Social Representations of Violence against Women in Cuba Is It a Consequence of Economic and Political Changes?

Roselín Martin-Ramos[1], Velia Cecilia Bobes-León[2], Flérida Guzmán-Gallangos[3]

[1]*University Motolinía at Pedregal (UMP), Latin American School of Social Sciences (FLACSO-Mexico), Mexico City, Mexico. roselinmr89@gmail.com*
[2]*Latin American School of Social Sciences (FLACSO-México), Mexico City, Mexico. cbobes@flacso.edu.mx*
[3]*Latin American School of Social Sciences (FLACSO-México), Mexico City, Mexico.flerida@flacso.edu.mx*

ABSTRACT: The main purpose of this research is to analyze social representations (SR) of violence against women in three generations from Sancti Spiritus in a context of sociocultural changes. With this purpose, 28 people from three different generations were interviewed using the Snowball method. As part of the methodology, the semi-structured interviews, as well as the Free Association method (written variant) and the non-participant observation were used. The data obtained was interpreted with the qualitative paradigm. Myths about violence were found anchored in the collective imagination, without distinction of age. Likewise, there were changes in the SR of the three generations towards violence: the generation of older adults exhibits beliefs more attached to the government-supported discourse on equality; the youngsters blamed more the victim of violence and showed SR in which the control of man over woman is normalized. The intermediate generation exhibited SR more in accordance with reality. This generation, raised in a context of educational and social achievements, where inequality and social precarious brought by the special period, didn't have a dent in social values and norms, showed a less macho ideology.

KEYWORDS: social representations, violence against women, collective imagination, myths, victim

Introduction

Violence against women (VAW), as any other type of violence between human beings, has existed throughout the history of mankind in every country. In some cases it has been encouraged and justified by creed and culture (Postigo, Vera and Cortés 2016).

Cagigas (2000) defined it as "the direct relation of power between men and women in which men, who have interest in control, use, submission and oppression of women, effectively carry out their interests." For it to occur effectively, the means is the abuse of force, in other words, violence and all forms of power due to sex, hence its name of gender violence or misogynist violence (Díaz 2009).

This exercise of domination or violence is transversal. It takes place without distinction, in every cultural, economic and ideological level, and it is used against individuals in a disadvantaged position (Cagigas 2000). The belief of man's possession over women is what causes violence, because he considers his wife as his object. They believe that they are dominant by nature and women submissive, so any contempt will be experienced as an offense to manhood (Connell 1995).

This is aggravated by women's lack of knowledge about their own rights, by their limited access to information, help or legal protection, by the lack of laws that effectively prohibit it, by fear, shame at the complaint and by their own cultural formation in which the male role is seen as superior (Díaz 2009).

The VAW is one of the main problems that countries face currently. According to estimates published by the World Health Organization (WHO), approximately one in three women worldwide have suffered sexual and/or physical violence, by their intimate partner or a stranger, (quoted in Siqueira 2015). The most affected regions by this scourge are: Southeastern Asia with a prevalence of 37.7%, Eastern Mediterranean with 37%, Africa with 36.6%, America with 29.8%, Europe with 25.4%, and the West Pacific with 24.6% (in this order), which is quite alarming considering that Latin America occupies the following position after Africa.

According to recent data (CEPAL 2018), every day at least 12 Latin American and Caribbean women die in average by the mere fact of being a woman. In Cuba, for example, the situation is similar to the one in Latin America according to some researchers, since the indexes of violence against women have significantly raised (Salas and Pujol 2011) although there are not official figures that back up such affirmation.

Most authors agree that it is difficult to eradicate it because it is socially learnt from beliefs on the possession of woman (Postigo, Vera, and Cortés 2016). Nevertheless, there are cultural, social, familiar and individual factors that make it more likely and complex. All of them answer to a common denominator: patriarchy culture and learning the roles and principles that are produced in society and family.

However, authors like García-Moreno (2000) express that the subordination of women is generally more likely to take place in a precarious socioeconomical level, hence that countries from Africa, Latin America and particularly Cuba, seem more vulnerable to the increase of this violence in the measure inasmuch as the growing precarity. This is also confirmed by Proveyer (2008) expressing that, "when there are difficulties of any type: occupational, economical, housing difficulties... stress is caused and conflicts, violence, moral and principle crisis increase. It is a spiral that grows, reproduces and installs itself in a couple's relationship and family", explains the author.

Some of these forms of violence against women are normalized and praised by social representations (SR) imbued with machismo and have prevailed for years. Thus, some theorists warn that "not a single mind escapes from the conditioning imposed by culture, through language and the system of representations, to the thought and perception" (Moscovici 2000, 23). Following this line of reasoning, Moscovici (1985) emphasizes the importance of ideologies, cultural and economic systems, social and historical conditions.

In this same line of thought, Flores-Palacios (2012) considers that the historical, sociocultural and economic conditions noticeably influence in these representations, as each person is the result of their own interaction in their cultural context. This interaction is measured by a complex process of designation of meanings and representations that constitute their own existence and form the structure of their reality (Flores-Palacios 2012, 356). There is a metasystem in her, constituted by social regulations that intercede with models, pre-established beliefs, norms and principles (Flores-Palacios 2012, 343).

For a better understanding of what is meant by social representations (SR), hereunder is a personal concept based on the one given by Flores Palacios (2012) suggesting that:

The SR are conceived as the form of common sense that is denoted in everyday language typical of each social group and in the behavioral repertoire of each individual. They work in a narrow bond with the social norms that rule in a particular context. It allows communities to explain their reality in a coherent way with the frame of mind and constitute a social construct that is internalized by the individual who reconstructs it and gives it back to society (Martin 2018).

All of these postulates can be useful in the analysis of the following paradoxical situation:

The changes (political, economic and social) that took place from the triumph of the Revolution in 1959, caused in the country a series of modifications in every order that favored the equality of rights and women's opportunities. For more than fifty-seven years, the Cuban State has incorporated women to Cuba's working, economic and political life with laws and measures that have guaranteed the participation of women in every field of public life. This way, with equal value jobs, the State promoted non-discrimination at work and professional training, and wage equality between men and women. It also looked after the fair distribution of job positions between men and women, passed the Maternity Benefit Act and, in the Family Code, advocated the equality of women's rights and obligations in the marriage, among others (Bobes 1999).

Despite everything, following the socioeconomical crisis of the nineties, and more acutely in the last years, there have been social regressions that are linked with gender. More women are tolerating different forms of violence from their partners and acquaintances, both in public and private (Hernández and Delgado 2016). This does not happen in a homogeneous way, but it has

occurred with greater notoriety in the youngest generations. The acceptance of such behaviors indicates the acceptance of SR less critical about violence against women.

The cultural learning acquired in the Cuban patriarchal context (among which SR stand out) and how the social norms of that context have an influence on violence against women, would be the explanation of a social problem that seems to continuously reproduce despite the social policies that pretend to eradicate it (Hernández and Delgado 2015).

General Objective

Analyze the SR of violence against women of three generations of Espirituanos in the Cuban sociocultural context.

In order to answer to the objective, some of the alleged theoretical assumptions of the author Fátima Flores-Palacios (2012, 343-356) were used. For example, that each person is the result of their own interaction in their cultural context, which is measured by a complex process of designation of meanings and SR. Considering that the SR contain sociocultural products, this allows us to identify common issues in the SR of the people, for being common in their context. This allows us to understand that the modification of the contexts, within the economic, social, political and cultural can have an impact in the SR.

Method

The work presented consists in an exploratory study developed from a non-probabilistic sample and in chain, using the Snowball Sampling. Based on a qualitative analysis, the speeches of the interviewees from the Sancti Spíritus province, Cuba, were interpreted.

For the collection of information, a bibliographic review was made and instruments such as the Semi-Structured interview, the Free Association (written variable) and the Non-Participatory Observation. All of them with the purpose of analyzing the SR of violence against women.

Twenty-eight people from Sancti Spíritus province were interviewed without sex distinction. These interviewees were selected according to three age ranges that were previously established, which means they belonged to three different generations. Amongst these groups of interviewees, a ten-year gap was left so that the group characteristics were more different.

Chart 1. Criteria of the selection of the interviewed generations

Youngsters (18-25 years)	**Adults** (35-45 years)	**Elders** (55-70 years)
-They were born after the special period. -They were socialized in a context of social precarity, inequality and the so-called "moral crisis". -They grew up among a society that has increasingly prioritized consumption, as well as promoting personal non-effort in studies because it does not guarantee a decent life.	-They were studying when the special period occurred. -They have memories of how their life changed. -They see the "moral crisis" and the noticeable interest in consumption as something alien to their generation. -They grew up in the 1980's which was the one with greatest equality in Cuban society. -They studied in the years when education in Cuba was of excellence.	-They were born before, during or in the first years of the Cuban Revolution. -Many were protagonists of the changes in the social position of women. -Their experiences allowed them to value social achievements better. -Likewise, their life experiences gave them a procedural criterion of the changes that occurred.

With these three groups a comparison of the SR was established on: violence against women and the myths associated to this problem. Likewise, the SR on street harassment as well as the normalization of sexist stereotypes were explored, analyzing changes, similarities, advances and setbacks among the generations interviewed.

To analyze the SR, the methodology proposed by Yazmín Cuevas (2016, 114) was used, because it allows to identify and interpret the content of the SR from a procedural perspective. Cuevas (2016) suits the analysis of the meanings and senses, of the SR insert in culture. This analysis supposes that the context works as a source of determination of the SR, after providing the ensemble of economic, social and historical conditions that characterize society and the moral system that circulates in it as she previously established (Ibáñez 2001).

Results and discussions

Social representation of the VAW

The young group represented violence against women (VAW) as physical violence (beating, assault and death) and to a lesser extent they represented psychological and verbal violence. For the youngsters, sexual violence, workplace and street harassment, as well as economic/property violence seem to be more normalized since these were not mentioned.

In the case of adults between 35- and 45-years old, violence against women was mostly represented in the physical form, but with more clarity over the asymmetry of underlaying power. As well as the psychological form expressed as: "emotionally leaving a mark on a woman just because she is a woman". This group showed a greater command of the "soft" forms of violence against women, including control as one of these. Violence is seen by them as "everything that subdues women…", "not considering her as a person".

On the other hand, the third group (adults between 55 and 70 years old) represented violence against women mostly in the physical form but showed greater SR on macho violence. Although many forms of violence such as street and workplace harassment were normalized. In this group many interviewees specified the relation between violence and jealousy and the macho qualities of men. Also, this third group identified the control of man over woman as a form of violence, not like the group of youngsters.

It was surprising that not a single generational group mentioned street and workplace harassment among their SR, which shows how little visibility this type of violence has in this context. Macho violence was always represented as domestic violence against the wife, making invisible the one that takes place in every day social life.

Normalization of macho stereotypes

When looking into the youngster's attitudes and morals towards equality in intergender relationships, the answers were very varied. In some occasions, the violence that a father exerts over a "bad mother", was accepted as something valid in certain circumstances. This coincides with Connell's approach (1995): "the belief of possession of a man over a woman is the one that originates violence, because he considers his wife as an object, as his belonging over which he can exert his natural and arbitrarily domination".

The university subjects between 35 and 45 years old, demonstrated a deeper reflection than the youngsters of the same school level. Adults, on their behalf, noticed that gender equality is the biggest accomplishment to aspire and that VAW is a problem solved by the Cuban Revolution. These results are coherent with the experiences lived by this group, that being part of all the social, political and economic transformations took place with the revolutionary triumph, saw how the Cuban woman became a protagonist in such changes.

When comparing the three generations, the adults of the second group demonstrated to have more criticism than the adults of the third group about the machismo that still exists among Cuban society as a revolutionary backwardness. This suggests a setback in the visibility that exists of VAW among the generation of youngsters regarding the one of adults between 35 and 45 years old.

Likewise, it corroborates one of the conclusions of Hernández and Delgado (2016) when saying that demonstrations of social regressions have taken place since the crisis and that the problem of the VAW in Cuba has had nuances in the last two decades.

Without doubts, as Proveyer (2014, 45-47) expressed, the transformation of Cuban women's situation has had an important economic, political and social repercussion. But it has been a process that has passed through contradictions and cultural barriers. One of the most significant has been the control and submission, the traditional gender roles, and the differential socialization of both sexes. All of this is typical of a patriarchal and discriminatory culture, that hasn't been changed in spite of the incorporation, by the Cuban Revolution, of the woman to the political, economic and social life in Cuba.

The criteria that equality has already been achieved, demonstrate that many forms of violence against woman have been normalized. The same happens with everyday sexual harassment, with objectification of women, among other forms that infringe upon the right to equality between both sexes. This confirms what Proveyer (2014, 9) expressed when she sentences that the normalization of violence and the invisibility of power asymmetries between genders do not allow to give VAW an effective treatment.

Although the political discourse of the first years declared a priority to end with women's discrimination, this goal was not translated in politics specifically created for this social group, since they believed that the end of exploitation, the incorporation of women to work and the egalitarian politics would eliminate by itself discrimination. This is why Bobes (1999) claims that it was a participation without gender identity.

SR about men's control over women in couple's relationship

With the exception of two youngsters (both with higher education), the rest considered that the control men have over women is reasonable if it is exerted "through communication between both parties". Some thought that: "there are limits for all, women's attire can't disrespect man. Since the man may require it to be in a particular way". This control, in words of Proveyer (2014, 45-47) is still the result of traditional gender roles and the differential socialization of both sexes.

In the groups of adults, the majority of the interviewed suggested that the way men exert control has to be with conversation, because communication is very important in every couple. In this two groups of adults there was a major criticism against control as a way of domination and violence, as there was a greater proportion of expressions against control than in the other groups: "…nobody has the right to control another person".

From the group of elders, half of the interviewed spoke in favor of trust in a couple and against control, for being violent. This group had more criticism than the previous one towards the macho violence that comprehends this one.

The relapse that was shown in the youngest generation in almost every aspect studied, coincides with the breakdown of social achievements, since the economic crisis or special period, which ruled the emphasis in social inequality gaps, from one ideology more centered in consumption, and more dissociated from the personal effort to not guarantee good living conditions. Likewise, this "special period" is considered a watershed in the collective imagination because it modified morals and ruled social norms that everyday accept more female objectification, prostitution, State robbery, corruption and violence against women.

These sociocultural characteristics seem to have had a greater influence in later generations than in previous generations, which were educated under other morals and in another social and economic context, where the educational achievements also suffered the consequences of this crisis. Therefrom, it seems that this stage has favored the conformation of SR that normalize control as a form of VAW.

Conclusions

The theory turned out to be useful when analyzing the changes within the SR of VAW in the interviewees according to the sociocultural changes that took place in the Cuban context due to the

special period. This is confirmed, for example, by the fact that sexual violence seems to be more normalized in the group of youngsters, which perceives a more accentuated tendency in Cuban society to female objectification. Nevertheless, in the Cuban patriarchal and macho context, other forms of violence have been made invisible such as street and workplace harassment which occur in a normalized way.

In this macho context there are many gender expectations that are significantly unequal for women and for men, which implies acceptance of standards towards certain forms of violence. The "deserved punishment" inflicted to a "bad mother" reveals the great pressure and demand behind this role, to which some people consider physical violence as something justifiable. This belief is more present in youngsters, and it was in this group in which less SR criticism was expressed about control as a form of macho violence, because almost for everybody was well accepted the control of a man over a woman without having any criticism about this form of subordination and inferiorization.

The influence of the context on the SR was also confirmed with regard to the evaluation of the current state of VAW in Cuba. In this sense, not only the youngsters interviewed were the less critical, but also the elder group. For this last group, the attained was much more of what was originally expected, therefore they have SR that everything was guaranteed by the State. The social representation of equality that these groups have, is based fundamentally on women's participation in Cuba's political, economic and social life, without gender identity (Bobes 1999). This apparent equality attained in Cuba does not reveal the essence of inequalities: the asymmetries of genders in current everyday nature imaginary, roles and stereotypes.

Generally speaking, there was a certain tendency in the generations of interviewees to as, the younger they are, the less they represent control as a form of violence that is unacceptable, even though these differences were mild from a group to another. This remains normalized as something valid for the majority, which corroborates the modification of SR and the most accepted social norms towards some types of VAW. This may be due to the own psychological characteristics of these age groups and the differences marked in education received by the generations. All of this confirms that, the SR on VAW have been modified in accordance with the sociocultural aspects of the Cuban context and have suffered a relapse regarding criticism and visibility.

References

Bobes, V. C. 1999. "Participation vs. identity: Women in Cuban public space." Latin American Profiles. *FLACSO-México* 8(15): 99–118. Retrieved August 28, 2018, from http://perfilesla.flacso.edu.mx/index.php /perfilesla/article/view/355/309.

Cagigas, A. 2000. "Patriarchy as the source of domestic violence." *Monte Buciero* (5): 307-318. Retrieved August 28, 2018, from https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=206323.

CEPAL. 2018. "Feminicide. Gender Equality Observatory for Latin America and the Caribbean." Retrieved August 28, 2018, from https://oig.cepal.org/es/indicadores/feminicidio.

Connell, R. W. 1995. *Masculinities* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Polity Press. Retrieved from http://www.librarything.com/ work/5346/ reviews/262505.

Cuevas, Y. 2016. "Recommendations for the study of social representations in educational research." *Culture and Social Representations* 11(21): 110–140. Retrieved from http://www.scielo.org.mx/pdf/crs/v11n21/2007-8110-crs-11-21-00109.pdf%0Ahttp://www.culturayrs.org.mx/revista/num21/5Cuevas16.pdf.

Díaz, G. 2009. "Gender violence in Mexico: challenge of government and society" (2). *Encrucijada, Electronic Magazine of the Center for Studies in Public Administration.* Retrieved August 31, 2018, from http://www.revistas.unam. mx/index.php/encrucijada/article/view/58551/51774.

Flores-Palacios, F. 2012. "Social representation and gender: a relationship of common sense." In *Feminist Research. Epistemology, Methodology and Social Representations*. (339–358). México: UNAM CEIICH. Retrieved August 29, 2018, from http://computo.ceiich.unam.mx/webceiich/docs/libro/Investigacion%20Feminista.pdf.

García-Moreno, C. 2000. "Violence against women. Gender and health equity." Harvard Center for Population and Development Studies. Retrieved August 29, 2018, from http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/165836/ 9789275327166.pdf?sequence=1.

Hernández, Y. and Delgado, A. N. 2016. "The role of poverty and exclusion in violence against women in Moa, Cuba." *La Manzana de la Discordia* 9(2): 43-56. Retrieved August 29, 2018, from http://revistas.univalle.edu.co/index.php/la_ manzana_de_la_discordia/article/view/1604.

Ibáñez, T. 2001. *Constructivist Social Psychology*. Mexico: University of Guadalajara. August 29, 2018, from http://www.worldcat.org/title/psicologia-social-construccionista/oclc/70863295/editions?referer=diand editions View=true.

Moscovici, S. 1985. "Comment on Potter and Litton." *British Journal of Psychology* 24 (2): 91-92. Retrieved August 29, from https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8309.1985.tb00665.x.

Moscovici, S. 2000. *Social Representations. Explorations in Social Psychology.* Cambridge: Polity Press. August 29, from https://www.wiley.com/en-us/Social+Representations%3A+Explorations+in+Social+ Psychology -p-9780745622255.

Postigo, I., Vera, T. and Cortés, A. 2016. The macho violence in the light of the interpretations of the news appeared in the news. Latin Social Communication Magazine, 71, 912–939. Retrieved from http://www.revistalatinacs.org/071/paper /1127/47es.html %0ADOI: 10.4185/RLCS-2016-1127.

Proveyer, C. 2008. "Violence is learned*."* Retrieved August 29, 2018, from https://www.alainet.org/es/active/27954.

Proveyer, C. 2014. "Gender violence: Approach from the Cuban reality." *Sexology and Society Magazine* 20 (1). Retrieved August 27, 2018, from http://revsexologiaysociedad.sld.cu/index.php/sexologiaysociedad/ article/view/465/507.

Salas, M. and Pujol, V. 2011. "Male violence. A look from a gender perspective." *Contributions to the Social Sciences*. Retrieved August 30, 2018 from http://www.eumed.net/rev/cccss/12/sppl.htm.

Siqueira, V. 2015. "Gender-based violence: a social phenomenon with an interdisciplinary approach." *Journal of Nursing UFPE* (online) 10(1): 179–184. Federal University of Pernambuco. Retrieved August 30, 2018, from https://periodicos.ufpe.br/revistas/revistaenfermagem/article/view/10936/12233.