

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN MEXICO: REVIEWING THE CONNECTIONS WITH WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

Extended Abstract

Domestic violence against women is understood as a situation supported and reinforced by gender norms and values that place women in a subordinate position in relation to men (García-Moreno, 1999). Marital violence is made possible by the power inequality between the partners. In other words, it is widely acknowledged that violence against women is fundamentally a result of gender-based inequities, more than the product of any other individual or social factor. Therefore, one would expect violence against women to be more common in societies where gender roles are strictly defined and particularly among couples where men control the wealth and the decision-making process (Shane and Ellsberg, 2002).

At the same time, women's empowerment is understood as the process –and the result– of defying and changing such gender inequities and the unequal distribution of power associated to them. Empowerment, by definition, should give women access and control over necessary resources and power so that they can make informed decisions and gain control over their lives (Kishor, 2000). Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that empowered women would be in a better position than less empowered women to avoid or reject violence.

In fact, diverse women's empowerment dimensions such as freedom of movement, decision-making power, formal education, participation in collective struggles or income generation have been hypothesized as elements which protect women from domestic violence (Ghuman, 2001; Schuler et al, 1996). Some studies report that domestic violence tends to diminish as women contribute economically to the household, or when they reach certain educational level or when they participate in social networks (Kabeer, 1998). However, another group of studies suggest that domestic violence increases when women challenge their husband's authority and challenge gender inequities (Schuler, et.al, 1996; Blumberg, 1999; Ghuman, 2001). Schuler et al. (1998), Sen and Batliwala (2000) and Mason and Smith (2003) have found an escalation of domestic violence when women generate their own income. These situations are

interpreted by men as threats to their authority and relative position within the household men and therefore they respond with violence (Blumberg, 1999).

Multiple elements possibly account for the variability –and discrepancies- of the existing findings regarding the relationship between women’s empowerment and domestic violence, like context diversity, differences in the available measures for women’s empowerment or the extent of women’s empowerment as a social process. Additionally, we contend that the multidimensionality of women’s empowerment –the fact that a woman might be highly empowered in one aspect like freedom of movement but poorly empowered in another like decision-making power -is a factor that contribute to the complexity of the study of the links between this process and the prevalence of domestic violence. Also, we believe that the diversity of violent behaviors included as domestic violence is another element that requires to be taken into account in order to better assess the characteristics of this relation.

Based on these considerations we intend to contribute to the current knowledge on the links between women’s empowerment and domestic violence by distinguishing through the analysis two different dimensions of women’s empowerment and four particular types of domestic violence, assuming that each particular pair (of a given dimension of empowerment and a particular kind of violence) may have distinctive relationship.

The main objective of this work is to analyze the relationship among wives’ empowerment -specifically their levels of autonomy and levels of decision-making power- and their risk of being victims of violence by their partners. As part of this task we examine, in the first place, the relationship between gender-roles ideology and women’s empowerment. Then, we examine the roles of women’s gender-roles ideology, women’s decision-making power, and women’s autonomy on women’s risk of being victim of any of four identified types of violence: psychological, economic, physical or sexual.

The data used comes from a recent survey in Mexico: the National Survey on the Dynamic of the Relationships in the Household (ENDIREH, 2003). This survey, which collected information on violence in the household, was developed by the National Institute of Women (Instituto Nacional de la Mujer). The ENDIREH is nationally

representative as well as representative of 11 states and targeted women 15 years and older who were married or living in union in 57,000 households. A total of 34,184 women were interviewed.

For the revision of the connections between gender-role ideologies and women's empowerment, we constructed three additive indexes. The first one is an index of gender-roles ideology, based on women's answer to six questions on the right attitude that a woman should have in a particular situation: a) a woman should obey her husband in all what he orders; b) a woman can choose her friends, even if her husband disagree; c) when the husband's income is enough, the woman is free to decide whether to work or not, d) a woman has the same capacity to earn money than a man, e) it is a duty of the wife to have sex with her husband even if she doesn't want to, f) the husband has the right to hit the woman if she doesn't fulfill her duties. For each of this affirmation the woman could answer "Yes", "No" or "It depends". We assigned a value of one (1) to the answer that reinforces wives submission to their husbands, a value of two (2) to "It depends" and a value of three (3) to the answers that reflect a rejection of women's subordination to men. The index ranges from 0 to 18, with increments on its value representing a larger rejection to the traditional and subordinated roles for women.

The second index is an Index on women's decision-making power, based on eleven questions included in the survey on "who in the couple decides about: a) how to expend the money; b) what to buy for food, c) authorizations to children; d) children's education; e) where to go for fun; f) what to do when children get sick; g) buying furniture; h) moving to another house; i) using contraception; j) who uses the contraceptive; k) how many children to have. The possible answers are "Husband", "Both" or "Wife", and they were coded as 0, 1 or 2, respectively, assigning a growing decision-making power when women decide by themselves. From factorial analysis we learned that these eleven questions represent four factors, which were finally grouped in one Index, weighting each factor in terms of the percentage of variance that they explain, and finally standardizing the index. The resulting index goes from 0 to 1, representing 1 the maximum level of decision-making power.

Finally, a third additive Index of women's autonomy was estimated, using information regarding five questions on whether the wife ask for her husband permission

or just tell him or do nothing before performing diverse activities a) to work, b) to go shopping, c) to visit relatives, d) to visit friends and e) to go to a party or to see a movie or to go for a walk. The alternative answers are: “Doesn’t do it”, “Ask permission”, “Just tell” and “Doesn’t need to do anything before”, and we assigned the codes 0, 1, 2 and 3 respectively, indicating a growing level of women’s autonomy. Factorial Analysis identified only one factor to represent this five items, but at the same time indicated a low correlation of the item “freedom to work” with the rest, suggesting the convenience of excluding it from the index. The resulting index, adding the values if the other four items, ranges from 0 to 12.

In the first part of the analysis we explore the relationship between the gender-roles index and each of the women’s empowerment dimension measured: the women’s decision-making power and the women’s autonomy, using anova and bivariate regressions. The preliminary results confirm the existence of a positive relationship between the gender-role ideology index and each empowerment dimension: larger values in the gender-roles index (that is, larger rejection to subordinated roles for women) are associated to larger levels of women’s decision-making power and to larger women’s autonomy. The relationship holds in the other direction too: larger levels of women’s autonomy and women’s decision-making power are positively associated to larger values in the gender-roles ideology index.

Then, we developed a multivariate logistic regression analysis, estimating the risks of each type of violence, incorporating these three indexes as explanatory variables, along with some individual and couple characteristics. The preliminary results indicate that gender-roles ideology has a significant and positive effect on women’s likelihood of being victims of emotional and economic violence, but no significant effects on women’s likelihood of physical or sexual violence. For women’s decision-making power we find exactly the same relationships: an increment on women’s decision –making power significantly enlarges women’s likelihood of emotional and economic violence, but has no significant effect on the likelihood of physical and sexual violence. Finally, increments on women’s autonomy significantly increase the likelihood of emotional violence but reduce the likelihood of physical aggression.

These results suggest that women's empowerment in Mexico –through gains in decision-making power and autonomy- may expose women to more conflicts with their partners, but at the same time might be giving them more element to avoid or reject certain types of violence, like physical violence.