# RESISTANCE PRACTICES

## TO ADDRESS GENDERED URBAN VIOLENCE IN MARÉ, RIO DE JANEIRO

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*There are no weak women, there are women who don't recognise their strength*

**Woman in Focus Group 3**

*young and politicized women with experience of feminist and racial perspectives*

# INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

This report examines the construction of coping and resistance practices by women in relation to gendered urban violence in Maré, one of the largest groups of favelas in Brazil, located in the North Zone of Rio de Janeiro. The territory is affected by high levels of poverty, inequality, organised crime and public insecurity, yet is also home to multiple struggles, protest and resistance as well as a large network of civil society initiatives and organisations. Maré was formally consolidated as a neighbourhood in 1994. It occupies almost 4kms square and is formed of 16 communities, housing around 140,000 residents, according to a 2013 community-led census.

In terms of the population, 51% are women and 62% identify as mixed-race and black (Redes da Maré, 2013). 45% of women are single mothers, meaning that they bear a disproportionate burden for raising children, with many living in extended household units. Many residents have low (although increasing) levels of education and work in informal or self-employment. Public service provision is inadequate, resulting in residents not being able to ensure basic rights.

Illegal armed groups, drug-trafficking 'factions' or paramilitary 'militia', dominate the territory. These groups have hierarchical structures, impose rules by force, and undermine the rule of law in Maré. Heavily armed, they regularly engage in armed clashes with each other or the police. State security forces, by turn, conduct violent operations and occupations that doubly victimise the civilian population of all genders. In addition to this unpredictable violence, residents also suffer from significant social stigma rooted in popular prejudice about favelas.

## GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN MARÉ

Previous research in Maré (Krenzinger et al, 2018; 2021; McIlwaine et al. 2021) showed that 57% of those surveyed experienced one or more forms of direct gender-based violence in the private and public sphere (34% physical, 30% sexual and 45% psychological), with black women most likely to suffer (69% of black women compared to 55% of mixed-race and 50% of those identifying as white). Almost half (47%) of the violence was perpetrated by intimate partners, with more than half of incidents occurring in the public sphere (53%). Significantly, only 52% of women who experienced direct gender-based violence disclosed or reported it, and this was mainly informal; only 2.5% reported to a formal source such as the police. Although men are direct targets of urban violence, women are also victims of police incursions, crossfire and fighting, especially being emotionally impacted by the fear this violence generates.

## METHODOLOGY

Based on individual interviews and focus groups, the project on which this report draws was structured around a collaborative, co-produced and interdisciplinary methodology to examine coping and resistance practices developed by women in Maré to address gendered urban violence. Focus groups became a space for sharing,

listening and collective elaboration for the women. The groups allowed participants to report intimate individual stories, rarely or never shared before; one woman in focus group 3 (with young and politicised women) noted that 'the more women talk and hear each other, we can demand more changes'. To capture this nuance, an artist was present to visually document the focus groups, creating drawings representing the participant's oral and body language (see Figures 1 and 2).

FIGURE 1: 'WE HAVE THE RIGHT TO TAKE CARE OF OURSELVES AND WE TAKE CARE OF EVERYONE ELSE': OBSERVATIONAL DRAWING OF FOCUS GROUP 1 (WOMEN WITH FORMAL OR INFORMAL WORK AND EXPOSURE TO AND COPING WITH GENDERED VIOLENCE)



(illustration by Mila de Choch)

During the research process, experiences and responses to different forms of gendered urban violence emerged, showing how these have been shaped by generations of women in Maré. Among the many resistance practices that were developed (see Table 1), an important oral tradition was noted drawing on ancestry, sharing community knowledge, common bonds and intergenerational transmission of experiences. While women faced significant challenges in the face of multiple types of violence, they also developed important collective responses.

| TYPE OF VIOLENCE | FORMS OF MANIFESTATION | FORMS OF RESISTANCE |
|---|---|---|
| **Gendered violence in the home** | Domestic violence, intimate partner violence, intrafamilial abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, financial and economic subjugation, gaslighting, verbal aggression, coercion | Strategic silence, leave home, change habits and routines, move homes, avoid relationships, use affective networks of protection, use women's mutual support networks, use formal networks, use private security, participation in collective spaces, invest in financial autonomy, rely on transgenerational knowledge, recourse to religious spaces |
| **Gendered violence in public spaces** | Harassment, catcalling, sexual assault, rape, duress and intimidation, stalking, uninvited touch | Seek safe spaces and routes, avoid circulating at night, carry sharp instruments, keep close to women, control one's attitude, escort by men |
| **Armed violence/ urban conflict** | Shooting, crossfire, gang violence, police violence, extortion, threat, torture, coercion, unfair treatment, unfair management of conflicts, racially-biased policing, militarization, paralegal territorial domination, state violence | Stay at home, seek safe spaces and routes, constant risk assessment, disseminate safe information, protect family, seek company of women, protect men, record violations, uses of social media, observe local norms, alternative conflict resolution mechanisms, rely on transgenerational knowledge |
| **Racial violence** | Racism, racial bias, bigotry, religious intolerance, body shaming, hate crime, state violence | Ancestry, self-care practices, self-affirmation, online activism, creatively use body as means to resist, collective engagement, recourse to religious spaces |
| **Area stigma** | Discrimination, criminalization, symbolic segregation, suspicion, unfair treatment, humiliation, embarrassment about place of residence, state violence | Valuing community history, self-affirmation, being outspoken, participation in collective spaces, online activism, entrepreneurship, professionalisation |
| **Structural violence** | Barriers of access to education, health care, social rights, the labour market, endemic poverty and state neglect, institutionalized racism, sexism, classism, state violence | Participation in collective spaces, courses and trainings, professionalisation, return to study or work, entrepreneurship, recourse to religious spaces |
| **Infrastructural violence** | Lack of access to statutory services, re-victimization in protection services, unsafe urban infrastructures (lighting, policing, distant bus stops), state violence | Informal and affective networks, women's mutual support networks, alternative conflict resolution, seek alternative conflict resolution mechanisms, rely on transgenerational knowledge, participation in collective spaces |
| **Symbolic violence** | Homophobia, transphobia, misogyny, sexism, racism, state violence | Online activism, self-care practices, self-affirmation, transgenerational knowledge, share and re-signify traumatic memories, recourse to religious spaces, creatively use body as means to resist, entrepreneurship |

Resistance practices developed by women to address gendered urban violence are presented in two broad distinctions: short-term practices and medium/long-term practices. The former refers to those that produce an immediate and reactive effect. The second group is composed of practices that produce effects over time and are sometimes able to modify the experience of violence linked with wider transformations. Such practices are also adapted according to whether 'outside' or 'inside' the community.

## SHORT-TERM PRACTICES

*I don't leave the house. [...] When there's an operation, I don't even leave the house. I'll stay indoors. I lock the gate. Preferably, I do not even get near the window, because once I was by the window, a shot came in and almost hit me.*

**Silvia, 56 years old, white**

Short-term practices inside Maré were identified as mainly responding to police operations and conflicts between armed groups. Women identified the following practices to manage armed violence most of which revolved around coping: staying at home, seeking more protected spaces in their homes, evaluating routes when necessary to circulate, using phone/online apps to obtain information about situations and to record violence, and staying with other women to prevent assaults and abuse during home invasions by the police.

Outside Maré, short term practices for women include seeking to stay close to one another, especially in public transport and deserted spaces, not circulating at night, carrying sharp instruments, sharing their location with people they know, speaking loudly and responding when living or witnessing situations of harassment, staying silent to avoid conflict, and talking about the power of Maré to produce other narratives about the favela. While many of these are reactive, informal and individual practices, some can also be interpreted as collective and more strategic.

## MEDIUM/LONG-TERM PRACTICES

*I was raised... I say that I have five mothers, my grandmother, my godmother, my mother, my stepmother because she does everything for me, and the great-grandmother of the father of my daughters who helps me in everything*

**Angela, 25 years old, mixed-race or parda**

Women in Maré identified a wide range of medium and long-term practices for resisting gendered urban violence. Support networks composed of family, friends and neighbours, and above all other women, were fundamental. Participation in collective spaces often allowed women to change their life trajectories. This was expressed by talking about the violence experienced and often silenced, and being able to identify, together with others, their own experiences of violence, thus giving them new meaning.

Other practices included: to return to studies and the labour market as a means of building financial autonomy and breaking cycles of violence; finding refuge in religious spaces, where women report being welcomed, and experiencing transformative processes; the agency of the body in resistance; and practices created in the face of limited access to protection and care in terms of public policy and services, including the accessing of illegal armed groups for support.

Perceptions of specific intersectional oppressions experienced by black women was another key issue that emerged (see Figure 2). Younger women reported the importance of valuing ancestry and historical belonging to Maré to construct new meanings for life, community histories and the development of resistance.

FIGURE 2: 'THE PYRAMID OF OPPRESSION': OBSERVATIONAL DRAWING OF FOCUS GROUP 4 (WOMEN WORKING IN HUMAN RIGHTS ORGANISATIONS IN MARÉ)



(illustration by Mila de Choch)

# REPORTING GENDERED URBAN VIOLENCE

> *Then he took me there to the 21st (police station). [...] The guy [chief of police] came and asked, "What happened?" Then I said, "He locked me in the bathroom with a butcher's knife in his hand; he wanted to kill me." Then he looked at me and asked "Where's the blood?"*
>
> **Elisa, 50 years, undeclared race**

When asked about support services for facing violence, many women stated that they did not know any state organisation or network. Lack of access to care and protection policies, or perceived inadequacy of public services was a common perception. As a rule, the main public policy mechanisms accessed are police stations, perceived as violent and ineffective by most women. In addition, health services, such as the basic or clinical units of the family, were viewed as precarious and providing poor quality care. Despite problems, these were the first places that women went to report gendered violence, especially domestic abuse. However, reporting at a police station typically occurs after serious escalation of violence, involving several episodes, aggression or even attempted femicide.

Ineffectiveness, failure of legally instituted guarantees and the violence produced by these services – perceived as only working properly in "the city" beyond favelas – leads the women of Maré to develop other means to cope with violence, often alone or by activating informal networks. This typically involves resorting to short-term coping practices such as leaving the house when men arrive drunk and aggressive, including sleeping on the street with children if necessary; planning new routes; changing routines, habits and residence when stalked by former partners; and relying on family, friends and neighbours so as not to circulate alone. These measures all imply significant restriction of freedom and choices by women.

On the rare occasions when access to public services and policies was possible and effective, this produced a feeling of dignity and respect. Access to justice, although quite rare in women's testimonials, raised the possibility of disruption of cycles of violence. In turn, a lack of access to services is commonly experienced as disrespect and reaffirms the inequalities and violence that affect the bodies and lives of women in Maré.

Facing endemic state neglect and direct police violence some residents of Maré find an alternative source of conflict resolution in the armed groups that dominate different areas. These groups occupy an ambivalent position in their narratives, both as sources of violence and as sources of protection. Some women indicated that they had personally sought help from the armed groups to deal with some situations of violence, most commonly intra-familial abuse and domestic violence. This recourse occurs for different reasons: out of necessity, when it comes to following certain local codes for conflict management; through a sense of familiarity; and disbelief in the state or previous experiences of lack of access and ineffectiveness of policies.

# WOMEN'S RESPONSES TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

> *First it is reactive, we do not know well what we are dealing with [...] just as everything at the beginning of the pandemic was reactive [...] I think that this change occurs from the moment we recognize each other as a network and can understand what can come out of there ... this begins to be thought collectively, intentionally and not only reactively*
>
> **Member of Women's Support Network of Maré [RAMM]**

Research began just before the COVID-19 outbreak in Brazil and faced numerous challenges to ensure its continuity. Social distancing and the urgency of coping with the pandemic, especially in peripheral territories already subjected to abundant social complexities, required reassessment of planned activities. The crisis affected research, not only because Brazil was one of the most severely affected countries globally, but also because favelas have been massively impacted by the health and economic crisis. Research was thus led in a way that would integrate observation of how women of Maré organised (individually and collectively) to cope with the hardship and distress resulting from the pandemic in terms of gendered urban violence.

Women interviewees and the focus groups addressed different aspects of the pandemic, indicating the singularities of its impact on Maré residents. Issues that emerged included a potential increase in the incidence of domestic violence due to the need for isolation; increased difficulty of access to health services, both for COVID-19 and other health demands; intensified economic vulnerability due to loss of work or reduced workload resulting in reduced income; the need to create new ways to guarantee sustenance of family and children; the extra burden of work at home due to the suspension of childcare units and schools; difficulties in accessing the Internet and technology necessary for remote activities and education; and the impossibility of attending collective spaces.

The pandemic had both negative and positive effects for women. In initial stages, it was overwhelmingly negative. But there were also positive outcomes for some participants. Many women reinvented themselves through starting new businesses or changing their ways of working - especially with the help of the Internet and social media. Many began to disseminate their work online, with cooking, the provision of services, sale of beauty products, clothing, among other activities. Women's creativity was essential to this reconstruction, given the absence of effective emergency public services to counter negative ramifications of the pandemic.

In 2020, two important local collective fronts were developed to cope with the effects of COVID-19 and consequent social isolation: the Women's Support Network of Maré (RAMM) and the Campaign Maré Says No to Coronavirus. Women created and led these initiatives. Analysis of both the Campaign and the RAMM, as well as the participatory observation, showed a movement that began with emergency

actions and responses, and led to the construction of structuring, transformative initiatives to cope with the pandemic and specific forms of violence and vulnerabilities arising from it. This has created 'emotional-political communities' among women from Maré as they have recognised the violence they live through and have sought to develop collective initiatives to cope with and resist it. (McIlwaine et al., 2022).

## CONCLUSION

> *And I think that's basically what women do, we've already learned to defend ourselves, even if it's, I don't know, just by being together*
>
> **Rita, 19 years old, black or preta**

Women in Maré have identified multiple coping practices created to resist gendered urban violence. By investigating these experiences in various forms and scale, the active role of women in combatting direct and indirect gendered urban violence emerges in a complex system of resistance practices.

Resistance practices can be formal and informal, short, medium and long-term actions, reactive and transformative, individual and collective. The centrality of women in the composition of support networks is key to these practices, especially through oral transmission of trans-generational knowledge and experience. While ways of dealing with violence are not necessarily identified as such, they are systematically integrated into the daily life of women.

Local and co-produced knowledge, formal and informal networks mobilized by women in the territory of Maré and in their encounters with the city, and the engagements and spaces of protection created by them throughout their lives are powerful forces for resistance. Many of the practices formulated respond to historical gaps in public services for the reception and protection of people living in favelas and peripheries, and to historically violent, racialised State action in these regions.

Effectiveness of public services for women in Maré relates not only to guarantee of access, but also the guarantee and development of policies that meet the singularities of their histories, ways of life, and real needs. Effective policies need to recognise that women who are victims and survivors of violence, who must act and take responsibility for their own safety, are often re-victimized when attempting to access available services.

Collective spaces are fundamental in the construction of coping and resistance networks for women in Maré. Places of collective engagement allow women to recognise experiences of violence, leading to reaffirmation of their stories, construction of new bonds, return to studies, access to paid opportunities, and engagement in processes of struggle and political transformation.

However, some public spaces can also operate as producers of violence. Police stations, in particular, have emerged as places where women are often violated when seeking shelter and protection. This has serious implications for future policies and the allocation of resources in addressing violence. At the same time, it is not only public service and policy provisions that produce violence. Illegal armed groups are perceived as both a source of protection and producer of gender-based violence. Collective spaces that play an important role in the construction of coping and resistance practices with structural, transformative and long-term impacts, primarily civil society organisations, must be central to future policies to better address gendered urban violence.

Finally, the body occupies a fundamental dimension in coping with violence. Women resist through their bodies and it is in them it that the story of their struggles is marked. In embodied experiences, women trace strategic routes through the streets of Maré, hide at home; change house, work, habits; their bodies seek the company of and support other women; they enter and exit Maré to protect other bodies; their bodies respond and assert their worth; they cry, give life to other bodies and care for so many others.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Public and especially police/judicial services should undergo training on dealing with women reporting gender-based violence to avoid re-victimisation

- Civil society organisations should extend hybrid service provision (online and in-person) developed during the COVID-19 pandemic for women requiring support for gendered urban violence

- Provision of collective spaces, formal and informal, to capture women's support and resistance mechanisms for addressing gendered urban violence

- Creation of livelihood options for women - possibly through micro-credit loans - allowing women to make choices in relation to gender-based and especially intra-family and intimate partner violence

- State and civil society investment in community history-making and ancestry initiatives for local residents, led by women, in order to challenge stigma and racism, build dignity and celebrate women's contribution to favela culture

- Ongoing citizenship rights, educational and information-sharing work needs to explicitly include women's experience as survivors of gendered urban violence

- A systematic online app-based warning system of danger hotspots for women should be developed within and beyond Maré (to include police incursions).

- The structural conditions underpinning gendered urban violence must be addressed including addressing poverty, inequality, racism and sexism. As part of this, police incursions into Mare must stop.

- Women of Maré must be included in the creation of public policies.

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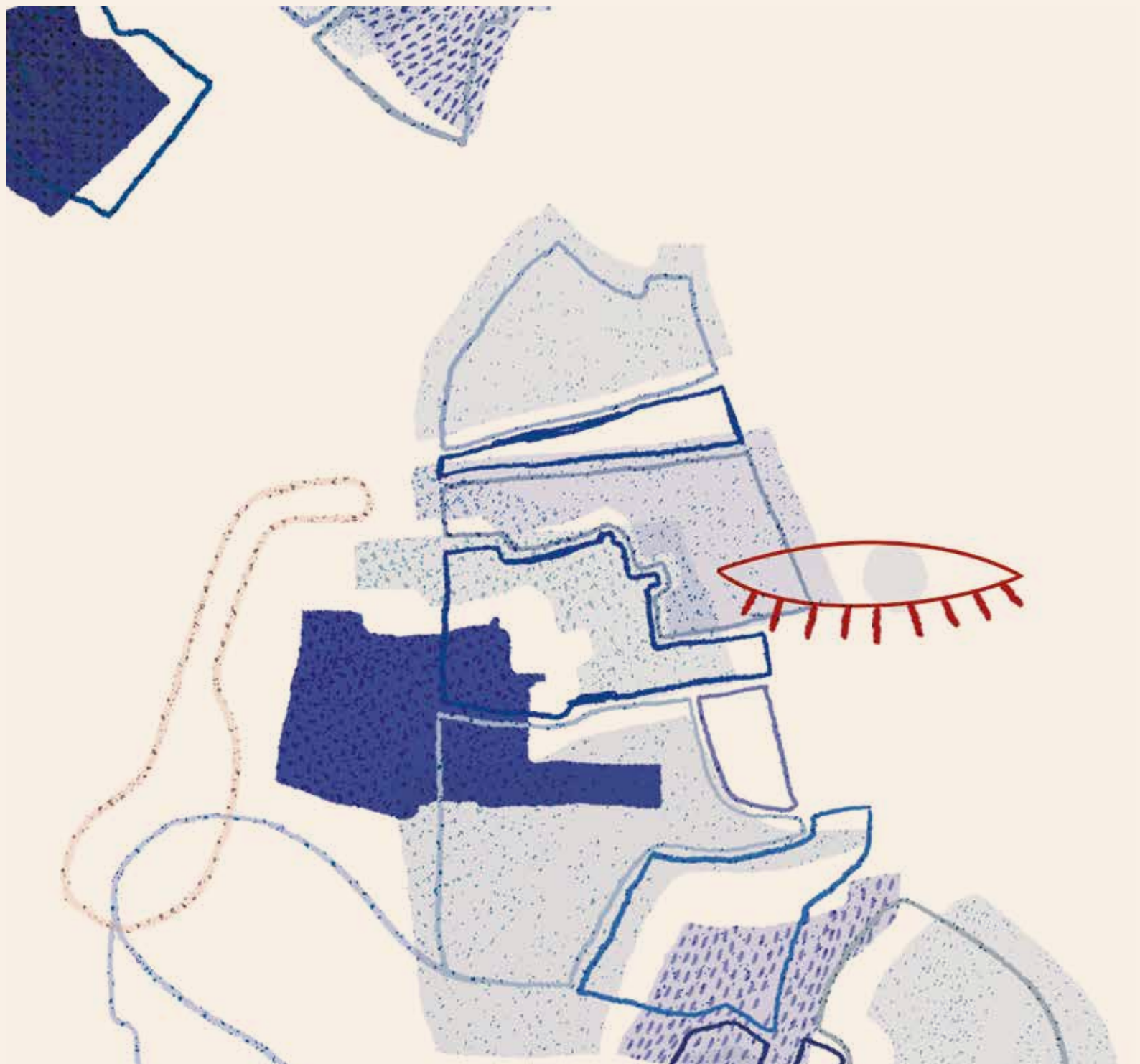
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