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Violence against women: The production of information to promote social transformation

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Introduction

This report describes the process of conducting the First National Survey of Family Relations and Gender Violence against Women in Ecuador, carried out between 2011 and 2012. The report's focus is on the production of information using technology in a way that supports social transformation.

Policy and political background

Since 1995 Ecuador has had a law prohibiting violence against women and the family. Adopted during the Sixto Durán Ballén administration (1992-1996), and in the political context of accelerated structural adjustment that shaped neoliberalism in Ecuador, the law was not however effective enough to prevent everyday violence against women. This was particularly the case during the economic crisis that Ecuador experienced in the following decade, which affected the poorest segment of the population, and therefore its most vulnerable groups – women, children, teenagers, the elderly, Afro-Ecuadorians and indigenous people. These groups experienced other kinds of violence related to a lack of access to the protection of the state.

With its "modernisation plan" – a recurring theme in most economic policies during the decades of the 1980s and 1990s in Latin America, the Ballén government pursued economic liberalisation and the dismantling of the welfare state. This shift was important, if we consider that the previous administration, under Rodrigo Borja Cevallos (1988-1992), emphasised a process of popular participation. This at least partially allowed the voices and demands of a wide range of movements to be heard, including gender rights organisations. However, most of these demands were systematically diluted during the Ballén period, and replaced by development policies centred on dealing with the social dissatisfaction that was the result of increasing economic crisis[1] – a crisis that undermined the livelihoods of the vulnerable social classes and increased social inequality in ways not seen before.[2]

Two reports were completed in Ecuador in line with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the first published in 2003 and the second in 2006. Both show the ineffectiveness of institutions to enforce the law passed in 1995, from the National Congress and other public institutions, to police stations, courts and health centres.

Violence against women, particularly domestic violence, was seen as a problem to be solved through reconciliation, with the intervention of social workers, and ultimately, through the vote. The failure to treat it as a crime pointed to perverse judicial and legal practice, in which the lack of protection and defence of women increased women's feeling of being defenceless.

The lack of clear procedures for reporting, as well as a lack of protection offered by health professionals, created a significant disparity between the number of cases of women treated for attacks, possibly related to their gender, and the number of complaints received by authorities. On the other hand, it created a sort of parallel justice system, for example, in universities, where solutions to sexual assault and abuse were dealt with by the universities themselves – despite surveys and research showing that sex crimes were widespread on many campuses.

These reports corroborated the existence of a culture in which shame, fear or belief in the possibility of resolving violent situations without resorting to the state were stronger than the precarious official structures built to eradicate violence against women.

In the period between these two reports, the National Council of Women (CONAMU)[3] included a section in the 2004 Demographic, Maternal and Child Health National Survey (ENDEMAIN)[4] which included a series of questions about domestic

1 Lind, A. (2001) Organizaciones de mujeres, reforma neoliberal y políticas de consumo en Ecuador, in Herrera, G. (ed.) *Antología Género*, FLACSO, Quito, p. 295-324.

2 Salgado, J. (ed.) (2006) *Informe Alternativo ante el Comité para la Eliminación de Todas las Formas de Discriminación contra la Mujer*, PADH-UASB, CLADEM, CPJ and UNIFEM, Quito.

3 A technical agency working under the Presidency of the Republic of Ecuador, created in 1997 and operating as such until May 2009, when a constitutional provision changed it to the Transition Commission Towards the National Council of Women and Gender Equality (from hereon called Transition Commission).

4 www.cepar.org.ec/endemain_04/nuevo05/pdf/texto/01_introduccion.pdf

violence and violence against women in relationships. The ENDEMAIN survey has been conducted in Ecuador since 1987. Information obtained in 2004 was crucial to expanding knowledge about the situation of women in Ecuador.

In this context, in 2007 the Ecuadorian government initiated the National Plan for the Eradication of Gender Violence against Children, Youth and Women, bringing together various levels of government and trying to create an agency to coordinate these levels. Among the activities proposed by this plan was the need to conduct a survey of available national data with which the agency could establish an information base truly representative of the gender violence phenomenon in the country. This was particularly needed to overcome and draw attention to the underreporting of gender-based violence, given the different sources of administrative information, such as health centres, police stations and courts. In this regard it should be noted that already in 2001 it had been recognised that "the single record for data collection agreed on years ago was not being used by several of the commissioners dealing with women and families, further limiting national statistics on violence against women reported by the commissioners."[5]

The need for information is one of the priority tasks in the process of eradicating gender violence. This priority existed at various levels, some deeper and more complex, according to Alba Pérez, coordinator of strategic information for the Transition Commission:

> We worked with a single record, as a first step. However, the issues don't reflect the violence completely, nor its magnitude, because there are many people living constantly in violence, but who never report it. But the other thing is: they do not even know that it is violence.[6]

The reality for many women victims of violence is that they face multiple forms of invisibility, whether on the record – as shown by the 2004 ENDEMAIN survey, which was only applied to married women or those living with a partner, concealing the violence that single women might face – or from the experience of women who do not report acts of violence because of a social structure that makes them feel either guilty or resigned to being passive recipients of abuse.

But in the most extreme cases, it is precisely the kind of invisibility that Pérez alerts us to: when women are not even aware that they are being victimised.

Faced with this reality, CONAMU, the Transition Commission and the various agencies involved in the National Plan for the Eradication of Gender Violence against Children, Youth and Women launched the First National Survey on Family Relations and Gender Violence against Women. The survey was conducted in November 2011 and initial findings were presented in March 2012. It was a process that was necessary to confront and remedy the lack of information on violence against women in Ecuador, which had resulted in underreporting and a lack of awareness and public discourse on gender violence.

Different steps were necessary for this purpose. First, the creation of a technical secretariat to organise and centralise methodologies and the data collection process was needed. Secondly, the active participation of the National Institute of Statistics and Census (INEC), which developed the survey tools and took charge of the survey process, was sought. INEC created a statistical framework for the survey, forming special and sectoral committees, including a special commission on gender statistics. This special commission resulted in much discussion around the development of the survey methodology, as well as training in the field for both members of the Transition Commission, who assumed the presidency of this special commission within the INEC, and INEC officials who were sensitised on gender issues.

Finally, it was necessary to create a team for intersectoral coordination and cooperation between the Transition Commission, INEC, the Ministries of Government and Social Development, the National Secretariat of Planning and Development (SENPLADES), and women's organisations. Former studies were focused only on married women, assuming violence against women takes place exclusively at home. The work of this team extended the framework to women in general (not just married women) as well as girls over the age of 12, implying access to sensitive information.

This pioneering survey also required extensive training of the personnel involved in the data processing, especially given the influx of new information. Workshops were conducted that lasted about a week. They became laboratories that demonstrated the reactions of a society still reluctant to talk about these issues:

> Then I remember there was a girl who sat in front of me. She was in the front row. She got up and said: "I have five children; now I realise what kind of life I've lived. The violence I put up

5 Jara, L. (2001) Ecuador: hacia un sistema de estadísticas sobre violencia contra las mujeres. Resumen, in CEPAL, *Estadísticas e indicadores de género para medir la incidencia y evolución de la violencia contra la mujer en América Latina y el Caribe*, UNIFEM, Quito.

6 Interview with Alba Pérez, 19 April 2013.

with all my life. If I have five children you will realise from my situation..." And then she began to cry. The workshop was extremely intense, not only for them, for me too, despite having worked on these issues. But, of course, these issues are much more complicated in reality. That was just on the first day.[7]

Women, asking women about their lives, trying to unravel the complex web of individual and social experiences, making them visible in a society that has systematically refused to recognise this complexity. And it still does not recognise it. But the survey revealed some very complex and alarming situations.

Amongst the most troubling findings is that in Ecuador, six out of ten women have experienced some form of violence, whether physical, psychological, sexual or related to property and assets.[8]

While it was revealed that one out of four women has experienced some form of sexual violence, the most recurrent form of violence is psychological, which reinforces the existence of a social and cultural problem. Restrictions faced by women mean that such violence is difficult to verify, punish or treat. The survey also revealed that this is the case regardless of ethnic self-identification, income and even educational level: 52.8% of women with graduate degrees have suffered some form of violence. And despite this, or perhaps because of it, only 20.6% of cases result in formal complaints.

The most widely shared story from the research was the case of Karina del Pozo. It is believed that this young woman was raped and murdered by men she knew, and her murder was described as a case of femicide. While in Ecuador there is no specific criminalisation of this type of crime (differentiated, that is, from homicide), since October 2011, and coinciding with the start of the survey, people started using the term femicide for the first time in messages posted on Twitter from Ecuadorian accounts. According to the website Topsy, which specialises in social network analysis, before October 2011 the hashtag #femicide had not been used in Ecuador. However, its use reached a peak between February and March 2013, coinciding with the spread of the Karina del Pozo case. Over 100 messages were written, while the hashtag #KarinadelPozo was retweeted 15,000 times.

It is safe to assume that this, and all the other cases that became visible after it, have allowed the issue of femicide to enter the Ecuadorian imaginary, and helped gather support for a proposal to include this specific type of crime in the Criminal Code. Prior to the survey, this kind of proposal would have been more difficult and met with greater resistance.

Conclusions

The conclusion of this experience, which is still ongoing, is that information is a scarce and much-needed resource. It can change collective behaviour and perception, and support the possibility of reconstructing an image of a society and its culture. The legitimacy of the information is important. In this case the survey was lent legitimacy through its design, its multisectoral support and input, and the implementation process. The kind of pressure exerted through these platforms can, at least as shown in the case of Ecuador, lead to discussion of a dark side of the reality and identity of nations, and to beginning to recognise problems that are hidden under very strong and capable former customs, labels, recriminations and social sanctions.

Action steps

It is necessary not only to spread these social discussions through media platforms, but to encourage activists, organisations and the public in general to demand more information from institutions, exercising the right of access to information. It is also necessary for people to ask questions about themselves, of their own behaviours that they feel are "natural", to be critical and to transform as a human collective. ■

7 Interview with Alba Pérez, 19 April 2013.

8 "The gender asset gap in Latin America with respect to ownership of land is significant. In few countries do women constitute even one-quarter of the landowners. Gender inequality in land ownership is related to male preference in inheritance, male privilege in marriage, male bias in community and state programmes of land distribution as well as gender bias in the land market, with women less likely than men to be successful buyers." Deere, C. D. and León, M. (2003) The Gender Asset Gap: Land in Latin America, *World Development*, 31(6), p. 925-947.