



***“It’s as if you don’t know, because you don’t do anything about it”:* gender and violence in El Salvador**

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1. Feldman, writing on political violence in Northern Ireland, stresses that violence is formative, affecting not only the development of individual and collective identity but also how individuals and

SUMMARY: *This paper explores how gendered violence in El Salvador continues to be minimized within public and private discourse. Through an examination of social understandings and reactions to violence, based on qualitative research, the paper argues that gendered violence remains an issue sidelined from mainstream social and political debates. In a society where the threshold for tolerating violence is very high, gendered violence stands out as an issue which, to a great degree, has become normalized as a central element of gender relations. This is borne out by the scant attention paid to issues of gender in both policy proposals and debates on violence.*

I. INTRODUCTION

THERE IS A long history of violence in El Salvador, a country where state terror and violence have both characterized the relations between the state and society and shaped the formation and reproduction of society itself.⁽¹⁾ Exposure to and the exercise of violence have been central, if highly harmful, forces in the lives of the men and women whose life histories inform this paper.⁽²⁾

In 1992, the Chapultepec Peace Agreement was signed between the left-wing FMLN and the government, bringing to an end a very brutal civil war that had claimed the lives of more than 80,000 men, women and children and had devastating effects on the country’s development. More than a decade since the formal cessation of the political conflict, El Salvador remains one of the most unequal societies in the world, measuring 0.54 on the GINI index and with more than 40 per cent of its population living in poverty.⁽³⁾ Politically, the society remains extremely polarized, with both the left and the right being regarded as the most extreme in the region.⁽⁴⁾ Random criminal violence and highly visible gang activity have contributed to a situation where fear and insecurity still characterize everyday life for many citizens. The war may have ended, but social and political relations remain characterized by what Taussig calls “terror as usual”.⁽⁵⁾ This exhibits itself through a sharp rise in street crime, a growing gang culture and high levels of violence in the private realm. Data from research undertaken during the 1990s indicate that between 6,000 and 8,000 murders occur each year in El Salvador, a country with just over 6 million inhabitants. This recorded average murder rate more than doubled between 1991 (43.5 per 100,000 inhabitants) and 1994 (over 100 per 100,000 inhabitants).⁽⁶⁾

Many respondents in the study on which this paper is based – both men and women – expressed nostalgia for past times, when all was “peaceful” (*tranquilo*) in their communities. At the same time, they spoke about episodes of very brutal violence – high levels of sexual and domestic violence, as well as child abuse. One group of men, participants in a focus group in El Boulevard, a marginal community in Greater San Salvador, associated the “arrival” of violence with the formation of the gang within the community in 1992.⁽⁷⁾ Interestingly, the war also ended in 1992. This raises questions about memory, the historicity of violence, and the meanings that individuals and communities ascribe to different types of violence in their lives. Importantly, it also points to the existence of wider social discourses that normalize certain types of violence, namely domestic violence and child abuse. Violence appears so enmeshed in the everyday that this affects the capacity of individuals and communities to recognize certain acts as violent. It is precisely how this process of recognition – or indeed, to borrow from Bourdieu, misrecognition⁽⁸⁾ – affects social reactions and ensuing levels of tolerance, or what is deemed to be “acceptable” violence, that is discussed in this article.

First, I consider how gender is perceived in the context of El Salvador, beginning with a brief introduction to the context of the research and to the multiple meanings that the research participants ascribed to violence. One of the most notable aspects of popular understandings of violence relates to the separation of the public and private spheres. This division of everyday life into two distinct areas has been the subject of much feminist debate, and continues to shape how individuals and communities perceive social reality.⁽⁹⁾ Within the context of this research, the continued tendency to identify domestic violence as an issue belonging to the private sphere appeared to be linked to a continued tolerance of this widespread social problem.

Then I consider how gendered violence is informed and reproduced through the construction of male identities that are based on the domination of women and children. This leads us to a discussion of sexual violence, perhaps the most “symbolic expression of male power”,⁽¹⁰⁾ and an examination of popular attitudes that minimize and invalidate the violence of rape. I also introduce some of the key policy debates on violence in El Salvador, highlighting in particular how domestic violence remains sidelined from debates on citizen/public security.

II. THE CONTEXT: RESEARCHING VIOLENCE IN EL SALVADOR

SCHEPER-HUGHES AND BOURGOIS argue that key to understanding violence is the recognition that it is invariably mediated by an expressed or implicit dichotomy between legitimate and illegitimate.⁽¹¹⁾ Empirical data from El Salvador and a gendered analysis presented in this article confirm that everyday reality is much more complex. There is no uniform checklist for what constitutes violence.⁽¹²⁾ Its meanings are both temporal and context-specific, although common patterns can be identified throughout time and within regions. Indeed, often it is what is not said about violence that is informative, as much as what is said.⁽¹³⁾ The UNDP representative in El Salvador, Bruno Moro,⁽¹⁴⁾ has argued that violence is the “central thread” of social and political relations in El Salvador. Unpicking this “central thread” from the tapestries of individual lives is not a straightforward endeavour, on either a theoretical or a practical level.

groups interact with their social and physical environment. See Feldman, Allen (1991), *Formations of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

2. This paper is based on my doctoral research carried out in two low-income urban communities in Greater San Salvador, namely La Vía and El Boulevard. It also draws on interviews and participatory workshops conducted in a self-help group for men convicted of domestic violence and in a prison in a town in the eastern part of El Salvador.

3. UNDP (2001), *Human Development Report: El Salvador*, UNDP, San Salvador. The GINI index is used to measure inequality based on per capita income. The global average is 0.4 and the average for Latin America is 0.47

4. Cruz, José Miguel (2003a), “Political parties in El Salvador, 2003”, paper presented at El Salvador seminar, St Anthony’s College, Oxford, May 2003.

5. Taussig, Michael (1984), “Culture of terror – face of death: Roger Casement’s Putumayo report and the explanation of torture”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* Vol 26, No 1, pages 467–497.

6. Cruz, José Miguel (2003b), “Violence, insecurity and legitimacy in post-war Central American countries”, MSc dissertation, St Anthony’s College, Oxford, citing de Mesquita Neto, Paulo (2002), “Crime, Violence, and Democracy in Latin America”, paper presented in the conference, *Integration in the Americas*, Albuquerque, New Mexico, April 5, 2002, page 19. These levels are very high; on a global scale, more than ten murders per 100,000 inhabitants is judged

extremely violent (see Ramos, Carlos Guillermo (2000), page 9 "Marginalización, Exclusion Social y Violencia" in *Violencia en una Sociedad en Transición: Ensayos*, PNUD/UNDP San Salvador. Although these figures have since been questioned as a result of problems in gathering official statistics, El Salvador is still regarded as one of the most violent countries in the world (see reference 4).

7. Hume, P M (2003), "Meanings, myths and realities: gender and violence in El Salvador", PhD thesis, University of Liverpool, UK.

8. This notion of "misrecognition" is informed by Bourdieu's exploration of "symbolic violence", in which he questions individual and societal capacity to recognize certain acts as violent because they are perceived as being part of the order of things. He identifies male domination as the paradigmatic form of symbolic violence, arguing that gender inequalities are so embedded in the fabric of society that they are seen as normal. See Bourdieu, Pierre (2001), *Masculine Domination*, Polity Press, Cambridge, UK.

9. Feminist scholarship has endeavoured to stress that, historically, the division between the public and private realms has bolstered inequalities within gender relations by concealing, and even rendering invisible, the inequalities and sexual politics of private existence. See, for example, Craske, Nikki (1999) *Women and Politics in Latin America*, Polity Press, Cambridge; also Cubbitt, Tessa and Helen Greenslade (1997), "Public and private spheres: the end of dichotomy" in Dore, Elizabeth (editor), *Gender Politics in Latin America: Debates in Theory and Practice*, Monthly Review

Throughout the course of my fieldwork, when confronted with very brutal episodes of violence, I often found my understanding of and reactions to violence to be at odds with those of the research participants. This demonstrated the myriad understandings of the phenomenon, but also alerted me to socially constructed levels of "acceptable" violence. For example, I listened to women's and men's stories of *cinchazos* (beating with a belt) and *leñazos* (beating with a piece of wood) that were commonly employed to *corregir* (correct) and *castigar* (punish). I heard women's accounts of repeated abuse by their partners, and witnessed children being beaten in communities. The depth of my reactions contrasted with the apparent acceptance displayed by the research participants, who seemed to treat these events as normal.⁽¹⁵⁾ This contrasted dramatically with their reactions to other forms of violence, such as gang violence. Indeed, when asked how to resolve the gang problem in his community, one leader responded: "...kill them, attack them at the roots and kill them all" (Enrique, 34 years old, El Boulevard). Such attitudes are not uncommon in El Salvador. The IUDOP/ACTIVA⁽¹⁶⁾ survey on cultural norms and attitudes towards violence found that 46.6 per cent of respondents would "understand" another person/group killing *gente indeseable* (undesirable people). In this situation, where violence is an important element of everyday social interaction, questions must be asked about when violence becomes unacceptable. It is important to make explicit the fact that my reactions as an outsider to individual narratives will be distinct from the reactions of those who have lived through the violence that informs this analysis. While I am committed to listening to their voices, I am also interested in how these voices have been moulded by, and how they might reflect, other social and cultural discourses, namely those that inform gendered patterns of behaviour.

Most of the research that informs this article was conducted in one low-income community in the municipality of Soyapango in Greater San Salvador, which I call El Boulevard. I also carried out interviews in another community in the same municipal jurisdiction, La Vía, in a state-sponsored self-help group for men who had been convicted of domestic violence, as well as conducting limited research in a prison.⁽¹⁷⁾ In addition, I consulted policy makers, academics and organizations such as the PNC (National Civil Police) that worked in the area of violence prevention and rehabilitation. The different research locations and the range of interviewees have offered me a variety of perspectives. Although I do not try to make comparisons between them, together they begin to form the basis of what constructs and authorizes definitions of violence in El Salvador. I endeavour to look at contradictions both within and between narratives, and the linkages with wider social processes, arguing that the process of remembering and defining violence is shaped by dominant cultural myths and a gendered reality. I question popular understandings of violence throughout. In so doing, I am not negating individual perceptions of people's lived past, merely unpacking the contradictions that these narratives expose, and exploring their relationship with the wider social discourse of gender roles.

III. UNDERSTANDING VIOLENCE: GRADING PUBLIC AND PRIVATE

POPULAR UNDERSTANDINGS OF violence are informed by myths and "powerful fictions" that serve to minimize or, indeed, negate the validity of individual experience.⁽¹⁸⁾ This is particularly true for those groups that

are structurally weak in society, such as women, children and the elderly, whose experiences are often ignored in analyses of violence. Recognizing the processes through which violence is awarded significance within individual and social narratives on violence is fundamental to understanding the power relations that produce and legitimate violent behaviours. Torres-Rivas speaks of a “conspiratorial silence” in relation to political violence in the region,⁽¹⁹⁾ however, nowhere would this silence seem more evident than in attitudes towards gendered violence, where strict distinctions between “public” and “private” spaces serve to render invisible much of women’s victimization.

It would be erroneous to suggest that there is little public awareness of the problems of “private” violence. Individuals in the communities all agreed that domestic violence was widespread: “...it is rare the home that is not affected by this [domestic violence]” (participants in focus group, El Boulevard, 2 June 2003). Strict notions of “privacy” are not possible in the context of these communities. The walls are thin and houses are very close together. Nevertheless, its effects appear to be minimized in comparison to the effects of other expressions of violence of a more “public” nature, by a tacit acceptance of its perceived normality. Margarita (32 years old, La Vía) reasoned that it was wrong for a man to hit a woman, “...except in cases of infidelity”, binding notions of appropriate behaviour for women with acceptable violence.⁽²⁰⁾ Alfonso (18 years old, La Vía) concluded that his experiences of violence as a child (including repeated physical and psychological abuse) were “...neither good nor bad, just normal.” (He narrated episodes of extreme violence by his grandmother that included, on one occasion, her electrocuting him with a light cable; he also suffered bullying from the local gang and his elder brothers.) He spoke openly about beating his partner yet, at the same time, he was critical of a local gang that had broken into his house and beaten her because “...women can’t handle [violence] (la mujer no aguanta)”. This differentiation between his use of violence against his partner and the gang’s is important, and goes to the core of gendered power relations. The glaring discrepancy in his interpretation of the two acts raises huge questions about the accepted use of force, by whom and towards whom. Does the fact that she is a woman and his partner give him some sort of right to beat her that others do not have?

This situation is further affected by levels of simmering violence in the two communities under study, where everyday life is marked by violent conflict between neighbours. According to one woman in a focus group from La Vía: “We are afraid to call the police because [the neighbours] might see you and thump you” (La Vía, 02 April 2002). One interviewee, María Dolores (46 years old, El Boulevard) was beaten by her husband for being “nosy” (*metida*) when she intervened to protect her sister, whose abusive partner was beating her with a hammer on the street. The violence against her sibling occurred in a public space, yet she was “punished” for interfering in a “private” matter.

Indeed, Enrique (34 years old, also from El Boulevard) said that men in his community threaten to report their partners to the gang, to dissuade them from contacting the authorities. Women are expected to maintain a strict silence with regard to men’s use of violence and, at the same time, are held responsible for ongoing violence because they remain in the violent relationship. He explains: “It’s as if you don’t even know because you do nothing. I mean you don’t want to have problems with your neighbour. Everyone says, if he hits his wife, why doesn’t she leave him? That’s what we say, why doesn’t she leave him?”

Press, New York, pages 52–64; also de Barbieri, M Teresita (1991), “Los ámbitos de acción de las mujeres”, *Revista Mexicana de Sociología* Year LIII, No 1, Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales, UNAM, Mexico DF, pages 203–224; and Pateman, Carol (1987), “Feminist critiques of the public/private dichotomy” in Benn, S and G Gaus (editors), *Public and Private in Social Life*, St Martin’s Press, London, page 284. Pateman suggests that the private sphere or domestic realm, normally the site of much of women’s activity, has been the “natural subordinate”. Behaviours vary from public to private, and our way of seeing the world can be mediated by the distinction made between these two spheres. It is not that the distinction mirrors reality, rather, it is that it has shaped how we understand and naturalize the gendered oppression that characterizes much of social reality.

10. Segal, Lynne (1997), *Slow Motion: Changing Masculinities, Changing Men*, Virago, London, second edition, page 233.

11. Scheper-Hughes, Nancy and Philippe Bourgois (2003), *Violence in War and Peace: An Anthology*, Blackwell Publishing, London.

12. See reference 11.

13. Nordstrom, Carolyn (1997), *A Different Kind of War Story*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia.

14. Bruno Moro (2000), “Introducción” in *Violencia en una Sociedad en Transición: Ensayos*, PNUD/UNDP, San Salvador.

15. The use of the term “normal” is problematic. By “normal”, I am referring to both the frequency of violence and the fact that certain types of violence are so accepted within society that they can readily be

explained and/or justified.
16. IUDOP (1999), "Normas culturales y actitudes sobre la violencia: estudio ACTIVA", UCA, San Salvador.

17. These two communities also form part of a larger study carried out by Savenije and Andrade-Eckhoff on violence and social exclusion in San Salvador. Pseudonyms have been used throughout. See Savenije, Wim and Katherine Andrade-Eckhoff (editors) (2003), *Conviviendo en la Orilla: Violencia y Exclusión Social en el Área Metropolitana de San Salvador*, FLACSO, San Salvador.

18. Muncie, John and Eugene McLaughlin (editors) (2002), *The Problem of Crime*, Sage, London and Open University Press, second edition.

19. Torres-Rivas, Edelberto (1999), "Epilogue: notes on terror, violence, fear and democracy", in Kooning, Kees and Dirk Kruijtt (editors), *Societies of Fear: The Legacy of Civil War, Violence and Terror in Latin America*, Zed Books, London, pages 285–300.

20. A recent survey in El Salvador found that 32.7 per cent of men believed that: "A man can punish a woman if she is unfaithful to him." Half of the adult men interviewed accepted that women's infidelity was more serious than men's. See Orellana, Víctor Antonio and Rubí Esmeralda Arana (2003), "El Salvador: masculinidad y factores socioculturales asociados a la paternidad", UNFPA, San Salvador, page 88.

21. Jimeno, M (2002), "Cultura y violencia", paper presented at UNDP permanent seminar on violence in a transitional society, San Salvador, 22 February 2003.

22. See reference 8, Bourdieu (2001).

Few men in the self-help group recognized their use of violence as the reason for having to attend the weekly sessions. Indeed, many blamed their partners for reporting them to the authorities: "It is her fault that I am here" (Don Alonso, 8 November 2001). Another participant in the self-help group offered an explanation for murdering his wife, alleging that he had found her with another man. His explanation can be seen as an attempt to extract some kind of empathy from the other men, as if they would "understand" his actions in light of his wife's alleged infidelity. So-called "crimes of passion" have been romanticized throughout history, obscuring the very real violence of the act.⁽²¹⁾ In the face of intimidation and threats, women's recourse to justice is highly restricted yet, as suggested above, men can openly call on other social groups to silence women who are effectively defending their rights. The separation of "public" and "private" appears key to the interpretation of violence within the research group, with the enforced silencing of private expressions being common. However, data highlight the fact that gendered violence occurs in both public and private spaces; it is the cultural norms surrounding gendered behaviour that minimizes and naturalizes what is seen as "private" violence.⁽²²⁾ The distinction, therefore, can be understood as ideological and not spatial.

IV. CONSTRUCTING VIOLENT GENDERED IDENTITIES

THE PROCESS BY which men and women are socialized inculcates a series of values that award significance to traditional notions of manliness and femininity. For women, appropriate behaviours may place importance on chastity, obedience and motherhood.⁽²³⁾ Data from interviews and focus groups highlight the fact that exaggerated sexual prowess and violence against women were central to men's identity. Above all, for most of the male interviewees, this identity required the domination of women, children and other men. Respondents testified to feeling more manly as a result of threatening and beating women, never giving in (*no se deja*), being brave, having sexual relations with many women, leaving women pregnant, having lots of children, feeling more important than other men, being proud. Some men said that carrying weapons made them feel more like a man. If a woman bosses a man about, he is a *culero* (derogatory term for homosexual). Such notions conform to what Connell has termed "hegemonic masculinity". Those who deviate from this model are not regarded as "real" men and their sexuality is questioned. Homophobia is widespread and the demonizing of homosexuality is learned at an early age. In one focus group in the school in El Boulevar, this was highlighted when students mentioned homosexuality as a type of violence. Such notions inform widespread perceptions of how gender relations are enacted or, specifically, of the use of violence as a legitimate element of this *machista* gendered identity.⁽²⁴⁾

This does not mean that all men accept and reproduce behaviour that can be identified with the extremes of hegemonic masculinity but, rather, that these extremes are seen as falling within the accepted boundaries of male behaviour. These boundaries are not static, and different social groups accept/excuse/minimize varying degrees of men's aggression within particular contexts. For example, one 64-year-old man differentiates between repeated abuse and the odd "smack", which he considers justifiable to keep a woman in her place. Most of the women who participated in

the research testified to having been subjected to violence at the hands of their partners. This was summed up, rather poignantly, by one elderly woman from La Vía, who informed me: *"I no longer have the problem of a husband. He's dead"* (focus group, 2 April 2002). Another (Meche, 76 years old, El Boulevard) spoke of how she loved the "single life" because, *"...it is only then that you have control over your own body."* Violence can become so routine and entrenched in everyday relations that it is almost expected as an inevitable and culturally sanctioned element of growing up or being a woman. As one woman emphasized: *"It is the simple fact of being a woman."* Men's agency in the violence is minimized, and it is seen as the responsibility of women to protect themselves against the excesses of men's behaviour. Women's responsibility for protecting themselves against violence is particularly pertinent to popular perceptions of sexual violence, which are discussed below.

V. MEN, SEXUALITY AND VIOLENCE

LEVELS OF SEXUAL violence, both in the domestic realm and in wider society, are considered extremely high in El Salvador. Both men and women identified it as widespread within their communities. A study carried out by the Universidad Tecnológica (UTEC) with 714 students shows that 38 per cent of respondents had been sexually abused as children. The figures indicate that 40 per cent of men and 36 per cent of women had been subject to varying degrees of abuse during childhood, a significantly higher percentage than that found in other countries where similar studies were carried out.⁽²⁵⁾ In El Boulevard, young women claimed to live in fear of sexual attack by gang members. When asked what problems affected her community, a 14-year-old student responded: *"Rape, mostly of girls, because the gang members get us, well they grab the girls, cause her harm and then they don't take responsibility."*⁽²⁶⁾ The common response is to keep teenage daughters inside, or accompanied at all times or, in the worst-case scenario, send them away from the community or move the whole family. Figures from the Attorney General's Office indicate that there have been more than 3,000 reported cases of rape in El Salvador each year for the last three years. This is likely to be only the tip of the iceberg, given the under-reporting of sexual violence. It is estimated that fewer than 9 per cent of reported cases have been brought to trial. This figure is significant if we consider that, on average, over 90 per cent of women claim to know their attacker.⁽²⁷⁾

Moffet talks about the "narratives of denial" that operate in South Africa, to mask and demonize the "sexually aggressive male".⁽²⁸⁾ Similar narratives can be identified in El Salvador with regard to physical and sexual violence, and they are revealed in popular language and attitudes that minimize the violence within the act. Throughout the research, many interviewees – both women and men – expressed a doubt that rape exists, and claimed that it is women who have the responsibility (and duty) to protect themselves and their daughters from sexual advances. Following the logic that men's sexual desire is an "uncontrollable force", it is, therefore, women who must behave "appropriately" so as not to put themselves or their daughters in danger.⁽²⁹⁾

Popular language concerning women's sexuality is laced with prejudice and moral judgement, and the practice of blaming the victim is common. The violence of rape is minimized or goes unrecognized. In El Salvador, one particularly brutal example concerns initiation rites into local gangs, where

23. Informal discussion with Nikki Craske (2003).

24. Connell does not suggest that hegemonic masculinity is the only expression of male gender identity. Indeed, it is unlikely that individual men possess all the characteristics associated with hegemonic masculinity. See Connell, Robert W (1987), *Gender and Power*, Polity Press, Oxford.

25. The authors point out that this higher incidence is not a result of using a wider definition of sexual abuse than in other studies. Indeed, they point out that their definition is, in fact, somewhat narrow in that it excludes exhibitionism and only includes experiences of sexual contact. See UTEC (2001), "Oscuridad de la casa: la realidad escondida del abuso sexual, el maltrato infantil y sus efectos psicológicas en El Salvador", Universidad Tecnológica, San Salvador, page 110.

26. Until recently, in some countries of Latin America, men could marry their victims to mitigate the crime of rape. Also, a woman's "honour" (or virginity) is taken into account to determine whether a crime has taken place. See Chant, Silvia with Nikki Craske (2003), "Gender in Latin America", Latin American Bureau, London. In popular discourse, the notion of men taking responsibility for their actions by forming a relationship with the victim still appears acceptable. Many women testified to violent sexual encounters with men either as their first sexual experience or with men who subsequently became their partners.

27. This figure is based on research carried out in San Marcos Municipality in Greater San Salvador in 2000 by Margarita Velado, who works for Las Dignas feminist organization in San

Salvador. See Velado, Margarita (2001), *Violencia Intrafamiliar y Delitos Contra la Libertad Sexual*, Las Melidas, San Salvador.

28. Moffet, Helen (2001), "Entering the labyrinth: coming to grips with gender war zones – the case of South Africa", Working Paper Series on Men's Roles and Responsibilities in Ending Gender-based Violence No 5, INSTRAW, New York.

29. Vásquez, Norma, Cristina Ibañez and Clara Murguialday (1996), *Mujeres – Montaña: Vivencias de Guerrilleras y Colaboradoras del FMLN*, Horas y Horas, Madrid.

30. Being beaten for 13 seconds (*golpes*) or having sexual relations with 13 men (*el trencito*) of the *clika* (local gang structure) i.e. gang rape.

31. Bourgois, Philippe (2001) (abridged), "Gender and symbolic violence", from *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in the Barrio*, Cambridge University Press, New York, in Scheper-Hughes, Nancy and Philippe Bourgois (2004), *Violence in War and Peace: An Anthology*, Blackwell Publishing, London.

32. O'Sullivan, Chris (1998), "Ladykillers: similarities and divergences of masculinities in gang rape and wife battery" in Bowker, Lee (editor), *Masculinities and Violence*, Sage, London.

33. A recent article in the *Guardian* newspaper highlights the fact that the practice of gang rape is widespread in the UK, yet there appears to be a great reluctance by communities and agencies to bring it into the open. One senior police officer is quoted: "Nobody gives a toss about gang rape." Moreover, young women face a series of challenges when their cases go to trial, and only an estimated 6–7 per cent result in prosecution (*Guardian*, 5 June 2004).

women are offered two options: *golpes* or *el trencito*.⁽³⁰⁾ According to a member of the MS gang in El Boulevard (Vladimir, 23 years old), young women who enter the gang by *el trencito* are not "worth" much, as they do not feel pain compared to the girls who are beaten:

"Thirteen men, but you can't even imagine. You have to give it to them from behind, in the mouth and in front at the same time. For me, that's fucked. I mean, you give them a choice. Some women choose to be beaten up and there are others, the stupid bitches, who say better do what you want with me. Maybe the women who let themselves do what they want are the ones that are of no use and the ones who have been beaten up are the ones who can stand up in the gang. Because, what pain has a woman felt who has been shagged by 13 men compared to her who has been beaten."

Despite the brutal description of the process of gang rape, he fails to recognize the trauma the victim may suffer, and she is seen as wanting the act. Similar processes have been identified in other contexts. For example, Bourgois⁽³¹⁾ notes that rape is an element of everyday violence among crack dealers in East Harlem, while O'Sullivan⁽³²⁾ indicates that the practice of gang rape is not uncommon among male fraternities in the US.⁽³³⁾ In the context of El Salvador, a country recovering from war, this is acutely expressed in the fact that sexual violence was systematically ignored by the report of the Truth Commission, despite ample evidence of its widespread existence.⁽³⁴⁾ Many of the "powerful fictions" that underpin the social meaning of violence give greater importance to certain types of violence than to others. As the above examples suggest, this is especially true of those types that occur within gendered relations, where certain individuals perceive that they have the right to use force against others. This right, for want of a better word, is profoundly embedded in the norms and codes that regulate gendered patterns of victimization and, specifically, the family as an institution where violence is subject to its own set of rules. The process by which gendered violence is ignored and silenced within everyday life has very practical and far-reaching implications for policy provision, as discussed below.

VI. PUBLIC POLICY – PRIVATE VIOLENCE?

UNDERSTANDING HOW A society responds, or indeed fails to respond, in the face of different types of violence will be a vital component of any policy that aims to reduce violence in an effective manner. Research has indicated that violence and criminality have emerged as issues of major concern to the citizens of Latin America in recent years.⁽³⁵⁾ Within the growing debates on issues of citizen security in the region, gendered violence remains very much confined to the sidelines.⁽³⁶⁾ This marks the continuation of an historic pattern where women's experiences have been ignored in much policy consideration. The scarce debate and limited policy response to much of women's subjection to violence continues to be a telling statement about the condition and position of women within society. Public expressions of violence, such as crime, gangs and kidnappings, have been pinpointed as particularly threatening in contemporary El Salvador. For example, in a series of focus groups in El Boulevard with youths and adults, a majority of participants mentioned the *mara* (gang) as the major problem affecting their community. If the effects of such violence are crudely based on victimization levels, it is an important, if extremely difficult, task to analyze how widespread the problem of

domestic violence is.

Due to the lack of systematic data collection, figures are hard to come by, but it is estimated that domestic violence is an issue that affects some 57 per cent of Salvadoran women.⁽³⁷⁾ National data for 2002 indicate that over 238 women were killed at the hands of their partners.⁽³⁸⁾ The law against intra-family violence in El Salvador was passed in December 1996, and the new Penal Code (1998) for the first time in Salvadoran history defines intra-family violence as a crime (Article 200). This includes violence against women, children and irresponsible paternity, that is, the failure to provide any financial contribution for children. The definition has been criticized by feminists and human rights organizations because the neutral term "intra-family violence" hides the fact that women suffer violence disproportionately in the domestic realm. Nevertheless, and despite international and national advocacy campaigns and changes in the law concerning "intra-family" violence, violence against women remains overwhelmingly understood as a "private" or family matter, with communities turning a blind eye. The deference to the private nature of such violence can arguably be understood as an expression of the social tolerance of a significant degree of violence against women.

VII. RESPONDING TO VIOLENCE: A GENDER BIAS?

IT IS INTERESTING to contrast the level of attention given to crime and gang violence with that directed at domestic violence. The *Mano Dura* anti-gang law, for instance, was brought into force in El Salvador in July 2003, repeating a similar trend in other Central American countries. The Salvadoran law advocates the trying of all gang members as adults regardless of age, and the forced internment of anyone suspected of being a gang member without right to due process. In the first months of its execution, thousands of young men from poor neighbourhoods were arrested. Human rights organizations have criticized the measure, not only for contravening major international human rights agreements but also for the widespread mistreatment of the individuals in custody. I have no interest in condoning these heavy-handed measures to combat crime and, in particular, gang violence. However, it is worth noting the high profile given to these concerns relative to the lack of budgetary and media attention directed at the ubiquitous problem of domestic violence.

Moser and Winton argue that the visibility of certain types of violence affects public awareness, associated levels of fear and the degree of tolerance.⁽³⁹⁾ In an opinion poll carried out by the Central American University's Polling Institute (IUDOP) in October 2003, soon after the implementation of the new gang law, *Mano Dura*, 20.8 per cent of respondents said that they felt gangs were the main problem facing the country. Before the introduction of the law, this figure had not reached 1 per cent. By contrast, despite the existence of a law and the high incidence of violence against women and children, domestic violence has never been mentioned within these polls as a major problem facing the nation. Moreover, authorities responsible for enforcing the law on domestic violence, such as the National Civil Police (PNC) and family judges, have been criticized for their ineffectiveness and, in some cases for siding with the aggressor.⁽⁴⁰⁾ There is a certain confusion within state bodies as to who is responsible for dealing with domestic violence. This has led to a "passing of the buck" between justices of the peace and the family courts.⁽⁴¹⁾ Furthermore, these bodies are open

34. Toombs, David (2004), "Unspeakable violence: The Truth Commissions in El Salvador and Guatemala", paper presented at a panel on "Remembering and Forgetting the Period of the Military in Latin America" at the Society for Latin American Studies Annual Conference, Leiden, 2 April 2004.

35. Buvinic, M, A Morrison and M Shifter (1999), "Violence in Latin America and the Caribbean: a framework for action", Inter-American Development Bank, Sustainable Development Department, Washington DC.

36. Shrader, Elizabeth (2000), *Methodologies to Measure the Gender Dimensions of Crime and Violence*, World Bank, Washington DC.

37. Gonzalez, Francisco and Pizarro, Crisóstomo (1998), *Cambios Recientes en la Situación de la Niñez y la Mujer en El Salvador*, UNICEF, San Salvador, cited in Amaya Cobar, Edgardo and Gustavo F Palmeiri (2000), "Debilidad institucional, impunidad y violencia" in UNDP, *Violencia en una Sociedad en Transición: Ensayos*, UNDP, San Salvador, pages 75–114.

38. CEMUJER, cited in IDHUCA (2003), *Boletín de Derechos Humanos*, UCA, San Salvador, July. Hernandez Reyes, Ana Patricia and Reina Maribel Solano, (2003) *Estudio sobre la Aplicación de la Ley Contra la Violencia Intrafamiliar*, UNDP, Asociación Cristiana Femenina and Comité 25 de noviembre, San Salvador.

39. Moser, Caroline O N and Ailsa Winton (2002), "Violence in the Central American region: towards an integrated framework for violence reduction" ODI Working Paper 171, Overseas Development Institute, London.

40. See reference 37.

41. See reference 38, Hernandez Reyes and Solano (2003).

42. The activities of these networks tend to be concentrated around important dates such as 25 November and 8 March, international women's day. The former, *Comité 25 de Noviembre*, is made up of a network of representatives from the women's movement, while the latter incorporates both state and non-state actors, including the women's movement, the PNC and the judiciary.

43. See, for example, Kelly, Liz (2000), "Wars against women: sexual violence, sexual politics and the militarised state" in Jacobs, Susie, Ruth Jacobson and Jen Marchbank (editors), *States of Conflict: Gender, Violence and Resistance*, Zed Books, London, pages 45–65.

only during office hours, leaving women with no support other than the emergency police services. In some communities, where levels of criminal and gang violence are high, police officers have refused to enter the area after dark. This leaves women even more vulnerable.

In the Salvadoran Legislative Assembly, there is a clear demarcation between citizen security and issues of intra-family violence. The former comes under the remit of the *Comisión de Seguridad Pública y Combate a la Narcoactividad* (Commission for Public Security and Prevention of Drug-related Crime), while intra-family violence is seen as a problem for the *Comisión de la Mujer y la Niñez* (Commission for Women and Children). This relegation of the problem of intra-family violence to the sidelines of the security debate reveals an enduring set of priorities when it comes to a consideration of violence on the national political agenda. Groups that have attempted to raise awareness of the problem through lobbying, such as the *Comité 25 de Noviembre* (25 November Committee) and the UNDP-facilitated *Red de Acción Contra la Violencia de Género* (Network for Action against Gendered Violence), have faced difficulties in placing the issue of gendered violence high on the national agenda.⁽⁴²⁾ More women are reporting violence, but the lack of reliable data and huge under-reporting makes the incidence hard to measure. Campaigns on and around 25 November, the international day for the elimination of violence against women, such as the widespread *No es no!* (No means no!) campaign have brought together local and national actors such as the PNC, local governments, schools and the women's movement in an attempt to raise awareness about gendered violence. Such efforts, however, require more consistent support on both local and national levels. Facilities for women escaping violence are extremely limited and the shortfall in state provision is made up for by the women's movement. NGOs such as *Mélida Anaya Montes Women's Movement* (MAM) and *Las Dignas* provide necessary services to women, offering counselling and legal services, self-help groups and medical attention. They also offer gender education on issues such as women's rights and sexuality. Their funding, however, is inadequate and dependent on international donors. The lack of alternatives available to women is a major impediment to their moving beyond violence.

VIII. CONCLUSION

THE EXISTENCE OF a gender culture that prescribes "appropriate" behaviour for men and women serves both to construct and reproduce notions of "acceptable" violence. Women's experience of violence at the hands of their intimate partners is viewed as a "private" or "family" matter.⁽⁴³⁾ One of the most damaging consequences of the acceptance of certain expressions of violence is that they are left unquestioned and, thus, rendered invisible. By employing a gendered analysis, many harmful forces with adverse effects on everyday life can be identified. These forces have been a constant in the lives of the interviewees, despite the changing social and political climate in El Salvador. A tolerance of different types of violence is learned and, as discussed above, gendered norms naturalize many expressions of violence. I have argued that individuals and groups grade violence, so that different manifestations are tolerated to different degrees, and the act of violence, or indeed the harm it causes, is effectively divorced from its social meaning. Key to the use of violence is that it is interpreted through a whole range of social norms, which effec-

tively separates the “violence” from the action. Violence against women is understood within the context of gendered discourse that gives some individuals – namely men – the right to beat others – namely women – and this is reinforced by the naturalization of gendered hierarchies within the social order. In order to understand this process, we must analyze how gender roles and identities are enacted and, specifically, how existing gendered norms serve to naturalize certain types of violence. A significant problem lies in the fact that domestic violence is hard to quantify, and no unified or accurate register exists. Further and more systematic research is urgently needed. Women’s groups and networks have been successful in advocating for changes in the law; however, it is imperative for women to be aware of this law and of the processes within the state that are accessible to them. Furthermore, the violence that women do suffer within the home should be understood as a major social problem and not merely as an unfortunate outcome of the excesses of normal male behaviour. It is imperative to redefine the parameters within which violence is understood in order to move beyond this widespread tolerance of gendered violence to a situation where individuals and communities not only know about the violence but actively work against it.