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Violence Against Women

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For Lydia Cacho and Alicia Leal

We men have humiliated, blackmailed, degraded, intimidated, threatened, struck and killed them. Violence against women occurs equally among poor and rich; among educated and uneducated.

In Mexico, violence against women has become the most serious public health problem, although the authorities refuse to recognize it. It occurs in six out of ten homes.

One out of five women who use hospital emergency services arrives as a victim of her partner's blows. One out of three women answers that she has suffered some type of aggression. The violence has become like another member of the family. And due to ignorance and the fear of new aggressions, 84% of women consider domestic violence to be something natural, a private matter concerning the couple and the family and no one else. The fear is such that only out one of 100 victims officially reports the violence to the designated authorities. In the minute that it takes to read this article, three acts of violence against women have taken place in this country. A beating every 18 seconds.

Here are more astonishing and shameful numbers: in one of four couples violence occurs with alarming frequency; 20% of murders happen within the family; 10% are husbands killing their spouses; in 95% of cases of violence against women, the aggressor is a man; of each four women who decide to take their own lives, one of them does it to escape the violence that marks her hell at home.

In Mexico as in other many societies, violence against women originates in the cultural background of imbalance and injustices in the power relations between the masculine and feminine genders in the social, religious, economic and political spheres. It is through violence that men maintain privileges and forms of power over women. The model of dominant masculinity characterizes men as independent, strong, emotionally controlled, macho and providers. The feminine model is the opposite: dependent, sentimental, emotional and of course, submissive.

The most common forms of violence women suffer in the home are: physical abuse, that ranges from pushes and slaps to tortures, being stabbed with sharp instruments and injuries that could cause death; emotional or psychological abuse, which includes behaviors like ridiculing, degrading, expressing contempt for, criticizing cruelly to her

family or friends, and ignoring her in public or private, among others; emotional violence does not leave visible marks, but its effects are important, painful and even lethal; sexual abuse happens when the woman is required to perform sexual acts against her wishes or is treated by him as a simple sexual object – this category includes marital rape. Finally, economic abuse happens when the man excludes the woman from financial decision making, exercises extreme control over her expenditures, knowingly deprives her of sufficient money, and hides information about household income from her.

Violence against women has very serious repercussions beyond the family to other economic and social spheres of the nation as a whole. According to the Inter-American Development Bank, every year we lose 100 million dollars – more than a billion pesos – in wages, sick leave and lack of productivity because of violence against women. And of every five days women are absent from work, one is due to partners' beatings, sexual violation and humiliations. Annually, more than a million women seek medical aid due to blows received from their husbands or because of transmission of venereal diseases; the most dramatic is the increase of women sentenced to death because their spouses transmit HIV/AIDS to them.

Violence against women has increased to the point that in 10 cities of the republic, such as Monterrey and Cancún, secret shelters have been created to protect the victims. Shelters to avoid being found by abusive husbands and brought back to be attacked, injured or even assassinated by them. I had the opportunity to be in two of these, Monterrey and Cancún, and the experience is frightening and yet they said to me: "I am trying to survive abuse, psychological violence as much as physical;" "the last time he beat me I fractured my nose and I fell to the ground in a pool of blood, my baby was three years old and was the only witness;" "when I was pregnant he beat me even more;" "he liked to hang us, me and my children, from the time he arrived at the house, the terror began for all of us;" "the fear paralyzes, is very great and stronger than the will"; "he does not see me like a wife, but like a prey, for that reason he does not want to give me a divorce, because he feels that the prey goes away from him and he will have no one to attack and do violence to;" "often I tried to take my own life, took a cable and tied it around my neck, out of pure desperation, when you are being abused you think that you are worth nothing and that life is meaningless;" "in the beginning the blows are what hurt you, but later what hurts is the soul".

In these shelters, an admirable effort of civil society, the lessons of those who have assumed the defense of women victims of violence are of sublime courage. They are about women defending women, even at the risk of their own safety, since we are speaking of victims persecuted by their husbands or partners that are an extensive and diverse fauna: narcotics traffickers, government officials, bricklayers, professionals and even justices of the peace who have ruled once or twice – maybe more? – in favor of battering husbands like themselves. Because of that one of the women said to us that "... to go to press charges is like a second violation... you only go to be humiliated and made fun of by them."

But, in addition to the formidable lesson of life that these shelters represent, there are some other initial things to learn about this extremely sad and gigantic problem that affects sixty out of one hundred homes in this country: The apparently inexplicable brute fact half of the human beings attacking the other half is the result of a whole social construction of continuing inequalities between men and women.

Certainly, this inequality causes shock in the military enclaves of Gaza, Bosnia or anywhere on the planet, but who is going to agitate for shelters to protect the women whose husbands make war on them every day?

Violence against the women is a matter of social justice, is a question of human rights and is as serious as systematic terrorism amounting to torture.

It is not true that women become addicted to beatings. There are other factors that make up the battered women's syndrome.

Neither is there an addiction to violence that justifies the aggressor in some way. The batterer of women is a delinquent and must be treated as such.

Intrafamily violence is not a private matter; it is a matter of public health. The unheard and unreported blows and screams sooner or later will have social repercussions that affect us all.

It is urgent to review, to analyze violence towards women with a gender perspective. Until now, the politicians, the mass media and even students and specialists in the subject, analyze the violence from a linear vision. It is absolutely necessary to see the other side of the coin. This cannot be only a matter of men against women; it is an immense cultural challenge that must comprehend the deep roots of the violence that we men exert towards women.

It is a fight that has just begun.

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