

IN DEPTH

Serious expressions of violence outside contexts of warfare

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A major concern since the end of the Second World War has been protection of civilians from the effects of violence caused by armed conflicts. These conflicts (inter-state and civil wars) are presently diminishing and are no longer the only setting of high-intensity violence affecting populations. In the period between the Second World War and the end of the Cold War, attention to armed conflict and violence was related with questions of disputed national sovereignty: conflicts between states or struggles between warring parties to obtain political control of a state. Violence that did not fit with such motivations received scant attention and was deemed to be *criminal*.[\[1 \]](#)

However, according to data of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, in today's world, "Criminal activity causes many more deaths than conflicts and terrorism combined. The 464,000 victims of homicide surpass by far the 89,000 killed in armed conflicts and the 26,000 fatal victims of terrorist violence in 2017."[\[2 \]](#) Furthermore, the number of transnational terrorist attacks is now greater than it has been at any time since 1970. The reach of criminal organisations extends across regions and countries.

According to the 2021 Global Peace Index of the Institute for Economics and Peace, violence is considered to be the greatest security risk in 49 out of 142 countries worldwide, while more than fifty percent of people in Afghanistan, Brazil, South Africa, Mexico, and the Dominican Republic say that violence is the greatest risk they face in their daily lives.

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Some expressions of violence which are not necessarily related with the existence of armed conflict but that most affect humanity are discussed below. They include violence encouraged by organised crime and its connections with political institutions; violence against the environment and the individuals and groups that defend it and claim their rights; violence resulting from gender inequality; violence produced by human trafficking and unlawful smuggling of migrants; and a series of forms of structural violence, including racism, poverty, and exclusion.

Criminal and political violence

Violence and criminality are part of a web of institutional and non-institutional power relations that are manifested in social interactions. These can range from micro expressions, power dynamics in territorially defined spaces, through to the macro types that are defined by state policy and their relationship with international interests.

The high rates of violence shown in countries where peace agreements have been signed to put an end to conventional or guerrilla warfare are the result of criminal or territorial dynamics. Armed conflicts may have been ended but the necessary ability to prevent transformation of the expressions of violence and their continuity is limited. The evidence reveals that, apart from the negative consequences of armed conflicts, there are also practices that boost profit-related benefits for some groups when political power is consolidated on the basis of the existence of an armed conflict. Criminality, as a social phenomenon, is a domain where these dynamics are reproduced and interconnected. Criminal networks seek to increase the benefits of armed conflict and adapt their activities so that they will continue to be profitable in post-conflict times. By means of mechanisms like corruption and clientelism, the political-criminal link, for example, enables the logic of benefits deriving from the conflict to shift to the public institutions after they undergo processes of reform following the signing of

peace agreements.

In these kinds of contexts, violence can be understood as a set of interconnections among different sections of society (including the state) shaping a system that feeds back on itself through a myriad of individual motives that generate violence as part of a scheme that produces benefits for some to the detriment of others. The economic profitability of this system is expressed in powerful illegal economies and political profiteering through corruption and clientelism which is exacerbated in periods of electoral competition. Violence, then, is the circuit that connects these many interests revolving around power and, essentially, political power. From formal guerrilla groups, terrorist bands, criminal rings, and gangs through to corrupt security forces and extermination and social cleansing organisations, they all actively participate in a system of violence directly related with politics in which the transition from the criminal to the political stage occurs through negotiation or overt demonstration of force by means of physical or symbolic aggression.

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Violence regularly occurs in places where there is no state presence and that are under the control of non-state groups which impose their power and delimit “invisible borders”, thus affecting people’s lives and mobility. These groups may be gangs or criminal organisations that produce an alternative social order as well as a system of power and resource allocation that provokes cycles of struggle to accede to, preserve, and transform the rules regulating political power. In order to secure territorial control, armed groups use violence against social actors who oppose their interests, and this increased control by non-state actors has been directly related with the upsurge in

armed social violence at the international level.

Violence and defence of land and the environment

Extractive activities and others generating, commercialising, and distributing energy have led to new expressions of conflict which, when not adequately addressed, aggravate pre-existing tensions related with systems of inequality, bias, exclusion, and discrimination that give rise to violent situations with repercussions at regional and national levels.

Access to, property of, and use of lands is another situation that causes conflict, especially with the expansion of the so-called monoculture crops and, most especially, the African palm. Concentration of land in very few hands, lack of access for most of the population concerned, the ecological impact because of loss of agricultural land, the devastating consequences for the soil, coercive land acquisition, and forced displacement are part of the problem of agrarian society in many areas. In these situations, when organised crime appears, attracted by the huge economic interests at stake, the conflicts become more complex and multidimensionality and multicausality acquire other characteristics and dimensions.

The struggle for the rights of populations that are vulnerable to agrarian conflicts is one of the reasons why so many human rights defenders have been killed. According to Front Line Defenders, 331 defenders were killed worldwide in 2020. Of these, 284 were in the Americas, with Colombia heading the list of numbers of murders (53% of the documented cases).

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With these controversies and attacks, there is a perception among a widespread range of social sectors that states are not fulfilling their obligation to safeguard the common

good, which then gives rise to mistrust towards and discrediting of the public institutions with the result that relations of respect and trust deteriorate to the point that they threaten governability.

The discontent of populations affected by what they see as violations of their human rights and attacks against their territory, traditional ways of life, and forms of organisation is expressed in “defence of the land” protests; demands made on the state; peaceful resistance and occupation of land [3] met with violent state responses.

Gender inequality and violence

Violence against women is the most exacerbated expression of patriarchal power relations in society and the historically unequal relations between men and women. As a structural part of the system, this kind of violence is perpetuated by means of social institutions including the family, schools, political and legal frameworks, and religion and belief systems, among others.

This kind of violence constitutes a violation of human rights, of equality and freedom while also restricting women’s access to resources and opportunities for fulfilment. This is a social problem, situated on a continuum that is exacerbated in situations of criminal violence and humanitarian crisis.

The levels of violence against women range from verbal harassment to physical and sexual abuse, with the maximum expression of femicide, or murder of women and girls because of their gender. The factors that influence this type of violence are linked to systems of patriarchal domination, but also to a series of inequalities or forms of exclusion that generate violence that must be analysed from the intersection of the sexism, racism, and classism that permeate the lives of women and men in different ways, depending on the context.

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Notwithstanding the advances that have been made in international regulations, women are generally ignorant about the laws and policies that protect them from these kinds of violence. Moreover, observers have identified many barriers to their accessing of channels of protection and care that would guarantee their rights. Hence, the tasks of consciousness raising in broad sectors of society, political advocacy with the institutions, and reflection on imaginaries and representations are all urgent priorities if women are to aspire to live free of violence.

Violence caused by human trafficking and smuggling of migrants

Globalisation has favoured an increase in these kinds of unlawful activities. Smuggling of refugees and migrants, as well as human trafficking, has given rise to increased numbers of victims of physical, sexual, and psychological violence on a global scale.

Human trafficking is “a criminal phenomenon of a nature that has been evolving until becoming a globalised, highly profitable practice that is now the second-largest illegal business, ahead of the drug trade, and only surpassed by the arms trafficking,” according to the Victoria García del Blanco.[\[4 \]](#)

The organisation *Ayuda en Acción* describes human trafficking as an illegal business that begins and ends with the movement of migrants who voluntarily contact a human trafficker with the aim of crossing a border. In this case, the trafficker takes advantage of the adverse situation of migrants to exploit them persistently for personal profit. Most of the victims are women and girls who are subjected to prostitution, sexual abuse, and illegal marriage.

Extreme poverty, scarcity of food, violence, and insecurity are factors that make people vulnerable to human smuggling and trafficking.

Starting in October 2018, a new strategy of mobilisation to confront this phenomenon is the organisation of caravans of migrants, mostly from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador with large numbers of people moving together, fleeing together, and coming from the same experience of exclusion. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM),^[5] the migrants believe that travelling together in caravans gives them greater protection from mafia groups since they are less exposed to crimes and abuses that often happen along the way; they have better chances of assistance from government entities and non-governmental organisations; and the related costs will be lower since there is less need to contract a coyote or trafficker to get them across borders.

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It is difficult to confront this kind of violence since it not only entails prosecution of mafia gangs, but it also requires responses to the structural problems that make people risk their lives or fall prey to smuggling and trafficking when they are trying to find better living conditions.

Structural violence

In addition to the direct forms of violence mentioned above, the significance of the various forms of structural violence cannot be overlooked. Racism is one of them. Appearing in very complex forms, it has become increasingly prevalent in many societies and, more and more, a key element of several social and political problems. In Europe, for example, racism has intensified in recent years owing to the “terrorist threat” and fear of immigration.^[6] Another example is the United States where economic and healthcare pressures on racial minorities and immigrants as well as the deeprooted racism against the African American population—which came to a head

with the murder of George Floyd—have led to a series of massive protests that were met with a repressive and violent police response.

Poverty and hunger come together in another kind of structural violence with devastating effects for millions of human beings and causing a much greater number of deaths than other more visibilised forms of violence. As José María Tortosa explains, increasing malnutrition has a huge human cost and is a breeding ground for violence since it places large numbers of the population in situations of vulnerability and thus becomes the trigger of possible social upheavals.[\[7\]](#)

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The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened some factors of these kinds of structural violence including existing inequality gaps since poverty levels have increased owing to the decline in economic activity as a result of confinement. Mainly affected, at the same time, are most of the informal economies on which a large part of the world’s population depends in order to survive. The pandemic has also exposed the fragility of many states which, unable to manage the problem and provide solutions for citizens’ demands, have resorted to authoritarian responses with major impacts on the levels of conflict and violence. According to the 2021 Global Peace Index, the worldwide level of civil unrest increased in 2020, largely driven by responses to the coronavirus restrictions. Many of these disturbances stemmed from social protest that channelled mass discontent and denounced injustice, corruption, inequalities, and restrictions on civil liberties.

The world is facing a period of rapid major changes in response to the fragility of the current model of development, and these changes will lead to conflict. To the extent

that violence continues to be the resort for solving such problems, they will persist in a variety of forms and at the cost of human suffering. It is necessary to think about new kinds of equitable and sustainable development that can bring about changes in the present system of production and consumption so that it will be possible to face future challenges of different kinds of violence.

[Article translated from the original in Spanish]

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[5] *Caravanas Migrantes*. See OIM Oficina Regional para Centroamérica, Norteamérica y el Caribe, 3 December 2021.

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[7] Tortosa, J. M. "Violencias, crisis y culturas". *Convergencia, Revista de Ciencias Sociales* (53), 2010, 69-89.

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