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Shoutings, Scoldings, Gossip, and Whispers: Mothers' Responses to Armed Actors and Militarization in Two Caracas Barrios

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Abstract

How do mothers deal with chronic violence and the constant presence of guns in their neighborhoods? How do they build situated meaning and discursive practices out of their experiences and relationships with armed actors? We compare the experiences of women in two poor and working-class neighborhoods in Caracas. Through this comparative ethnographic project, we aim to show how, in the midst of state-sponsored depredation and with an overwhelming presence of guns in their lives, women use their cultural roles as mothers to perform everyday forms of resistance vis-à-vis the different armed actors that impose their presence in the barrios. In the mothers' daily struggles, dramatic discursive actions—from more openly oppositional ones, such as shouting, scolding, and talking, to more hidden ones, such as both “circulating gossip” and “captive gossip,” to more vulnerable ones, such as whispering—are main resources in the micropolitics of their neighborhoods. Our findings suggest that strategies are context dependent and most likely vary according to numerous factors, including the history of civic organizing, policing practices, and the type of armed actor with whom they cohabit in their neighborhood.

Keywords: urban violence; armed actors; mothers; everyday forms of resistance; discursive strategies

Resumen

¿Cómo afrontan las madres la violencia crónica y la presencia constante de armas en sus barrios? ¿Cómo construyen significados situados y prácticas discursivas a partir de sus experiencias y relaciones con los actores armados? Comparamos las experiencias de mujeres en dos barrios de sectores populares de Caracas. A través de esta investigación etnográfica y comparativa pretendemos develar cómo, en medio de la depredación estatal y con una abrumadora presencia de armas de fuego en sus vidas, las mujeres utilizan sus roles culturales de madres para llevar a cabo formas cotidianas de resistencia frente a los diferentes actores armados que imponen su presencia en los barrios. En las luchas cotidianas de las madres, las acciones discursivas dramáticas—desde las más abiertamente opositoras, como gritar, regañar y hablar, hasta las menos visibles, como el “chisme circulante” y el “chisme cautivo”, pasando por las más vulnerables, como susurrar—son recursos principales puestos en juego por ellas en la micropolítica de sus barrios. Nuestras conclusiones sugieren que las estrategias dependen del contexto y muy probablemente varían en función de factores como la historia de organización cívica en sus vecindarios; las prácticas policiales y el tipo de actor armado con el que conviven en su comunidad.

Palabras clave: violencia urbana; actores armados; madres; formas cotidianas de resistencia; estrategias discursivas

On July 13, 2015, “La Piedad,” a densely populated poor and working-class neighborhood on the southern periphery of Caracas, awoke at dawn to a sudden siege of warfare.¹ In a spectacular and unexpected military invasion, fourteen people died, and more than two hundred were detained by the Bolivarian National Guard. Hours later, President Nicolás Maduro announced the new military operation, the fourth in the five years between 2010 and 2015, as the Operación de Liberación y Protección del Pueblo (OLP, Operation of Liberation and Protection of the People).

We started visiting La Piedad in August 2017 with young activists from a nongovernmental organization (NGO) that had recently opened a communal kitchen where local women cooked for barrio children; this food was an important supplement to their diets, given the food scarcity that much of the country was experiencing. By then, La Piedad had experienced extensive police and military interventions that resulted in frequent killings at the hands of state security forces for two years (2015–2017). The sector is one of a chain of interconnected barrios where local gangs used to be engaged in recurrent armed confrontations with one another. The intermittent militarized interventions to “fight crime” in Caracas began in 2009 and can be understood as a form of the *mano dura* (iron fist) policies that have become popular in the region (Rodgers 2007; Cruz 2016). In response, local gangs decided to forge an alliance to confront the police, as gangs had in El Salvador (Cruz, 2011). Furthermore, with the deterioration of the economy, Caracas gangs evolved into more organized crime groups that engaged in kidnappings and mass car thefts.

During our first visit to La Piedad, what struck us the most were the visible consequences of the ongoing military interventions of the police. In the first conversation we had with the women responsible for cooking at the community kitchen, they were bursting with stories about the previous two years, during which time they said a military intervention took place every week on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday. For two years, armed officers with covered faces entered the barrio in groups of thirty. They had “a ram to open the doors by force,” the women told us. That day, when we left the barrio, the children who accompanied us down the neighborhood’s steep hill showed us traces of bullets on the walls and places where other young people had been killed by the police. The road was paved with stories of killings.

The experiences of women from La Piedad contrasted starkly with those of women from La Caracola, a central barrio near Miraflores—the presidential palace—where the first author and other colleagues had done research for the previous four years. Civic organizations in La Caracola have a long history. Religious groups, student groups, and local authorities formed what would become a model of social networking to improve barrio infrastructure. La Caracola also had a long history of drug trafficking; during the 1990s and mid-2000s, the barrio experienced continued armed confrontations between gangs in two neighboring sectors that led to mass killings. It has become well known for the history of the cease-fire pact between women and drug traffickers that took place in 2007 and has been upheld to the present. When we learned about the pact, we decided to study the process leading to its achievement, which opened up a long period of collaboration with these women.

In this article, we focus on mother’s responses to violence, a topic that has been well documented in scholarship on the role that mothers play in protesting state violence. Applying insights from this research, we consider how in the midst of state-sponsored depredation and an overwhelming presence of guns in their lives, women use their cultural roles as mothers to perform everyday forms of resistance vis-à-vis the different armed actors that impose their presence in the barrio. The practices that we analyze here

¹ The communities’ names have been changed. We use digital media articles that refer to this vast popular-sector area but do not include any specific identification of the communities.

are not oriented toward mobilization; rather, we seek to understand how and why women, through their role as mothers, engage in resistance that exposes them to high levels of risk (Zulver 2022).

We focus on how women make and communicate meanings, engage in social networks with other women, and employ different discursive strategies as they deal with the armed actors. We foreground women's experiences in two barrios, asking what material and historical conditions make these different experiences possible. Finally, we highlight the contextual nature of these negotiations, showing that women's ability to draw upon motherhood as legitimate power and a source of social recognition varies according to the type and presence of armed actors in the community.

The goal of this article is also to contribute to the emerging understanding of urban and armed violence in Latin America from a gendered perspective that takes into account the experience of mothers from the popular sectors and their cultural practices of survival (Hume 2009; Wilding, 2010; Zubillaga, Llorens, and Souto 2015; Auyero and Kilanski 2015; Smith 2016; Zubillaga, Llorens, and Souto 2019). Through building knowledge based in women's experiences, we join Hume and Wilding (2019) in contributing to the understanding of the complexities of women's responses to extreme violence by focusing on the lived local repertoire of possibilities of actions associated with the particular contexts where they live. We ask: How do mothers deal with chronic violence and the constant presence of guns in their neighborhoods? How does the presence of different armed actors shape the strategies women deploy to survive? And how do they build situated meaning and discursive practices out of their experiences and relations with armed actors?

Our analysis suggests that the history and density of community organizations in La Caracola allowed women to gather in "peace commissions," as they called them in the neighborhood, and to develop strategies of resistance and forms of agency expressed in what Charles Tilly (1998) termed *contentious conversations*; we refer to talking, shouting, and scolding as contentious conversations; as a repertoire of actions mothers draw upon to explicitly resist armed violence in their neighborhood. The emphasis on their role as mothers enabled them to modify the terms of relationships with armed actors—drug traffickers and armed youth gangs—reaching coexistence agreements that secured the safety of their children. Women's communicative actions are expressed in various ways, from more up-front and oppositional forms of resistance, such as shouting and scolding, with which they confront the youngest armed men who deviate from agreements to more inconspicuous ways of circulating critical information, such as gossip (Scott 1990; Martin 1990). "Circulating gossip" plays on and manipulates the identities of armed men, becoming an effective and subtle way to control the exposure of guns in the neighborhood.

In contrast to La Caracola, regular militarized police raids in the community of La Piedad subjected women to extreme forms of police harassment and cruelty and activated a "warfare mode" among members of organized criminal groups, which in turn imposed ostensible armed domination of the community, subjugating women to a forced coexistence. Although La Caracola has experienced intermittent police raids—a common security strategy in Venezuela since the 1970s—the degree and intensity of these raids are quite distinct in La Piedad. Women's daily lives are defined by a besieged coexistence with local organized crime groups who display high-caliber weapons in community spaces. Unlike in La Caracola, the women cannot count on collective negotiation mechanisms, as their possibilities of agency are reduced to survival strategies such as silencing (Hume 2009; Hume and Wilding 2019). The violent intervention of the state has only exacerbated these precarious relationships, eliminating negotiation as a daily survival strategy. Conversations between women are extremely cautious because of the family links of some women with criminals. In an illustrative example of women's perilous situation, we were told that criminals shot and then burned to death one woman for talking too much to

government organizations. Women whisper when they speak about the armed men. In this context, gossip loses its effectiveness by being restricted only to private conversations and among people in one's extreme confidence. We propose that gossip in this context becomes "captive."

Theoretical approach

We draw from a perspective that understands violence and cultural practices associated with it as responses to the material conditions of adversity in which large sectors of the population live, specifically addressing the intersection between structural and interpersonal violence, and social subjectivities (Moser and McIlwayne 2004; Hume 2009; Wilding 2010; Auyero and Kilanski 2015; Smith 2016).

Our analysis also derives from the literature on crime, conflict, and urban plural orders in Latin America (see Wolff 2015; Arjona 2016; Arias 2017; Arias and Barnes 2017; Antillano, Arias, and Zubillaga 2020). These studies aim to reveal the diversity of criminal violence in local contexts in the same city or country and have focused on the variability of the relationships between armed actors and their communities, but the specific experiences of women have not been visible, even though women are the ones who spend most of their time in their neighborhoods.

This work explicitly positions itself within an ethnographic gendered approach. Our understanding of gender is based on the notion of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989). The latter portrays gender as intimately linked to the intersection of other attributes of social structure, such as race, class, and age. These inequalities crisscross and superimpose each other to place women in particular positions that produce different life experiences, particularly with respect to violence and discrimination, such as in the singularity of Black mothers' experiences (Crenshaw 1989). Precisely Christen Smith highlights how Black mothers in cities in the US and Brazil bear a unique burden expressed in the slow lethal sequelae resulting from the pain and loss of their children to state violence (2016, 31). Mo Hume, in her gender ethnographic research in El Salvador, points out that structures such as age, class, and gender are key factors that affect exposure to different types of violence and inform perceptions of fear (2009, 23). Indeed, as we will further discuss, being inhabitants of popular sectors and mothers drew these women into a "creativity of urgency" expressed in the repertoire of discursive practices resulting out of desperation and arising against the imminent risks of death and the unbearable pain of losing a son posed by the occurrence of armed invasions and clashes in their daily lives.

Being mothers also placed them in a unique symbolic position of ascendance. Joann Martin (1990), in her study in a Mexican community, highlights how women use the image of being mothers and their power in the domestic arena to reinforce their legitimacy in the local political arena of their communities. "The power of images of women's roles in childbirth and mothering" that might be an expression of male ideological control was used by the women and provided them a model for their entrance into the political arena. "Paradoxically, an image that might seem to victimize women becomes a source of power and pride" when women in the studied Mexican community began to demand political authority (Martin 1990, 486). Alejandro Moreno (2000) characterizes Venezuelan popular culture as profoundly mother centered, with the influence of a mother on a son exercised throughout their lives. As we will see, the cultural scripts of motherhood, which positions mothers as sacrificing and nurturing figures for children and family members, provide powerful meanings for women to maneuver spaces of agency vis-à-vis armed men.

The two neighborhoods we analyze here can be described as small-scale societies in which personal relationships and face-to-face interactions—as opposed to formal, anonymous, and impersonal relations with government officials and the law—are of vital

importance in the course of daily life (Peristiany 1966, 11). The prominent presence of armed actors in the life of these two communities and the impact it has on the daily lives of women and their families allow us to quickly perceive the weight of the neighborhood micropolitics. Ruth Lister's (2005) notion of micropolitics helps us clarify women's experiences. Aiming to establish a feminist theory of citizenship, Lister uses the term to describe women's small-scale political actions in their local communities. At this level, daily face-to-face conversations become a particularly salient tool in the barrios' micropolitics, if we understand conversations as a continuous negotiated communication that can alter the terms that define daily lives (Tilly 1998; McFarland 2004). In more adverse conditions of power domination, conversations can at least raise a basic social critique of this dominance (Scott 1985, 1990; Besnier 2009).

Although women suffer the weight of the devastating presence of weapons in their lives—and are thus subjected to micro-level armed regimes (Arias 2017)—at the same time, they have access to various spaces of agency and resistance to safeguard their lives and their families. We share Mo Hume and Polly Wilding's (2019, 5) focus on local lived agency to “explore both the situated politics of agency and the ways in which women actively recognize and negotiate the constraints imposed upon them in contexts of extreme violence.”

The struggles of these women to preserve their lives and those of their families in these two communities are expressed in more or less open forms of resistance, with different cultural resources and dramatic repertoires to which they can turn (Scott 1990; Swidler 1995). They aim to have influence on the terms of daily coexistence and bargain about the use of weapons to achieve spaces free of armed confrontation for their children, in the case of La Caracola. In the case of La Piedad, where a warfare state prevails, silence has become a survival strategy where women feel an “overwhelming impotence against the high levels of violence in their lives” (Hume 2009, 95). As we discuss in the following pages, the devastating state military interventions in women's communities have significantly reduced spaces of agency and resistance in this community, subjecting them to situations of extreme terror and helplessness (Smith 2016).

Undoubtedly, our notions of resistance are inspired by the work of James C. Scott, who focuses on the permanent complexity of power relationships, the range of possibilities for resistance and for opposition strategies that subordinates deploy unceasingly against the powerful, and the options and calculations that people in subordinated positions use to gain spaces of power. Such acts of resistance range from the most “open declared forms of resistance, which attract more attention” to “the disguised, low-profile, undeclared resistance that constitutes the domain of infrapolitics” (Scott 1990, 198). However, more critical perspectives of Scott's notion of resistance are necessary to identify the expressions of resistance with which we are dealing. The feminist ethnography of Abu-Lughod (1990), critical of a tendency to romanticize resistance, invites us to be sensible about what diverse expressions of resistance tell us about different, interwoven forms of power and how people are caught up in them. She calls for a complex understanding of the sense of agency and capacity of resistance women have. To remain quiet and to be silenced does not necessarily evidence passivity, a characteristic long associated with women. These can be understood as practices that allow survival and sometimes even the recovery of dignity in contexts of extreme urban violence, even as they viciously perpetuate the status quo and impunity.

To be clear, we are not dealing here with a women's movement as such, or with a national movement focused on women's identity as victims, such as the Argentinian *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo*. While we are analyzing coordinated actions by women that are sustained over time, we do not understand these actions as a unitary collective movement with which women identify. Instead, we analyze them as practices and strategies developed by women to alter the terms of their relations with armed actors. Some of these actions are projected over the long term, as in La Caracola, where the

women grouped into what they called peace commissions and achieved a cease-fire pact; others might alter only the outcome of an immediate situation.

Context and methods

Our ethnographic research in La Caracola began in November 2009. We found out about the cease-fire pact and were enthusiastic about doing the research, since the government discourse about criminality was already starting to become one of *mano dura*. We wanted to systematically document this community experience consisting of a cease-fire pact and dialogues to counteract the spreading discourses of war. Because we all had links with the Universidad Católica Andrés Bello, which supported the community religious centers Fe y Alegría in the barrio, the initial contact went very smoothly. We said we wanted to collect and systematize information on both the women's and the community's experience of the pact.

We visited La Caracola weekly—and sometimes twice a week—between 2010 and 2012. Like other barrios, La Caracola is composed mainly of precarious, self-constructed low-income housing known as *ranchos*. The barrio prides itself on a long tradition of community engagement, which, in cooperation with social organizations such as church, local government, and universities, has helped improve infrastructure and barrio living conditions by transforming some of the self-constructed housing into low apartment buildings and community public space. In fact, this coming together of social organizations and community commitment became an institutionalized model of cooperation and networking when the barrio's local improvement association, known as La Caracola Consortium Social, was founded in 1993. By 1995, the consortium was selected as one of the hundred best practices of human-settlement improvement worldwide at the UN World Conference Habitat II (Baldó and Villanueva 1996). La Caracola's geographical location, near the center of the city, has resulted in connections with health centers, educational institutions, churches, markets, and means of transport, among other services. It is also well located for and has long supported a robust and flourishing drug market. The barrio has not experienced an increase in large-scale militarized interventions, but young men in general and drug traffickers in particular continue to suffer regular extortion by police agents, leading to the police benefiting from illicit rents. In exchange, they protect and stabilize the local drug market.

When doing fieldwork, we usually visited in the evenings, both because the women worked during the day and because this is when we felt safest in the neighborhood. We had many encounters with the women, who were between their midtwenties and late forties, in two community religious centers. During our research, we recorded more than a dozen vivid group discussion sessions with the thirteen women who had taken part in the cease-fire pact; most of them were also mothers of young armed men. We also did in-depth interviews with each of these women, as well as with four young armed men who took part in the cease-fire pact; two of them were sons of the women involved in the cease-fire. We conducted interviews with community residents, and we had daily conversations with a female community leader, Doris, who was one of the main mediators of the cease-fire pact. In 2014 and again in 2017, we initiated a new phase of systematic interviewing. In the last research period, we wanted to study the follow-up to the cease-fire pacts and understand how the current situation was playing out, and how drug trafficking was working. The traditional leader had been put in jail, and with his support from prison, his ex-wife was running the business.

La Piedad is a neighborhood located in the center-south periphery of the city. The hillside on which La Piedad sits on the periphery of the city includes several other connected barrios. Police officers and newspapers call this area Los Corredores

de la Muerte (Corridors of Death) to highlight that this steep chain of barrios is controlled by organized criminal gangs. In fact, the OLP was launched to recover “territorial sovereignty” from these organizations.

La Piedad’s location plays an important role in criminal activity in the area. The difficult mountain terrain on which the barrio is built provides a degree of safety to the operation of criminal groups. The proximity of a large number of poor neighborhoods on this hillside provides valuable opportunities for collaboration: hiding stolen cars and kidnapping victims, as well as the clandestine movement of weapons across a series of paths that connect various parts of the city. The top of the mountain also provides a strategic advantage: it is a lookout from which criminal groups, with surveillance crews in place along the hillside, can always detect when police officers are coming.

We usually went to La Piedad in the morning. We always had to wait for someone from the community to meet us in the lower part of the barrio, and then we climbed the hill through a series of steep staircases to the communal kitchen. After a number of visits, we began saying that we wanted to collect the women’s experiences during the military interventions to record the systematic abuses of police forces; in short, to ensure that their stories would not be forgotten. This justification avoided any risk of being perceived as informers.

From the beginning, we were impressed by how visible guns and later hand grenades were in public spaces in the barrio. We have been doing fieldwork in Caracas barrios for more than fifteen years, and we had never seen such flaunting of weapons. During one of our group interviews, we had to stop because the young men began an argument and threatened one another with their guns. Another had to be stopped because the police were coming. Everyone was terrified when that happened, and we had to wait and then continue the conversations later. It was also common to hear gunshots in the air when they were “trying out” their guns. Bars and walls had many bullet holes from old armed confrontations between gangs or, later, from police invasions.

From August 2017 to August 2018, we went once or twice a week to the barrio. We engaged in ethnographic observations and kept a fieldwork diary of each visit; we were able to record some interviews but not others. We conducted more than thirty individual interviews and group discussions with women from the community, women community leaders, young men from the barrio, and police officers. As in La Caracola, the women we worked with in La Piedad were between their midtwenties and late forties. The communal kitchen was a gathering point for mothers, a place where we could get to know and talk with many women who had children. We were also able to participate in different activities developed by the NGO with a crowd of children who were playing in the vicinity of the kitchen. Their presence gave the barrio a sense of normality and joyfulness.

Because the corner where the men got together was near the kitchen, we also had a group interview with the younger members of the gang, mostly about their experiences during the military interventions. The leader of the criminal group was usually around, so we were able to speak with him four times about his life, his family, a recent pact with high-ranking officials, and the transformations of his business. We were able to talk as well with local drug traffickers and other young men².

Talking, scolding, and shouting: Mothers’ up-front responses to armed actors

The responses to the armed actors of the women in this section constitute an open *mise-en-scène* of mothers who talk about and negotiate the use of weapons to achieve spaces free of armed confrontation for their children and, in doing so, achieve a pact that benefits

² All the group discussions and interviews recorded were transcribed and coded following the main principles of the grounded theory method of qualitative data analysis (Charmaz 2006).

both women and the armed actors involved in drug trafficking. They also include mothers who scold young men who do not adhere to these agreements. These are the most public and strategic performances of the role of “mother” that women use to guarantee spaces of relative calm for their families in their everyday lives.

Talking: Reaching a cease-fire pact

The cease-fire pact in La Caracola was developed and agreed upon by women and young gang members from sectors in conflict. This pact was supported by the man who controlled the local drug market and was the son of one of the women. Regular armed confrontations did not usually originate in drug conflicts, which decreased after one group established control over the drug trade. However, groups of young men continued to seek vengeance for relatives killed in the past, and internal boundaries were established to limit the ability of the men to move between sectors of the neighborhood.

The pact was made after the murder of a young man during a long night of intense armed confrontation. Women told us that a mother whose eldest son had already been murdered, crying, demanded a cease-fire and the end of the ceaseless cycle of revenge. This meeting was a turning point, a key event on the path to a nonaggression agreement. It was the scene where mothers from historically rival neighborhoods started conversations after years of enmity.

According to their narratives, after talking for hours that day, the women realized they shared similar stories and suffering associated with the loss of their sons. Only after the mutual recognition of their pain and their desire to stop it was it possible to create a pact that would alter the historical pattern of exchange among young men. Mirta, one of the women we interviewed, spoke of their shared grieving as mothers: “We have cried over all these deaths, and 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.” The sharing of their experiences of loss let them realize the sequelae and the suffering they embodied as being mothers.

The cease-fire pact put in place a set of autonomous ground rules agreed to by the women and the young men and supervised by the women. The young men were called in to discuss the agreements and signed their consent. These rules prescribed, first, that young men would stop consistently provoking one another, and second, that if they had an altercation, the women would intervene. Women grouped themselves into what they called “peace commissions.” A commission was set up in each sector (seven women in one sector and six in the other sector), and each one met every week among themselves and every other week with the commission of the neighboring sector. These commissions were in constant communication and immediately intervened if threats of confrontation reappeared.

The pact was also successful because of the history of civic organizations in La Caracola. The women who later were active in the peace commissions had participated in the Consortium Social La Caracola and the community-building process that had taken place years before, as well as in *grupos cristianos de base* (Christian base community groups) that met to discuss the Bible and community issues. The women’s associations with church members, social organizations, and committed neighbors without a doubt increased their possibilities for agency by providing traditions of collective coordinated action and reflexive dialogue, as well as an ability in the face of challenges to imagine future alternative possibilities (Emirbayer and Mische 1998).

In the case of La Caracola, we want to stress two elements: first, the use of the role of motherhood as legitimate power and a source of social recognition among the women, and

second, how women stand up together to the armed men, coordinating action among themselves and using daily conversations to alter the terms of everyday coexistence, thus opening up alternative frameworks of interaction (Tilly 1998; McFarland 2004). In this sense, we could say that through their coordinated and collective action, women develop a sort of “clandestine collective efficacy” when talking.³ We will see next how shouting at armed actors resulted in the cease-fire pact that resulted in safer spaces for their families and at the same time facilitated women’s resistance to their neighborhood’s hegemonic armed regime (Arjona 2016).

We should also point out that for many neighbors, the agreements and cease-fire pact seemed to favor the consolidation of the drug business by the man who controlled the local drug market. Despite recognizing the pact’s important benefits for the community, some women with whom we spoke at the same time questioned it because of the support it had from leading traffickers. These women asked, “Who does this agreement really benefit? The deaths ended but the business surged.” Other neighbors saw the benefits of an agreement built on an alliance between local mothers connected to religious organizations and a drug dealer to ensure a local peace that reduced deaths, enabled neighbors to once again move around the neighborhood, and to the drug dealer’s advantage, limited police presence in the area.

Shouting and scolding: The expressive resistance of a mother’s confrontation

In their effort to preserve their lives and those of their loved ones, the women mobilized a set of meanings and social resources for this asymmetrical struggle. The expressive resistance of a mother’s confrontation set up dramaturgical performances associated with the role they play in the interactions when they dare to confront young men. In fact, women threatened the youth with making a formal complaint to the police, even though they knew they would not. The “respect” that a son owes his mother is integrated into the daily community dynamics. Laura revealed how this logic operates in a story about her nephew, the leader of the drug trafficking in the community:

Laura: My nephew, at his age, and as bad as he is supposed to be, my sister shouts and 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: Don’t mess with her, she’s my mother! The respect that he has, independently of whatever he is, he said: that’s my mother, and don’t ever mess with her.

Being a mother grants women cultural authority to question and confront the armed young males. As the social science literature that analyzes barrio women’s participation in local politics in Latin America points out, traditional roles such as motherhood can subjugate women as well as idealize them, but they can also give women a strategic tool to employ in resisting patriarchal structures, such as the violence in the barrio (Martin 1990; Rodríguez 1994; Codur and King 2015).

Motherhood offers the women a suitable vocabulary of motives to restrain young men and thus represents an extraordinary toolkit for the cease-fire pact. When Jennifer, a member of one of the peace commissions, talked about confronting the youths,

³ Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls (1997) identify the achievement of collective efficacy as social cohesion among neighbors and willingness to intervene on behalf of the common good. La Caracola’s long tradition of civic and religious organizations helped to build trust and the capacity for coordinated action towards a common good, revealing possibilities of a clandestine collective efficacy between female neighbors and armed males.

she said: “[You talk to them] as if they were your own children ... make them pay attention: ‘Hey, you come here, we have rules, and norms.’”

One of the fundamental dramatic strategies women use is shouting and talking strongly to convey one’s intentions with force. For us, the action of raising their voice underlines the importance of the performance of power relations, translated as metaphors of verticality that establish hierarchy and superiority on the scene of interpellation:

Celia: 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. We’re not going to change our stance because they are part of our family. No, we have to talk louder to make them see, you understand.

Researcher: What does talking louder mean?

Celia: You know, to keep our level, that you can’t lower it or try to say things delicately because he’s family.

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 create an emotional lexicon for the narration of the encounters with the young men. Part of the performance is to hide the fear that inherent in these situations. Managing the fear of losing one’s life when faced with that possibility becomes a dramaturgical act, as Goffman (1959) states. As Darielis said: “Every time that I personally have to find a solution to a situation like that, a little fear [*sustico*] appears. But, I’m not going to show it, I’m not going to show that I’m nervous.”

The importance of this communicative strategy is evident for women when in the heat of the confrontation they experience the effects of the power exercises: the young men obey their demands. Therefore, the young men “refrain from doing it again.” Jennifer said: “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.”

Whispering: Hushed responses to armed actors

In La Piedad, even though systematic military interventions had been suspended when we started our fieldwork, there were still intermittent police intrusions. We could still feel that fear was omnipresent. Similar to other poor neighborhoods in Latin American cities, such as Rio de Janeiro, where extreme, violent policing has estranged neighbors from the authorities and armed actors have established their armed, territorial dominance (Wolff 2015; Arias 2017), both criminals and police officers co-participate in creating a state of permanent fear and insecurity among neighbors. The state’s disruptive military interventions as well as the criminal group’s power to suspend normality and decree “everybody in their house, because the block is getting a little hostile,” as one young mother reported the local *malandros* (thugs) saying, contribute to create an episodic but regular state of emergency in their barrio (Penglase 2009). In this context, women, like the other community members, did not dare to openly gossip or critique armed actors.

If women in La Caracola can draw upon their role as mothers to organize and even negotiate with armed actors, in La Piedad, women’s roles as mothers make them feel vulnerable. Unable to protect their children from violence—whether enacted by the police or criminal actors—they live in constant fear for their sons and daughters. When we asked a young mother in one neighborhood how she felt living in this situation, she replied: “Chaos! Everything is chaos! I have said to my mother so many times, ‘Mom, I want to buy

a house, I don't care if it is a *ranchito* [a little self-built house]. Just a small piece of land. Anywhere so my children don't have to grow up seeing this . . . They have been living this chaos since they were little." Another mother told us: "Everyone avoids the street when they are out. I mean, what if the police show up—a confrontation! This is what we see all the time. So you stop going outside, you stop letting the kids out. It's 'get inside, the *malandros* are out!' [They say,] 'But mom I want to go out and play,' and I tell them, 'when the [*malandros*] are gone.'"

Behind the narrative of La Piedad women saying "*malandros* protect the community," and "they don't mess with the community," the arbitrary presence of the armed men in the community was evident. The men were armed no matter what time of the day it was, and they fired their guns or threatened one another with them when arguments burst out, producing panic among the women and children. This "outward display of weapons" (Wolff 2015) facilitated the territorial monopoly of the criminal group.

During group interviews women were very talkative, referring to their experiences with military interventions. Their attitude changed when we asked about armed actors from their barrio. In these moments women lowered their voices and whispered, as if the men could hear them. Some women stayed silent; others, usually family members of the armed men, monopolized the conversation saying their *malandros* were not menacing but protected their barrio. In individual conversations, some dared to speak negatively about armed actors but still lowered their voices and never said the name of the leader. They always used expressions like "you know who," "this person," and "the one I told you about."

When the relationship with the armed men of the community was concerned, the contrast of these La Piedad women with the women of La Caracola was very evident. While the women of La Caracola openly scolded their armed men, even in public, the La Piedad women did the opposite. They spoke negatively about them only in individual conversations with us, and when they did, it would be "softly," in hushed voices. Janis, the woman who cooked in the kitchen for the children, explained: "Sometimes they sit there [speaking about the young armed men], but I don't start fighting with them! It's not that I am a dumb or I am afraid of anyone! But it's better, it's better to talk like this [and she lowers her voice] than throwing blows! They tell me [referring the other women], 'You are so dumb!' No, I'm not! One has to know how to do things! If I shout or say Stop here! . . . boom! They kill me like a fool."

These radically different scenarios in La Caracola and La Piedad affected access to gossip as a resource for social control. The military operations that supposedly "confront criminality" take from these communities—and especially from women in their role as mothers—their capacity to reorder hierarchies and place demands on armed men. As a result, community members are thrown into an environment dominated by armed criminal groups, which condemns the community's children to deeply authoritarian and violent upbringings. Furthermore, military operations are taking away the power of collective feminine efficacy and subjecting women and children to the escalation of lethal arms, as well as to the more arbitrary and brutal power of police officers and local armed groups. In essence, the women and their neighborhoods are caught between these two despotic armed actors.

Gossip in circulation and gossip in captivity

In both La Caracola and La Piedad, women reported being systematically called "old gossipers" by armed men in the community and by police officers. It was especially illustrative when the women of La Piedad said the police called them "gossipers," since behind the word's pejorative meaning, we can see the animosity of the police vis-à-vis mothers in their role as witnesses and fundamental figures in the denunciation of

atrocities the police perpetrate in the community. Indeed, gossip as a discursive and interactional genre is often gendered as feminine (Coates 1988), and the designation undoubtedly conveys the tension of gender relations, as well as a way to denigrate feminine communicative activities by the male world (Besnier 2009; Paz 2009). Gossip has been a classic object of study in anthropology, and it has been identified as a conversational practice of paramount importance in the everyday life of communities (Haviland 1977; Gluckman 1963). The fact that gossip is defined as conversations concerning absent third parties in private domains (Stross 1978,184) means that it always entails the possibility of becoming public. As J. Haviland (1977) notes, gossip trades on a separation between public and private information; it celebrates leakage from one domain to another, with dramatic consequences. Martin (1990) also draws attention to women's gossiping as a subtle power strategy. According to Martin, women exercise considerable power in their role as information carriers and network creators, and the more fluid the boundaries between the domestic and the public spheres, the greater are their power and potent effect on target's reputations and social definitions of reality (Martin 1990, 476).

In La Caracola women were aware of gossip's effectiveness; they knew that it circulates and discredits men's reputations, which can have real consequences. But again, the contrast with the women in La Piedad was significant. In the context of "war mode" that prevailed in La Piedad, entailing greater risk for women, private conversations about the armed men were expressed in whispers because of fear of reprisals. Gossip in this context is a liability, not a weapon. This led us to distinguish analytically between gossip in circulation and gossip in captivity.

Gossip in circulation

According to La Caracola women's narrative, when they went to speak with the leader of the drug traffickers about the cease-fire agreement he told them, "You don't need to speak to us, you need to speak to the *viejas chismosas* [the old gossipers]."

Indeed, for the La Caracola women, gossip and the effect it had on their reputations was one of their control strategies to keep the younger men loyal to the cease-fire, thus illustrating in practical terms how gossip can be conceptualized as a form of resistance. The effectiveness of this strategy depends on the seriousness of its results and the real consequences it entails, such as being incarcerated or murdered by other young people 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 pay for it with many years [in jail]."

The micropower of the women rests on both their ability to discredit the youths with nicknames behind their backs and their threat to formally complain to the authorities, that is, to transmit the gossip to authorities. In a sense, the women constitute an unofficial body that attaches increasingly negative descriptions to the young men's reputations through the circulation of gossip. Aware of this power, women explicitly threaten the men with this degrading discursive action that can bring them disastrous consequences. One of the women we interviewed described how she warned one youngster:

Virginia: 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*, or "slander and denounce"]."

Gossip appears again and again as a regulator of male youth actions. It constitutes one of the routine strategies of sanction and control (Stross 1978) used by those in a position of weakness (Scott 1985) when faced with the imposition of armed males 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 young men (Ramirez 1999, 69).

Gossip is effective in communities where face-to-face relations prevail, significantly influencing the reputation of a targeted person (Peristiany 1966). Its effectiveness also relates to the expected outcome: the explicit hostility of the rest of the women and neighbors and even the arrival of the police. This loss of reputation carries serious corollaries, such as suffering incarceration, police brutality, and the devaluation of the subject's public image. But they are also examples of the strategy's limited potential, because gossip works only among those who are familiar and identifiable and thus vulnerable to devaluation. This makes strangers to the neighborhood invulnerable to gossip.

Gossip in captivity

In La Piedad, one of the stories that the women persistently repeated to us with horror was about an event that made a great impression on them, in which a neighborhood woman was shot and then burned to death by the armed gang. The victim, who belonged to a political organization, had been pointed out as a whistle-blower who gave information about the gang to the police. When speaking with Cecilia about how profoundly annoyed she felt at having the ostentatiously armed young men hanging around near her house, I asked her if anyone dared to tell them to stop hanging around with their guns. She answered: "Imagine! Around here there have been episodes, a woman was burned [to death]. Up there, near here! They took her out of her house, in front of her family, they shot her, and then they burned her [alive]! And they put the video online, on social networks ... Imagine!"

Another woman recounted:

Three national policemen got into my house and then into the bedrooms. They asked who slept there, how many people lived here? They asked if we knew "You, you know who" [referring to the leader of the criminal group], if I know him? I was so afraid, and because of my nerves I said I didn't know him. I do know him, because he grew up here. But I can't say yes either, because if they ask me [referring to the police officers], if I know where he is ... They ask you all those kinds of things. That's terrifying. Another day they came and gave me a phone number—if I saw him, I should call them. My husband grabbed the phone number and when they left, he ripped up the little paper. Because, who would dare to say who is who. You have your children—I don't want to die burned, nor killed either.

For the women, this brutal, dramatic event was a stunning message about what could happen to them if they dare to defy the criminals' rule in the neighborhood, when they know something and say more than what they are allowed to—in other words, if they dare to gossip about the armed men, and the gossip circulates to the public realm. One grandmother told us: "It is like if I stand in the corner and say: So-and-so did this and this! At night, the gang did this! And someone passes by and hears you—they'll burn me! It seems that she began to comment on something about them and the boys who heard her, grabbed her at her door! She was in the PSUV [the United Socialist Party of Venezuela]."

The war mode established in the neighborhood by the military interventions helped to cause this symbolically breathtaking event, the burning of the woman's body. To impose and reinforce social control over residents, the armed men use violence strategically to transmit meaning: to set boundaries, to communicate what is acceptable or not in the community (Wilding 2014). Residents, especially women unwilling and afraid to test the boundaries of gang tolerance, have no other option than to subjugate and restrain their

own behavior by silencing themselves. In short, police presence eliminated gossip as a cultural repertoire that women could draw on to exert control in their community.

In La Piedad, women are thus deprived of one of their daily tools of control, namely gossip. Women are extremely cautious with what they say, in what context and to whom, in order not to let the information they manage become public knowledge. They have learned from this dramatic and tragic event that circulating rumors could cost their lives. In this sense, in such discursive state of siege, gossip becomes captive because women are afraid of speaking.

This was very clear to Cecilia: “We live here like the small jungle animals, like the little monkey: I don’t see, I don’t hear, I don’t speak. They shoot their guns, and one can’t say: look, don’t shoot up the door of my house! We live like small, camouflaged animals! So we wouldn’t be seen, so they don’t eat us, so they don’t attack us. We keep a low profile, all of the time.” It is very revealing the way Cecilia describes her sense of dehumanization in the loss of their most basic human capacities: not only seeing and hearing but knowing (I don’t see, I don’t hear) and talking (I don’t speak).

Enduring events that happen in their daily lives, and being caught between the armed regime of the men in their neighborhood and the regular but intermittent massive interventions of the police, other residents and especially women experience and talk about the harshness of being reduced to biological life. In other words, living in a “state of exception” and experiencing what Agamben (1998) calls “nuda vida” (naked life), that is the experience of being deprived of the most basic rights and human capacities: speech and political action in the public realm.

Women’s capacity for resistance ends up being restricted to the realm of private conversation. For instance, during our interviews, women took all the necessary measures to be sure that what they said would be kept in this face-to-face encounter between us. It was during these private conversations that they could raise their questions about the situation in which they were living. In fact, the precautions the La Piedad women took to make it clear that these stories “can’t get out of here,” as a woman said, prevented them from using the threatening capacity of “circulating gossip” that women in La Caracola clearly used.

Here, as Abu-Lughod (1990) points out, critiquing a romanticized, omnipresent sense of resistance among the subalterns, gossips in captivity tells us something more significant about the type of oppressive armed order that La Piedad residents and women in particular submit to—besieged by constant militarized operations and the ostentatious armed presence of young men—than about resistance.

Final comments

Contributing to previous scholarship on women’s survival strategies in violent Latin American contexts, here we have analyzed gossip and rumor as repertoires of discursive practices associated with the particular contexts in which women live. While often overlooked as communicative action due to their feminization, women deploy these repertoires to become information carriers, network creators, and arbiters of men’s reputations. We have also paid close attention to how access to these repertoires varies according to history, local context, and the types of armed actors present. Under certain circumstances gossip circulates and under others it becomes captive leaving women vulnerable, unable to draw upon gossip as a resource.

Finally, our comparative study suggests that strategies such as hiding, isolation, and silence, so often documented by former research, are context dependent and most likely vary according to numerous factors, some of which we have analyzed here.

La Caracola is a clear example of the power of local women's networking to resist and reduce violence. In this neighborhood, there are complex relationships between armed actors and local communities due to the neighborhood's history of organizing and civil associations. Women in La Caracola have a number of resources from which they can draw in negotiating with armed actors: scolding, gossip, and the mothers' organization that maintains the cease-fire pact. With a long history of social collaboration and development of support networks, La Caracola represents the case for collective agency and for the possibility of social transformation of the terms of daily interactions. This case expresses the power that daily conversations and the circulation of gossip can exert over armed men. What might be chalked up to "women's talk" makes possible the negotiation of agreements and the development of new routines, and allows the definition of alternative courses of action over time. La Caracola 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). Finally, as in other Latin American experiences, the ambiguity associated with "the image of women's power" supplies a "symbolic framework within which women describe and interpret their participation in the political arena" (Martin 1990, 472). As in the experience of the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, women can bargain and both posit and frame their demands in the name of being mothers and loving their families, even in contexts of repressive regimes, like the armed regimes in which they live their daily lives.

The experience of La Caracola coheres with recent literature focused on the relationships between armed actors and their local communities. While "civilians have bargaining power because they can threaten rebels with collective resistance" (Arjona 2016, 63) we must keep in mind that resistance is always gendered. The weight of the long-standing traditions of local organizations in La Caracola provided women with the narratives, the experiences of coordination, and the possibilities to imagine alternative outcomes to their realities. These traditions helped the women to collectively resist armed actors and to negotiate terms that govern their daily lives, allowing them to protect themselves and their children.

The case of La Piedad is akin to common representations of women in violent neighborhoods—these women live in an almost constant state of fear. Neighbors have not developed organizing capacities over time, and the social networks that do exist have been frayed by regular police incursions. In this context, women cannot shout, denounce in public, or gossip about armed actors without fearing for their lives. Indeed, the one story that circulates in La Piedad, as we discuss above, is of a woman being burned alive for talking. This reveals how the militarization of citizen security actually leaves mothers even more helpless, subject to armed power and deprived of the resources that women in other communities use to resist armed actors and even exert a degree of control over.

The timing of these intense, militarized interventions is, of course, part of the local context. Had La Caracola experienced the same intensity and frequency of militarized police raids as La Piedad had before the peace agreements making up the pact had been reached, we believe they would have been much less successful. The contrast speaks to the ways police violence breaks apart community relationships and produces disorganization within neighborhoods, weakening collective efficacy. The presence of both state and nonstate armed actors shapes women's survival strategies, as we have argued, and would likely alter the tolerance of gossip and public scolding that work as effective forms of social control in La Caracola—although most likely in ways distinct from La Piedad, given the different histories of community organizing.

Just as armed actors are shaped by the organizational and political context in which they are embedded, so, too, are women's strategies to survive and perhaps even coexist with armed actors by negotiating boundaries around armed violence. More research needs to be conducted on women's survival strategies within a context of multiple armed actors.

While Caracas is often characterized as an extreme case in studies on urban violence, we expect that future research in other places will resonate with our findings.

Although men experience the extreme violence of extrajudicial executions and carry out armed violence, it is necessary to highlight the invisible suffering of women, and especially mothers (Smith 2016). Mothers' struggles remain anonymous struggles, where dramatic discursive actions such as shouting, scolding, gossiping and silencing are their main resources in the micropolitics of their neighborhoods.

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