is the effect of gossip on a youngster's reputation—thus, the microresistance of gossip. The effectiveness of this strategy depends on the real consequences it entails, such as being incarcerated or murdered by other youngsters or the police.

One of the women explained it well: "He was put in jail for a bunch of years for being the barrio thug and those who are accused of that spend many years [in jail]."

The micropower of the women depends on their ability to tarnish youngsters' reputations behind their backs and their threat to formally complain to authorities. In a sense, the women constitute an unofficial organ that assigns degrading qualifications to the reputation of youth through the circulation of gossip. Aware of this power, women explicitly threaten the men with this degrading act, which can bring disastrous consequences for them. One of the neighbors, Virginia, described to us how she warned one youngster: "Sometimes I tell him, 'You came back, but don't you start screwing up again, you hear!' Cause we're gonna bitch about you [*te vamos a echar paja*]."[5]

Gossip appears again as a regulator of male youth actions in the barrio. Gossip constitutes one of the routine strategies of sanction and control used by those in a position of weakness (Scott 1985) when facing the imposition of armed men in the barrio. Gossip can be understood as a mechanism of devaluation, as the ability to spread information that defines and affects the social identity of the youngsters (Ramirez 1999, 69). When the leader of the gang in one of the sectors was approached by a community activist to organize a community meeting and to discuss a possible cease-fire, he answered, "You don't need to speak to us, you need to speak to the *viejas chismosas* [the old gossips]."

Gossip is effective in communities where face-to-face relations prevail, significantly influencing the reputation of a targeted person (Péristiany 1966). Its effectiveness also relates to promised consequences: the explicit hostility of the rest of the women and neighbors and/or the arrival of the police. This reputation carries serious consequences, such as incarceration, police brutality, and devaluation of the subject's public

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[5] *Echar paja* means "to slander and denounce."

image. But this is also a sample of its limited potential, as gossip operates only among those who are familiar and identifiable and thus vulnerable to devaluation. This makes strangers to the neighborhood invulnerable.

The threat of formal complaint

If the men signed the cease-fire agreement, and if gossip and devaluation of one's reputation is a strategy that, used discreetly, controls youngsters and makes them submit to community norms, then the threat of formally filing a complaint with police constitutes an extreme strategy women use when youngsters have systematically broken the sense of community respect and the pact's agreements.

In one of the interview sessions, the women were quite worried by the repeated actions of one of the young men:

> VIRGINIA: Look I'm going to say one thing: he is over the age limit, if he wants war, we're going to give him war. That's how he's going to learn and it's over!

> LAURA: If he can't understand through reason, he's going to have to understand through force.

> VIRGINIA: Let's see if it happens again, if it happens, we'll report him.

Calling the police is one of the main worries of the women because they are also the mothers and aunts of many of the implicated youngsters. In this sense, women face a choice between enforcing their cultural, traditional, motherly authority and appealing to the state through the police. But the police are well known for their abuses in the barrio, including beating and killing young men, so a call for their intervention is an appeal not to the rule of law but to the dissuasive force of police punishment and extralegal abuse. This leads to keen tensions among them: the women debate whether the use of the police is an effective control strategy or fractures their relationships with these young men.

Even if the threat of calling the police seems to be one of the most powerful resources to prevent breaking the pact, filing a complaint produces confusion and fear that their own children could be apprehended and reveals radical distrust of state institutions. This also betrays the incredible tensions these women endure, as they carry the additional burden of supervising daily life and coexistence in their neighborhoods while divided between their commitment to establish limits and their loyalty to male family members.

Negotiating: Forging a Cease-Fire

The more we spoke with the women, the more we realized that they shared similar stories and suffering associated with the loss of their sons. Indeed, they were in perpetual mourning for the repeated loss of loved ones. They were experiencing what Judith Butler (2009) refers to as the recognition of our shared experiences of life's precariousness. Only after the mutual recognition of pain and the desire to stop it was it possible to create a pact. Mirta spoke of their shared sufferings as mothers: "We have cried [for] all these deaths, so they have also mourned the death of our children. We have shared the pain. Anyone who has lost a child knows what that pain is, those who haven't, don't, and God won't let them ever know. Because nowadays it is all upside down, we are now mothers burying our children and that is not what it should be. Children should be the ones burying their mothers. We have shared very hard times and we have cried and suddenly we laughed remembering things of them from their childhood."

As mentioned earlier, the cease-fire was developed and agreed to by the women of the sectors in conflict and the young men after the murder of a man during a night of prolonged and intense armed confrontation. The mother, whose eldest son had already been murdered, cried for a cease-fire and to stop the never-ending cycle of revenge.

It is worth elaborating on one moment of this event. One woman demanded that the community center intervene. She called those responsible at the center, who responded that the women had to actively participate if the center were to intervene, and so they decided to organize a meeting. The meeting reunited representatives from both sides, all of whom had suffered years of violence. These women had accumulated not only the pain of their losses—many brothers, fathers, sons, and nephews—but also the terrible grudges against those who represented the families who had perpetrated those crimes. The meeting of these women from both sectors turned out to be one of the most emotionally intense gatherings of their lives. They described the reunion with awe. It became a crucial turning point in the history of the barrios. It allowed the women to meet and see their own pain in their counterparts' lives. Whenever we spoke about that first meeting, the women repeatedly described how extraordinarily moving that night had been for them: "And

the truth is that in the end we came out hugging each other, crying, because we all had the same problem. The same problems that we were living here was what they were living there, like sleeping with the mattress on top, locked in, scared to go out even to buy what you needed, all the same, so the meeting was beautiful after all."

This meeting was a key event for a renewed agreement of peaceful coexistence. But we must also take into account that Carache boasts a long history of social organizations, such as church, ties to local government, universities, and an education center, as well as a long history of community engagement that helped improve living conditions. The presence of church members, social organizations, and committed neighbors facilitated the use of dialogue as a strategy. Several of the women who later were active in the peace commissions had participated in the community-building process, and all but three had participated in "grupos cristianos" that met to discuss the Bible and community issues. That said, they had attempted pacts before, recruiting the youngsters directly, but it had not been effective. Agreements were not respected, and violence soon resurfaced. The difference this time was the protagonism of these women who worked as mediators with their own children and nephews.

The pact installed a set of ground rules agreed to by all and supervised by the women. A commission was set up in each sector that met every week, and every other week with the commission of the neighboring sector. These commissions of women intervened if threats of confrontation appeared. The young men were called to discuss the agreements and, after agreeing, signed their consent. Indeed, when speaking with one of the young men (the son of one of the women of the peace commissions) about the efficacy of the cease-fire pact, he simply revealed: "To tell you the truth, I did this cause I respect my mama … to be clear, you understand…. Because the commission itself is not something I believe in…. I don't support it, you understand?"

We want to stress two elements: First, the use of motherhood as a legitimate power able to produce recognition among the women, and, second, the women's standing up together to the men, using dialogue and humanizing the other, which allowed for alternatives to violence. As has been mentioned elsewhere (Codur and King 2015), traditional roles such as motherhood that can subjugate women as well as idealize them can give women a strategic tool for resisting patriarchal structures, such as barrio violence. Codur and King (2015) argued that women have been effective at times in resisting violence. They concluded that there are "suggestive indications" that involving women in security lowers violence and contributes to the creation of a more humane society. This is achieved through women's capacity to disarm violent men by challenging them in unexpected ways (e.g., offering gifts, through motherly outreach and affection). Codur and King (2015) also mentioned the tendency of women's organizations to be more horizontal and highlighted their greater networking skills. In the case of Carache, this is relevant. We observed how these women were able to confront violent youngsters in part because of their role as mothers, but also because their approach included human recognition of their children's value even when those children were caught transgressing a norm. Their capacity to bond with the young men, even while challenging them, is a crucial difference from the simple use of police force. Finally, Carache is a clear example of the power of networking to resist violence.

Through a long history of social collaboration and the development of support networks, Carache represents a unique case of agency and possibility for social transformation. It is therefore an experience of collective efficacy in contexts of urgency (Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls 1997). This case expresses the basic task of politics and of institutions, that is, the possibility of negotiating agreements, developing routines, and defining alternative courses of action over time, which supply the necessary meaning and in turn allow for the recognition of mutual humanity and vulnerability.

Carache also reveals the complexity of context, the importance of the local trajectories of social networks, and the importance of narratives to make sense and build new meanings that enhance action (Swidler 1995). Faced with a fatalist view that supports the notion that those living in poverty are condemned to a life of violence, this experience also reveals the possibility of recognizing one another's pain and dignity, and the potential to restore that which defines us as political beings, beings with agency and the ability to influence the course of our collective life (Arendt 1997), even despite conflicting positions.

The "dark side" of the pact is that women still have to threaten to call the police to keep the cease-fire working, which causes them extreme anguish. Furthermore, it piles more responsibilities on the shoulders of women, who are already burdened with the hardships of daily life. They have had to assume one of the state's basic responsibilities: the pacification of social relations and the preservation of the integrity of its citizens.

Discussion and Final Comments

The experience of extreme helplessness in these women leads to solutions that are sometimes trapped in either isolation or revenge. This disenfranchisement makes collective solutions more difficult by trapping the sufferers in cycles of even more suffering, which disempowers them before the state and their armed family members.

By "political survival strategies," we are referring to strategies employed by sectors of the population dealing with adverse social and economic circumstances that lead to extreme duress. In this sense, they not only suffer the adversity of structural violence related to the experience of unfulfilled basic needs, such as housing and alternative employment for survival, they also have to deal with direct threats to their lives produced by the everyday armed confrontation in their own neighborhood. This "turn" to the political represents another attack on the traditional survival strategies that produce defensive solidarities, characterized by the us-versus-them or zero-sum logics. It constitutes a rupture and reduction of the exchange networks that imply a loss of social resources that would otherwise have the potential to make life more bearable.

The political survival strategies in these contexts of armed violence and helplessness therefore include taking cover and hiding in one's own home (an expression of extreme vulnerability); collaborating and participating directly in the conflict, which contributes to legitimizing the violence and its reproduction; and collectively negotiating with young armed men.

The various accounts provided by women highlight their potential for agency: on the one hand, they juggle particular strategies related to the different experiences of vulnerability, and on the other hand, the possibilities of controlling youth and their armed confrontations. Their narratives also help make visible the relevance and effectiveness of local practices and methods that often go unrecognized (Bent 2014). Different strategies have become more relevant than others over time. We can understand this through the history of social networks in the barrio and women's potential in forming coalitions and influencing the balances of power in their communities (the peace commissions); putting into play performances of power (the expressive resistance of the mother's confrontation); the manipulation of information and the appeal to the coercive power of the state (e.g., gossip, threats of formal complaints), whereby the political survival strategies are cyclical and linked to the specific historical and social trajectories of women and their networks as well as the balance of power in the barrio.

Given the urgency and this structurally imposed suffering (Bourgois 2009), these practices of fear and pain are inextricably interwoven with subjectivities filled with anguish, fear, and extreme rage that are similar to emotions experienced in contexts of war. Women's power to assign categories that affect the young men's identities and reputations reveal the power of women to foster grudges that reproduce violence but also the necessary influence to contain young men's actions. The mutual recognition of suffering among women and the opportunity to forge a cease-fire also opened up the possibility of supportive acts among women. Consequently, they experienced solidarity and a collective sense of agency that activated, in powerful ways, meanings attached to motherhood. This experience challenges preconceived stigmas about the lack of agency of the poor. At the same time, it shows that collective efficacy is the result of a process of building trust, improving material living conditions, and having a constant network of support for these women, all of which takes time and investment of resources in these communities (Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls 1997).

This complexity of the participation of women in the logics of violence in their communities could have implications for public policy at the local level. A public policy in the sphere of citizen security at the barrio level must take into account, first, the need for the institutional and community support these women deserve, usually left alone to deal with insecurity by themselves and signaled in public opinion and state discourse as responsible for their sons' violence. This is coherent with a feminist approach to public policy that goes beyond structural and institutional rebuilding to consider these issues at a relational level (McKay and Mazurana 2001).

Women cannot be the only ones accountable; this kind of initiative must be very cautious so as to not further burden already-overloaded women. Men, uncorrupted police should take part in this broader network. Young men should also be included in networks of opportunities to protect against the painful seduction of illicit economies, usually the only ones willing to include them. Other lines of public policy should encompass institutional networks of healing, justice, and reparation. This means spaces for dealing with the pain and mourning associated with the loss of sons, nephews, and brothers that these women have endured. The chronic lack of justice has its origins in networks of revenge but also in the transmission of pain that leads to a revenge in which these women participate.

This research has also shown that motherhood constitutes grounds for the recognition of mutual vulnerability and is an extraordinary cultural tool to produce mechanisms of local containment for young men's actions based on traditional local practices as well as a sense of solidarity and belonging. It could be a resource in helping develop collective efficacy and pacification at the local level without neglect of the other necessary conditions. It has to be part of an overall movement and public policy oriented toward the strengthening of citizenship as well as rights and responsibilities. This is bringing big politics into the picture and the state into the pacification of social relationships. Therefore, when we speak about citizenship, we want to highlight, like Braun and McCarthy (2005, 804), that "citizenship, and political life more broadly, must be understood as not simply constituted in language or law, or conceived as a property that belongs inherently to the subject, but as composed in and through complex assemblages that include myriad nonhuman actors and entities. Some of those relationships are ones of connection: are individuals and groups able to connect with and mobilize food, medicine, transportation, documents, levees, lab results, and more in ways that allow them to live, as bodies and as members of the nation." In a broader sense, this perspective stresses and implies, as Jelin (1996, 104) points out, drawing on Arendt, a specific premise: "the basic right is the right to have rights."

This article builds on and contributes to the emerging literature on urban violence in Latin America that is centered on women's experiences. It has sought to show the intense participation of women in a particular neighborhood, illustrating the wide array of strategies they have developed. These strategies are practices of urgency that try to alter power relations of the armed men of the barrio. These women use every resource at hand: the discursive power of gossip, dramatization of the legitimate authority attributed to motherhood, the power of threats, and even active participation in the conflicts—all this sometimes helps lessen the voracious logic of violence but at other times contributes to its unending cycle.

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