

Violence Against Women in Complexo da Maré, Rio de Janeiro

2018

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Introduction

This report outlines the main results from research carried out for the project *Healthy, Secure and Gender Just Cities: Transnational Perspectives on VAWG in Rio de Janeiro and London*, with funding from the Economic and Social Research Council and the Newton Fund, UK. The report focuses on research carried out in Complexo da Maré, Rio de Janeiro, where a survey was undertaken with 801 women, along with 20 interviews with local women who experienced violence; the mapping of 14 organisations that provide support services for women survivors of violence; and seven focus groups involving 65 participants who discussed themes related to violence against women and girls (VAWG).

Research assumptions

- VAWG is understood to be a power relationship exerted in a dynamic manner by both men and women, although unequally.
- VAWG is a multidimensional phenomenon that expresses socially-constructed differences between gender and race, as well as sexual inequality of access to the world of work, and that encompasses both situations of conjugal violence and other forms of VAWG (e.g. police violence, racial discrimination, violence against LGBTQI+ people).
- Both practices of violence and the response to these practices from state agencies and various social groups are influenced by issues of gender as well as by issues of social class, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, amongst other socially-constructed categories.
- The roles imposed on women and men, which have been consolidated over the course of history and reinforced by patriarchal ideologies, further the establishment of a relationship of violence between the sexes, which is a product of socialisation; the social construct of both femininity and masculinity is associated with the phenomenon of gender-based violence.
- The types of violence (e.g. physical, psychological) and the contexts where they manifest (domestic, urban, institutional) result principally from economic, cultural and relational factors.
- Brazilian culture has as its basis a patriarchal matrix that fosters social inequality of access to justice as well as a weak system of protection and assurance of women's rights.
- The prevalence of sexism and gender violence leads some women to blame the victims of violence, thus reproducing the violence that oppresses them.
- Particular characteristics of urban life in Brazil (i.e. violence by armed gangs) contribute to the perpetration of gender-based violence.

Context: the Complexo da Maré

The Maré complex of *favelas* encompasses an area of nearly 4 square kilometres, comprising 16 communities with some 140,000 residents, making up the largest slum complex in Rio de Janeiro - an area larger than 90% of Brazilian towns and cities. Three armed groups are in violent dispute over the control of the territory and daily lives of the residents. The state and federal governments make frequent interventions in the area, under a militarised public security policy, with violent actions that impact directly on residents' civic rights. Between January and July 2017, some 6,000 children had no safe access to schools in Maré for 20 days: there were 40 days of armed confrontations that left 20 people dead, a number greater than the official homicide figure for the complex in 2016 (17 deaths). Police interventions are characterised by arbitrary entries and searches of homes and of the premises of civil society organisations, damage to property, arrest without warrant, and even summary executions: this creates an everyday atmosphere of terror.

A PROFILE OF WOMEN IN MARÉ

About three in five (62%) of the women who were surveyed were born in Rio de Janeiro, and the majority of these (41% of the total) were born in Maré. Most of the women born outside Rio de Janeiro (38%) are from the northeast of Brazil (88% of this subset). In terms of race, nearly half declared themselves to be mixed race, one in three (30%) white, and nearly one fifth (19%) Black. The two main groups of women who reported that they had experienced violence were aged 18-29 (33%) and 30-44 (32%). A key feature of the women who were interviewed was the low level of education, with nearly two fifths (39%) having not completed basic education, one in four (24%) having completed only basic education, and three in ten (30%) having completed secondary education.

VAWG IN MARÉ

Most women (76%) thought that VAWG does occur in Maré, but nearly one in five (18%) were not able to say. A small minority (6%) thought that it does not take place in Maré.

Similarly, a majority of women (72%) thought that VAWG in Maré had increased, whilst one quarter (25%) noticed no change, and a very small minority (3%) thought that it had declined.

As a part of the survey research, women were also able to put forward their own definition of violence. Just over one third (34%) identified violence as physical and psychological abuse. About 15% defined violence as general aggression (with no further specifics); 14% defined violence as a combination of various forms of aggression, violation and ill-treatment; one in ten (10%) gave no definition; 8% identified violence purely as physical aggression; and a smaller group (6%) mentioned urban aspects that linked violence to wider social relations (non-personal).

Almost a third (29%) of women declared in the survey that they had personal experience of violence, but this figure was adjusted upwards during analysis, since an additional 10% (N=81) who had responded "no" to this question subsequently noted in answer to a later question that they had disclosed an experience to somebody else - thus indicating that they did not perceive as violence some of the forms that were defined in the survey. In total, therefore, 43% of women stated that they had experienced gender-based violence.

Of the women interviewed, 17 had experienced multiple and concurrent forms of physical violence and verbal abuse over the course of their lives, predominantly in the domestic sphere, although some did not recognise some forms as constituting violence (e.g. racism, child labour, ill-treatment in childhood). Other forms of violence identified were sexual abuse or rape (9), and ill-treatment in childhood.

Various forms of violence were also identified in the focus groups, such as psychological and physical violence; material deprivation or control by male partners leading to financial dependence; cheating in relationships; disrespectful and offensive treatment of women. Homophobic prejudice emerged as the main cause of violence towards LGBTQI+ people, which was experienced from an early age, and perpetrated by members of their own families. Community leaders and social activists identified violence as being a part of social relations and the result of unequal power relations.

REPORTING VAWG

The survey shows that women mainly turn to their family to reveal their experiences of violence. Nearly two thirds (64%) did not report the violence they experienced because they thought that it was not sufficiently serious. Some women felt confidence in the public protection and justice system; others had none.

During the in-depth interviews and focus groups, apart from the family, religious leaders and the bosses of drug gangs emerged as alternative sources of support to help women deal with intimate partner violence. There were also repeated expressions of distrust towards networks of protection and channels of access to justice, whilst religion emerged as source of protection, although some religious dogmas make it difficult for women to leave perpetrators. Fear and shame were noted in the survey, interviews and focus groups as factors that prevent women from seeking help to deal with violence.

The mapping of service providers revealed that the existing infrastructure for public protection is inadequate, in terms both of the number of services provided and of the number of staff available, and it is also becoming more precarious (e.g. lack of receptionists and cleaners). Service providers noted that women are not aware of the role of different providers, and that often the services on offer do not match the needs, resulting in an unmet demand. Referral services also often lack coordination, and although there are efforts towards providing a more integrated service, what prevails is a 'personal network' between the staff of different providers.

ADDRESSING VAWG

When asked which agents were responsible for change or capable of helping to change society's perception of violence and women's rights, one in three women (30%) answered 'the state/public agencies'; one in five (20%) could not identify whose responsibility it was; one in five women (20%) noted the importance of public debate and awareness-raising about the manifestations of violence and about women's rights. "Everyone" was also a significant response to this question, indicating that violence is an issue that implicates the whole of society in its reproduction and prevention. Around 13% of the women thought that women themselves were responsible for effecting change.

Some recommendations: what is needed

- Policies that go beyond the ‘safe cities’ agenda which tends to focus only on the symptoms of urban violence, rather than on the subjacent multi-causal factors which are rooted in profound gender inequalities.
- More education, health and income-earning opportunities rather than punishment of perpetrators; more policies to address perpetrators, alongside education and prevention of gender-based violence.
- Collective organisation and income generation should be recognised as important ways to bring about the end of the cycle of violence and enable women to earn income to help them support their families and break away from dependence on perpetrators.
- Projects to help women develop skills relevant to the labour market or to income-generating activities, followed by provision of basic information about women’s rights, work, sexual health and family planning, and about existing public service provision.
- Education on human rights, work and gender to foster reflection on gender inequality, the intersections between gender and race and its implications, sexual division of labour, urban and domestic violence, the ‘Maria da Penha Law’¹, social and public participation, mental health, alcohol and drug abuse, and public security.

1 Enacted in 2006, Brazil’s federal law 11340 on domestic and family violence is colloquially known as the ‘Maria de Penha law’ as a tribute to a prominent campaigner for women’s rights and survivor of domestic violence who won a landmark case against Brazil at the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. The international court condemned the Brazilian state for failing to uphold women’s rights to access to justice, protection and compensation, and for a level of widespread inaction and negligence that amounted to state tolerance of gender-based violence and effective impunity for perpetrators. The new law created in response to this case increased maximum sentences from one to three years, established special courts, police stations and shelters, explicitly guarantees the rights of LGBT women, and provides for measures including a police power of arrest while domestic violence is being committed; judicial powers to impose custodial sentences without alternatives; removing perpetrators from the home environment; restraining orders on perpetrators; compulsory attendance at re-education programmes; and more severe sentences for perpetrators of violence against those with special needs. The law is recognised as a turning-point for Brazil, but is acknowledged still to be ineffectively resourced in many areas.

Research impacts

Since 2017, the partnership between the School of Social Work at Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ) and *Casa das Mulheres/Redes da Maré* has been implementing a host of actions, such as provision of out-of-hours social support, running workshops on citizenship rights, socio-legal advice, and individual and family support for women who suffer violence.

The socio-legal team of *Casa das Mulheres* is becoming a convenor of excellence in training, research and outreach on women's rights by UFRJ. Its key role has been to orient its activities towards the civil society organisations based in Complexo da Maré, and towards the defence and evaluation of public policies for the promotion of the human rights of women who experience violence.