

## **A common factor in war and peace: gun violence against women**

07 August 2009

Tatiana Gonçalves Moura of the Observatory on Gender and Armed Violence (OGAV) in Coimbra, Portugal, was recently interviewed by Comunidade Segura, a project of Viva Rio in Brazil. OGAV's work spans Europe, Latin America and the Portuguese-speaking countries of Africa.

Based on her research, Tatiana emphasizes that violence against women and the use of firearms are two types of violence that occur both in times of war and times of peace. That's why she has chosen to study models of masculinity that are not based on violent behavior. "These are the majority and have hardly been studied", she stated.

### **Question: Where did the idea for the Observatory on Gender and Armed Violence (OGAV) come from and what are its goals?**

**A:** OGAV was founded in October of 2008 as a result of years of research on issues related to gender and armed violence. Since 2000, the Center for Social Studies, in particular the Department of Peace Studies, has been conducting important research in this field. The projects that were developed over this period – we conducted research in Rio de Janeiro, San Salvador, Medellin, Cidade da Praia (Cape Verde), Bissau, (Guinea-Bissau) and Lisbon – generated the need to create a more structured line of research and provide a forum to organize the information and share it with the general public, as a platform for exchanging research information and experiences.

### **Question: Can you tell us about the work of your organization?**

**A:** OGAV's mission is to develop research, conduct analyses and make practical recommendations for policies and programs about femininity, masculinity and (in) security issues in the context of armed violence. On the one hand, we want to consolidate the field of analysis at a national level, and on the other hand, develop a networking platform of research and intervention projects on this topic across Europe, Latin-America and the Portuguese-speaking African countries.

### **Question: What have been the Observatory's main activities over the last few months?**

**A:** We have worked together on some projects with our partner organizations, such as the Promundo international seminar and the human rights debates with Cinema Nossa, in Rio de Janeiro. But our first big initiative was the premiere of a documentary made five years ago with Cinema Nosso, entitled "Luto como mãe" (the Portuguese title has a dual meaning: "fight like a mother" or "mourn like a mother"). We also participated in the international campaign of the IANSA Women's Network on Armed Domestic Violence, the only one in the world that brings together the issues of gender, women's rights, firearms and armed violence.

**Question: What is the documentary about?**

**A:** Luis Carlos Nascimento's documentary portrays mothers, sisters and wives who have lost loved ones in acts of armed urban violence and deal on a daily basis with the breakdown of their family, financial difficulties and the stigma.

**Question: Is there some mechanism for relating the research to their lives and experiences?**

**A:** As an organization, OGAV's goal is not to provide direct services and care to victims. However, we do work very closely with a number of organizations that provide these services, like the Portuguese Victim Services Association (APAV). We are also developing a study on armed domestic violence in Portugal in partnership with APAV, similar to the one we conducted in Rio de Janeiro several years ago.

OGAV has also participated in public debates about a new gun control law in Portugal, and we plan to assess a measure included in this law that calls for the apprehension of the aggressor's weapon in cases of domestic violence. This will allow us to have a mid to long term impact on these women's lives.

**Question: The Observatory is concerned with women in violent situations in Latin America, Europe and Africa. Are any similarities among their situations, despite the distance and cultural differences?**

**A:** Certainly! I believe that violence against women and the use of firearms are two forms of violence that bring war and peace closer together. In other words, these are transversal issues that challenge the preconceived definitions of war and peace.

**Question: What do you mean?**

**A:** Wars are being waged during peace time and there can also be peace among war. In fact, when you look at the different contexts, the only difference is the degree of intensity or the scale of violence.

**Question: What is the current situation of women living in areas affected by armed violence in Brazil?**

**A:** It depends on what regions we are talking about. Armed violence is not only confined to micro-areas within society. However, it seems that there is an exaggeration of this kind of violence in poorer communities, in the slums or favelas, where organized drug dealers or armed militia groups are active. This makes armed violence, either directly or indirectly, much more visible.

As far as the conditions of the women who live in these areas....in addition to being poor, and often black, many of these women are the head of their household and could

be in a privileged position to contribute to violence prevention, if they have the right support, actions, projects and initiatives.

**Question: Does the violence committed by armed groups or gender-related violence have the same consequences as war-related violence?**

**A:** There have been a large number of studies on war-time strategies used by dominant masculinities to control and/or threaten the enemy or instill terror upon the oppressed femininities and masculinities. Systematic sex crimes, forced displacement or the manipulation or perversion of the perceptions of the roles of men and women for the purposes of war, are all too familiar examples of this. These same war strategies can be found in "non war" settings.

**Question: Can you explain that?**

**A:** Armed violence causes a certain impact on the lives of men and women, both in times of war or in times of violent peace. But because the female gender hasn't been seen as the primary risk category (those who kill and get killed the most), the existing research mechanisms have been inadequate to understand the complexity of women's involvement in armed violence or to analyze the overall impact of this kind of violence on their lives.

As a result, women are usually seen as victims and the men as aggressors. In times of war, women emerge as victims of armed violence as well as sexual violence; in times of peace, women are exclusively seen as victims of domestic violence.

A political consequence of this approach is that solutions in the public realm are usually geared towards men (policies on public security or disarmament) and solutions in the private realm are usually geared to women (related to domestic violence), as if these two worlds weren't interrelated.

**Question: Can you give some examples?**

**A:** It's important to understand that the involvement of women in armed groups, like in Rio de Janeiro or in San Salvador, doesn't necessarily mean a breakdown in traditional female roles. Although the power of firearms gives women some room to reestablish their identity, in most cases, for example when women get involved in war-related activities, their functions and roles are primarily determined by their capacity to fulfill those roles that are normally associated with masculine hegemony.

When this doesn't occur, women are usually relegated to a supporting role in maintaining the area of masculine rule, either in a private setting (as girlfriends or wives of members of an armed group), or through the activities they undertake (such as transporting weapons and drugs).

**Question: Are Latin American cities particularly aggressive to women?**

**A:** These contexts, which I have called the "newest wars", do take on an unusual form in Latin America. In many countries in the region, the establishment of formal peace didn't result in a decrease of violence, but rather in a "democratization of violence". We noticed that many countries experienced an increase in social violence and armed crime after the war ended.

In this sense, the cities with these characteristics are as dangerous to men as they are to women. However, the world-wide pattern repeats itself here: in general men are victims of unknown assailants, in the public realm, and women are, in 90% of the cases, the victim of someone they know, usually in the private realm.

**Question: Can you highlight any positive initiatives for reducing violence?**

**A:** I would say that the Brazilian Disarmament Statute and including the issue of firearms in the Brazilian law against domestic violence are two great examples.

**Question: The Observatory is also concerned about masculinity.... What studies are you undertaking on this issue?**

**A:** Research on armed violence generally studies the faces of violence, which means young males, often black. However, we know that those young men that adhere to a violent model of male identity don't make up the majority. I find the research conducted by Gary Barker and the Promundo Institute on this topic to be very relevant.

On the one hand, we have to know about the spiral of violence in which these young men find themselves when they choose violence, especially armed violence. On the other hand, it's just as important to know why they don't resort to violence. This latter group, who chooses a non violent model of male identity, makes up the majority in the world. And we don't actually know a lot about them. Right now we are developing a study on this issue in Portugal, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau and El Salvador.

Also available at: <http://www.comunidadessegura.org/en/STORY-watching-out-for-domestic-violence>

Source:

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