

Two pathways for women to take to stop gender-based partner violence

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Abstract. Women trapped by the gender-based violence of their partners have to travel a lengthy pathway to recognise and confront it, before they can ultimately halt break the pattern. This is a highly complex, painful and heterogeneous process in which women pass through various phases. There are two pathways to breaking the pattern: one is based on positive factors that foster the empowerment of women, and the other revolves around negative factors that lead to their exhaustion and destruction. Measures that foster the economic and subject autonomy of women have proven decisive in the process of halting and overcoming gender-based violence. This has demonstrated the ineffectiveness of a large proportion of the public measures directed at women affected by gender-based violence. A radical change in these measures is therefore urgent. Social work is a decisive profession – perhaps the decisive profession – in supporting women through their processes of confronting, halting and overcoming gender-based violence, particularly in the case of women who are more vulnerable to it.

Keywords: gender; social work; empowerment; vulnerability.

Summary: Introduction. 1. Methodology. 2. Previous considerations. 3. Beginning, evolution and consciousness of GBV. 3.1. The path to consciousness. 3.2. Evolution of their feelings. 3.3. Strategies to stop GBV. 3.4. Aggravation. 3.5. Reactions of the women's environment on learning about GBV. 3.6. Partial break-ups. 4. From consciousness to final break-up. 4.1. Negative Enabling Factors. 4.2. Positive Enabling Factors. 4.3. The two ways to breaking up. 5. Essential factors for the break-up. 6. Conclusions. 7. References.

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Introduction²

Gender-based violence (GBV onwards) is one of the most serious problems in our society nowadays. It is a consequence of the patriarchal system that promotes unequal relationships between men and women (Miranda, 2007), encouraging men's dominance and women's subordination.

GBV, understood as the one exerted by men to secure privileges that culture has given them and women's role provides them (Nogueiras, 2011), has multiple expressions. One of the most important is violence in heterosexual couples' relationships.

GBV has hit the headlines more and more often in our societies thanks to the powerful social movements led by women in different parts of the world, which are reclaiming a radical change in policies. In our country, new and more resources have been implemented to tackle this problem. But, unfortunately, the results show the failure of most of these strategies, which are focused on the judicialization of GBV. We should review what is happening with the intervention processes. In many of them, social work is involved.

This article will show how women go through different stages since they are aware of the violence that their partner exerts on them until

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they are able to break with it. The differences among these ways are going to determine the success of the break-up with that violence and the overcoming of the trauma suffered in their life, in their children's lives and in their families and friends.

Social work is the profession that plays a crucial role in accompanying women and their children in their process that usually lasts years. The expertise and the professional competence are going to help them reduce the number of years of suffering. Our responsibility as social workers is huge. Knowing and understanding the processes that affect women in order to carry out correct social interventions suitable to each woman is an enormous challenge. Not all the interventions are good or efficient. Some of them even make them feel victims again.

1. Methodology

The results exposed here are, basically, some conclusions of my doctoral thesis³, which tries to show the factors that help women who suffer from GBV break up and overcome it. The field work was carried out with qualitative methodology. In-depth interviews, triangular interviews and group dynamics were used.

In the first stage of the field work (2012) I interviewed 50 women of different ages, backgrounds and social classes. They shared these criteria: they had experienced at least a break-up after suffering GBV, they were happier after the break-up and they had made personal progress.

The interviews were semi-structured. Women taking part in them were referred by professionals from the public services and entities that intervene in GBV cases in La Rioja. One of the purposes of this work was to give voice to women with situations of vulnerability/exclusion, who are usually not included in this kind of investigations. To this end, these interviews were carried out: 21 migrants, 2 prison inmates and another former prisoner, 4 with disabilities, 3 older than 65 years old, 11 from the rural world, 1 who had had addiction problems, 1 gypsy and 3 in other situations of social exclusion.

Seven interviews from the total of 50 were excluded because the women had not managed to overcome the GBV. The interviews were audio recorded, except for the 2 of them that were carried out in prison. The average duration of each interview is close to 2 hours.

In the second stage (May 2013), 4 triangular interviews with 12 professionals expert in GBV (social workers, psychologists, family doctor and psychiatrist) from different institutions were carried out.

Furthermore, three group dynamics with women were carried out (June and July 2013). The first one was a focal group with women from the groups⁴ from the Logroño municipal project "*Autonomía en femenino plural*" ("Autonomous women") to compare the different coping processes – women in violent couple relationships and women with other situations of personal crisis- with the aim of exploring similarities and differences between both coping processes. The other two group dynamics were composed of women who had been part of the individual interviews in the first stage.

Data analysis of all interviews (individual, professional and group) was realized with the program ATLAS.ti v.4.1. The rigorous ethical and methodological aspects of the field work can be consulted directly in the corresponding section of the doctoral thesis.

In this article some testimonies of the women will be shown, pointed out at the end of the quotations as follows: (W-woman-. Interview number)

2. Previous considerations

Before continuing, it is necessary to remark four fundamental questions:

The heterogeneity

Each and every couple's relationship with GBV has its own particular character. The original way in which the diverse types of factors are combined to form the identity of each woman (from the closest ones - personal and from the close socio-cultural context - to the most structural ones) and each man create unique

³ The doctoral thesis can be freely accessed (see final bibliography) where the methodological process followed (professionals and entities that referred women, detailed profiles of each one as well as the reasons for exclusion) as well as some unexpected results of the techniques used, are gathered in an exhaustive manner.

⁴ Support groups for women in vital crisis situations. The participants in the dynamic had not experienced GBV in a couple.

violent couple relationships (García and Casado, 2010). Diversity characterizes: the moment and forms of beginning of the GBV, its evolution, the ways in which the woman perceives it and understands it, the confrontations of the situation, the break-up and the later itinerary of overcoming.

Although for expository reasons processes will be described here from a general framework, it is essential to keep in mind this heterogeneity and uniqueness in the professional approach to each woman –and her environment– affected by GBV.

The naturalization and invisibility

Violence against women is present in one form or another in all social relationships, dominated by structural gender inequality. Its naturalization, the result of patriarchy, makes it difficult for both professionals and women to reveal it. There is a very significant part of women directly affected by GBV who are not aware of it.

Its enormous consequences

The dramatic and devastating consequences that this violence produces have been highlighted in a great profusion of national and international studies, generating consensus about the harmful effects it produces on women's health (Valls, 2008) in the short, medium and long term. It affects their health, dignity, safety and autonomy. It has an impact on other people who live with them (children, dependent persons). It hinders their social and economic participation. It influences the probability of having a job and the possibilities of promotion. It produces a tendency to occupy low-skilled jobs, lower salaries, higher absenteeism rate and job loss. GBV impoverishes women, their families and communities. Being a woman who has experienced GBV increases the likelihood of being stigmatized.

Most vulnerable women

Although all women are equally exposed to GBV since they are women (a structural variable), not all women will experience it and face it in the same way. There are situations that increase their vulnerability to GBV in direct relation to their economic and subjective dependence (Aretio, 2015). The following stand

out: migration, social exclusion, poverty, functional diversity, residence in the rural world, minority ethnicity, high age...

3. Beginning, evolution and consciousness of GBV

GBV does not emerge suddenly. Neither the woman nor the man is positioned equally from the beginning. There is a long and complex evolution until women give way to the definitive break-up. Imperceptible changes follow each other, generating an enveloping dynamic that captures them more strongly as time goes by.

It can be clearly present almost from the beginning of the relationship (courtship) or it can be emerging more underhandedly. It is cooked slowly, in a subtle way, covered with romantic love, masking dominance and control. It includes the isolation of support networks and own spaces as well as the undermining of women's projects linked to spheres of autonomy. Despite the heterogeneity, there is a typical itinerary regarding the initial forms of expression of violence, from less to more serious intensity. Psychological abuse is present in all relationships; physical abuse is the least frequent. Sexual, social and economic abuses are highly invisible.

3.1. The path to consciousness

It is a long process in time. At first, women perceive a non-specific discomfort, disenchantment, contradictions. They have less capacity to dialogue with their partner, to decide. An encirclement that narrows, disorienting them, undermining their previous references. They do not know how to put a name to the deep regret that is emerging in their lives. Their castle, built on unconditional surrender, begins to crumble, minimizing behaviors of control and domination. They still cannot see what they are not prepared to find. Many come to recognize a great distance between their previous ideal of life as a couple and reality, but they still seek justification for the aggressor's behavior. In this way, they tend to blame themselves for the failure of the relationship.

But the discomfort advances, preventing them from ceasing the search for explanations. They begin to think that the causes are not in them, but in their relationship.

The path of consciousness goes through stages, in order to accept reality and name violence. In addition, the stereotype that associates GBV almost exclusively with explosive outbursts of very serious physical violence makes it difficult for them to recognize other types of violence before.

Within the heterogeneity, there are some outstanding elements that help in this lucidity. One of them is the diminished purpose of amendment in their partners. Another one is the physical aggressions, as well as the increase in seriousness of the usual aggressions; or the economic mistreatment when it causes material deficiencies in the daily life; or some appropriate and timely professional interventions. The media can also be very useful, especially when there is intense social isolation.

This process of discernment involves some previous steps, such as assuming one's own individuality. Traditional female socialization

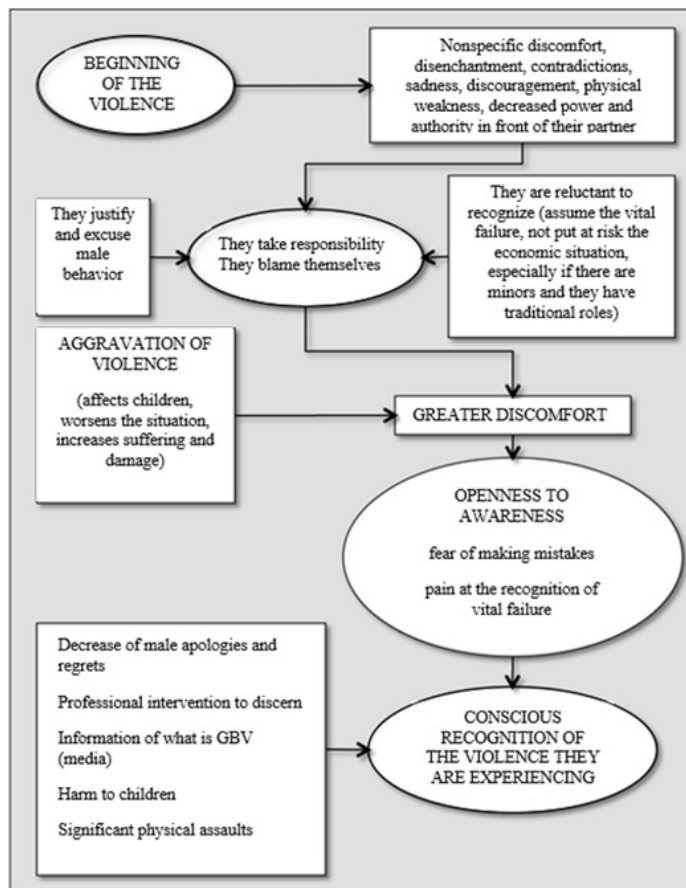
revolves around every decision. The command to take care of children and other people in their family above their own needs (Lagarde, 2000) conditions that many women, sensing the situation of abuse, do not want to consciously enter into it. This variable acquires greater weight in older women. But when they perceive that GBV directly harms their descendants, there is a change: it is one of the important reasons for recognizing it.

But it is not until sometime after the break-up has taken place that they are fully aware of what they have experienced.

It is when you escape from mistreatment that you become aware of what has actually happened to you (W.29).

To summarize, the process of consciousness includes various stages collected⁵ in this way:

Figure 1: Process of women's awareness of gender-based violence.



Source: author's own elaboration.

⁵ Bearing in mind that it is a standard process that does not completely capture the heterogeneity of all women's processes.

3.2. Evolution of their feelings

They emerge parallel to the cognitive process of knowing oneself as a “battered woman”.

At first, they experience moments of confusion, insecurity and ambivalence; disappointment is constant. Later, the sensation of failure appears. To realize their mistake attracts feelings of excessive responsibility, almost guilt. Although they try to minimize the violence they have received, they experience contradictions that allow them to remain alert and move forward.

But violence is installed: it increases discomfort, loss of control, emptiness and disorientation. Their self-esteem gradually drops, as does the feeling of competence to turn the situation around.

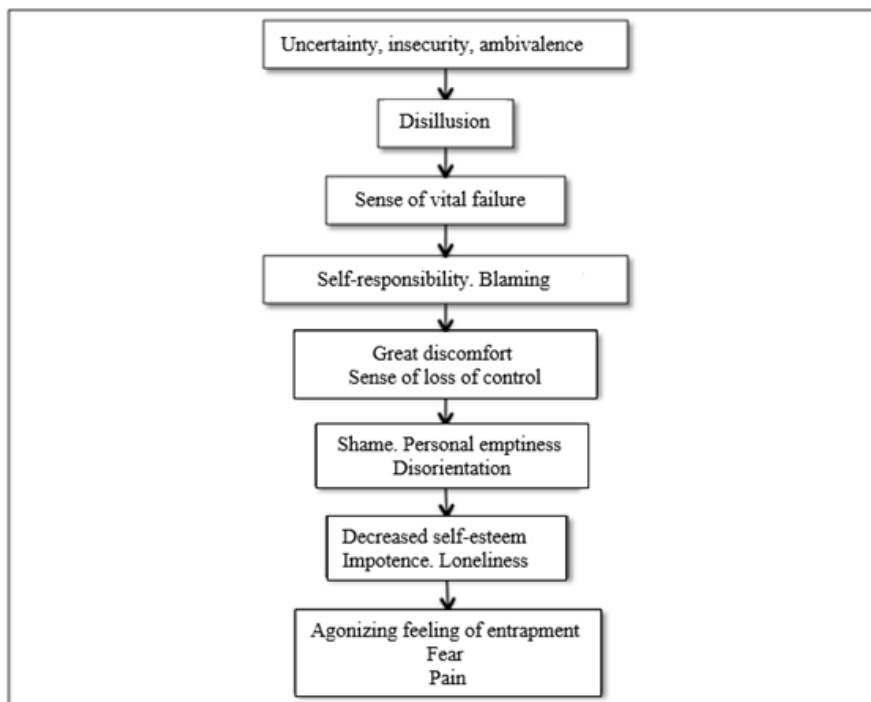
To recognize oneself as a woman trapped by GBV is very painful, especially when they are weakened. Furthermore, “to know oneself as a victim without having the psychological resources to react adequately is devastating” (Dio, 2011).

The pain, shame, feeling of failure, insecurity, together with the isolation and lack of social support, push them to live this experience in solitude. It is a more and more agonizing vicious circle, from which it is more difficult to get out as time goes by.

The violence continues: fear appears in all women. Then they can consider the break-up as a solution.

The following figure shows this process. The intensity of most emotions will increase over time, adding up to the moment when fear envelops the others.

Figure 2: Evolution of feelings as the awareness of GBV advances.



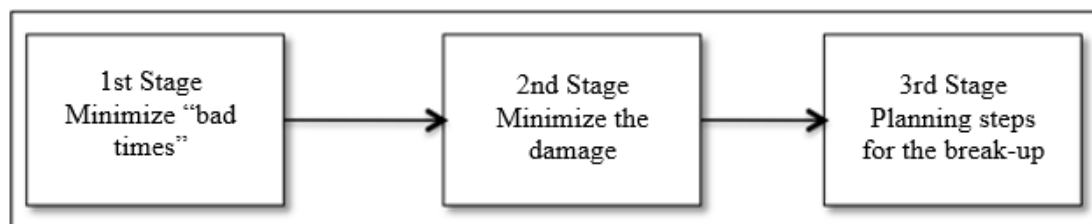
Source: author's own elaboration.

3.3. Strategies to stop GBV

Women are very active in plotting strategies from the beginning to minimize GBV and “save” their partners. These are multiple and adapted both to the situation and possibilities of each one as well as to the coherence with the three stages through which they seem to pass

in their exhausting determination. At first, they rely on their own ability to control the violence. As they see that it is going to happen anyway, whatever they do, their maneuvers will be aimed at suffering as little as possible. Finally, assuming that their partner is not going to change, they plan actions aimed at breaking up.

Figure 3: Stages to minimize violence.



It shows the activity of each woman throughout the process and her immense effort to get out of the violence.

3.4. Aggravation

Many of them point out that episodes with physical and/or sexual violence constitute a leap to greater severity in the violent escalation. Many of them have never been physically assaulted, but the psychological violence ends up being as devastating -or even more- as the physical one. In spite of such heterogeneity, there is a common thread: the feeling of loss of control and the emergence of fear, panic and weakness, present in their lives from a certain stage onwards.

The time when each woman decides to continue in the relationship despite the violence is diverse. Their testimonies reveal an intense reflective process where each one weighs up elements for and against, breaking down the image of passivity and of little or mistaken capacity to discern what is projected onto them.

In relation to moments of extreme violence, present in one part of the relationships, one can see their symbolic and contextual complexity. Far from being the only reason for the break-up, they can be a very powerful incident that contributes to drain the resistance of each woman.

The severity of the changes women experience from GBV leaves their lives (and those of their children) devastated for a long time. Some consequences will be forever (Simon, 2017).

3.5. Reactions of the women's environment on learning about GBV

Women do not live this process of violence in a vacuum. The reactions of their close environment (family, social and professional support) are very relevant. The support they receive is

decisive in their process towards breaking up. Qualitatively and quantitatively, support from family and friends has proven to be more effective. The professional intervenes much less in the stages prior to the break-up. Friends provide much appreciated support, especially for migrant women; for many of them, friends are their only source of help. Sometimes abusers also put pressure on family and friends. Negative attitudes and beliefs about GBV still persist in all three types of support, making effective help difficult.

3.6. Partial break-ups

Some women are involved in non-definitive break-ups; they agree to reconciliation by giving new opportunities to their partners. The reasons for which they decide to break off the relationship at the beginning are no different from those given by women who make a definitive break-up. However, they encounter some unforeseen situations that "push" them to return to their aggressor. Among the most relevant are:

- Economic dependence, labor and conciliation problems: job insecurity, late and/or insufficient public aid, difficulties in taking care of their children.
- Affective dependence on the aggressor, feeling of guilt.
- Fear and death threats.
- Pressure from their family (including their children) and social environment to give them a new opportunity.
- Legal difficulties: secondary revictimization in courts, wrong and/or deficient advice, fear of losing custody of their children.
- Insufficient preparation (material). The break-up consumes a lot of energy and resources that, unless planned, are often not available. It causes too much lack and insecurity in them and their environment.

4. From consciousness to final break-up

There is no single moment or event that generates the break-up. It is a process that is rooted in the particular set of experience of each woman.

After consciousness, fear and pain usually advance to the point where they consider a way out and organize themselves for it. This process can last a long time, even years (in more traditional women and with less support).

Women agree that they experience a moment when they feel that the decision and possibility of the break-up is in their hands: they feel competent. That is a “revealing” moment that places them at the center of their responsibility and autonomy. All of them have clearly perceived this. A moment of liberation (Pérez-Portabella, 2011), which they find difficult to reach: they come from a relationship where their self-determination has been mutilated. From then on, the scenario is different: they organize their forces for separation.

You start thinking about it more and more and it was clear to me that I didn't want that for my entire life (...). That's when I secretly opened a bank account for myself... (W.40)

Since women decide to cut until the moment the break-up occurs, the time spent varies according to circumstances and available resources. Decisive factors are found, which can be grouped into two blocks:

- Negative: they produce pain and suffering.
- Positive: they allow women to improve their situation (physical, psychological and social) through a process of empowerment while continuing in the violent bond.

4.1. Negative Enabling Factors

Among them are:

- Moments of extreme violence and/or when this violence becomes public. Far from being the sole reason for the break-up, they can be a very powerful incident in changing their decision.
- The aggressor's relapse into the violence after the woman agrees to live together after a partial break-up.
- Perception of the harm that violence produces in their descendants. Two commands

are contradictory: the one of supporting the partner/family and the one of care and protection of their children. This is one of the most powerful reasons to promote the break-up as soon as possible.

- Important pressures from their close environments.
- Exhaustion, great deteriorating health and extreme suffering after years of violence (8 years on average, according to the 2015 Macro Survey of the Government Delegation for the GBV). Women no longer have the strength to continue.
- Almost total loss of control over the situation. They know that the evolution will only get worse; there is no hope for change. At that point the suicidal desires, or even the feeling that the death threats of their aggressor will come true, place the women in an extreme situation in which, combined with other circumstances, those may be the ultimate trigger for breaking up.
- Conflicts with sexuality (discovery of partner's infidelity, systematic rape, rejection of women's bodies...). They question their identity and the role within that couple for which they have endured and maintained sexual and emotional exclusivity. It causes a decisive break in their self-esteem.
- Important economic damages (systematic economic abuse, lack of basic needs...) even when they are the economic supporters of the family.

This whole set of negative enabling factors (and others similar to them) leads to a final state of exhaustion: women cannot continue to endure violence. Along the way they have lost health, energy and their best illusions of life. They are devastated, some on the verge of death and/or suicide. They have given their partners every opportunity to change, and only when the situation becomes very serious, do they understand the nonsense of continuing to sustain the relationship -once the feeling of guilt for having done everything they could is removed. When they reach this exhausting position, they recognize: “I can't take it anymore”. At that moment, any small or large incident works as a definitive trigger for the break-up. That incident should not be understood outside the whole context and evolutionary process of each woman in the relationship and, sometimes, within the whole of her life.

When the break-up takes place mainly from the influence of many negative factors is characterized by pain, extreme weakening, and destruction of the woman. It is a “negative” way out, called Track A.

You come to a point when you realize “there are no more opportunities”. (...) it’s the feeling of fear that makes you take the step (...), the feeling of your life leaving you immediately (W.43).

4.2. Positive Enabling Factors

They are multiple and diverse. They are characterized by the ability to place women in another scenario marked by hope and access to some rights, breaking the suffocating dynamics of domination. Some of the most significant are:

- Effective and sufficient support of all kinds (instrumental, material, informative, affective) received from family, friends and social network as well as from the professional circuit, which helps them evaluate the situation differently and accompany them in the transit.
- Access to diverse spaces –work and/or social spaces– of more egalitarian relationships where they receive an image of greater esteem and recognition that increases their competence for change.
- Access to alternative models of being a woman. Knowing that relationships can be based on respect and equality. Having references from a different future allows them to rethink their present. They cut with the GBV encouraged by the desire of a better life within their reach. In general, all processes that favor their personal and social empowerment to understand that they have the right to a different life. Within this block it is important to participate in group spaces (Zamanillo, 2008); better shaped from a gender perspective (Millán, 2019). They are very valuable tools for providing them with alternative references and giving them experiences and opportunities (Burin, 2002).

This group of positive supports as a whole allows women to change their world of reference, and progressively initiate a necessary process of “identity deconstruction”: from

inequality and subordination to a horizon of greater independence and respect (Lagarde, 2000). They conquer spaces of economic and/or psychological autonomy while still being paired with their aggressor. It is a path towards a new identity which allows them to position themselves differently: autonomous and empowered women. In this position they begin to recognize: “I don’t want to live like this”, “I don’t deserve this”, “I want and wish to live differently”. This moment of awareness of their dignity and worth allows them to evaluate their relationship and conclude that continuing with their partner does not compensate them. They begin the journey towards autonomy within the violent bond. This new way of asserting themselves in front of their partners will make it possible for them to break up completely afterwards.

It is a path to a break-up based on progressive empowerment and greater availability of support. A “positive” way out, called Track B.

I knew I had to get out of that relationship (...) then I started working, going to meeting, attending a course, meeting new people (...) I started thinking and realizing (...) those were the first things that helped me (W.6).

The mixture of both types of facilitating factors (positive and negative) characterizes Track C. In this way, the availability of diverse support and the fear experienced after extreme moments of violence take on greater importance.

4.3. The two ways to breaking up

In the varied journey of each woman towards break-up (whether negative or positive facilitating factors are more present) the various psychosocial and structural variables are particularly combined. A path traversed by qualitatively different stages, which lead to the moment of conscious and autonomous positioning of each one to affirm her desire and will to break the bond that chains her to the aggressor.

What is significant in all the biographies is that in the process of GBV the time and energy that each woman has, including her margin of resistance, is like a container (different for each one) that is progressively filled in the course of the relationship. Every event, incident, insult, denial, contempt, infidelity, harassment,

exploitation, humiliation... counts until a moment comes when it is overwhelming and the woman is placed in another situation. In all cases it is as if they have reached the limit of their capacity to endure GBV and support their partner, regardless of each of the specific reasons more or less close to the decision of the final break-up.

Women break up with the relationship when their particular vessel overflows and/or when they feel they do not deserve and/or do not want to live like this from their dignity. That moment leads them to conclude that it is not worth it to continue with their partner: they cannot and/or do not want to. They have to feel this clearly at some point or the regret for the loss will cause a return to the relationship or a very pronounced grief.

After this process of discernment and overall evaluation of their experience as a couple, many express "this is as far as I go!" (Cantera, 2004). From that key moment on, they position themselves and their partners in a different way: they have already started the path of loneliness, the couple is over (although some of them still have to live with their aggressors for some time while they solve legal or other issues such as housing, economy,...). They are not going to make any more efforts to save the bond. All their energies are directed towards organizing their new life, for which they now feel responsible. They know there is no turning back. It is a very significant moment: women have a high awareness of what it means; their self-determination is very strong. If the social and professional supports had not been present before, this is the ideal moment in which all should conjugate to support women in this stage of transit towards their new life, showing alternatives, facilitating resources, trusting in their capacity of election.

From the time they decide to separate from the abuser until they do so, the timeframes can be very varied. Some women resolve it in a few weeks; others take many months. They all need to prepare to change their lives. In the former, usually after a very violent incident, but there are also those who make the decision because fears or difficulties that kept them tied to the relationship fade away. When the break-up takes long, it is often due to women's plans to leave in better conditions: they save, they wait for their descendants to be older, or to have a job that allows them economic autonomy, or they take

steps towards a progressive improvement of their self-esteem or physical recovery.

In any case, there are no reasons for the break-up independent of the context and history of each relationship. What is a cause of break-up for one woman may be a minor reason for another. Despite the heterogeneity of experiences, there is a common pattern. All women reach a point where they feel they cannot and/or will not sustain the relationship any longer. It is the process that is relevant, not the specific incident.

Not everyone takes the step with the same conviction. Some have reported that it has been circumstances triggered at a particular time that have ended up changing their position. It is usually people close to them (who see them suffering a lot and with ambivalence before the decision) who do, or provoke something, that ends up leading them to the break-up. Their adult (or minor) children play a prominent role, even putting pressure on them to break up. Also, family members, close friends, co-workers, and even professional pressure can precipitate the moment of break-up.

A classification can be established according to the precise moment when the physical separation of the couple occurs:

- planned
- hasty.

In the planned break-up, women make the transition with greater serenity, foresight and awareness of what is happening. They decide with sufficient elements of judgment. They have precise support both within the family, social network and public services. Children, if any, experience transit with less urgency, without their lives being disrupted. Women may even have recovered quite physically and emotionally. It is a more orderly process, better respecting the rhythms and needs of both women and their descendants. They are the protagonists of the process, they decide progressively about the multitude of elements on which to make determinations. This planned break-up coincides more with Track B, the "positive" exit.

In the case of a hasty rupture, the probability of losing control of the situation and rights—due to ignorance, many are not exercised—increases, as does the probability of increasing collateral damage (including children). Women perceive the process as chaotic; they do not know very

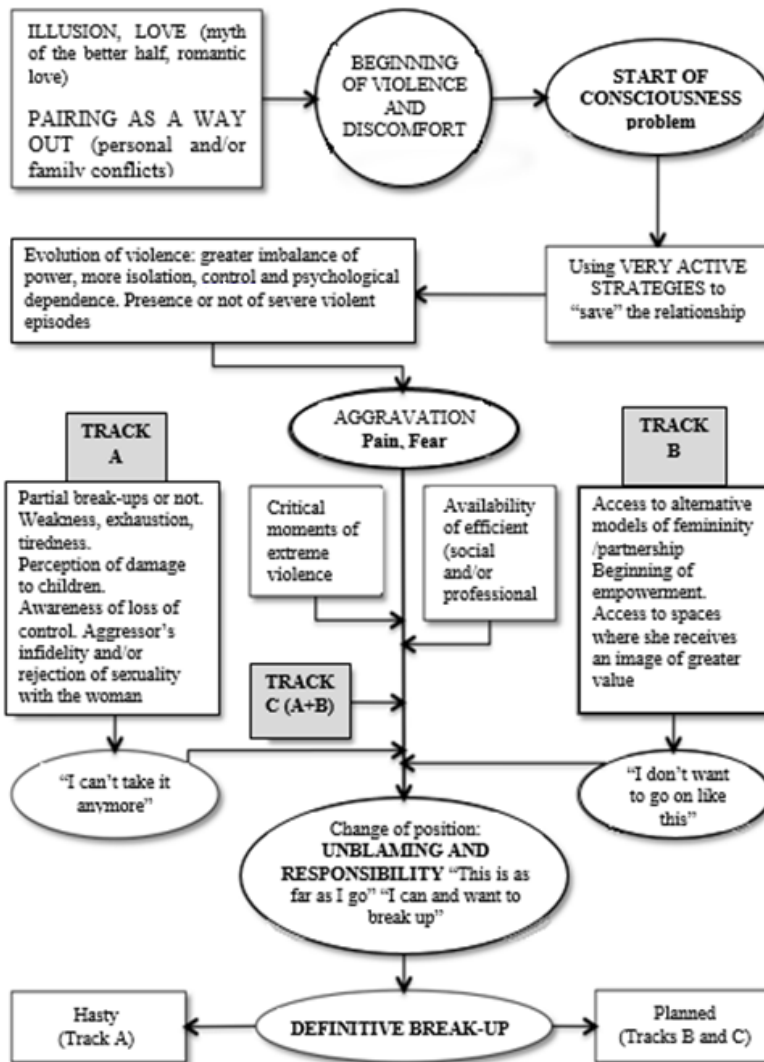
well either what they are saying or to whom they are telling (if they report it, they usually make many statements chained in time before different professionals, almost without rest and/or with much physical and psychological weakness). Their descendants go through those days as if a strange force were pushing them back and forth, living moments of certain helplessness. A vortex that envelops them all. Sometimes women are tempted to turn back to recover part of their previous life perceived in that transit as less chaotic. This hasty rupture coincides more with Track A, the “negative” exit.

The consequences of breaking up in one way or another are very different and relevant.

The path taken determines the well-being of each woman and her family as well as their feeling of having made the right decision.

As a synthesis of the process that women go through from the pairing to the break-up, the following figure is offered, which includes the most relevant moments of the process and the influential factors at each stage. After the stage of aggravation and notable presence of the pain, two exit routes are drawn (three including the mixed C) that are characterized by the greater or lesser autonomy and empowerment that the woman acquires in them. These, in turn, make it easier for the break-up to take place in a planned or hasty manner.

Figure 4: From pairing to breaking up in a violent heterosexual relationship.



Source: author’s own elaboration.

5. Essential factors for the break-up

In addition to the above, and as a great framework that encompasses the process of the break-up, there is a direct relationship between the power (personal and social) that each woman has and the greater probability of leading a break-up and overcoming in less time and with less suffering.

There are two sets of factors that have a determining influence: those that allow **economic autonomy** and those that enable **subjective autonomy**. Autonomy understood as self-government (Murillo, 2011). They are the key to achieving the empowerment of women. Thus, it can be stated that:

- As long as a woman achieves both, she overcomes the GBV.
- If a woman has difficulty in achieving either or both of the two aspects of autonomy, she will either stay longer or not be able to overcome the GBV.

When economic dependence is combined with the existence of dependent descendants, the chronicity in the GBV increases, as well as the greater difficulty in cutting off the relationship and overcoming it. If this is added to a situation of scarce and insufficient support to reconcile the care of this/these, the panorama becomes dramatic (Moriana, 2015).

I thought who is going to take care of my child? (W.24).

The most vulnerable situations are the ones that most inhibit autonomy. They are diverse, as stated at the beginning. If several coincide in a woman, their negative effects are multiplied in an exponential way. Some of these variables are more present in the most vulnerable women: greater preeminence of patriarchal values and roles, less economic autonomy, less access to public services and greater difficulty with the support received from their social networks, which aggravate and make the GBV chronic.

Sons and daughters are a fundamental factor that conditions both breaking up and overcoming. The influence they exert on women to maintain or break up with GBV is complex and evolves through various phases. In general terms, the chain of meaning follows this axis: from being a reason to maintain the bond and

preserve the patriarchal nuclear family model, to perceiving the suffering they receive because of GBV, to finally being one of the main motivations for the break-up.

The separation does not automatically imply the cease of the GBV; much less the overcoming of the GBV (Murillo, 2011). Among other means, the aggressors use their children to continue exercising violence. Women and their descendants continue to suffer. Subsequent harassment is so persistent that many women consider returning to the relationship.

Professional support is more effective to the extent that:

- It detects the GBV in an early way.
- It respects women's self-determination, rhythms and needs.
- It establishes a good link and there is a reference figure.
- It plans the break-up with time, coordination and adequate resources.
- It ensures effective coordination if it is initiated in moments of urgency/severity/denunciation.

6. Conclusions

- Women have revealed the complex reality of GBV. Each one lives a particular process where personal, psychosocial and structural variables are differentially interwoven. They demand in the professional intervention an individualized and exhaustive look at their stories in order to listen and reveal together with them the plots that sustain the violent process in each unique relationship, within its evolutionary context. It implies evaluating the internal dynamics of the two members of the couple (interaction of socio-cultural factors with specific ones), the psychosocial situation of each woman, the way she perceives herself and contemplates or not alternative ways out.
- Women need a new alternative frame of reference to enable them to change. They ask for self-determination in deciding how – including whether to file a complaint or not (Aretio, 2007) – and when to break up (or remain in the relationship). They demand to be agents of their own change process, leaving to the professional sector the role of accompaniment that facilitates their autonomy and empowerment.

- The two-track model questions most public interventions and policies, which focus on denouncing and forcing the immediate exit of GBV. It is necessary and urgent to reorient the focus on the processes of support for women, from awareness to empowerment, so that they are the ones who decide. It demands the provision of time and effective and enough professional and material means.
- Economic and subjective autonomy are the essential elements for the break-up with the GBV. Society has a direct responsibility in its achievement. It implies a radical change in the institutional approach to GBV, as well as to unblamed women for not achieving the break-up before.
- Women with some situation of vulnerability need much more support (diverse, intensive, specific, adapted to their needs and enough to overcome or minimize their condition/s of vulnerability) coordinated and synergic. Partial or insufficient support will reinforce the chronification and aggravation of GBV.
- Many of the decisive factors for awareness of and break with GBV are intimately linked to the competencies of social work, including the ability to accompany through the long process for subjective and economic autonomy. The proximity of this profession to the context of women (individual/family, group and community) (Rios, 2020) allows for a global approach adapted to the particular needs of each woman. For all these reasons, social work is one of the most relevant or “the” key profession in the intervention before GBV.
- Social workers need to improve their qualifications to intervene in GBV (Elboj and Ruiz, 2010). To help discern, show and facilitate alternatives. To welcome, to listen, to encourage, to promote strengths, to facilitate, to propitiate resources, to reinforce the social support (Andreu, 2017). To carry out interdisciplinary teamwork and networking (Navarro, 2004). To coordinate. To research.
- Social work that has to be done from the indispensable feminist perspective to help women unveil the patriarchal mandates that chain them to GBV and remove social structures to generate equal living conditions (Romero, 2019). To defend human rights, equality and social justice, violated by GBV and principles inherent in our profession (CGTS, 2019).
- All of these conclusions, and particularly the model of the two paths to break-up presented here, provide key differential elements to the academic and/or professional knowledge shared to date. They can encourage the elaboration of alternative training and intervention proposals from social work (also extended to other professional disciplines involved in this matter) in relation to GBV in order to be more respectful of the needs (particular and collective) of the women affected.

7. References

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