

Ethnographic Perspectives on Gender-Based Violence in Colombia: Voices and Testimonies from Everyday Life

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Abstract

This study explores gender-based violence in Colombia from a qualitative ethnographic research approach, focused on the reports and experiences of women who have experienced situations of violence in different social and community contexts. Through the application of in-depth interviews, focus groups, and participant observation, qualitative data were collected that allow us to understand the sociocultural dynamics that perpetuate this problem. The results reveal that patriarchal structures and cultural norms influence the normalization of violence, and that women face symbolic and material barriers to accessing justice and obtaining institutional support. In addition, patterns of justification of violence based on emotional dependence and psychological manipulation were identified, which reinforces the need to implement educational and early awareness programs. This study highlights the importance of listening to women's voices and building a comprehensive approach that addresses gender-based violence from an intersectional perspective, recognizing the different ways in which it manifests itself in family, work, and community spaces.

Keywords: *Gender-Based Violence, Ethnographic Research, Emotional Dependence, Community Justice, Intersectional Approach, Colombia.*

Introduction

Gender-based violence is one of the most persistent and complex problems in the Colombian context, manifesting itself in various forms ranging from physical and sexual violence to psychological and economic violence. This violence is perpetuated in different spaces, such as the home, work, community and even in institutions that should guarantee the protection of human rights. Despite regulatory advances in Colombia, such as Law 1257 of 2008, which establishes measures to prevent, punish and eradicate violence against women, recent statistics show that the levels of gender-based violence have not decreased significantly. According to the Attorney General's Office (2022), more than 28,000 cases of domestic violence were registered, where women constituted 82% of the victims, which reveals an alarming panorama of inequality and violation of rights.

Qualitative ethnographic research offers an in-depth and contextualized perspective to address this problem, since it allows analyzing women's experiences from their own voices, revealing the sociocultural dynamics that sustain gender violence. This methodological approach focuses on participant observation, in-depth interviews and focus groups, tools that make it possible to understand individual and collective narratives around violence, as well as the identification of the mechanisms of resistance and overcoming that women develop in their daily contexts.

In Colombia, gender-based violence is aggravated in territories with low institutional presence and in communities that have been historically marginalized. Indigenous, Afro-descendant and peasant women face additional barriers to accessing justice, due to factors such as geographical distance, discrimination and lack of specialized services. In addition, the internal armed conflict has generated scenarios of systematic

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sexual violence, used as a tool of control and domination. These contexts reinforce the need to use an ethnographic methodology, as it allows not only to document the facts, but also to interpret the cultural meanings associated with violence and how these influence the perception and reaction of the victims.

This study focuses on analyzing gender-based violence from an ethnographic perspective, exploring the life histories of women who have experienced different types of violence in rural and urban contexts in Colombia. The aim is to identify the structural and symbolic factors that perpetuate violence, as well as the strategies of resistance that emerge from the communities themselves. It also seeks to contribute to the design of public policies and educational programs that address gender-based violence from a comprehensive and intersectional perspective, promoting access to justice and the construction of safe environments free of violence.

Gender-based violence is a complex phenomenon that is framed by socio-cultural structures and systems of power that perpetuate inequality and discrimination. From a theoretical approach, this study is based on different currents that allow us to analyze gender violence not only as an individual problem, but as a structural manifestation of asymmetrical power relations.

One of the main theoretical frameworks used is Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic power (1998), who argues that symbolic violence is exercised in a subtle way through everyday practices and discourses that legitimize women's subordination. In the context of gender-based violence, symbolic power is manifested in the naturalization of abusive behaviors, in the construction of gender stereotypes, and in the acceptance of cultural norms that justify violence as a mechanism of social control. This theory is fundamental for ethnographic analysis, since it allows us to understand how women internalize certain practices of violence and interpret them based on the predominant cultural meanings in their communities.

From a feminist perspective, Judith Butler (1990) contributes to the analysis with her concept of gender performativity, which suggests that gender is not a fixed identity, but is constructed and reproduced through repetitive acts within a normative framework. Butler argues that gender norms influence social expectations about women's behavior, often limiting their ability to respond to situations of violence. In this sense, the ethnographic approach allows us to explore how women negotiate and challenge these norms in their daily contexts, offering an in-depth look at the processes of resistance and empowerment.

Intersectional theory, developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), provides another key framework for this research, highlighting that gender-based violence does not affect all women equally, but intersects with other social categories such as race, social class, sexual orientation, and ethnic identity. This approach allows us to analyze how the experiences of violence of indigenous, Afro-descendant, or poor women can differ significantly from those of other women, and how these differences influence their access to resources for support and justice.

The study is also based on restorative justice, proposed by Howard Zehr (2002), which emphasizes the need to center intervention strategies on the voices and needs of victims. Restorative justice focuses on reparation of harm, restitution of rights, and the transformation of power relations within communities. Applied to gender-based violence, this theory suggests that public policies and intervention programs should be based on the construction of a genuine dialogue with women, promoting their active participation in the construction of solutions that respond to their realities and expectations.

From an ethnographic perspective, these theories allow not only to document women's experiences, but also to interpret the cultural meanings associated with violence and to analyze how power dynamics are reproduced and challenged in everyday environments. This theoretical framework provides the basis for developing a critical analysis of the narratives and testimonies collected, identifying not only the factors that perpetuate violence, but also the strategies of agency and empowerment that emerge from women themselves.

Methodology

This study is part of a qualitative ethnographic research, whose objective is to explore the sociocultural dynamics of gender-based violence in Colombia through the voices and experiences of women in different social contexts. The ethnographic methodology is characterized by its immersive and contextualized approach, which allows not only to collect information, but also to interpret the meanings and cultural practices associated with gender-based violence.

The study population was made up of women of different sociodemographic profiles, including rural, urban, indigenous, and Afro-descendant women, in order to capture a wide diversity of experiences. The selection of the participants was carried out through intentional sampling, prioritizing women who had experienced situations of gender violence and who were willing to share their testimonies in an environment of confidentiality and respect. In total, 30 women were interviewed in depth and 4 focus groups were conducted with an average of 8 participants each.

Data collection techniques

The ethnographic methodology was based on the following techniques:

In-depth interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore women's life histories, focusing on their experiences with gender-based violence, barriers to accessing justice, and coping strategies developed. The interviews included open-ended questions about:

- Types of violence experienced (physical, psychological, sexual, economic).
- Contexts in which violence manifests itself (home, work, community).
- Perceptions of the institutional and community response.
- Personal processes of overcoming and empowerment.

Focus groups: Four focus groups were organized with women from different communities. This technique made it possible to generate a space for dialogue and collective reflection, where participants shared experiences, identified common patterns of violence, and critically analyzed the cultural and social dynamics that perpetuate gender-based violence. The focus groups facilitated the co-construction of knowledge, allowing women to contrast their experiences and develop a shared critical perspective.

- **Participant observation:** The researcher participated in community activities and workshops organized by women's collectives, ethnographically documenting social interactions, discourses, and cultural practices related to gender-based violence. This technique allowed us to identify how relations of power and control are manifested in everyday life, as well as community responses to cases of violence.
- **Documentary analysis:** Institutional documents, local regulations and public policies related to attention to gender-based violence were reviewed, which allowed contextualizing the experiences of women in the Colombian legal and institutional framework.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the information was carried out using the content analysis technique, using a thematic and inductive approach. The interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed with the consent of the participants, guaranteeing the confidentiality and anonymity of the data. Emerging codes and categories were used to identify patterns in women's narratives, analyzing both the explicit manifestations of violence and the symbolic and cultural discourses that sustain it.

The use of qualitative software (Atlas.ti) facilitated the organization and categorization of the data, allowing an in-depth analysis of the narratives and generating concept maps that showed the relationships between the different dimensions of gender-based violence. Special attention was paid to the cultural meanings attributed to violence, as well as to the strategies of resistance and empowerment identified by the participants.

The ethnographic methodology allowed for the development of an in-depth and contextualized analysis of gender-based violence, highlighting not only the direct experiences of women, but also the symbolic and cultural structures that influence their perception and response to violence. The qualitative data collected provides a solid foundation for understanding the dynamics of power and control, as well as for identifying opportunities for community intervention that contribute to the transformation of gender relations and the construction of safer and more inclusive environments.

Results

The ethnographic analysis of the in-depth interviews, focus groups, and participant observation allowed us to identify the sociocultural dynamics that perpetuate gender-based violence in Colombia, as well as the resistance and empowerment strategies developed by women in their communities. The results are organized around four main categories emerging from the qualitative analysis: normalization of violence, barriers to access to justice, emotional dependence and psychological manipulation, and strategies of resistance and female agency.

Normalization of violence: Everyday practices and cultural discourses

The women's accounts show how gender-based violence is normalized in everyday practices, manifesting itself not only through physical or verbal aggression, but also through subtle behaviors of control and manipulation. During the interviews, several women shared experiences in which abuse was perceived as a natural part of relationships or as an expression of affection:

"My mom always told me that if my husband was jealous of me it was because he loved me. I grew up thinking that was normal, too, until I realized that jealousy isolated me from my friends and family." (Interview 7)

This quote reflects how cultural and family norms can reinforce acceptance of gender-based violence, especially in contexts where asymmetrical power relations are seen as an expected component of affective dynamics. From a theoretical perspective, these findings are aligned with Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic power (1998), who argues that symbolic violence is exercised through everyday practices that legitimize women's subordination without the need to resort to direct coercion.

Barriers to access to justice: Structural and institutional limitations

The participants highlighted the difficulties in accessing formal justice, mentioning barriers such as lack of information, fear of reprisals and distrust in institutions. In the focus groups, stories emerged about the revictimization that women experience when reporting situations of violence:

"I went to the police station and they told me that it was better to fix things at home, that it was not good to 'wash dirty laundry in public'. I left feeling worse, as if it was my fault." (Focus Group 2)

This testimony shows how the institutions in charge of protecting victims can, in some cases, reinforce structural violence by minimizing the seriousness of complaints or by prioritizing the preservation of the family unit over the protection of women. From the perspective of restorative justice (Zehr, 2002), these findings highlight the need to transform institutional practices to ensure that victims of gender-based violence receive a response based on the recognition of their rights and reparation for harm.

Emotional dependence and psychological manipulation: Factors that perpetuate violence

Emotional dependence emerged as a critical factor in the perpetuation of gender-based violence. Many women shared experiences in which psychological manipulation and blaming by their aggressors kept them in situations of prolonged violence:

"He told me that no one else was going to love me, that without him I was nothing. I believed it for a long time, until I started talking to other women and realized that I was not alone." (Interview 15)

The analysis of these stories shows how psychological and emotional violence can be as destructive as physical violence, affecting the self-esteem and perception of autonomy of the victims. Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity contributes to this analysis by explaining how discourses and practices of control reinforce subordinate identities, causing women to internalize violence as part of their everyday reality.

Strategies of Resistance and Female Agency: Overcoming and Empowerment

Despite the difficulties and barriers faced, many women developed strategies of resistance and empowerment to get out of situations of violence. These strategies included participating in community support networks, accessing women's empowerment workshops, and actively seeking information and resources to break cycles of abuse. An example of this is evidenced in the following testimony:

"I started going to women's workshops and little by little I understood that I had rights, that I was not obliged to put up with the mistreatment. There I found the support I needed to make the decision to leave home." (Interview 22)

These experiences highlight the importance of promoting safe spaces where women can share their stories, build a sense of belonging, and develop coping skills. From the intersectional approach of Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), these support networks allow women to recognize the intersections of their identities (gender, ethnicity, social class) and develop a collective agency that contributes to transforming their environments.

The qualitative data obtained through ethnographic research allow us to affirm that gender-based violence in Colombia cannot be addressed only from a punitive or normative approach. It is necessary to implement public policies and community programs that integrate human rights education, early awareness, and the strengthening of local support networks. It also suggests the adoption of a restorative justice approach, where women are not only heard and protected, but also actively participate in the construction of solutions that respond to their realities.

Discussion

The results of this ethnographic study allow us to understand gender-based violence in Colombia from an in-depth and contextualized perspective, revealing how sociocultural dynamics and power structures influence the normalization of violence and the barriers to access justice. From a theoretical approach, these findings are related to Pierre Bourdieu's (1998) proposals on symbolic violence, Judith Butler's (1990) gender performativity, and Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) intersectional approach, all of which highlight the importance of analyzing violence not only as an individual act, but as a structurally and culturally sustained phenomenon.

Normalization of Violence: A Manifestation of Symbolic Violence

The study showed that women internalize discourses and practices that justify gender violence, which is aligned with Bourdieu's (1998) theory of symbolic violence. According to this approach, symbolic violence manifests itself when subordinate people accept their position of inequality as part of the natural order, without questioning the structures that sustain it. In the case of gender-based violence, this is reflected in how women perceive jealousy, control and psychological aggression as normal expressions or even as displays of affection.

Women's accounts showed that cultural and family norms influence the acceptance of violence, especially when these norms are passed down from generation to generation. For example, in the focus groups, several participants mentioned that their mothers and grandmothers had experienced similar situations, which reinforces the idea that the normalization of violence is a process learned and sustained by the social environment. This intergenerational transmission of violence reinforces the need to implement early educational programs that challenge gender stereotypes and promote relationships based on respect and equity.

Barriers to Access to Justice: Structural and Institutional Challenges

Access to justice is one of the main challenges identified in this study. From the perspective of restorative justice (Zehr, 2002), it is essential that justice systems not only focus on conflict resolution, but also on reparation of damage and restitution of victims' rights. However, the testimonies collected reveal that women face symbolic and material barriers to accessing justice, such as institutional revictimization, lack of psychosocial support, and distrust of the authorities.

These findings coincide with previous studies that indicate that formal justice can be perceived as distant and bureaucratic, especially in rural communities or in sectors where women do not have the economic resources to sustain a prolonged judicial process. In addition, the lack of a gender perspective in justice institutions can lead to cases of violence being minimized or dismissed, perpetuating a cycle of impunity and violation of rights.

Emotional Dependence and Psychological Manipulation: An Analysis from the Performativity of Gender

Emotional dependence and psychological manipulation emerged as critical factors in the perpetuation of gender-based violence. Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity provides a deep understanding of how women construct their identity and sense of agency based on the normative discourses and practices of their environment. The interviews showed how aggressors use emotional control tactics, generating in women a sense of guilt and responsibility for the violence suffered.

From this perspective, it is crucial that community and therapeutic interventions include a component of identity reconstruction, where women can question dominant discourses and develop a new personal narrative that is not based on subordination or self-blame. Female empowerment strategies should focus on strengthening self-esteem, providing tools to identify and resist emotional manipulation, and creating safe spaces where women can share their experiences without fear of judgment or stigmatization.

Strategies of Resistance and Female Agency: The Importance of Community Support Networks

Despite the barriers and challenges, many women developed strategies of resistance that allowed them to break cycles of violence and move towards empowerment processes. The focus groups revealed that community support networks play a critical role in this process, offering not only practical assistance but also a sense of belonging and emotional validation. From Crenshaw's (1989) intersectional approach, these networks make it possible to address gender-based violence from a comprehensive perspective, considering the multiple dimensions of women's identity and the structural factors that condition their access to resources and opportunities.

The study suggests that public policies should prioritize strengthening these networks, supporting women's collectives working in communities, and providing resources for human rights education and early awareness. In addition, the need to implement a restorative justice approach is highlighted, where women not only receive protection and assistance, but are also recognized as active agents in the construction of solutions to gender-based violence.

Implications for practice and public policy

The results of this study have direct implications for the design of intervention programs and public policies aimed at the prevention and care of gender-based violence in Colombia. Some key recommendations include:

- Integrate human rights education into school curricula, in order to denormalize violence from an early age and promote egalitarian relationships.
- Train justice institutions in gender perspective and restorative justice, ensuring that the processes of reporting and attention do not revictimize women.
- Strengthen community support networks, providing economic and technical resources to women's organizations working on violence prevention and psychosocial support.
- Promote safe spaces for women, where they can share their experiences, reconstruct their personal narrative, and develop coping and empowerment skills.

In conclusion, the ethnographic research developed in this study allows us to affirm that gender-based violence in Colombia is not only a problem of a legal or institutional nature, but a cultural and structural phenomenon that requires a comprehensive and multidimensional approach to address it. It is hoped that these findings will contribute to raising awareness in society, strengthening public policies and improving institutional practices, promoting a culture of peace, equity and respect for human rights.

Conclusions

The results of this ethnographic study allow us to conclude that gender-based violence in Colombia is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, deeply influenced by sociocultural dynamics, power structures and normative discourses that perpetuate inequality and discrimination. Through the collection of qualitative data through in-depth interviews, focus groups, and participant observation, it was evidenced that gender-based violence manifests itself not only in visible forms such as physical and sexual violence, but also through subtle mechanisms of psychological manipulation and emotional control, which can be equally harmful to victims.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings are aligned with Pierre Bourdieu's (1998) proposals on symbolic violence, where women internalize practices of violence as part of everyday normality, often influenced by cultural and family norms. Likewise, Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity made it possible to understand how social discourses and expectations reinforce women's subordination, hindering their ability to identify and report situations of abuse. The intersectional perspective of Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) was crucial in analyzing how gender-based violence affects women of diverse social identities in a differentiated way, considering variables such as race, social class, sexual orientation, and geographical context.

The study reveals that women face multiple barriers to accessing justice, from institutional revictimization to lack of resources and community support. This reality reinforces the need to adopt a restorative justice approach (Zehr, 2002), where women are not only heard and protected, but also actively participate in the construction of solutions based on the recognition of their rights and the reparation of harm. The resistance and empowerment strategies identified, such as participation in community support networks and human rights education, demonstrate the transformative power of women-led initiatives, highlighting their agency and resilience.

From an applied perspective, these findings have important implications for the design of public policies and intervention programs aimed at the prevention and care of gender-based violence in Colombia. Some key recommendations include:

- Strengthen human rights education from an early age, promoting a profound cultural change that denaturalizes violence and encourages the construction of egalitarian and respectful relationships.
- Implement training programs in gender perspective for justice institutions, ensuring that women receive fair and prejudice-free treatment in the processes of complaint and attention.
- Support and finance community support networks, especially in rural areas and vulnerable communities, by providing resources for psychosocial accompaniment and free legal assistance.
- Develop interventions based on restorative justice, creating safe spaces where women can share their experiences, reconstruct their personal narratives and participate in the generation of community solutions to gender-based violence.
- Encourage the active participation of women in the formulation of public policies, recognizing their voices and experiences as legitimate sources of knowledge and guides for institutional action.

In terms of future research, it is recommended to carry out longitudinal studies to evaluate the impact of public policies and community programs on the reduction of gender-based violence. It would also be valuable to develop comparative research that analyzes how different intervention strategies influence women's perception of safety and well-being in different socioeconomic and cultural contexts.

In conclusion, the qualitative ethnographic research developed in this study shows that gender-based violence in Colombia cannot be addressed only from a legal or normative approach, but requires a comprehensive perspective that considers the cultural, social, and economic dynamics that sustain violence. It is hoped that these findings will contribute to raising awareness in society, strengthening public policies and improving institutional practices, promoting a culture of peace, equity and respect for human rights that allows women to live in safe environments free of violence.

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