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**SHOUTINGS, SCOLDINGS, TALKINGS, AND WHISPERS:  
MOTHERS' RESPONSES TO ARMED ACTORS AND  
MILITARIZATION IN TWO CARACAS BARRIOS**

VERÓNICA ZUBILLAGA and REBECCA HANSON

440

December  
2020

paper



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**SHOUTINGS, SCOLDINGS, TALKINGS, AND WHISPERS:  
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IN TWO CARACAS BARRIOS\***

**Verónica Zubillaga and Rebecca Hanson**

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Working Paper #440 – December 2020**

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\*This article is based on two research projects developed between 2018–2016 and 2009–2012, both generously supported by the Latin American Program of the Open Society Foundations. The paper was made possible thanks to Veronica Zubillaga's stay as a visiting fellow at the Kellogg Institute for International Studies, University of Notre Dame, during the academic year 2018–2019. In particular, she would like to thank Paolo Carozza, Sharon Schierling, Denise Wright, and the Kellogg Institute staff for their warm support. We are very grateful to Kellogg colleagues who read first versions of this paper and gave us generous comments and suggestions: Guillermo Trejo, Ann Mische, and Abby Córdoba; Kellogg colleagues in the frame of the Kellogg Work in Progress series, especially visiting fellows Ben Phillips, Claudio Orrego, Diego Sánchez-Ancochea, Max Goedl, and Victoria Paniagua; colleagues and students from the Kroc-Kellogg Peace, Conflict, Crime and Violence Workshop, especially Guillermo Trejo, Laurie Nathan, and Anibal Pérez-Liñán. We are also very thankful to Alejandro Velasco for his careful reading and suggestions, and to Andrés Antillano, Desmond Arias, Manuel Llorens, and John Souto, with whom we have collaborated on research in Caracas; their ideas are also present in this paper. We can't thank Elizabeth Rankin enough for being such a wonderful editor and benefiting from her extremely careful reading and her always-illuminating comments. Special thanks to our anonymous reviewers at the Kellogg Institute whose critical reviews improved significantly the clarity and quality of our paper. The final writing of this article was also supported by the Ford Foundation. During fieldwork we had much-appreciated support from the organization Caracas Mi Convive. All our special gratitude to Roberto Patiño, Neorelis Muñoz, Iorgina Cumarín, Camila Oropeza, Juan Francisco Mejía, and Santiago García.

## ABSTRACT

How do mothers deal with chronic violence and the constant presence of guns in their neighborhoods? How do they relate to the armed actors who inhabit their neighborhoods? How do they build situated meaning and discursive practices out of their experiences and relationships with armed actors? We compare the experience of women in two poor and working-class neighborhoods in Caracas. La Caracola, with a long history of civic organizations and drug trafficking, suffers regular, extortionate actions by the police. La Piedad has been ravaged by militarized police operations, which have produced a "warfare mode" among the members of organized criminal groups. 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 traditional cultural roles as mothers to perform everyday forms of resistance vis-à-vis the different armed actors that impose their presence in the barrios. 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. In the mothers' daily struggles, dramatic discursive actions—from more openly oppositional, such as shouting, scolding, and talking, to more hidden ones, such as, both "circulating gossip" and "captive gossip" to more helpless ones, such as whispering—are their main resources in the micropolitics of their neighborhoods.

## RESUMEN

¿Cómo afrontan las madres la violencia crónica y la presencia constante de armas de fuego en sus barrios? ¿Cómo se relacionan con los actores armados que habitan en sus vecindarios? ¿Cómo construyen significados y prácticas discursivas a partir de sus experiencias y relaciones con los actores armados? En este artículo comparamos la experiencia de mujeres en dos barrios de sectores populares de Caracas. La Caracola, con una larga trayectoria y presencia de organizaciones cívicas, así como microtráfico de drogas, presenta acciones extorsivas regulares por parte de la policía. La Piedad ha sido devastada por operativos policiales militarizados, que han producido un "modo de guerra" entre los miembros de los grupos criminales organizados. A través de este proyecto etnográfico comparativo pretendemos mostrar cómo, en medio de la depredación perpetrada por el Estado y una presencia abrumadora de armas de fuego en sus vidas, las mujeres utilizan roles culturales tradicionales como el de madres para ejercer formas cotidianas de resistencia frente a los diferentes actores armados que imponen su presencia en los barrios. Nos enfocamos en cómo las mujeres crean y comunican significados; participan en redes sociales con otras mujeres; y emplean diferentes estrategias discursivas en sus relaciones cotidianas con los actores armados. Nos enfocamos las experiencias de mujeres en dos barrios, preguntándonos qué condiciones materiales e históricas hacen posibles las diferentes experiencias. En las luchas diarias de las madres, acciones discursivas dramáticas, desde las más abiertamente opositoras, como gritar, regañar y hablar, hasta otras más ocultas, como los "chismes circulantes" y los "chismes cautivos" hasta las que revelan mayor sujeción, como los susurros — son sus principales recursos en la micropolítica de sus barrios.

On July 13, 2015, “La Piedad,”<sup>1</sup> a densely populated poor and working-class neighborhood on the south periphery of Caracas, awoke at dawn to a sudden siege of warfare. In a spectacular and unexpected military invasion, 14 people died, and more than 200 were detained by the Bolivarian National Guard. Hours later, President Nicolás Maduro announced the new military operation, the fourth in the last five years, 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 an NGO that had recently opened a communal kitchen where local women cooked for barrio children, in the context of the food scarcity that much of the country was experiencing. For the past two years, La Piedad has experienced extensive military interventions and massive police killings. It 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 criminality” 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).<sup>2</sup> In response, local gangs, decided to forge an alliance in order to confront the police, as gangs had in El Salvador.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, with the deterioration of the economy, the Caracas gangs evolved into organized crime groups that engaged in kidnappings and massive car thefts.

From our first visit, what struck us the most was the visibility of the consequences of the ongoing military interventions of the police. In the first conversation we had with the women responsible for cooking, they were bursting with stories, telling us that in the past two years, a military intervention took place every week, on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday. For two years, the officers entered the barrio, hooded and carrying weapons, in groups of 30. They had “a ram to open the doors by force,” women told us. That day, when we left the barrio, the children

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> El Salvador’s Mano Dura (‘Iron Fist’) policies constitute hardline anti-gang programs that have imprisoned massive numbers of people and have “extended the scope of police powers, increased the severity of sentences, and unleashed massive police operations. These plans were accompanied by a discourse that justified the use of excessive force as the fundamental backbone of public security” (Cruz, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> According to José Miguel Cruz (2011), Mano Dura policies in El Salvador resulted in the Maras members reorganizing to respond to the wave of repression; the ability to meet in prison favored preparation and organization for the declared war. Homicide rates increased from 47.3 per one hundred thousand inhabitants in 2002 to 64.7 in 2006, following the start of the Mano Dura Plan in 2003 and the Super-Dura Plan in 2005.

accompanied us down the neighborhood's steep hill, and all the way down, they 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 one of us and other colleagues had done research for the past four years. La Caracola has a long history of civic organizations, which with religious groups, university groups, and local authorities, formed what would become a model of social networking to improve the barrio infrastructure. La Caracola also had a long history of drug trafficking; during the 90s and mid-2000s, the barrio experienced continued armed confrontations between gangs in two neighboring sectors that led to massive killings. It has become well known for the history of the ceasefire pact between women and drug traffickers that took place in 2007 and has been upheld to the present. Women associated with a religious organization first achieved a ceasefire pact with the local drug traffickers in one sector and with young armed men from the neighboring sector, and the women went on to create so-called “peace commissions” to mediate among young armed men. 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.

Through this comparative ethnographic project we aim to show how, in the midst of state-sponsored depredation and an overwhelming presence of guns in their lives, women use their traditional cultural roles as mothers to perform everyday forms of resistance vis-à-vis the different armed actors that impose their presence in the barrio. We will 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.

The goal of this paper is also to contribute to the emerging understanding of urban and armed violence in Latin America that takes into account the perspective of women from the popular sectors and their cultural practices of survival (Gay, 2005; Wilding, 2010; Zubillaga, Llorens and Souto, 2015; Auyero and Kilanski, 2015). Within violent contexts, women are often portrayed as trapped victims with no control over their circumstances (see Aretxaga 1997);

through building knowledge based in women's experiences, we contribute to disrupting these dominant narratives. We aim to enrich the literature of women's forms of participation and power leverage in public domains (Martin, 1990; Rodriguez, 1994), with one of our major contributions being to do this specifically in contexts of criminal violence. We ask: How do mothers deal with chronic violence and the constant presence of guns in their neighborhoods? How do they relate to the armed actors that inhabit their neighborhoods? How do they build situated meaning and discursive practices out of their experiences and relations with armed actors?

The diversity of women's experiences in these two scenarios leads us to better understand their gendered experiences, and in particular their salient role as mothers, intimately linked to the local context and the particular history of each community. The marked influence of armed actors—both state and non-state—in women's daily lives obliges us to interpret the women's actions as eminently related to the type of armed actor with whom they must live. Further, we were struck by the fact that when women give an account of the relationships they have with different armed actors, relationships full of tension and conflict, they related that they are called "old gossipers." This "character" tells us a great deal about the ways in which women relate to armed men. It also emphasizes the importance of daily conversations in the life of the neighborhood and shows the role of women as agents of information flow and of "definitions of reality and identities" (Coates, 1988; Besnier, 2009).

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" or as we say, talking, shouting, and scolding to speak through the coordination of collective action. The dramatic 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 the agreements, to more inconspicuous ways of circulating critical information (Scott, 1990). "Circulating gossip," that plays on and manipulates the identities of armed men, becomes an effective and subtle way to control the



exposure of guns in the neighborhood. How the women take into account which armed actors are present in the neighborhood is also key to our argument.

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 is quite distinct in La Piedad. In their daily lives, women suffer, living 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 negotiation mechanisms. 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. Gossip loses its effectiveness by being restricted only to private conversations and among people in one's extreme confidence. Gossip becomes "captive."

## **CONTEXT AND METHODS**

Our ethnographic research in La Caracola began in November 2009. We found out about the ceasefire pact and were enthusiastic about doing the research, since the government discourse about criminality was already starting to become one of a *Mano Dura*. We wanted to systematically document this community experience consisting of a ceasefire pact and dialogues to counteract the spreading discourses of war. Since 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 to 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 100 best practices of human-settlement improvement worldwide at the United Nations World Conference Habitat II (Baldo 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 rather 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, because the women were working during the day, and we felt safe. We had many encounters with the women in two community religious centers. During our research, we recorded more than a dozen vivid group discussion sessions with the 13 women who had taken part in the ceasefire pact; most of them are 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 ceasefire pact; two of them were sons of the women involved in the ceasefire. 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 ceasefire pact. In 2014 and again in 2017, we initiated a new phase of systematic interviewing. In this last research period, we wanted to study the follow up to the ceasefire 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 a number of 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 are 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 in order that there would be a record of the systematic abuses of the police forces—and that their stories would not be forgotten when the time of justice comes. 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 each other 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 kept a fieldwork diary of each visit; we were able to record some interviews but not others. 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 little 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 men.<sup>4</sup>

### **THEORETICAL APPROACH**

We draw from a perspective that understands cultural practices 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 (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourgois, 1995; Moser and McIllwayne, 2004; McIllwayne and Moser, 2007 ; Wilding, 2010; Auyero and Kilanski, 2015). At the same time, from a situational point of view, we can comprehend women's responses to armed actors as practices resulting from a "creativity of urgency" arising against the imminent risks of death posed by the occurrence of armed invasions and clashes in their daily lives. In this paper we will focus on the fabric of everyday actions in which meanings, discursive resources, dramatic and theatrical efforts, and the series of cultural tools available to these women are put into play (Goffman, 1959; Abu-Lughod, 1990; Swidler, 1995; McFarland, 2004), to manage but also to resist the daily lethal threats in their lives.

This work explicitly engages with the call for a "relational sociology" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Emirbayer, 1997; Mische, 2011). Our relational analysis also derives from the intersection between cultural anthropology, cultural sociology, and literature on crime in Latin America, focusing on the modes of relationships and forms of resistance women employ with the different armed actors with whom they must cohabit, taking into account the leading role of

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<sup>4</sup> 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).

dramatic conversations in everyday life. The paper is also aligned with recent literature on criminality in Latin America that seeks to understand the variability of violence and its different expressions in diverse local contexts of the same city or region (see Wolff, 2015; Arjona, 2016; Arias, 2017; Arias and Barnes, 2017; Antillano, Arias and Zubillaga, 2020).

This literature and concepts such as urban plural orders (Arias and Barnes, 2017) point precisely to the need to come to grips with: the particular local armed dynamics in each barrio, resulting from its history and local geographical conditions; the community organizations and their collective efficacy; the types of illicit economies and armed actors; the particular and situated practices of the police officers; and the historical relationships between neighbors, armed actors, and state officials. In a similar vein, Ana Arjona (2016) invites us to understand the particular social orders that emerge in local realities in civil war contexts related to the history of local communities' organization and the type of relationship established with parastatal armed actors. Indeed, Arjona shows that in areas where there is a tradition of civic organizations and institutions for conflict resolution, communities have a coordinated and joint power of action that allows them to bargain and resist with greater force the order that parastatal actors intend to impose.

These studies aim to reveal the diversity of criminal violence in local contexts in the same city or country and have focused on 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.

Our main contribution in this paper is to show how, in contexts of criminal violence, gendered and communicative practices of agency and resistance vary depending on the community history of civic organizations and the type of presence of state security forces. This research shows how women use their role as mothers strategically to negotiate spaces of power with armed actors, in contexts where civic organizations also provide tools to resist. On the other hand, our study also shows how militarized *Mano Dura* policies disempower women and residents vis-a-vis the armed actors with whom they have to deal in their everyday lives. Women's performance, interaction, and communication in situated contexts are of paramount importance in these relationships.

## TALKING, SCOLDING, SHOUTING, AND WHISPERING: MOTHERS' RESPONSES TO ARMED ACTORS

These two neighborhoods can be described as small-scale societies where 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). In the world of the neighborhood, everyday conversations, gossip that builds or takes down reputations, and the ensuing social responses that stem from that gossip all constitute resources in daily power relations (Pitt-Rivers, 1966; Besnier, 2009).

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 notion of “micropolitics” (2005) 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.<sup>5</sup> 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; Mische, 2011). 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. What is also evident in this research, as we will discuss in the following pages, is that the devastating state military interventions in women's communities significantly reduce these spaces of agency and resistance.

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

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<sup>5</sup> An informal policy developed locally is forged outside the formal structures of political parties, but nonetheless might be involved with these structures (Lister, 2005).

to have influence on the terms of daily coexistence and bargain about the use of weapons in order to achieve spaces free of armed confrontation for their children.

Undoubtedly, our notions of resistance are inspired by the work of James C. Scott (1990), 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. De Certeau's (1984) notion of the "oppositional practices of everyday life" is also instructive here, as its focus is on the social meaning of resistance and everyday practices as spaces of social transformation that can both open and close off political intervention.

To be clear, 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 ceasefire pact; others might alter only the outcome of an immediate situation. 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. .

The metaphor of onstage and off stage will also be fruitful in organizing the different responses women deploy. Both metaphors, from the point of view of the range of resistance strategies—i.e., from the most open and active to the most veiled (Scott, 1985; 1990; McFarland, 2004; Besnier, 2009)—as well as from the dramaturgical point of view—i.e., the scripts, dramatic cultural repertoires, and *mise-en-scenes* (Goffman, 1959; Swidler, 1995)—are useful in particular situations. We will pay special attention to the dramatically situated characters displayed by the women we studied: the figure of the scolding mother; the old gossipers that

shout, on the one hand, and whisper on the other. Also helpful to this analysis has been the more contemporary work of Daniel MacFarland (2004), who draws from Erving Goffman and Victor Turner to study student resistance as social dramas in school settings.

Both barrio communities express the richness and complexity of women's responses and reveal the different forms of agency that women can deploy in armed contexts. Undoubtedly, the militarization of daily life directly reduces the possibilities for women by restricting them to forms of withdrawal and criticism usually more confined to the domain of private **communication.**

### **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-scene of mothers who talk about and negotiate the use of weapons in order to achieve spaces free of armed confrontation for their children, and in doing so, achieve a pact that benefits 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, let's say, 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 Ceasefire Pact**

The ceasefire pact in La Caracola was developed and agreed upon by women from the sectors in conflict and the young gang members, with the support of the man who controlled the local drug market, 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. The mother, crying, whose eldest son had already been murdered, demanded a ceasefire and the end of the ceaseless cycle of revenge. This meeting was a turning point, a key



event on the path to a non-aggression 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. Indeed, they shared a perpetual mourning for the repeated loss of loved ones. 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 ceasefire 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, after agreeing, signed their consent. These rules prescribed, first, that young men would stop consistently provoking each other, 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 (7 women in one sector and 6 in other sector), and each one met every week amongst 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 that later were active in the peace commissions had participated in the Consorsium 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).

We want to stress two elements: first, the use of the role of motherhood as a legitimate power and 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”<sup>6</sup> when talking—and we will see next, shouting—to armed actors, achieving a ceasefire pact that resulted in safer spaces for their families, and at the same time resisting their neighborhood’s hegemonic armed regime (Arjona, 2016).

We should also point out that for many neighbors, the agreements and ceasefire pact seemed to favor the consolidation of the drug business by the man who controlled the local drug market. In spite of 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 in order 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.

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<sup>6</sup> Sampson, R., S. Raudenbush and F. Earls (1997) identify the achievement of collective efficacy as social cohesion among neighbors and willingness to intervene on behalf of the common good. They argue that local participation in voluntary organizations and the existence of informal social control mechanisms are essential elements of collective efficacy. Catuche’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. In a context of chronic disadvantage, this minimal and clandestine collective efficacy does not aim to reduce drug trafficking, indeed the only source of income for poor young men, but to create safer spaces to guarantee life and physical preservation, free circulation through the space, and especially children’s safety

### **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.

Alejandro Moreno characterizes Venezuelan popular culture as profoundly mother-centered, with the influence of a mother on a son exercised throughout their lives (Moreno, 2000). Various cultural studies in Latin America have pointed out the paramount importance of mothers in the lives of young armed men; sometimes she is the only complex figure of affection (Salazar, 1998; Márquez, 1999). 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 mom! The respect that he has, independently of whatever he is, he said: that's my mom, and don't ever mess with her."

Being a mother, with all the dramatic components it entails, 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 ceasefire pact. When Jennifer, on one of the peace commissions, talked about confronting the youths, she said: "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 constitutes the way they express themselves; shouting and talking strongly conveys one's intentions with force. For us, it 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 effort is to hide the fear that appears in these situations. Managing the fear of losing one's life when faced with that possibility becomes a dramaturgical act, as Goffman (1959) states. 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: "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 (Penglase, 2009). 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 even more 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: they were armed no matter what time of the day it was, and they fired their guns or threatened each other with them when arguments burst out, producing panic among the women and children. Like the criminal dominance in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro M. Wolff (2015) describes, "outward display of weapons" facilitated the territorial monopoly of the criminal group.

During the group interviews, the women were very talkative, referring to their experiences with military interventions. Their attitude changed when we had to speak about

armed actors from their barrio. They lowered their voice 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. However, again and again during our conversations, as I mentioned earlier, when there was any episode with guns (guys trying out their guns and firing), the women were terrified. In individual conversations, some dared to speak negatively about armed actors, but still they lowered their voices and never said the name of the leader. They always used expressions like “you know who,” “this person,” “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. Janet, 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 and the space to be able to defend their needs and those of their families. As a result, the 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 primitive 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. Police officers are probably aware that these women can denounce them. Indeed, gossip as a discursive and interactional genre is often gendered as feminine (Martin, 1990; Coates, 1988; Paz, 2009; Besnier, 2009), and this 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; Stross, 1978; Glukman, 1963; Paz, 2009; Besnier, 2009). It has been described as a “classic form of agentic action; one of the most hidden of hidden transcripts; a quintessential tool for political action in private realms. A focus on gossip enables us to understand politics ‘from below,’ particularly from the perspective of those whose voice are rarely heard in public...” (Besnier, 2009:12).

This focus on the importance of gossip in the politics of everyday life is particularly interesting for us in our analyses of the relationships between the women and the armed actors in each community. Furthermore, 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. Like J. Haviland beautifully puts it: gossip trades on a separation between public and private information; it celebrates leakage from one domain to another (Haviland, 1977), with dramatic consequences.

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, as outlined below.

### **Gossip in Circulation**

According to the La Caracola women's narrative, it was the leader of the drug traffickers who said, "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, one of their control strategies to keep the younger men loyal to the ceasefire was the effect that gossip had on their reputations, thus illustrating in practical terms how gossip can be conceptualized as a form of resistance (Scott, 1985). The effectiveness of this strategy depends on the seriousness of its results, 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 micro power 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; this 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 neighbors 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<sup>7</sup>].'"

Gossip appears once 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).

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<sup>7</sup> Echar paja: Slander and denounce.



Gossip is effective in communities where face-to-face relations prevail, therefore significantly influencing the reputation of a targeted person (Peristiany, 1966). Its effectiveness also relates to the promised outcome: the explicit hostility of the rest of the women and neighbors; 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, since gossip only works 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 whistleblower 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 women 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 kind 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.

A clear common-sense knowledge of causal relationship was evident among the women who knew that if they gossiped or talked about the armed men, they would suffer devastating consequences. One grandmother told me: “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.”<sup>8</sup>

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. In this sense, as Polly Wilding (2014) suggests when thinking about the gendered meanings and experiences of violence in Rio de Janeiro, in order 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. 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 (Rodríguez, 1994; Wilding 2014). 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 scuttlebutt could cost their lives. In this sense, in such discursive state of siege, gossip becomes captive because women are afraid of speaking. Men’s armed rule, especially in a time of war with the police, restricts one of the paramount activities of women: conversations and the circulation of information that deals with identities and courses of actions in their community—in other words, gossiping.

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

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<sup>8</sup> The Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela or United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV).

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 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**

In this paper, we have shown how women’s experiences with armed actors in two communities with distinct histories of organizing and police violence shape the resources that these women have access to in attempting to construct a sense of security and fulfill the expectations of “good” mothers: protecting their children.

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 ceasefire pact. With a long history of social collaboration and development of support networks, La Caracola represents the case for 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 (Martin, 1990).

The experience of La Caracola coheres with recent literature focused on the relationships between armed actors and their local communities. As we pointed out earlier, Ana Arjona discusses the diverse social orders emerging in different regions during the Colombian civil war, writing, "communities with legitimate and effective institutions are likely to be both willing and able to resist" rebels' armed dominance (Arjona, 2016:63). In this sense, she points out, "civilians have bargaining power because they can threaten rebels with collective resistance." Yet, we must keep in mind that resistance is always gendered. The similarity we want to highlight is the weight of the long-standing traditions of local organizations that provided women with the narratives, the experiences of coordination, and the possibilities to imagine alternative outcomes to their realities. These traditions helped the women of La Caracola 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 in which police violence breaks apart community relationships and produces disorganization within neighborhoods, weakening collective efficacy. The presence of both state and non-state armed actors shapes women's survival strategies, as we have argued here, 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.

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. In this paper we have sought to highlight the gendered dynamics of violence as well as responses to it. Mothers' struggles remain anonymous struggles, where dramatic discursive actions such as shouting, scolding, talking, and gossiping are their main resources in the micropolitics of their neighborhoods.

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