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The power of violence against women: fictitious inclusion, actual exclusion

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Numbers, stories and inequality

On April 18, 2010, one of the most shocking femicides in Venezuela was perpetrated. Boxer Edwin "Inca" Valero killed his wife, Jennifer Carolina Viera Finol[1]. Later in his detention cell, the famous athlete committed suicide. Eleven years later, on April 19, 2021, a loud wave of voices emerged among Venezuelan social networks. With the hashtag #Yosítecreo[2], Venezuelan women from different parts of the world began to denounce the harassment, sexual abuse and violent situations that they had suffered at the hands of men in the public arena. One of the accused, the Caracas writer Willy McKey, died when he leaped from the 9th floor of a building in Buenos Aires. A cycle was thus repeated: the victims and the debate fell into the background when the aggressor took his own life.

1 https://www.europapress.es/internacional/noticia-examen-psiquiatrico-revela-boxeador-inca-tenia-personalidad-inestable-impulsiva-20100422081046.html

2 https://www.washingtonpost.com/es/post-opinion/2021/05/12/venezuela-yo-te-creo-violencia-genero-feminismo-me-too/

This article starts off with extreme expressions of violence against women to lead the way into politics. We understand that all types of violence directed against women are themselves a form of exercising power and are always a form of belittlement of women with the purpose of disciplining them; they also seek to subdue men who resist normative masculinity. Therefore, it is not surprising that political violence appears as a determining obstacle for women. María Rojas Valverde (2012) suggests that this violence is as dissimilar as it is perverse in its daily expressions, which range from harassment to femicide (Flores, 2020).

Has Venezuelan society moved forward since 2010 to 2021?

The first two, drastic examples –each, by the way, linked in one way or another to the country›s political poles– are relevant because violence against women –which contemplates femicide as one of its most extreme expressions– must be understood from a comprehensive perspective. The bottom line is that they share a starting point: power and the way it is conceived.

Pre-existing disparities furthermore grew during the COVID-19 pandemic, according to the **2020 Global Gender Gap Report**[3]. The index analyzes indicators in areas such as economic participation and opportunities, political participation, education and health, and survival. In the edition published in March 2021, preliminary data suggest that the health emergency and

3 The *World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report* was first presented in 2006 to measure the magnitude of the gap between women and men in terms of health, education, economy and political indicators, considering the following areas: (1) Economic participation and opportunity: salaries, participation and highly skilled employment, (2) Education: access to basic and higher levels of education, (3) Political participation: representation in decision-making structures, and (4) Health and survival: life expectancy and male-female ratio (http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2021.pdf).

the corresponding economic recession have affected women more than men, partially reopening gaps that had already been closed. The findings indicate that the worldwide average distance completed towards reaching parity stands at 68%, which represents a decline compared to the previous report (-0.6 percentage points). These figures are mainly driven by a decrease in the results of large countries. If it continues its current trajectory, it would take 135.6 years to close the gender gap across the entire world. Also, the report found that the gender gap in terms of political empowerment remains the largest of the four gaps analyzed, reaching a scarce 22% of fulfillment to date, having increased from the previous report by 2.4 percentage points.

With an index of 0.699 (the closer to 0, the larger the gap), Venezuela is located in position 91 out of a total of 156 countries analyzed, scoring lower than 21 countries in the region including Nicaragua, Bolivia, Peru, Colombia, far behind African nations such as Namibia, and below Zimbabwe and Mozambique. Iceland, Finland and Norway occupy the top three positions and yet none of these nations have achieved a score of 1.

A gender gap is the distance between men and women in terms of access to political participation, resources, education and other factors that guarantee the full enjoyment of their rights.

In the case of Venezuela, a score of 0.69 means that women have approximately 29% fewer opportunities than men.

Disaggregated by area, the gender gap identified in political empowerment in Venezuela is almost 80%, reaching a score of 0.199. Its best performance was found in the health sector with 0.980, which places it among the first in the group of countries analyzed.

"Pre-existing gender gaps have amplified the crisis asymmetrically between men and women, even when women have been at the frontlines of managing the crisis as essential workers. The hardest hit sectors by lockdowns and rapid digitalization are those where women are more frequently employed. Combined with the additional pressures of providing care in the home, the crisis has halted progress toward gender parity in several economies and industries", states WEF's report.

This scenario is conducive to generating situations of violence and micro-violence, especially when there is such a notable exclusion in the political arena.

"Violence against women is the expression of a patriarchal system of power. That is why it occurs not only in the sphere of the family but also in politics, in companies: because they are the spaces for decision-making. If they are understood as zero-sum spaces, then it results in violence, which can range from harassment to micro-sexism –such as being laughed at, being the subject of memes, not being heard, getting interrupted..." sums up Susana Reina[4].

#Yosítecreo has generated public conversations filled with reactions, resistance and especially the re-victimization of the complainants, as well as the political use of the questions raised. This leads us to think that there has been no progress in terms of gender stereotypes or prejudices in society. This calls for a public discussion, with the support of organizations that have experience working on these issues.

4 I consulted Susana Reina on this matter. She helped me build definitions based on Gender Theory. Reina is the founder of Feminismo Inc. (https://feminismoinc.org).

The public debate on this matter has seemed to lag behind in our country, I presume, due to the fact that social leaders and advocates have focused on other problems, that their voices and warnings are not heard en masse, and because one of the traps of polarization is to misrepresent fundamental issues that aim towards defending human rights, and then favor these according to political tendencies,–e.g. equal marriage, abortion, among others.

A basic expression of these manipulations occurs with the inclusive language accepted by the Real Academia Española de la Lengua. Once used by Chavismo actors, it creates apprehensions in other sectors. While the rest of Latin America debates the uses of *todes*[5], and the conversation extends to how to refer to non-binary definitions, Venezuela is still immersed in a Byzantine debate about using both feminine and masculine articles and grammatical endings associated with the visibility of binary opposites.

This power and its exercise does not have an ideological –left or right– dimension. If organizations of different tendencies can agree on something, it is on the fact that the treatment of women is influenced by a lack of equity. While some cases border on a pseudo-compassionate paternalism, others express plain denialism.

Disqualifying a priori a conception of power that values a woman›s life in a different way, or ignoring that this logic affects the exercise of rights, even if there is a favorable legislative framework, delays a discussion that is necessary in Venezuela.

5 A gender neutral alternative to the Spanish word for "all", "todos" (masc) or "todas" (fem).

Fictitious inclusion

One aspect of the exercise of violence against women is the instrumentalization of females to make people believe that there is a process of inclusion, such as assigning a certain number of them to decision-making positions. Evangelina García Prince refers to this as subordinate inclusion[6], which in practice is a real form of exclusion:

> The exclusion suffered by Venezuelan women in the public space becomes, mimetically, a **subordinate inclusion**, which in practice is a ***fictitious inclusion***, equivalent to **actual exclusion**, not from the system itself, because it is within the political system, but of the decisive positions and processes that define democratic public and political life.
>
> The strategies that the structures of the public and political world use to give the subordinate inclusion of women the appearance of true inclusion are varied; strategies that have an eminently symbolic nature, aimed at creating inclusion solutions for women that appear politically correct and that preserve the supremacy, values, criteria and practices of the dominant androcentric gender order. They are inclusion practices that could be classified as postmodern inspiration due to their apparent nature and the emphasis placed on political correctness: changes in language that become fairly gender inclusive, such as that used in the Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, the creation of spaces for women yet with no capacity to influence political decisions, tokenism to lead to believe that they are included,

6 La participación política de las mujeres en Venezuela: Situación actual y estrategias para su ampliación (https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/caracas/09154.pdf).

> the increase in the female presence in insignificant or expendable positions and spaces in a time of crisis or whose disappearance does not affect the real stability of the organizations" (own translation).

The inequality in the political participation of Venezuelan women means that, by January 2021, our country occupies the 90th place in the world ranking of political participation of women in parliaments, with 22% of women in the National Assembly.

Mitzy Flores[7], researcher, observes the patriarchal imaginaries still remnant in political parties, as well as in society's beliefs, that hinder the visibility and effective participation of women in all spaces. Together with women's diminished economic capacity to finance their own candidacies, this favors the emergence of men for candidacies, further excluding women.

Low representation in the spheres of political organizations also takes place in a country that measures women who exercise a public function not by their performance, but by their gender. We have seen a pattern of defamation and verbal abuse and assaults on women of different tendencies that refer to their physical characteristics.

At different levels of violence, there have been arbitrary arrests and human rights violations of female political prisoners. Foro Penal's lawyer, Gonzalo Himiob, in an April 2021 report, noted that despite the fact that female political prisoners are still much less in number than their male counterparts, repression

7 La violencia política contra las mujeres en Venezuela. Un fenómeno creciente (https://www.otrasvoceseneducacion.org/archivos/335474).

has doubled. He observed there are now twice as many women imprisoned for political reasons than at the beginning of 2020[8].

Of 19 political prisoners, 84% have been tortured and ill-treated. 17 of them are accused of treason to the homeland. One of them, Emirlendris Carolina Benítez, was pregnant at the time of her arrest. She suffered a miscarriage. She was detained after she was linked, via her husband, to the alleged drone attack on Nicolás Maduro in August 2018.

The Organic Law[9] on the right of women to a life free of violence contemplates 21 types of violence, but none refers to political violence. In contrast, Bolivia's Law 243[10], enacted in 2012, defines harassment and political violence.

- **Political harassment**: the act or set of acts of pressure, persecution, harassment or threats, committed by a person or group of persons, directly or through third parties, against women candidates, elected, appointed or exercising a political-public function, or against their families, with the purpose of shortening, suspending, preventing or restricting them from fulfilling the functions inherent to their position, or of inducing or forcing them to carry out, against their will, an action or to incur in an omission in

8 Mujeres presas políticas en Venezuela (https://www.observatorionacionalddhh.com/2021/04/informe-de-mujeres-presas-politicas-en-venezuela/).

9 Ley orgánica sobre el derecho de las mujeres a una vida libre de violencia (https://oig.cepal.org/sites/default/files/2014_ven_feminicidio_ley_organica_sobre_derecho_de_mujeres_a_una_vida_libre_de_violencia_25_11_14-1.pdf).

10 Ley contra el acoso y violencia política hacia las mujeres (http://www.coordinadoradelamujer.org.bo/observatorio/archivos/marco/2012_BOL_Ley243_346.pdf).

the fulfillment of their functions or in the exercise of their rights.

- **Political violence**: the actions, behaviors and/or physical, psychological and sexual forms of aggression, committed by a person or a group of persons, directly or through third parties, against women candidates, elected, appointed or exercising a political-public function, or against their families, with the purpose of shortening, suspending, preventing or restricting them from fulfilling the functions inherent to their positions, or of inducing or forcing them to carry out, against their will, an action or to incur in an omisison in the fulfillment of their functions or in the exercise of their rights.

I am sure that, to anyone aware of the contemporary political scene in Venezuela reading these definitions, some emblematic cases come to mind. For instance, Judge Afiuni and leader María Corina Machado have both been violated in their exercise of political-public functions.

Defining these concepts is not easy. There are still international debates which seek to review them. According to more general parameters, political violence can constitute a violation of human rights.

There are two definitions that I think can contribute to the discussion:

Krook[11] argues that any act of violence against a female politician is an act of political violence based on gender. According

11 Género y violencia política en América latina. Conceptos, debates y soluciones (http://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1665-20372016000100127).

o the author, it includes any "physical and/or psychological aggression exerted by partisan leaders and other political actors, to resist the presence of women in public life". And even though each act is directed to a specific woman, "these actions are directed against all women, in an attempt to preserve politics under male dominance".

What can be done?

The definitions here mentioned have been contested. However, these disagreements are usually outlined to avoid the substantive debate that allows us to move forward and seek strategies and promote public policies that guarantee the real protection of women›s rights. It creates an obstacle in understanding that this issue is a matter of human rights, that we live in a sexist, patriarcal society, and that the presence of women does not guarantee an integral approach which focuses on inequalities, asymmetries and intersectionalities of a matter of impact not only in Venezuela but across borders.

Progress has been made in the region, but has not yet reached our country. Bolivian Law 243 is considered a fundamental precedent; Argentina recently approved a law legalizing the right of women to terminate their pregnancies; in Mexico, violence against women is widely discussed and researched. Venezuela has had a feminist movement, which in the 1980s achieved victories for the non-partisan approach to these issues. Venezuelan feminist voices nowadays seem to be less heard, not because they are lacking, but instead because Venezuelan society is not really paying the attention this topic deserves.

One of the necessary steps is to broaden the argued debate on what the current situation is, check how our biases affect the way we perceive violence against women, verify if legal instruments

have really met their objectives or what the status on the provisions that contemplate such norms is.

It is also important to encourage the participation of women in popularly elected positions at electoral time. This is due to the historical debt that there is with equity and the alternation that implies 50% of female candidacies, a proposal that was excluded from the constitutional amendment. Another factor I consider to be vital is the training of journalists in the emerging digital and other traditional media so as not only to raise awareness about violence against women, but also that the organizations that work in this field can have spaces to amplify their messages and actions in the media.

If the life of Jennifer, as well as those of the 256[12] women murdered in 2020, are worthless, then so are the many others in different conditions, no matter how much we want to believe that we are protected by some rights or by our particular living situation, or how we've normalized the micro-violences we all live under believing them to not be as important or widespread as they really are.

12 Monitoreos de femicidios (https://cepaz.org/documentos_informes/monitoreo-de-femicidios-mayo-2021/).

Conclusion

The fourteenth issue of *Democratización* comes to an end with the compilation of five articles that show how Venezuelan women have been opening spaces in society –and what is still to be done– to achieve equal conditions that allow their inclusion in public life and the end of serious injustices such as gender violence.

In the precarious social, political and economic context in which Venezuela finds itself, talking about feminism, gender equality, violence against women and women's participation in politics is not only a necessary act, but an indispensable one. The purpose of this issue is to contribute to the debate that is increasingly present in our society.

With this in mind, there are three ideas that can summarize and conclude this issue:

1. These texts reveal figures of inequality and violence against women. In this sense, we can conclude that the road ahead is still long and that we must continue working day by day for a more equitable and just society.

2. The fight must not be solitary or individual. We must work to join forces, to make our struggle visible, and to make both men and women aware of what we have achieved and what we want to achieve.

3. We must not be afraid to raise our voices, to express our opinions, to participate and to seize. There are many women in our democratic history. Their example and their struggle have helped to plow the field so that new

generations of women can have more rights and spaces for participation. Like Gloria Lizárraga de Capriles, let's not be afraid to take on new challenges, no matter how big.

4. Women must be an example and a sisterhood. An example for all those girls who are born, who grow up and who have big dreams every day so that they see in us the will, empathy, power, responsibility and courage that inspire and encourage them to fulfill their dreams. And a sisterhood, so that we help each other grow, supporting each other in whatever field we work in, as Adriana Boersner Herrera, Maryhen Jiménez and María Corina Muskus do with the 101 women who are part of the Venezuelan Investigan network.

5. And finally, in the words of Paola Bautista de Alemán, let us embrace our femininity and the benefits of our gender, turning them into an engine that drives us to continue fighting, breaking through and taking down barriers that exist in our society, because “it is wonderful to be a woman”.