The Woman Who Fell in Love with the Man Who Thought the World Was Flat

Public Policy, Identity, and the Challenge of Reconceptualizing Domestic Violence in the Latino Community

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Almost as Often as the Earth Turns

The story I am about to tell should have taken place during medieval times, but instead, it takes place in the twenty-first century. Perhaps it could best be described as a Latino version of a tale about a knight-errant and his damsel, a tragic fairy-tale-in-the-making that has as its protagonists an undocumented Mexican couple – a man and a woman who ventured to an unknown land, like so many others, looking for work and the promise of a better future. I was a witness to this story before I became its narrator, and as such, I was struck by the ties that reach out across history, repeating the same tales again and again. The lovers and travelers, then and now, searching for hope and facing great obstacles, and even violence, along the way. This much is enough to tie us to the past, to tie fiction to reality. But there is more. For one of the most remarkable and surprising things that I discovered was that the modern caballero I knew, like the medieval cavalier I could only imagine, was utterly sure that the world is flat.

I discovered this fact while walking along Main Street in a small town somewhere in the American Midwest. I was making my way back to my office with our “hero” and his doncella (from now on, “Pedro” and “Isabel”), talking to them about their hometown.1 It was a time during which that city found itself at the center of international news due to a high intensity earthquake that had just hit, causing major damage and loss of life. “It’s amazing how quickly we learn of events happening in places so far away these days,” I commented, “but I suppose that’s the nature of technology: news travels around the globe in no time.”

To my surprise, Pedro reacted with confusion and disbelief – not to the claim that news travels quickly, but to the claim that it travels “around a globe.” Isabel proceeded to explain to an incredulous Pedro that the world was, indeed, round. She enunciated the word “round,” or redondo in Spanish, in such a beautiful and musical way that there was no doubt what she meant to convey, how she meant to insist on the idea of the roundness of the world. I also felt compelled to add that the Earth turned on its axis and, further, revolved around the sun. The cosmos is about curves and ellipses, never about flat surfaces and straight lines. Pedro listened for a while, looking at us condescendingly, apparently feeling sorry for us. After all, we were women, and by definition we were not capable of knowing more than he did. The conversation continued for a while, with stories of Columbus and Copernicus, explorers and scientists, discoveries and celebrations; but Pedro remained silent, unconvinced, and always smiling as if to indicate his disdain. I changed the topic and kept walking, sensing that we were not going to change Pedro’s mind in the first round.

We made our way through the summer air, and I thought of the seasons. I thought of the beauty of the way it all unfolds, spinning and turning. And I thought of Isabel and myself trying to argue for what we knew was right in the face of overwhelming and powerful disbelief, the two of us like modern female Latin American versions of Galileo. When Pedro looked away I whispered in Isabel’s ear “E pure torna.”
She turned to me and smiled. I doubt now that Isabel understood the presumptuous reference to Galileo’s final rebuttal, as I later found out that although she is quite intelligent, Isabel never had the opportunity to finish elementary school while in Mexico. Despite her lack of formal training, though, there were many things that Isabel knew with complete certainty that happened to be true. She knew, for instance, that the world was round, that Pedro was wrong, and that he was no Prince Charming. As it turned out, Pedro beat Isabel on a regular basis – almost as often as the Earth turns. And in spite of all of this, she walked along through the trees and the flowers of a foreign land, her eyes full of care and compassion, deeply and completely in love with her unmoved abuser.

Over several months, I came to know Pedro and Isabel, and in the process I gained a far deeper understanding of their relationship and their story. My preconceived, simplistic notions that a person who experiences domestic violence should immediately leave the abusive relationship – and that self-respect should take precedence over any other apparent emotions – were put into context and put to the test. Although these are surely good guidelines and firm truths in some situations given particular cultural and social backgrounds, I now know that they can be difficult to enforce universally, for even the very conceptualization of “domestic violence” is part of a larger worldview that changes with time and circumstances.

Understanding Domestic Violence from the Abuser’s Perspective

By accepting repeated emotional and physical abuse from her partner, Isabel was doing something irrational and difficult for many of us who are outside of such a situation to understand. It therefore seems as easy to judge her behavior as it is to judge that of her abuser. Through faulty and simplistic reasoning, conclusions such as, “She must like it,” “They are poor and uneducated; those people behave like that,” or “Latin American culture accepts domestic violence” are widely maintained. In fact, once Pedro’s actions were brought to light, I overheard a social worker and a policeman saying that Pedro had to remember that he was not in Mexico any longer and thus couldn’t act that way. Ironically, that was all he already thought about: this place was not his place.

Pedro had a strong and well-defined sense of identity. He knew exactly who he was. He was Mexican and was proud of his origins; he was Catholic and venerated the Virgin of Guadalupe; he had a clear vision of the role that he was supposed to play in society as a male; and he desperately wanted to go back home. Pedro, in fact, repeatedly claimed that it had been a big mistake to come to the United States. He reported that he had the persistent feeling that most Americans looked down on him due to his ethnicity. But perhaps the most interesting critique was Pedro’s observation that the United States was a backward society because women had more power than men. He reached such a conclusion the same way that he determined that the world was flat: through observation, experience, and selective confirmation of his beliefs.

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Sadly, I could not offer a rebuttal to the claim that there is persistent discrimination and racism in this society. Both my own personal experience and my years of more abstract academic training and reading only confirmed the conclusion. But when I asked Pedro why he thought that the U.S. was based on a matriarchal society, he told me that it was clear in the way that the law enforcement and judicial systems were organized here. When they arrested him, booked him, and took him to jail, everyone consistently used Pedro’s mother’s maiden name to identify him instead of his father’s last name – which meant, to Pedro, that American society obviously adhered to a matriarchal system. His experience in court, coupled with his comparing notes with fellow countrymen, led him to think (through a seemingly impeccable logic) that using one’s mother’s last name was the way Americans have chosen to name themselves because women were more important than men in America. I tried to explain to him where his reasoning had gone wrong. I described the sense in which it was all a mistake. The “officials” in America were using Pedro’s mother’s last name to identify him out of a basic misunderstanding due to their own lack of knowledge concerning Latino culture. They, to be
sure, were as confused as he was. For Mexicans, as for most Latin Americans, an identification document includes the person’s given names (nombres) and last names (apellidos). The given names are what non-Spanish speakers typically easily recognize as a first name, middle name, and sometimes a second middle name. But the last name for a Latin American includes both the father’s last name and the mother’s last name, without hyphenation, in that order. Though one is referred to everyday by only the father’s last name, the mother’s last name is still listed in the full name – and it is listed last. When a non-Spanish speaking police officer looks at a Mexican I.D. in an effort to try to make sense of this “foreign language document,” he or she looks for the last word in the sequence of names, assumes it is the last name of the person, and mistakenly records the mother’s last name of the suspect as the only last name. I explained to Pedro that in the United States a woman traditionally loses her last name completely when she gets married, adopting her husband’s last name as her only last name and thus ensuring that her children will have no trace of her family name in their names. I thought that this might make it clear just how deeply patriarchal the American system actually is. But Pedro’s expression was once again a familiar look of disbelief. I gave more examples, explained the history of it all, and suggested why the American officials were confused because they didn’t even imagine that a woman’s last name could be a part of his name. But Pedro was still Pedro, I was still a mere woman, and truth was elusive.

During those same days, I happened to be reading a scholarly paper on feminist epistemology as well as an essay on critical thinking and the problem of circular reasoning. The nature of rationality, complete with its many critiques, was on my mind. And for all of this academic insight, I was utterly surprised that I was fascinated by this man and was even, on some level, starting to admire him – and Isabel. True, Pedro seemed the incarnation of “machismo,” but in spite of that, or perhaps even because of it, throughout all of our exchanges he was charming and funny. He was proud of his ethnicity. He contested everything that did not make sense to him just as critical thinkers are supposed to do, refusing to take an appeal to authority or hearsay as legitimate evidence. He recognized his own mistake in coming to the United States and having fallen prey to the illusion of “the immigrant’s American dream.” He had a sense of self that resisted the forces of American hegemony and the oppressive potential of his poverty. He had the love of a good and thoughtful woman. A compassionate and intelligent woman. Whom he beat.

At times, for better or worse, throughout my interactions with Pedro I was able to put aside the fact that he abused his partner. But the abuse was real and demanded attention. I knew it to be real not only because Isabel had told me her terrible stories and because I had seen the wounds to her body and her soul, but also because Pedro himself had admitted to me that he had been abusive toward the woman he loved. He had said this to me one day in the same breadth that he stated that he missed his daughters back in Mexico and would never allow a man to abuse either of them because it was clearly wrong.

Somehow I was able to see Pedro as a troubled human being and not simply a “monster” (as a well-meaning social worker from the local shelter had recently bluntly characterized him). Although I understood the sentiment of hatred toward Pedro from the people who provided assistance and shelter to Isabel during those times when things became unbearable and too dangerous for her at home, I also understood why the help such well-meaning people were offering was not as effective as they hoped it might be. By only validating Isabel’s legitimate feelings of deep disapproval concerning Pedro’s abusive behavior and not addressing the fact that for her there were also apparently legitimate reasons to love him, they were not allowing her to express and deal with the contradiction, confusion, insecurity, and guilt in her life. Perhaps it was the language and cultural barrier that made it difficult for the duality to be reconciled with their help, but to the credit of the social workers, their physical manifestations of empathy and constant and complete availability were an attempt to balance everything out.

From my own interaction with Pedro and Isabel, I slowly came to understand one of the reasons why an intelligent woman would continue to share her life with a man who threatened her very existence. Not unlike the rest of us – when dealing with people and institutions in our society that disconcert and disappoint us (the State and the Church among them) – Isabel was able to deal with the violent side of Pedro by dividing him into two different people: the “real” Pedro, who provided company and security against the unknown world, who was funny,
According to Pedro, it was the Virgin’s image and her presence in his parents’ home that made survival possible. The image was so powerful in Pedro’s life, in fact, that once it almost made him stop abusing Isabel.

Walking toward the mall on a fall morning nearly a year ago, Pedro saw a sign from heaven on the sidewalk. It was a card bearing an image of the Virgin, a card that someone, no doubt, had dropped after receiving it as a memento of a funeral. As Pedro tells it, later that day he informed Isabel that he was going to change and he was going to stop abusing her. The image that had protected him from dying from abuse during his childhood had appeared once again in his life, now demanding that he change his ways and honor that past gift. For two full weeks, Isabel was not beaten, and for that she, too, was grateful to the Virgin. But such breaks from violence – which are typically preceded by promises and apparently sincere remorse – only make things worse for the victim. And for Isabel, this was surely the case, as Pedro’s heartfelt story and seeming desire to do good merely added to the confusing dichotomy surrounding Pedro’s personality in Isabel’s eyes. When Pedro eventually broke his promise, Isabel felt so ashamed that she tried to hide her wounds and the truth. It was a shame that cannot be easily understood by someone who does not know the whole story, who does not share the cultural Catholicism of those in the story, and who does not want this man to be a good man for his own sake as well as for his victim’s. The fact that he actually did not beat her for nearly two weeks made Isabel think that miracles can happen and that Pedro could change. The change, she now thought, could come from a love for two women: the Virgin and herself.

As tragic and as frustrating as this all was, the story also gave me hope for finding help for Pedro. He was not a happy man, and he wanted change in his life. Apart from merely trying to find help for Isabel, I did research on resources available for batterers; and in the small town where we live, the support in such cases often turned out to be of a psychological or a religious nature. But Pedro would not contemplate the idea of going to see a therapist because, as he said it, he was not crazy; and going to church did not sound very exciting or hopeful to him either. He told me that he was sure that they could not even begin to understand him, both because of the language and cultural barriers and also because

Pedro fit the clichéd definition of “machismo” almost perfectly, and one got the sense that he knew this, knew the role he was “supposed” to play, and knew what he thought someone cast in such a difficult part was supposed to be. According to the script of “machismo,” men are supposed to be heroes and villains at the same time. As heroes, men are expected to conduct themselves following a code of honor that includes responsibility toward their families, with constant displays of pride and courage and loyalty. And as villains, men are expected to celebrate their sexual prowess, to be tough and aggressive, to consume alcohol excessively, and to believe and act as if they are intellectually and physically superior to women. Isabel’s strategy to love the hero in Pedro and simultaneously to reject and block from her mind the villainous aspects of his “machismo” thus made sense. What the American system of providing assistance to abuse victims seemed to be missing was, in part, an understanding of this dualism seen in the context of a woman’s potential desire to save her relationship with the man who was abusing her. Isabel saw the qualities in Pedro that caused her to fall in love with him. And she saw the villain as well. How could she not be confused as well as frightened?

Another factor that made Pedro less of a monster and more of a deeply troubled human being was the fact that as a youngster he was himself a victim of domestic violence. As research on the topic has established, most abusers have also been subjects of abuse, and as a result they “see violence as an acceptable and useful means of resolving conflict” (Valle 2005, 120). Pedro was no exception. Isabel confided in me that Pedro’s father was “a drunk who regularly beat his wife and children,” and Pedro believed that he owed his life to the Virgin Guadalupe who had protected him throughout his childhood.
the power that the image of the Virgin held for him was not one that was available in the institutionalized Church – especially one that spoke English.

**Violence as a Problem within the Community**

Apart from the Church and the therapist, in the United States there seems only to be the possibility of punishment for the abuser and shelter for the abused. But there are alternatives, though the programs and theories behind them are not well known, nor are they in widespread use in the U.S.

Julia Perilla is among those who have pioneered a new approach to solving the problems surrounding domestic violence by means of involving the abusers themselves in combating and dealing with those problems. Contrary to the usual procedure recommended to female victims of domestic violence – which is to leave the abusive relationship (thus breaking up the family and breaking all ties with the abuser) as soon as it is possible and safe to do so – Perilla argues for expanding efforts to assist the batterers in order to confront, take responsibility, and deal with their own abusive behavior. Inviting the batterer into the conversation, argues Perilla, involves seeing the batterer as a human being and not a monster. And it furthermore leads to the possibility of recognizing that there might be an answer to the set of problems surrounding this issue that could be internally generated rather than externally imposed.

Perilla explains:

> [I]t is essential that we do not stop at our study of women. In cultures in which the family plays such a central role, the men involved in abusive relationships – and their own environment – must be studied as well…. As we begin to listen more closely to the soft voices of abused Latinas, we must invite Latino men to speak to us as well. Furthermore, to understand the full texture of Latino families, we must study the interactions of Latino couples in which domestic violence is present, as well as those in which it is not, so as to learn not only their weaknesses and problems but their gifts and strengths as well (Perilla 1994, 337-8).

Looking to the gifts and strengths of the Latino culture in an attempt to solve the problem of domestic violence is a novel approach. But such practices are encouraging. Currently, in Atlanta, Georgia, Perilla runs a program that helps men stop being abusers. Based on *The Noble Man* (a program in use in some places in Mexico), Perilla’s approach tries to analyze machismo and find the positive things in it (e.g., loyalty, respectfulness, honor, etc.), asking the abuser to take part in the process of analyzing how best to bring the cycle of abuse to an end by means of thinking about how best to be a man, a partner, a husband, and a member of a community. The program uses, for instance, indigenous Mexican stories that discuss what it is to be a man, mining such narratives for ways to get men thinking about how to become better men. Rather than assuming machismo to be a monolithic ideology that requires men to be abusive, *The Noble Man* program attempts to force men to confront the ways in which their abuse is a failure of that very ideology.

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Furthermore, it is key to *The Noble Man* program’s success that this endeavor is not one taken up by individuals but by a community. This requires a major shift in our way of thinking in the United States. Social workers will still be key, but they will not be seen as there to solve the problems but rather to work with the community to help solve the problems not by telling people what to do but by “walking along with them.” Even the therapy sessions are always group sessions. Such an approach consequently has the additional benefit of empowering women rather than putting them in yet another relationship where they are subservient and dependent on others for protection, well-being, safety, and knowledge. Asking women what to do rather than telling them what to do is a first step. But asking men what to do – and family members and community members at large (including men who are not abusing their partners) – is also key. This approach is communal, and as such it requires a
major reconceptualization of the very nature of domestic violence.

The crime of domestic violence, under this model, is not seen as merely a crime one individual has committed against another in private. Indeed, the label of “crime” must itself come under scrutiny. As Natalie J. Sokoloff and Ida Dupont argue:

[There has been an overreliance on law enforcement to deal with social problems in poor communities of color and this overreliance has had several unintended negative consequences.… They] create tensions for poor women of color between the need for some kind of state intervention to protect them from abuse in their homes and the recognition that many of the women most in need of such protection are made more vulnerable by these very interventions (Sokoloff and Dupont 2005, 55).

Moreover, calling something a crime rather than a social problem doesn’t solve it; it merely points us toward a different set of actors to try to solve that problem. The very term “domestic” violence further turns abuse into a private matter and sees things in an individualistic way. By singling out this sort of violence and giving it a “privatizing” label, the problem of such abuse is instantly seen as somehow separate from all of the overarching institutions and ideologies in place in society at large that may be playing a role in creating, or at the very least condoning, such violence. This move to relegate “domestic violence” to the home where one individual is acting inappropriately toward another in a private setting is thus also a move that ignores the possibility that (1) our homes are public and are parts of communities, and (2) there are larger structures of racism, sexism, colonialism, and economic oppression at work in creating the so-called domestic violence.

Perilla is right to point out that as immigrant families face severe financial difficulties, Latinas who might have stayed at home to raise their families are increasingly joining the labor force, forcing Latino men out of their roles as sole financial providers for their families. Traditional roles are becoming less distinct and clear, thus creating new family dynamics that must be negotiated by people already confronted by majority culture values and expectations different from their own.… On the average, the more a woman contributed to her family’s income, the more abuse she experienced.… Factors leading to gender equality in a relationship in the long run may decrease wife abuse. In the short run, however, these same factors may increase abuse due to the man’s perceived loss of power relative to his perception of competency (Perilla 1994, 326, 336).

It is true that economic and cultural forces put pressure on the relationship between a Latino man and woman, thus increasing the chances of a loss of identity and the possibility of violence. But while this is undeniable, it must not be overlooked that the question of what it is to be a man and what it is to be a woman is not a question that can be separated from these larger social and economic structures. Thus, as Sokoloff and Dupont have argued:

We exist in social contexts created by the intersections of systems of power (e.g., race, class, gender, and sexual orientation) and oppression (e.g., prejudice, class stratification, gender inequality, and heterosexist bias). No dimension, such as gender inequality, is privileged in explaining domestic violence. Most important, gender inequality itself is modified by its intersection with other systems of power and oppression.… Although culture is crucial to understanding and combating domestic violence, we cannot rest on simplistic notions of culture. Rather, we must address how different communities’ cultural experiences of violence are mediated through structural forms of oppression, such as racism, colonialism, economic exploitation, heterosexism, and the like. (Sokoloff and Dupont 2005, 43, 45).

When Latinos come to this country with their families and reside in it illegally, their status in society and their role in the family changes dramatically. Latino males often suffer prejudice, racism, and abuse in their workplace and in the community where they live. Men who usually were respected, were confident, and had a defined place in their communities of origin suddenly find themselves powerless and oppressed in a new and different way. The manner in which they often deal with this situation is by
reaching for alcohol or drugs, and by trying to control the members of their families.

The male and female roles within the family life thus also change. The men are no longer the sole providers, and the women who exclusively played the role of the housewives and caregivers back home now must start working to make ends meet. Frustration and the loss of control generated from the structural changes within the family— in addition to the reality of oppression, discrimination, and unfair treatment in the workplace— triggers a behavior described by Paulo Freire. According to Freire, when an individual is the victim of oppression, his or her reaction will be to seize any opportunity to become an oppressor himself/herself. In Freire’s words,

the oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to become oppressors, or “sub-oppressors.” The very structure of their thought has been conditioned by the contradictions of the concrete, existential situation by which they were shaped. Their ideal is to be men; but for them, to be men is to be oppressors. This is their model of humanity (Freire 1999, 45).

In general, the new victims of the oppression (the victims, that is, of the originally oppressed individuals) are going to be the most vulnerable members of the community. In the case of the Latino undocumented immigrant population, the most vulnerable individuals are women and children.

This is not meant to offer an excuse for Pedro and other abusers of women. We cannot simply say, “Well, Pedro is confused about being a man; he is confronted with racism everyday; and he cannot break free from the bonds of his poverty; thus he is to be excused.” Rather it is to move toward an explanation, and, with any luck, a possible solution that takes into account the ways in which all of these issues are always already interlaced. It is true that Pedro must take responsibility for his actions, but that does not mean that larger structures of injustice are not also at work and that they do not bear some responsibility for having created the possibility of violence. Consequently, if we are to have any hope of helping Isabel (and her sisters), we must not merely spirit them away from their abusers and lock up those abusers as punishment for their immorality, but we must, as well, confront anew the question of what constitutes and what causes “domestic” violence.

Latinas in the Absence of a Social Network and the Problem of Immigration

Violence against women is not accepted or tolerated in Latin American culture. It is necessary to establish this as a fact in order to counteract the negative effect that the opposite stereotype causes in the perception and attitudes toward Latinos in the U.S., and more specifically in the judicial system, social services agencies, and within the Latino community residing in this country. If we begin with a racist notion that somehow violence against women is part of Latino culture, then we will have little hope of solving this problem. It is true that, on average, there is a greater level of (reported) domestic violence in the Latino community in the U.S. than in the majority white community. But it does not follow that Latino culture naturally includes such violence any more than it follows that such violence is being committed more often in the Latino community because the group members are Latinos. Such thinking is not only indicative of racism, but is, at heart, not a good argument logically. Social scientists call this fallacy “correlation does not imply causation.” For example, in the 1970s in New York City a study was conducted that measured the murder rate and compared it to the rate of sales of ice cream in the city. With complete correlation and predictability, it was found that whenever ice cream sales went up, so did the murder rate. So, was ice cream consumption turning people...
into murderers? Though the data matched perfectly, of course the more obvious explanation is that as the weather heats up and more people are out and interacting with each other, the chances of (deadly) confrontations rise – as does the amount of ice cream sold. The correlation between the sets of data does not imply that a causal link exists. Similarly, just because a Latino family is more likely to experience domestic abuse than a white family, there is nothing in such a claim that indicates that being Latino is why one is more likely to commit an act of violence.

There are various factors that may account for the higher incidence of domestic violence in the Latino community in the U.S. when compared to the white population. Most of these factors are the same ones invoked as the explanation for a higher incidence of domestic violence in other minority groups as well: lower levels of education, limited access to housing, the effects of perpetual racism, and – perhaps most importantly – poverty. This is undoubtedly true, but one distinguishing factor that could shed light on the specific problem of violence against women among U.S. Latinos is the absence of a strong social and familial network characteristic of Latin American social systems.

Families, neighbors and friends – all of which combine to form a basic social network – are vital when it comes to dealing with violence against women and children in Latin America. In Latin America, individuals are defined and conceived in a manner that stresses the need for families and groups as the providers of the environment and resources – material, emotional, and spiritual – that make possible the full development of an individual. In other words, individual determination and excellence (which are widely celebrated) can be achieved only through common action. It is thus that such authors as Martín-Baró argue that issues that are usually understood as being individual in nature in the U.S. should be contextualized and elevated to the collective level when considered in terms of Latino communities. The definition of the individual and his or her reality should thus take into consideration the fact that there is no person without family, no learning without culture, no madness without social order; and therefore neither can there be an I without a We, a knowing without a symbolic system, a disorder that does not have reference to moral and social norms (Martín-Baró 1994, 41).

When Latinas come to the United States they leave many things behind. One of the factors that makes them most vulnerable and prone to violence in the home is the absence of their extended family and their social network. Latinas are completely dependent on their partners economically, emotionally, and even in matters of immigration. Without their families and social network, Latinas are isolated, lacking the means to solve conflict and avoid threatening situations (Valle 2002, 115).

One distinguishing factor that could shed light on the specific problem of violence against women among U.S. Latinos is the absence of a strong social and familial network characteristic of Latin American social systems.

In addition to the absence of a social network, the payment to a coyote to bring women (girlfriends, partners, and wives) into the U.S. illegally transforms women into “property.” The men who paid several thousand dollars to have their significant others “delivered” to them (men usually come to the U.S. in advance), expect their women to be forever in debt to them and therefore only “exist” in this country in order to fulfill their every need. This is a direct result of the current United States’ immigration system and foreign policy. Structures are put in place that thus force women into a category that removes their very subjectivity. How could we expect these women to be treated as full people once they finally arrive? How could we not imagine that domestic violence would be on the rise in such homes?

In the specific case of Isabel, for instance, each time she gathered the courage to consider the possibility that she might leave her abusive relationship with Pedro or even confront him about his behavior, she made reference to the need for her to finish paying Pedro the $3,000 that he paid the coyote to smuggle her into the U.S. According to Isabel, this “indentured” status was something that Pedro often made reference to, both explicitly and implicitly. Without excusing Pedro, we can see how easy it might be to slip into a kind of thinking such
that Isabel would be seen to be less than a person given this particular situation and history. After all, Isabel had literally been treated as a thing when she was brought to this country. She was put in a trunk like luggage to cross the border. And when she walked through the desert, she had to drink water meant for horses and hide in the brush with the snakes. In Pedro’s eyes, and in her own eyes, Isabel had become a thing and an animal. Although men often go through the same struggles and indignities with the help of a coyote, it is different when the man is paying for all of this – indeed, with Freire in mind, it might be argued that the man is regaining his own humanity by stealing it from someone else (the woman). To have suffered the degradation of being treated like a thing, the man – without even necessarily meaning to do so – struggles to regain his own humanity by the only means allowed him: by taking it from another. Thus, he pays for the delivery of “his woman” and turns her into a thing that is indebted to him. If we compare this to a white couple emigrating from, say, England to the United States, in this instance the man’s wife perhaps arrives safely and welcomed into the comfort of JFK airport, having sat on the plane beside her husband for the whole trip. Though there are social and political structures that this white couple will face as well the very circumstances of Isabel’s arrival into the U.S. sets her apart. She arrives as a thing. To continue to treat her as a thing is thus more understandable.5

The reification, degradation, and lowering in the hierarchy of beings of Latinas – and the impact that all of this has had on their intimate relationships with partners – is a direct consequence of the current immigration system in the U.S. The process of transporting undocumented women into America conjures up echoes of colonial America, where human trafficking and the public sale of women were lawful and common practices:

The conditions under which white settlers came to America created various situations for women. Where the first settlements consisted almost entirely of men, women were imported as sex slaves, childbearers, and companions: … agreeable persons, young and incorrupt, … sold with their own consent to settlers as wives, the price to be the cost of their own transportation (Zinn 1999, 104).

It is easy to substitute “undocumented Latino immigrants” for “white settlers” and “Latinas” for the generic “women” in such a historical account, thus being reminded how history repeats itself. But it must be remembered as well that thoughtful policy and appropriate initiative can break the cycle. On the national level, we must push to have a more meaningful debate on foreign policy and immigration. And on the local level, we must remember that these large, overarching structures are having a direct influence on the men and women caught up in cases of domestic violence. Until we confront these problems on every level, we are condemning our neighbors, our communities, and ourselves to Freire’s nightmare.

Indeed, even well-intentioned public policy can help perpetuate the problem rather than solve it. Months after going through the same legal and social procedures and institutions, the final hope that Isabel was given was that if she finally agreed to bring Pedro up on official charges, she could file for immigration papers that would make her legal once and for all, and Pedro would be rounded up, tried, and deported. To Isabel’s ears, all that she heard was that she could be legal: legal under the status of a victim of abuse, a victim without a safe home to which to return. And with the promise of a green card waved before her, Isabel soon went to the police station and filed every charge she could against Pedro with enthusiasm. If all goes well, she will now get her citizenship by bringing her man up on charges; she will get her papers by stripping him of his “humanity.” The cycle repeats, there are no real winners, and the real problems of domestic violence are ignored.

Conclusion: The Loss of Hope at the End of the World

After accompanying Isabel for nearly a year through the abuse, sadness, and hope – through Pedro’s several arrests, his sentencing, and finally his imminent deportation – the question of public policy has, I admit, become not merely one of theory for me but one of pragmatism and application. I have come to ask myself not only what policy seems most efficacious and most appropriate for our society, but I often find myself reflecting on Isabel and Pedro’s story, asking how and why their needs were failed to be addressed by the institutions involved in
preventing and dealing with domestic violence in the community where we reside.

Pedro never received any kind of effective help and he never understood completely that what he was doing was unacceptable. Or to be more precise, if he did understand on some level that his actions were unacceptable, he did not have the slightest idea how to go about changing them, how to see them in relation to his larger worldview, or how to think of his own actions as inappropriate within the context of his own desire to be a good person. When he asked for help in all of this, the two options – apart from jail – that were made available to him were to see a psychologist or to seek help through the local Catholic Church. Neither institution offered specialized and culturally appropriate help, and Pedro declined to use them. Successful programs in the U.S. directed at helping Latinos are generally based on group therapy that takes into consideration Latino traditions, social expectations, effects of immigration on families, and other culturally specific issues. Such groups are not available in our community.

The deterrence effect intended by law enforcement and the judicial system did not work in Pedro’s case. He could not understand a system that would sometimes deprive him of his freedom, and then inexplicably release him into Isabel’s arms when a bond was posted. Week after week, he kept doing the same thing. In his mind, his passage through the court and detention system was confusing and illogical. “How is it possible that by paying money I could be freed?” he once asked me. “Is ‘bond’ like the ‘mordidas’ [bribes] that we pay in Mexico, only they are done out in the open?” The task of explaining and establishing the differences between the legal notion of bail compared to the bribes of corruption was a challenging one. In Pedro’s mind, his freedom was determined by how much money he had and whom he paid it to, not by how he was treating Isabel. In Pedro’s mind, no actions were really bad because everything could be translated into a dollar (or a peso) amount and be erased. I found it hard to argue against this. I tried. But I could not find the words. Just as I was similarly made silent when Pedro finally managed to ask in a straightforward manner, “So rich people get easier and faster out of jail? How is that ‘justice’?” To compound the complexity of the situation, making bond meant to Pedro that he was receiving support and approval from his family, friends, and even Isabel – the tiny support network that ultimately collected the money and made Pedro’s freedom possible again. In Isabel’s visit to the bondsman, was there not an implicit forgiveness? Forgiveness for a crime none of them fully understood?

As for Isabel, throughout the process she never learned how to avoid and deal with domestic violence. She knew that she could go to the local shelter in order to get help and protection; and every time she was admitted, she received a copy of the “Battered Woman Syndrome Cycle of Violence” pamphlet, she got a cell phone which she could use to dial 911 in case Pedro would threaten her, and she tried to figure out how to be safe when outside the shelter. But she never understood why she was a victim of domestic violence, or how she could avoid it in the future, or what it meant for her still to love the man she feared. For all of the well-intentioned help that she received, she was alone. She did not have the support of her family and the social network that she would have had back home. She did not have a sense of what she did right to survive domestic violence as long as she did, and she thought that perhaps there was something wrong with her for loving Pedro.

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All along, Isabel had hoped for Pedro to change. Time after time, she told me how deeply she loved him and how she longed to find something magical that would make his bad side go away for good and they could live happily ever after. She gave up on that dream when she was offered the possibility of obtaining a U-Visa if she agreed to collaborate with law enforcement and the prosecutor’s office in order to convict Pedro. I remember that on the day she turned Pedro in, she cried for so long I wondered if she would ever stop. And then she did; and she moved on. I can only hope that her next partner will not be abusive, and that Pedro will not find her when he comes back to the U.S. after being deported as
everyone feels he will surely do. I can hope, and I can try to change the way we deal with domestic violence in our community. But it seems increasingly a task better suited for a community rather than an individual.

I do not see Isabel very often anymore. When I last ran into her, she told me that she was still frightened every day. Little, it appeared, had really changed. She knew that Pedro would find a way to come back. The same economic and social forces that had driven him to the United States would still be there when he was deposited once again in Mexico, and he would surely follow his old path and make his way back to the U.S. What real choice was there for him? Or for her? Through new tears, she told me how much she still loved him, and how everyone knows – herself included – that she betrayed him. She told me that she wasn’t sure what to do with her life. She told me that the only thing that could keep her safe now would be if Pedro were to fall from the edge of the earth.

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Notes:

1The place in which all of this unfolds, and the names of those involved, have been obscured or altered in order to maintain the confidentiality of those concerned. The story, however, is true.

2For example, the late president of Venezuela was Hugo Chávez. But his full name was actually Hugo Rafael Chávez Frías. Hugo was his first name. Rafael was his middle name. Chávez was his father’s last name. And Frías was his mother’s last name. A confused U.S. police officer might look at President Chávez’s I.D. card and think his name was Hugo Frías.

3The available data about the difference between domestic violence in the white population and Latino population is inconclusive and conflicting. Some surveys have concluded that the incidence of domestic violence seems to be consistent across racial and ethnic groups. But other studies have produced data establishing higher levels of partner abuse in Latinos (and African-American communities) than in white populations.

4A meaningful reform of the H-2A Agricultural Seasonal Worker Program could potentially reduce the cases of illegal transportation of women through the U.S.-Mexican border, but a comprehensive reform of the immigration system is necessary in order to start making a difference in this area. However, reforming the U.S. immigration system and even overhauling the current U.S. foreign policy will not eliminate the problem since the present situation is rather the result of systemic, institutional, structural, and historical forces at work in our society.

5All of this is not to say that the only solution to the problem of domestic abuse in the U.S. Latino community is to end all immigration laws and have a completely open and porous border. Rather, it is to suggest that current immigration laws do, indeed, discriminate against certain groups of people, thus leading to the problems we have been investigating. More than this, though, there is a deep misunderstanding in current U.S. immigration policy that begins with the assumption, “Everyone wants to come to the United States.” As is clear for Pedro, and literally hundreds of thousands of others, most undocumented workers absolutely do not want to come to the United States. They dream of going back home. But the economic situation at home – driven in part by U.S. foreign policy, colonialism, and imperialism – creates the need to cross the border and “come to the United States” in order to work. Until policy-makers understand the relationships among foreign policy, economics, history, and culture, one fears that there will never be worthwhile immigration reform.

Sources:


