

Public security female workers at the coast of Paraná, Brazil: intersections of gender, work, violence(s), and health

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Abstract *This study aimed to promote visibility of women working in public security along the Parana coast, articulating issues of gender, violence(s), and the health-disease process. The methodology was qualitative, through an ethnographic research which included 50 women (civilians, military policewomen, and prison officers) from municipalities along the Parana coast, between March 2014 and March 2015. Results revealed: 1) the dilemmas that these women are subjected to, facing the seasonal dynamics in the field of public security in the region; 2) exposure to violence (mainly institutional and gender-based) and its impact on these women's health; 3) power relations, marked by corporations' hierarchies and gender asymmetries between men and women in professional settings. In summary, this research highlighted the need to promote visibility of women working in public security institutions, considering the impact of violence and gender inequalities in their personal and professional lives, including the resistance and rearrangements promoted by these women in the institutions in response to their presence in a hegemonic and traditionally male environment.*

Key words *Women, Public security, Gender, Violence*

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Introduction

The subject of public security is rarely tackled by academia or the Public Health field, especially when the issue at hand is the living conditions of female public security professionals as human beings in possession of subjectivity, not robots who provide security for our society¹. These professionals are more exposed to the risk of violent deaths and have higher vulnerability to some mental and physical diseases, as pointed out by current research initiatives¹⁻⁶.

Some articles discuss the risks associated with careers in public security, broadening concepts of risk and security, as well as valuing police officers inside and outside their institution⁷.

Curiosity on this matter was the starting point for the present study, which focused on the perspective of female public security professionals and their specialties: 1) Military Police Officers, exposed to daily risks, subject to disciplinary and hierarchy commandments, sharing a feeling of belonging and identification with their job, many times connected to their uniform; 2) Civil Police Officer, with no strict hierarchy, execute crime investigation tasks and investigate criminal offenses; 3) Correctional Officers, assigned to protect civilian society and to perform correctional treatment, while watching over and keeping custody of prisoners, as determined by legal instruments. This is based simultaneously on punishing and resocializing criminals, making use of defensive tactics in their daily routine^{8,9}.

The present study aimed to analyze and reflect upon the reality of their activities, highlighting daily exposition to violence, seeking to understand the unique details of this seldom explored group of women, and how these women relate to one another and to men.

This study emerged from the main author's intrinsic motivation after working six years as a public security professional, prior to entering academic life.

To understand the dilemmas and challenges these women face in public security, it is critical to understand the gender analysis category. Joan Scott^{10,11} proposes a view of gender as a cornerstone of social relations, built upon the perceived differences between sexes, with gender being an initial form of assigning meaning to power relations. The author uses gender as an analysis category, in the same way we use class, race/ethnicity, generation, and their meanings.

On the other hand, Christine Delphy¹² argues that gender is a social element which constitutes

sex, pointing out that gender is not an effect of biological differences, but rather that sex is socially built because of gender. Thus, differences between men and women are meaningless anatomical facts without the present gender arrangements, which recognize and level the differences between men and women. The author suggests that transforming such difference into inequality is a social act.

Joan W. Scott^{10,11} states she is bothered when definitions take gender as a familiar methodology, instead of a form of questioning. She argues gender is an open-ended issue. Perhaps the key to advancing through these dilemmas would be to further comprehend the different forms of oppression and exclusion, avoiding prescriptions, questioning and keeping open the gender proposal^{13,14}.

Intersections between gender and violence are also discussed by a number of female authors^{15,16}, including not only physical and sexual violence but also psychological violence, such as humiliation, social isolation, intimidation, verbal violence, among others. The different manifestations of gender violence are a very complex topic, which requires study and dialog between different fields of knowledge, especially social and health sciences, making Public Health a privileged space for such.

In the present days, violence is among the main causes of morbidity and mortality in many countries, including Brazil¹⁷. Brazil is among the countries with the highest murder index in the planet, even higher in regards to the women murder index (femicide), as reported by the SINAN¹⁸ (Case Reporting Information System) reports and the series of studies which originated the *Mapa da Violência* (Map of Violence)¹⁷. Therefore, reflecting upon this problem is fundamental, as it presents itself as a major challenge to Public Health. Roberto da Matta¹⁹ states that violence is an intrinsic part of the human condition that bears positive and negative facets, which vary from one society to another. However, this setting implies an agenda for public security, unfolding into several issues for professionals of this area who struggle with this problem in their daily lives.

In view of this, this study aimed to perform an ethnographic study of a group of women who work in the field of public security. It aimed particularly to explore the issues of gender and the way these women are exposed to violence, as well as its relationship with the health-disease process, taking the coast of Parana as the region

of analysis. It is believed that the insertion of the topic of public security in academia could subsidize new public policies which cater to gender specificities. By bringing these professionals and their struggles into the spotlight, we hope to provide these professionals with better work and life conditions.

Methodology

This study is based on a qualitative methodology and an ethnographic approach as proposed by Clifford Geertz²⁰, aiming to understand the work dynamics of a group of 50 women acting in public security in municipalities along the coast of Parana. This group is comprised of Military Police Officers, Civil Police Officers, and Correctional Officers acting solely on seaside municipalities, seeking to understand the particularities of this territory and its influences on their work dynamics. Ethnography has been adopted in researches from the fields of public health²⁰ and public security²¹, with analysis focusing on group cultures i.e. the connections and meaning patterns that define a culture and guide the actions of its participants. It is important to highlight they are never completely mapped. Moreover, ethnographic studies are always partial and incomplete assumptions, not complete explanations. The field research was performed between March 2014 and March 2015, through complete immersion in the daily life of these professionals, including their work routines (inside institutions and attending to incidents), along with field records and semi-structured interviews with the professionals. Observations and voices emerging from the field were coded, thematically categorized, and subsequently analyzed in the light of studies on gender, violence, and public health. Semi-structured scripts guided the in-depth interviews. For Liamputtong and Ezzy²², qualitative research is based on interpretative orientation, focusing on the complexity of creating and maintaining the meaning surrounding a specific event, aiming to clarify and contextualize the nature of experiences and actions, which in turn generates consistent and integrative analysis by linking events and individual interpretations with patterns and systems with wide meanings. The number of participants was not defined prior to research, but by progressive inclusion, interrupted by the saturation of interviews²³. Par-

ticipation was voluntary and anonymous. The number of participants and their original corporation were not disclosed in this paper in order to preserve their identities and maintain the origin of the interviewees confidential.

This research followed every ethical and bio-ethical precept, in compliance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki and Resolution 466/2012 of the CNS - National Council of Health. All participants agreed to participate by signing an Informed Consent Form. All names cited in this paper are fictitious, in order to preserve the professionals' identities.

Results

Characterization of the ethnographic field

The seaside municipalities in the Parana coast are Guaratuba (with a population of approximately 34,000), Matinhos (32,000), and Pontal do Parana (23,000)²⁴. They are peculiar territories with deep contrasts, where seasonality directly influences the local way of life since their population rises tenfold during summer. The territory is arguably a link in which society and space relate to each other, composed of socially built spacial relations, conceived within spaces controlled by power relations, in which political and cultural interests act simultaneously as composing and limiting factors.

Regarding public security, dynamics vary throughout the year, especially in the Summer season, in which security actions are enhanced due to the large number of visitors. Civil and Military Police Officers from different municipalities of Parana are relocated to the coast in order to enhance local security, reaching a total of three thousand police officers and firefighters, according to the numbers of the 2014 summer season. During other seasons, the region becomes partially abandoned, having about one or two police cars, manned with three or four officers per shift in each municipality. That means only one police car for 34,000 citizens, which corroborates with reports of increasing risk and insecurity for female public security professionals. Seasonal variation is noticeable and alarming for these professionals, because as summer ends, so does the security reinforcements, as well as many other jobs. However, problems related to social inequality, drug traffic, and violence persist²⁵.

Gender, power, and public security

Recent gender studies promote reflections on the relationships established between men and women, between women, and between men^{10,11}. Being a woman or a man does not necessarily involve being born female or male, but rather assuming socially established and hierarchical roles. These are culturally constructed categories imposed to human beings. The following account, collected during field research, shows how gender inequality influences the work routine of female public security professionals:

... Gender influences work directly, in the relations between men and women, because women have to prove their competence, they have to impose themselves, as they otherwise end up in cleaning or administrative duties. There are male colleagues who are prejudiced, who do not work with women because they are scared. It is different if she is a lesbian. She is treated like one of them. Homosexual men, on the other hand, are mistreated and suffer even more prejudice... (Caroline – 35 years old - Military Police Officer).

This account expresses how everything feminine is regarded as negative. In public security, heterosexual women and homosexual men are slighted, whereas homosexual women are treated differently due to their association with masculinity. Hierarchy between men and women is brought to light, facing the functionalist approach that, although pointing out discrimination towards women, characterized their domestic and public roles in the same level, attributing the same explanatory potential²⁶.

Dowling²⁷ discusses the point of female physical inferiority, which was constituted by speech and learned gradually throughout history, resulting in the underdevelopment of their physical capability, as well as strength and body knowledge as a whole. In another participant's account, this inferiority is noted:

“... There is much inequality between men and women on public security, jobs are limited for women, which I don't find fair.” “...Careers in public security are not advantageous for women, because in Brazil the police are violent and repressive, which demands an aggressive behavior. In this matter, women are in disadvantage, both physically and emotionally...” Those who enter this profession end up losing their fragile side since the violent reality affects their way of being. ... (Letícia – 27 years old – Civil Police Officer)

The guiding principles of public security are hierarchy and discipline, i.e. power based on

obedience towards orders since power rests in the fact that some can do more, and some less. However, not in a physically repressive manner, but by attributes of domination and subordination (i.e. symbolic power) as observed in the following account:

“... Women are the minority in Officer positions in public security. A Colonel had to go to court to get her promotion, which was her right. This is absurd, so much prejudice...” “...Women sometimes perform better as Officers, but I think they are not so respected.” “...Troops obey way more when there is a man in charge...” (Andreia – 30 years old - Military Police Officer).

Pierre Bourdieu^{28,29} argues that symbolic power is an invisible power that can only be implemented with the compliance of the ones subjected to it, or even the ones who retain the power. The author focuses on situations in which this power is normally ignored, which allows for an interpretation that such power is fully recognized by the agents involved. It is a strategical position in society, a special form of relation that influences and modifies the conduct of a few individual which, in turn, corroborate so that power relations become more complex and generate other powers³⁰, as observed on another account:

“...Power is paramount in our field. Hierarchy is complicated, we can't go over a command chain, otherwise, we are punished, harassed, sometimes even sexually.” ... “We have to follow orders by the book, with discipline, or we are punished. So I notice the sensation of power changes from one to another, the thirst for power transforms someone, generally into something negative...” (Janaina – 28 years old - Military Police Officer).

In a certain way, until a while ago, society would not accept or imagine the possibility for women to act in public security inside an institution comprised mainly of men, in which standards of manliness and physical prowess are widespread. Presently, women act and are more visible in the field of public security, especially after the Brazilian dictatorship period, in which female presence was used to soften the appearance of the police force³¹. However, some aspects questioned by gender studies, such as the association between woman/feminine to frailty are observed in some speeches.

During this study, it was possible to notice that women are still a minority in public security institutions:

“... Women are the minority when compared to men. Until a while ago, we as women were forbidden to drive cars, there was so much sexism. There

was no reason why, only the order. And because of the hierarchy, we had to obey, otherwise, we would be punished or even harassed... “... Many times we are treated as whores by the troop and mainly by the wives of male officers, who don't allow them to work with females due to their jealousy... (Priscila – 27 years old - Military Police Officer).

Michael Foucault³⁰ argues that there is not a global unit of power, but instead there are different forms of power, in perpetual transformation. Power is a social practice, and as such it is constructed historically. Thus, power manifestations or practices vary from time to time or from one society to another. The present study showed vividly what Joan Scott^{10,11} proposes regarding gender analysis, which is that it is one of the first ways of giving meaning to power relations. Professionals are considered less than men for the sole fact of being women and are restrained from acting in some functions, besides suffering different forms of violence, justified by this implicit logic that permeates this system. Some participants mentioned the difficulty in relating with male colleagues, particularly the challenge in earning their trust. On field work, when tending incidents or performing surveillance, police officers and guards usually act in pairs, as one accounts for the other's safety. The term used by participants is 'to provide cover' when one defends another in a situation of confrontation or threat. When a pair is formed by a woman and a man, the latter finds himself in a physically disadvantageous situation, as follows:

... I heard from a colleague that he would not work with women. He said he would be unprotected, that I would be caught off guard during crunch time, that he did not want to die, that he did not trust women to be his colleagues, that we are weak and did not command respect (Fernanda – 35 years old - Military Police Officer).

It was curious to see how “gender inequalities” were so glaringly present in the interactions between work colleagues. In this sense, it can be presumed that this is a reality for most professions, not only the ones in public security, but especially those traditionally related to male supremacy, such as the military, in which rules, dichotomies, and gender inequalities seem stricter. On the other hand, some participants reported not feeling slighted in the face of such prejudice, but rather feeling empowered by their profession:

“...I feel empowered in this profession. Even my husband respects me more, I think of us as warriors, because besides taking care of the household and the children, we work outside the home. This is

not for everyone...” “...I toiled to be in this place, I earned it, my self-esteem improved since I got in...” (Rebeca – 24 years old - Military Police Officer)

The definition of empowerment refers to the capability of individuals and groups to decide what relates to them, to choose the courses of action in multiple spheres – political, economic, cultural, psychological, among others³². Thereby, it is an attribute, but also a process in which power and liberty, both positive and negative, are conferred. Empowerment can be perceived as resulting from political processes in individuals and groups. Female empowerment in public security renews the possible interpretations about the conception of power, assuming democratic forms and comprising a new challenge. It assumes changes in gender premises, such as one of the free woman who is a hard worker and head of her family, who accumulates many more functions in modern societies, facing challenges and becoming capable of handling more functions inside and outside the household.

However, it is important to highlight that empowerment is a conflictive process. It is a constant search for changes in the power relations that exist and are diffused in our culture. To understand empowerment, it is necessary to take into account that its start and end are not well defined and that it is not the same for different women. Empowerment is different for each individual or group, according to their history of life, culture, and territory.

Seasonality, violence(s) and health

To Minayo^{33,34}, violence is a complex phenomenon that is created and developed daily in intergroup and interpersonal relations. The author highlights that a more suitable term would be “violences”, as it involves a number of factors expressed in humane actions of individuals, social classes, and groups, resulting in violent acts such as deaths or damage to physical, mental, moral or spiritual integrity.

It is fundamental to integrate reflections about the connections between violence and health, establish dialogs between the academy and professionals acting at the forefront, as well as to understand the transversality in which violence crosses public health and manifests itself in different scenarios. The municipalities where the present research was conducted are renowned for their urban violence, especially due to territorial disputes between drug traffic gangs, who fight for the right to supply the tourist market,

resulting in murders, rapes, and robberies.

In short, the coast of Parana is comprised of two distinctive scenarios: Summer, when there is a great flux of people and structural reinforcements made by the State, both in public health and in public security; and Winter, comprising the majority of the year, with abandonment and scarcity of public policies. It is a scenario of deep contrasts, in which seasonality directly influences the locals' way of life. Important anthropological studies aim to understand seasonality as a social fact. Marcel Mauss³⁵ and Evans-Prichard^{36,37} analyze how the way of life in specific environmental contexts become collective experiences, in which representations are constructed according to the logic of each specific society.

Peculiar differences are noticeable in this territory, such as inequality of opportunities and seasonal changes, and become particularly evident regarding public security, especially as shifts harm family life and health:

"...Our shift is demanding, as we have a 12-hour shift followed by a 24-hour break or a 12-hour shift followed by a 48-hour break, being called for one reinforcement in our 48 hours off. It is exhausting. It makes it difficult to spend time with our families, it affects our psychological functions..." *"... Ever since I joined the force, I have not spent one Christmas Day with my children. "...These shifts harm our health, altering sleep routines every day, one day I need caffeine to keep myself awake, on the other, I take sleeping pills, we get old really fast, we ravage our health..."* (Loreta – 37 years old - Military Police Officer)

Minayo and Adorno² present an important contribution in their article regarding the reflection of the police officers as producers and consumers of public security. The police officer compromises his own safety in order to ensure the safety of others and pays a steep price for it. The authors state that collective security cannot be obtained by neglecting the security of the law enforcers, underneath the cruel excuse of a supposed vocation for heroism. Such concepts converge with this study, as one participant reports exactly that:

"... This is a dangerous profession; we risk our lives. We lack proper equipment. Dealing with prisoners is always a surprise, when they rebel it is so stressful, and we worry because the [female] professional is always the target of rapes..." *"...Our biggest and worst concern is with our families, we have a label, we are threatened inside and outside work, and our family sometimes pays this price. My son has been threatened many times. It is terrible*

to live in constant alert..." (Flavia – 33 years old – Correctional Officer).

The dimensions of violence below were faced by these public security professionals during the stages of the study in which their daily work routine was followed and was also present in their speeches: 1) urban violence, which is the social phenomenon of a deliberately transgressive and aggressive behavior, presented by the group of citizens or part of them, in the boundaries of the urban space, i.e. the violence these women are exposed to when answering distress calls on the streets; 2) gender violence, characterized by asymmetrical power relations resulting from the fact that they are women; 3) institutional violence, present inside public security institutions, especially related to the hierarchical structure that dominates the system, resulting in occupational stress and psychological suffering, which adds to the sickening of this category of women.

Additional factors seen as challenges to their collective health include work overload and unhealthy work conditions. These issues affect family life, causing professional dissatisfaction. Last, but not least, the interviews also showed these women's feelings of professional and personal devaluation from the State as well as from the population. These aspects and their repercussions need to be pondered when planning and executing health actions for all women that are a part of the group of public security workers.

Final considerations

The present study aimed to show the dense and conflictive context of negotiations to which these women are exposed, imbricated in power and hierarchical relations. It also presented their work routine, which is noticeably permeated by inequalities of gender, in an environment of institutionalized violence, materialized by prejudicial and discriminatory attitudes resulting from them being women, and even cases of moral and sexual harassment. However, it was also possible to observe a meaningful phenomenon related to these women's empowerment through work, breaking socially imposed taboos and climbing important positions in the corporation. For the participants of this study, being a woman means to be more than one, performing multiple functions: daughter, wife, mother, professional, housewife, head of household. In this sense, public and private spaces merge, which can be conflicting and complex to these women, since by exposing themselves

to different kinds of risks they also fear for their family, especially their children.

The seasonal influence was also an important aspect identified by this study, as it permeates the spheres of public health and security due to the defining power it has over the way of life of groups or societies subject to this dynamic. Female public security professional and the population as a whole experience two different lifestyles, one during Summer, and one throughout the rest of the year. Throughout the year (except during Summer), the territory lacks the structures it needs in public security and health, a dynamic that possibly affects other similar territories. Another notable factor were the precarious work conditions that have direct results in the relationship between health and disease, unhealthy environments with work overload in more active periods, and lack of public security professionals and equipment in the winter period. Work reverberates in these women's personal and social life, especially the risk and threats their families are exposed to, causing heavy emotional and psychological trauma due them being in a constant alert state, especially because these are small towns, where public security professionals are easily identified and become easy targets for criminals and gangs.

The limitations of such study should also be pointed out. Being an ethnographic study, this is a partial interpretation of a specific reality, since the influence of the researchers directly affects the process. Ethnographic studies never aim to exhaust the research object, but rather to translate a problem into a specific space and time frame. Differently from statistical studies that can have their results applied to other scenarios, it is pos-

sible that this study is restricted to the researched territory, or presents convergences towards other locations, particularly those marked by seasonal dynamics. At the same time, the potential for this method is evidenced by Public Health studies^{38,39}. In this sense, one of the greatest contributions to the Public Health field consists of the level of depth an ethnographic study such as this one is capable of translating. The length of stay in the field, associated with a more in-depth study of theories, allows for a reflective view of these professionals, which perhaps could be more difficult to obtain using other methodologies.

This study revealed the complexity of violences these women and their families are exposed to in their work, inside their own institution, and on the streets, being gender one of the main elements of the intersection. During field research, one of the main intentions was to give these women a "voice", in the broader sense, as they talked about their yearnings and fears in setting in which access and dialog are difficult and everything is veiled. Thus, it is expected that this study results in discussions regarding the dilemmas lived by these professionals, promoting visibility to their yearnings. The subjective experience of these women is still invisible for official statistics of public security, possibly not only in Parana. Therefore, an important strategy for enabling this visibility would be to know who these women are, what are their work routines, which challenges they face on the job, and to discuss their reality. We hereby hope this study has been able to contribute to the construction of sensible knowledge regarding gender issues, collaborating with the reduction of asymmetries between men and women.

Collaborations

D Schneider was responsible for conducting field research and writing this paper, which was based on her Master's thesis. MC Signorelli acted as her advisor and was the first one to envision this paper. PPG Pereira helped by revising and approving the final version presented here.

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