

FEAR AND COPING

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1. Introduction²

Repression does not only affect those who have been detained, raped, and murdered. It is also aimed at the families, groups, and communities where these people live and with whom they often share values and practices. Gender differences permeate in the ways that repression ensues.

At times, violence comes from within the family itself and, at times,—as happened in Chihuahua, Mexico and other places—family members take advantage of the widespread repression that exists in the city or community to act violently against women and LGBTTTI people, from their family and community.

In reference to the repressive process in Chile, Javier Olavarría notes that, in every repressive process, it becomes necessary to define a gender policy that neutralizes women, at the least, by keeping them dependent and pointing out what is expected of them along with the punishments they will risk receiving if they do not adhere to what has been established. Within this framework, traditional gender roles are further entrenched: women's place is reproduction. Their possible participation in public and/or political life—whether by helping or protecting a man in their lives or through their own agency—would make them enter into a space of suspicion, where the enemy is, and, therefore, they could be objects of repression.

The message, Olavarría continues, is one of domination: stay in your place or you must be afraid. This is a profoundly political argument, which results from the structural relations of power, domination, and privilege established between men and women in our society. Women who go beyond the established limit are considered to be enemies and treated as such. There are two categories of women who are targets of special attention: one, those whose political conscience drives them to political activism with the aim of establishing a more just social order, and a second category of women who do not have a recognized political identity of their own, but who are subjects of attention for their relationships with men. They are chosen for the activism of their husbands, lovers, sons, fathers, or brothers and seen as an extension of these men and as their property; men whom are considered to be enemies (Bunster 1996: 50–51).³

Repression aims to spread fear in societies, families, women or LGBTTTI people within the family or community so they do not resist gender mandates. People become more distrustful and often feel paralyzed, or they do not participate in their group or community activities. Thus, fear becomes one of the largest mechanisms of political control, as Riera and Beristain explain.⁴

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² Correa, Clemencia. *La salud mental y los Derechos Humanos desde una perspectiva psicosocial* [Mental health and human rights from a psychosocial perspective] (2011). The contributions of colleagues from the Mesoamerican Initiative for Women Human Rights Defenders were important for developing this proposal (Orfe Castillo, Marusia López, Alda Facio).

³ Olavarría, José. *El sexismo tortura y mata. Política de Género y represión hacia las mujeres en Chile* [Sexism Tortures and Kills. Gender policy and repression of women in Chile]. Flacso-Chile, 2003.

⁴ Beristain, Carlos and Francisco Riera. *Afirmación y resistencia: la comunidad como apoyo* [Assertion and Resistance: The community as

For Elizabeth Lira⁵, “Fear, anguish, anxiety, dread, panic, fright, and horror are words that refer to life experiences that are unleashed by the perception of a certain or imprecise fear, either present or probable in the future, that comes from one’s internal world or surrounding world.”⁶

In regard to this, Father Javier Giraldo⁷ asserts that if fear is characterized by a widespread physiological reaction to the unknown, the unexpected, or risks that drives the person to face this reality with tension or aggression or to flee from it, then terror entails the same reaction, but it is no longer to the ambiguity of the unknown or the unexpected but to the positive threat of violence that is aimed against life, integrity, and liberty:⁸

For Luis Ibacache,⁹ fear is, simultaneously, constituted in fear and, ultimately, it is a necessary condition of political repression as well as a result that is secured through it. The enduring vital threat; the absence of stable personal, group, institutional, and social parameters; the growing dissolution of the boundaries between security and danger, between the prohibited and the permitted, and between the real and the possible; and the difficulty to submit sensations of threat or persecution to a reality check provoke a widespread experience of terror and uncertainty. He explains that fear—as a situation that the power creates, plans, and exacerbates—stops being a natural reaction of alarm and a purely individual experience to become an undercurrent in social relations, that is, in communication between people.¹⁰

We can conclude that fear and terror are old strategies of societal control: generating terror so there is no organization, creating intimidation so that opponents of the system stop taking action, instilling fear to paralyze people and entire societies.

Fear as a strategy and aim of repression uses and constructs pain and anguish from social and cultural dynamics that cause insecurity. Sexual violence against women, for example, is present as a threat in all politics of fear, not only for its effects on the life and integrity of women, but also for the stigma and the impunity that it entails in a society that tolerates, justifies, and promotes it. Another example is the social exclusion of women who challenge traditional gender mandates, which, in some communities, can even lead to their expulsion. The exacerbation of these dynamics through the politics of fear has the same effectiveness as direct threats or attacks from the State’s repressive bodies.

Politically active women transgress gender roles, and repression seeks to discipline them in their “traditional” role. It is a societal control strategy that executes acts of terror. Under the imposition of fear, the power is gradually able to confuse the society, put the cohesion of social groups into question, and dissolve the construction of alternative politics.

The power creates a circle of:
Terror (injustice, destruction of social fabric, moral conscience)
Silence (normalizing, acceptance, connivance, coexistence)
Impunity (lies, subjugation)¹¹

support], Chapter 4.

⁵ Chilean psychologist, predecessor of Latin American political psychology, from the 1980s to present. She considers the human rights perspective and political psychology.

⁶ Translators Note: This quote was translated from Lira’s original Spanish text for use in this publication.

⁷ Jesuit priest, human rights defender in Colombia.

⁸ Javier Giraldo M., S.J. *El terrorismo de Estado* [State Terrorism]. Tuesday, 23 November 2004. Available in Spanish at: <http://www.javiergiraldo.org/spip.php?article86>

⁹ Chilean medical psychiatrist.

¹⁰ Las huellas del miedo [*The Tracks of Fear*]. <http://www.derechos.org/nizkor/chile/libros/poderII/cap2.html>

¹¹ Correa and Rueda. *Efectos psicosociales y culturales del desplazamiento* [Psychosocial and Cultural Effects of Displacement]. Digital Library. UN Institutional Repository. <http://www.bdigital.unal.edu.co/1461/>

Due to the aforementioned points, in order to resist and continue doing our work, today, one of our fundamental tasks is to know how to cope with fear so as to avoid isolating ourselves, silencing ourselves, or becoming vulnerable to the control that those in power want to impose over us.

For many women defenders, fear is not only generated by public powers. Fear of slandering, of mockery, of exclusion from their own organizational spaces and movements for assuming non-legitimized stances, or of violence from their own families and partners for taking on a leadership role or requesting new arrangements in the division of labor is also present for many women defenders.

In the case of women defenders, challenging the fear that is provoked by repression also involves challenging the fear that is generated by gender violence or by questioning traditional gender roles, and this involves several tasks and trials. First, it involves gaining familiarity with the context, the actors, and their interests in order to understand the intention behind their acts of terror and, thus, be able to face the impacts of these acts with awareness. In contrast, it also entails evaluating the risk and developing prevention and protection measures that provide us with conditions of security.

All of this will necessarily lead us to gain awareness of who we are, what we want, how we want it, how we have been culturally constructed, what we need, and what we can do to face this situation. We are speaking of options and of work on reflection and collective agreements—because the control is of everyone, and, therefore, it is a collective task. This is why facing fear should be an individual goal with friends, family, organizations, and the networks we are part of so that we can support each other. Although we cannot forget that if someone has a partner who uses fear as a strategy, this person's family might not always be present in this process.

For women, this also entails a task of transforming one's own identity, of questioning vital dependencies in order to construct autonomy, strengthen our self-esteem, and transform the gender roles that we do not want in our lives. In the case of men, this also means questioning their own ways of exercising and experiencing power.

Below, we share a methodological proposal for approaching this issue.

2. Coping with fear in borderline situations¹²

Below, we summarize the fundamental concepts and tasks for understanding fear and coping with it according to the basic sections proposed by Carlos Beristain.¹³

He states that in borderline situations of a political nature, many experiences occur that generate fear and anguish. The fear can be:

- ❖ Fear of the unknown—that something might happen and that we are not quite sure what it could be.
- ❖ Fear of the known—a concrete threat (fear of abduction, of security forces, of one's partner, of one's family in cases of domestic violence...).

In reality, these two fears are mixed. On the one hand, closed off social environments, disinformation, and the arbitrariness of situations spread fear of the "unknown." On the other hand, official propaganda, threats, and

¹² Op. cit.

¹³ Medical psychiatrist; international consulting advisor on mental health and expert witness for the Inter-American System.

ongoing experiences of repression within and outside of the family cause repression and bring about fear when facing the certainty of the threat. The first produces a great deal of uncertainty, which is difficult to face. In general, the clearer the threat is, the greater the possibility that it will have to be positioned and faced.

2.1 Fear: parts and consequences

There are four things that we are interested in recognizing here and that make up the different experiences of fear, which we can call components of fear.

- **The sensation of being vulnerable**, of a lack of protection that harm can be done easily. The social construction of women as vulnerable beings and objects of violence is a factor that increases the sensation of vulnerability and the fear itself. In Honduras, for example, many women said that the repression of political demonstrations made them feel afraid because the police would sexually assault them.
- **The state of “alert”** from tension caused by what could happen, which leads to being constantly “on guard.”
- **Individual powerlessness**. The sensation that nothing can be done, that what might happen to you is out of your hands. The social construction of women as people who depend socially, financially, and affectively on others can increase this feeling of powerlessness.
- **An altered sense of reality** from not actually knowing where the danger is that appears as a vague threat, where the limits are, or what is actually happening.

Because of all this, the author says that the different experiences of fear have a series of consequences that we could summarize as:

- Recognition of the risk: Fear helps recognize how far something can go and how to distinguish between what has elements of risk and what does not.
- Bodily reactions: This includes palpitations, drowning sensations, sensations that the stomach is “coming up,” rapid breathing, etc., which are normal in situations of dread.
- Fantasies: Fear is an experience from which all others are evaluated. It becomes a type of filter that makes one see things differently.
- Feeding into fear: Sometimes fear turns into a tangled knot that wraps us inside of it, and this is an experience that grows increasingly larger, since fear is fed even more by not coping with it.
- Lack of organization of behavior: Sometimes fear leads us to have other impulsive behaviors, to do things without thinking when the situation is not controlled.

2.2 Fear as safety or inhibition

One fundamental aspect that stands out is that fear is not always negative. Fear is a defense and safety mechanism that allows us to take precautions in situations of threat. Yet, fear can also lead us to situations of paralysis, obsession, or even guilt. Here are some examples of the negative effects of fear:

Paralysis:

- No longer taking part in group activities.
- Staying home to avoid problems.
- Feeling paralyzed when facing a violent situation.

Obsession:

- Thinking obsessively about being followed.
- Distrusting one's own colleagues or group members because of insignificant matters or misunderstandings.

Guilt:

- Feeling guilty or cowardly for feeling afraid.
- Feeling you are to blame for not having done something.

2.3 Coping with fear in borderline situations

Sharing each person's different experiences of fear in a group can help see how fear influences people's lives and the different ways they cope with it. Here, we will point out some resources that can be used to cope with fear.

However, to share these experiences, there should be recognition that groups are not always sensitive about accepting all the experiences that cause us fear. For example, an indigenous woman defender who reports an indigenous leader for domestic violence and starts to receive threats (due to arrangements the leader makes with local authorities) will probably not feel comfortable talking about this within her organization due to a fear that they will justify the aggression against her for having "reported a community member."

Therefore, a basic condition for sharing fears is to create spaces of trust and form basic agreements of respect. In the case of women defenders, it will often be necessary to have specific spaces for them where their words are received as being credible and where the dynamics of fear that are linked to the social dynamics of tolerating violence against women can be recognized.

A. Keep an active stance

If for some reason anguish presents itself and nothing is done to cope with it, it is probable that this anguish will grow and that it will take increasingly more energy to control it. It is important to take action, to do something to cope with the situations that cause anguish and not allow them to take over. If not, the person will be increasingly more deprived of vital energy, feeling increasingly less capable and more paralyzed.

There are two ways to cope with anguish:

- By coping directly with the situations it produces. Although often they cannot be eliminated, it might be possible to introduce changes (to take precautions or change habits or behaviors that are too risky without forgetting that, in situations of domestic violence, changing habits can actually result in more violence.)
- By facing the consequences, trying to keep situations under control, and avoiding impulsive behaviors. (Relax or think, *"Okay, I'm nervous, but I'm going to try to do this, and then I'll see what happens. It is important to not lose control."* etc.)

B. Work on fears

Cope with them from at least four points:

- **Recognize them**...this is the initial step to work on. One recognizes and is aware that she/he is afraid. (What

do I feel? What am I thinking?)

- **Analyze them**...to evaluate the risks and their real basis. (For example: The risks that could be involved with a political demonstration or the danger of an attack on the community.)
- **Socialize them**...share experiences with friends and colleagues to gain awareness of them and free oneself from a deteriorated self-image for feeling afraid. See what group members have in common, what they feel, and what the group experiences are. (For example: recognize dangers and fears with others. Release accumulated tensions.)
- **Break them down**...to try to see what their parts are. (For example: Not knowing what to do in the case of an attack or abduction, feeling unsafe when alone...) See what can be done to cope with them. (For example: have safety regulations, make agreements about what each person should do in the case of an abduction, avoid certain unnecessary risks, etc.)

Recognizing them, analyzing them, socializing them, and breaking them down is the only way to relativize situations, assuming the real risks that do exist, keeping them in mind, and being careful but without letting fear invade everything.

C. Avoid rigid stances

Quite often, three stances are taken when facing fear:

- One denies it as a way of steadying oneself and feeling good about oneself. ("Me? Not at all. I'm not afraid." "That's impossible. I can't be afraid." "For someone like me, it's not logical to be afraid.")
- One tries to hide to not cause concern for others or to avoid being ill regarded. (There's nothing to worry about. Everything's going well.)
- One acts as if it doesn't exist, avoiding or shying away from issues or situations that could provoke it. ("It's better not to talk about it. It's not important." "Let's leave it for another occasion. We don't have time for that now.")

It is not, however, about denying experiences, but about establishing their nature and integrating them into the process itself. Sometimes this can lead to making the expectations one had created for her/himself flexible and adapting them more to the real context. (*"I'm afraid because there is a dangerous situation...but this does not mean that I am a bad friend/colleague."*)

Only by avoiding rigid stances can one also be self-critical, but self-critical in a way that does not destroy the person or bring her/him down.

Another example related to rigidity is avoiding forms of degrading by recognizing the experience of fear. (Being afraid does not mean being a "coward.") Only after considering this can one break the cycle of denying the experience that causes a growing rigidity in people and in the dynamics of many groups.

D. Share feelings

Experiences of fear bring on many feelings and emotions. These feelings and emotions simply exist and cannot be qualified as negative, as, by doing so, one starts to negativize everything related to fear and create weighty prejudices against those who suffer from it.

It is not, therefore, about analyzing if fear has a "real" basis or not. While often these feelings and emotions are not tied to "logical" reasons, this does not diminish their capacity to control our lives and provoke many contradictory

emotions.

This is where the need arises for having to cope with emotions and share them on a deeper emotional level, from the meaning of a social struggle or a person or group's reason for taking part in it.

It is about getting to know one's feelings of fear and sharing them, sharing the whole sense of what one is doing. In this regard, women need other women as a gender to recognize ourselves and strengthen ourselves.

It is also about analyzing one's own identity and recognizing the elements that favor or do not favor fear based on how we have been socialized. If it is socially assumed that feelings are feminine and, therefore, inferior, that women are weak by nature or that our well-being is based on whether we are wives or have children, it is probable that the way we experience fear and find it difficult to express in our organization will grow.

E. Promote solidarity

We have seen how borderline situations also force people and groups to experience situations with high levels of tension. In these situations, solidarity is more important, when possible.

The group, which should normally be a space of trust and acceptance, can be affected by fear and distrust among the members themselves.

People do not go through these borderline situations alone, but rather they experience them as a group. The group can be a very important resource for coping with them, encouraging ideological reinforcement. Yet, the group can also be a space of mutual support—we can mutually lend each other strength, control impulsive reactions, share experiences, and offer solutions to problems.

Identifying with others is fundamental. As Marcela Lagarde¹⁴ notes, sorority as personal and political awareness entails defending one's own autonomy and sharing the aspiration of transforming society. Having individual rights as women depends on gender rights, on sharing sexual specificity or difference, and on accepting other women as being deserving of the same rights and the same freedoms that we aspire to have.

For the group to be supportive, it is necessary to form certain pacts and basic agreements in order to, for example, grant equal legitimacy to the words and testimony of all the members and eradicate sexist and violent practices within the group itself. Groups tend to reproduce social relations of gender inequality if they do not question them, and this creates an unfavorable environment for sharing experiences of fear. In the case of women, it is important to build relationships of support and alliance in order to support one another, not only to face fear, but also so the entire organization, including the men, recognizes it and validates it. This happens by women recognizing each other's authority and questioning the cultural practices of how women relate to one another that limit solidarity (ideas like, "Women won't even walk to the corner together").

Sometimes, terror or fear can affect a group member to the point that reaching solidarity in the group becomes something incredibly complex.

3. Methodological proposal:

A. Share experiences

Share real life experiences or situations that cause fear and relate them to the feelings and sensations that they cause.

¹⁴ Marcela Lagarde. Autoestima y Género [Self-Esteem and Gender] in Cuadernos Inacabados 39: Claves feministas para la autoestima de las mujeres [Unfinished Notebooks 39: Feminist Keys for the Women's Self-Esteem]. 2000.

One way of doing this could be to:

- Describe some of the situations that cause fear.
- Analyze some of the consequences that they lead to for the person or the group.
- Relate them to the sensations that present themselves in the workshop and the four characteristics of fear that we have indicated (the sensation of being vulnerable, the state of alert, individual powerlessness, and an altered sense of reality) or the five consequences that we have noted (recognition of the risk, bodily reactions, fantasies, feeding into fear, and a lack of organization of behavior).

This way of analyzing one's own experiences can help in seeing how fear presents itself in each person and in each group. Accordingly, it is possible to see the different parts of fear that are created by the family, the organization, or state or public-sector agents, and, therefore, to clarify how to cope with them.

B. Strategies for coping with fear

Another possibility is to share positive experiences with different ways of coping with fear. Experiences of situations in which a positive result came from doing one thing or another or ways people have had to overcome inhibition, etc., can be shared in the group. Learning from the personal and group experiences through which women have faced fear caused by gender violence can be a great help for facing the fear caused by public powers. These may be individual or group experiences.

These different strategies for facing fear can be analyzed in the group to see why they had positive results. From this group discussion, some general rules or useful attitudes toward fear can be gradually established. At the end, the group's conclusions can be filled out or contrasted with the five points for coping with fear that have been discussed in this chapter (keeping an active stance, working on fears, avoiding rigid stances, sharing feelings, and promoting solidarity).

C. Risk technique

This technique is useful for expressing and analyzing the fears surrounding a situation and for seeing how they can be coped with as a group.

This technique is based on the idea that feelings that are generally labeled as negative can be released when awareness is gained and when one expresses her/himself with others and shares with them. Releasing the expression of these feelings of fear and dread in a group setting reduces the tension of anguish that these same fears had been causing in people and it opens a path toward accepting the situation.

The risk technique can be used to analyze fears in a group that has to carry out a certain action (to prepare for a political march, for example) or, more generally, to analyze the situations that cause fear and paralysis in daily life.

Part one: present the risks and fears

1. The situation is clearly presented and the group is asked to only focus on the unpleasant aspects that fear produces. The aim is to create a setting with absolute communication and trust in which fears can be expressed with ease.
2. Group members express their fears, whose objectivity will not be discussed, and they are written down on a whiteboard. If several people express the same fear of a risk, the number of people will be noted. Group members can be asked if someone did not feel comfortable sharing a fear and why.

Part two: analysis

1. Once the first part has been exhausted, the group is invited to discuss and analyze their responses. This will start a free discussion about the reality and basis of their fears. When establishing the “reality” of a fear, it is important to also question if any stereotypes are being inserted regarding what fears are socially acceptable. It is very common for the fears expressed by women to be disqualified or minimized, whether because the women themselves disqualify or minimize them or because their fears are established in life settings that are considered to be private. During this time, the coordinator will not express her own opinions; rather, she will make an effort to sustain the discussion around a risk until the necessary clarifications are made for changing the group’s attitude.
2. When the group rejects a risk as being imaginary or something that can be overcome, it will be crossed off the whiteboard. It is natural for fears to be released as they are expressed, and, as other group members listen, everyone will start forming a more objective vision of reality.

Part three: assuming the real risks

1. The real risks, whose objectivity is recognized by everyone, will remain.
2. The coordinator will invite the group to find measures that could ease or eliminate these risks and secure reasons that would push the group to assume the possible consequences. All actions involve a risk; it is about knowing if such a risk has a certain value and if it is worth taking.

D. Relaxing

Situations that are upheld by tension, in the case of fear, for example, form ideas (“I’m not capable of controlling myself. I’m going to get really nervous. There’s nothing I can do...”) and characteristic symptoms (palpitations, rapid breathing, muscular tension, etc.). These ideas and symptoms, which are caused by fear, also create anxiety and increase tension in a cycle of sorts that feeds itself. (This is what we called feeding into fear, above).

A way to control the tension created by fear is to learn how to relax. In this indirect way, some of the consequences of the tension (palpitations, rapid and superficial breathing, shaking, rigidity in the body, digestive issues, the sensation of powerlessness...) can be reduced. Relaxing helps lessen the consequences and better control tension.

The group can learn a simple relaxation method, which can then be put into practice anywhere and in situations of heightened tension. One of these methods is based on controlled breathing. It consists of concentrating on the rhythm of one’s breath by using the diaphragm muscle (when one breathes in, the abdomen expands, and when one breathes out, it pulls back in).

After having taken an adequate number of breaths (between 10 and 20), people are able to feel calmer and relax the rest of their bodies. With their eyes closed, they can think about pleasant situations (a landscape, loved ones...) or a fixed image (an object, a number, a color...) that helps them remove themselves somewhat from the situation they are experiencing.

They can also calm themselves with internal speech, telling themselves, *“I am going to try to calm myself down because that way I can anticipate situations. I am going to relax my breathing and think of something pleasant. I am going to be capable of...”*