

Gender Expressions, Morality and the Use of Physical Force by the Argentine Police

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the phenomenon of the use of police force and gender moralities in training and professional practices of police women. The central question is how physical and lethal force produces contradictions between making progress careers and agreeing with expressions of femininity that inhibit, *a priori*, such skills. This paper is the result of an ethnographic fieldwork displayed over five years in different police Argentinian institutions.

The fieldwork includes interviews and participant observation in training facilities and workplaces (police stations, patrols and special operations) of Argentina's Federal Police, Argentine National Gendarmerie, Buenos Aires Provincial Police and Argentine Naval Prefecture. Ethnographic descriptions discuss the idea of homogeneity of police culture and contribute to think about flexibility, permeability and diversity in the police profession.

This article presents arguments and empirical data which lead to conceive police as a space of tensions regarding the conceptions of gender. On the one hand, police officers (males and females) reaffirm some hegemonic ideas of gender; on the other hand, in their speeches they break the traditional notion that femininity systematically implies weakness. In this sense, the display of physical force is incorporated by women in the course of their police careers and exercised in contexts of police actions, but reinterpreted when justifying their actions against judicial agents.

Keywords: Physical Force, Police, Ethnography, Gender, Moral Standards.



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1. Introduction

The relationship between policewomen and the use of force is a thoroughly studied topic in Anthropology and Sociology. Empirical studies carried out mainly in the United States, Europe and Mexico have shown how complex this relationship is. Such complexity resides in the legal framework, the cultural conceptions that the police officers have about their tasks, how professional those police officers are, and the relationship between the police as an institution and other social agents.

This paper analyzes the phenomenon of the use of police force in one of its specific dimensions: gender moralities. In this sense, the guiding question in this research is how femininity is expressed in a profession that demands the use of physical force. This article focuses on the articulations among socially legitimate femininity –in the police –, the use of violence and the evaluation of police professional performance. This proposal draws from analyses such as Marilyn Strathern’s in New Guinea (Strathern, 1997), in which she explores the “double standards” used in trials to convict women and men. In the same way, this article examines the way in which expectations about women’s and men’s behavior are differentiated in the physical practices and, at the same time, how abusive behavior is justified differently. The starting point is a perspective shared by gender theories and by police native theories. This view indicates that women, by definition, are those who renounce violence and leave it to men. The issue we propose here is to describe ethnographically the ways in which women perform in a profession that demands a quality that is supposed to be masculine. Although the main contribution of this article is empirical- since it shows experiences, justifications and ideas of police agents in Argentina- it does not lose sight of the theoretical contribution to the understanding of femininity, morality and police culture.

This paper is made up by different sections. The first one, “Training and Learning of Women in the Use of Physical Force” is devoted to examining the physical expressivity of police officers when they use force to hurt someone, to defend themselves or to impose themselves to the citizens. More specifically, it shows that some policewomen use the relationship between femininity and weakness in a strategic manner, and with it they achieve the highest degree of freedom in the exercise of their profession. The second section, “Strategic uses of Femininity in interactions with the Judiciary” compiles the arguments favoring the police officers’ strategies when dealing with one of the federal agencies that supervise them, the Judiciary. Both policemen and policewomen strive to highlight a feminine weakness which is not always present in the concrete activities of the police officers; nevertheless, such weakness is effective to avoid sanctions, as members of the judiciary agree with this view of womanhood. The following section, “Firearms” gathers the findings from the fieldwork concerning two positions of the female agents regarding the skill in the use of guns. On one hand, we find the arguments insisting on the care and responsibility as key elements of this skill, which aligns with the classic expressions of femininity. On the other hand, there are discourses supporting access to guns with the technical knowledge, distinguishing this practical skill from feminine qualities and locating it solely on the professional ground. The section “Good manners appropriate for female officers, according to native perspective” includes policewomen’s ways of dressing, ways of speaking, and ways of grooming themselves as effects of public authority. These elements are linked to manners and are used in two directions: either they distinguish authority figures from non-authority persons, or they distinguish between respectable policewomen from non-respectable policewomen. This section also includes an initial subsection that deals with methodological decisions and the reflections these made available.

The topics selected allow for the analysis of gender moralities that either enable or hinder skills and strategies of policewomen's use of physical force in Argentina. The exercise of physical force, an activity that is traditionally associated with men, is redefined in the police, thanks to the appropriation and the exercise of femininity considered viable by police officers, citizens and members of the judiciary. The frameworks for the exercise of the police profession are defined in the dialogue between moralities and action strategies.

2. Methodology

This paper is the result of a fieldwork conducted from 2009 to 2014, and it was carried out in several stages that produced different records. These will be explained below. During 2009 and 2010, I made interviews and observations in two police stations of the Buenos Aires Provincial Police (*Policía de la Provincia de Buenos Aires*), the most important provincial police in Argentina (because of the number of officers it has and since it is in charge of a territory that has both high political visibility and the highest crime rate in the country). This corpus of records was produced and used especially for my doctoral thesis (Calandrón, 2014), which was oriented to the analysis of gender relations and sexualities in police stations. I carried out this fieldwork intensely and on my own, which is why I managed to gain the trust of the police officers. They not only shared information and their opinion with me, but also made me part of their leisure moments, nights out during off hours, and the breaks they took during their shifts. At this stage, the production of records was profuse and I paid attention to all the topics that emerged, in a generalist fashion. For this reason, it was not difficult to go back to these notes specifically to review the topic of the use of police force, since it was during this stage of the fieldwork that the idea of writing about it came up for the first time.

Later, in 2012, I carried out fieldwork in Argentina's Federal Police (*Policía Federal Argentina*); in 2013, I devoted myself to the Argentine Naval Prefecture (*Prefectura Naval Argentina*) and, in 2014, to Argentine National Gendarmerie (*Gendarmería Nacional Argentina*). These last three police agencies have federal jurisdiction, since they work in the whole Argentine territory and answer to federal authorities: the National Ministry of Security (*Ministerio de Seguridad de la Nación*) in the first place, and then to the national police authorities. During those years, I did fieldwork in two types of facilities: training facilities and workplaces (police stations, patrols and special operations). This was a collective fieldwork, which was shared with other researchers¹, and it was devoted to the analysis of the education and training of police officers. In general, the records from this stage were produced individually but, since they were supposed to be shared with the other researchers involved, they were complete and clear. Unlike the previous description, this work was undertaken with full disclosure since its beginnings, because we had formal authorization to

¹ They are Sabina Frederic, Mariana Galvani, Tomás Bover, Iván Galvani and Mariano Melotto, to whom I am very thankful.

carry it out; therefore, the trust with the natives was more limited. This resulted in fewer insights and opinions by the police officers, but it contained detailed descriptions about the exercises, training, and patrol instances.

In these notes, I found formative and professional practices and events during which my colleagues and I, in our capacity as researchers, only participated with our observation. From the complete corpus of these records, I decided to use only those that I produced, since I consider that the fact of “having been there” is not only of great ethnographic relevance but also irreplaceable.

Adding the two field experiences I conducted more than 80 interviews and observed police activities (training and patrolling) for more than 400 hours. I interviewed NCOs and officers, mostly in lower and middle grades. Among 10 and 12 interviews were conducted to high ranking police commissioners. Respect to the antiquity in the force, I found a diverse rank that went from young agents entered a few months ago to agents of more than 32 years of service. Besides police officers, I also interviewed civilian who made part of the police institution: psychologists, lawyers, social workers, and physical education teachers. The interviews started with different purposes in each fieldwork experience because they were articulated to different research problems. However, they were all undirected interviews (Guber, 1991). This means that the problems defined theoretically were provisional and initial in the interviews dynamic, which was later opened to topics of interest proposed by the police.

These clarifications show the difficulties of going back and reviewing records produced to other ends and in different years. However, these differences also make visible the dynamics in the empirical fields. First of all, they show the distinct insertions in the field according to the time and the formality of the access. Secondly, they expose the fact that participating in the police institution in an individual way (as I did during my first experience) is not normal, and this situation needs to be corrected. This is the reason why I was made a participant in the officers’ discussions, conversations and night outs. Instead, when I was part of a group –in the same way that officers are joined by rank, course or task– I was not a discordant element in the environment, and my group was allowed to remain there without altering the regular dynamics. Thirdly, the natives assumed that I was prejudiced against policewomen’s attitudes and practices, and these assumptions were only dissipated after I told my own experiences, unprejudiced and similar to theirs, accepting of divergent femininities.

I discovered that officers show their physical force and techniques in relation to both professional and social expectations of gender. Respect to this idea, I would like to develop a methodological consideration. It was in my role as a female researcher that I noted the officers’ (both men and women) assumption about my lack of experience with guns. Every time I went to a shooting range, for example, the instructors started the lesson based on their perception that I did not know how to use a gun, that I had never practiced shooting, and that it would be my first time doing so. I was taught by different instructors, and all of them were excited to teach me. However, they were greatly disappointed when they realized that it was not my first time shooting and, also, when I proved that I was not as inexperienced

as they expected I would be. What did this prejudice say about me? And, more importantly, what would be the consequences of this attitude in my work? Not only did they believe that I had spent my life away from guns, but also that I did not approve this behavior by other women. That is to say, they assumed I adhered to certain moral prerogatives about gender that, undoubtedly, are common in society. Because of this preconception, policewomen avoided talking about their experiences with firearms or fights outside the police. Tearing down this moral barriers and opening up the dialogue about the use of force in all of its forms by women were two challenges faced in the course of this fieldwork. This experience was useful to value the problem of research: how physical and lethal force produces contradictions for policewomen between making progress in their careers and agreeing with expressions of femininity that inhibit, *a priori*, such skills.

3. Training and Learning of Women in the Use of Physical Force

The training devoted to body techniques and the use of physical force poses clear differences between male and female trainees for the instructors in police schools and training centers. The reason is that most women have smaller build and they generally feel shy about exhibiting brute force. This attitude is linked to gender expressions that are socially legitimate from their point of view. Most specifically, during the first lessons of police training, women do not show enthusiasm, vitality or engagement with the tasks.

Beyond this general framework, a self-defense instructor that teaches at the Argentina's Federal Police managed to find a formula that would enable the expression of physical brutality. During the last five minutes of each class, the instructor would shout the curious assignment: "*Fight!*" When the aspiring policewomen heard this word, they immediately changed their stance, facing the peer closest to them. The exercise goal was to restrain the opponent until the bell rang, indicating the class had finished. This situation was experienced rather as a game which both contestants tried to win. In order to do so, each had to reduce their opponent to the floor, climb on top of her and exert as much force with the arms as possible. During those last minutes, the class turned into a ring as much as a child's game, because it did not stop being a fun time.

This instructor's teaching method is based on the cadets leaving aside their classic gender roles through a playful context in which socially correct parameters of movement were relegated to a second level. However, the instructor was frustrated because he could not achieve this goal during the whole class, he said: "*They're difficult to deal with. They're reluctant to participate during the entire class. It is only at the end that they wake up.*" This scenario constitutes these women's first encounter with the use of brutal physical force in a police context, although it can be inferred that in most cases this was not the first experience of this kind in their life (which was proven by the moment of the "wrestling" game, during which they seem to know what they were doing). This difficult combination between a profession, whose dominant skill is the use of physical force, and the identification with a

sense of femininity, whose standards exclude violence, constitutes a central point of reflection.

The tentative initial training in police schools can take several paths during the development of the officers' professional career. One of those paths is maintaining the typical standards of femininity at the expense of the physical skills that the career demands, assuming compliance, kindness, affection and weakness as key qualities of said femininity. Another possible way consists in highlighting physical skills and techniques; here we find two recurrent models. On the one hand, these policewomen openly attempt to show traits they believe to be manly to prove themselves valuable in male-dominant institutions². On the other hand, we find those policewomen who aim at gender *hybridization*, leaving behind those traits that highlight femininity but without showing masculine gestures. It involves a hybrid that is not necessarily categorically masculine or feminine³.

Training, preparation and courage impose themselves in those who decide to make a career in the use of physical force. During a professional career in the police, gender expressions and social parameters play a different role than that observed during initial training. During the course of the fieldwork, I expressed, from time to time, my own common senses about the responsibilities of policewomen, asking whether or not they were less respected than their male peers when they worked in the streets. An officer explained me the following:

Pablo: No, just the opposite, actually, because it is always different with them. It depends on how each of them handles herself, but in general they do well. They hold them [the detainees], curse them, better yet if they push them around a little or if they tighten the handcuffs so the detainees stay cool. Maybe, if it is me [a man], the detainee would want to fight with me... but when they're women, the detainees are not defiant or they don't want to fight with the policewomen because... How are they going to fight against a woman? There's this macho⁴ thing that makes them behave without complaining.

In this instance, gender expressions reveal a particular role of women's physical work. When policewomen encounter possible felons, great opportunities appear for these women. The reason is that they have more freedom to exert force over the bodies of the male detainees, who would refuse to face the public shame that entails having been subdued or hurt by a woman. These same actions ("*push them*

² In Argentina, police forces included only men until mid 20th Century. The first to include women in operative tasks was the Buenos Aires Provincial Police in 1947 (Galeano & Calandrón, 2013). Argentina's Federal Police incorporated women in the 70's and the Argentine National Gendarmerie, one of the last to make advances in this area, did so around the year 2009. In addition, quantitatively speaking, women constitute a minority in all of Argentina's police agencies and even more so in the hierarchical structure, mostly occupied by men.

³ On this topic of police training, Susana Durão's paper (Durão, 2004) could be considered of interest in the framework of Portugal's police.

⁴ The word *macho*, makes reference to a specific kind of masculinity, one that is virile, dominant and heterosexual. This term is widely used in Latin America to refer to the traditional "real masculinity", many times associated to violent expressions of such identity. A study on this word can be found in Malhuus & Stolen's paper (Malhuus & Stolen, 2007).

around a little” and “tighten the handcuffs”) carried out by a policeman would be punishable and even reported in some cases.

The difference in social standards as regards the genders that is seen as a disadvantage during the training phase becomes an advantage in the practice of the profession. The generalized image of women as weak, defenseless and less brutal than men favors a more excessive and unrestricted use of force by female officers when detaining male suspects. At this point, Strathern’s work (Strathern, 1997) on the *double standards* involved in the assignment of responsibilities to people is doubly useful. First, and on a more superficial level, this work shows the different judgment of subjects on the basis of them being women or men. Secondly, and more specifically, it poses that if the aggressive action was directed against another woman, such action will be judged differently than if it was committed against a man.

In the same way, if female officers use brutal force, this will be more accepted on moral grounds when they use it against a man, since an alleged gender disadvantage counterbalances the legal advantage. On the contrary, if a man uses his power excessively against another man, this abuse will be more graphic and punishable in the eyes of the other police officers.

Moral argumentations regarding the ways of using force against citizens establish, from a native point of view, right or wrong ways of behaving. In order to gather these data and put them at play, we took the perspective of the native moralities, developed by Howell, in an attempt to avoid normativity and prescription (Howell, 1997). The legality or foundation of the use of physical force is not discussed here, but the ways in which natives justify their actions. In policers’ explanation gender is substantial to interpret whether an action is correct or not.

If the physical action is performed by a female police officer against a male citizen, it is completely justified. If the action is carried out by a female police officer against a female citizen, it is fairly justified. If the action is carried out by a male police officer against a male citizen, the context can be evaluated. And finally, if a male police officer deploys force against a female citizen can be reprehensible. In this sense, morality is elaborated on the basis of gender, and for this analysis I propose the term *gender morality*. Gender morality refers to evaluations, judgments and justifications about actions or people that are inseparable from the gender relations in which they are registered.

In this text, we include a description of those things that police officers consider good and bad actions in each situation, as well as what they view as an action typical of a “good police officer.” These definitions are not stable neither equal to every police officer, although it is possible to find recurrences and reiterations. Also, they are important in the sense that they are not only valid for the evaluation of other people’s actions but to guide one’s own.

Let us review another instance in which the imaginary –and outdated– model of femininity as an identity characterized by weakness, submission and sensitivity faces practices of femininity that are strong, assertive, brutal. One evening, in the Metropolitan Area of the province of Buenos Aires, two patrols of four agents detained two young men that, apparently, had stolen a motorcycle. This could have

been a routine detention procedure, but it was further complicated by fighting and damage to the police cars. The situation got worse because one of the officers had marks in his face, product of being kicked, the detainees looked like they had been beaten, and the car window was broken.

When the police officers arrived (three men and a woman), they were questioned about what had happened. “Pelado” was the first to give us the details:

I asked him for his ID and he came at me, so we kinda boxed [he mimics the stance and gestures of a boxer in a fight]. I subdued him, cuffed him, and Durán [Pelado's patrol partner] subdued the second suspect. But he didn't have handcuffs, so we called Daiana and Chino, who were on another patrol.

Daiana, a 35 year-old Sergeant with fifteen years of experience, was blond, thin and energetic. She spoke with a powerful voice, making a lot of hand gestures. She did not conceal her sensual and complicit attitude. In her narration of the facts, she became the protagonist:

Daiana: Chino and I were in the car when we heard a call for backup in the radio. Since we were near the scene, we went there. We found these two [officers] with the suspects on the ground. One of the suspects had handcuffs but not the other one, since my partners did not have an extra pair of handcuffs. So, I stayed with one of them to cuff him while my partners took the other suspect to the car. When I approached the suspect to hook him [put him the handcuffs], he tried to stand up... I held him down and he tried to do that again. He lifts his head and spits me.

Gabriela [officer taking Daiana's statement]: In the face?

Daiana: In the eye! That's when I got angry, I hooked him and kicked him; he tried to move again, so I had to kick him just a few other times [she laughs].

Daniel: Super Daiana... superpowers.

Daiana: After that, I made him get in the car.

Gabriela: What about the other two officers?

Daiana: They were forcing the other suspect into the car but couldn't make him to get in. That suspect was the one to kick the door and break the window when he was pushed inside. When he smashed the window with his foot, he kicked Pelado in the face.

Gabriela: Two officers couldn't handle a suspect and you did it all by yourself?

Daiana: Of course, honey! What do you think? [She answered with a defying tone].

Showing toughness and physical control of the situation with a suspect, the absence of fear in the event of a possibly violent response and, finally, succeeding in a test of force constitute a large part of the police work and replicate themselves, almost analogously, among women and men.

In the narration of the events to other curious officers, to me (in my role as a researcher) and in the police report that was filed for the judiciary, the aggression suffered by Daiana took center stage. A non-commissioned officer questioned the suspects: “Why did you spit on the girl? Why did you do that? How dare you? Because you did that, you're going to spend the night in a cell.” The kick in the face that Pelado

suffered was relegated to a second stage, while the aggression to “the girl” turned into the reason to detain the suspects and the subsequent physical punishment the detainees suffered.

Daiana had proven to be skillful in the use of physical force, participating successfully in the operation. And the aggression she suffered seemed less harmful than a kick. Nevertheless, the accounts of the facts appealed to women’s weakness in a particular manner: exaggerating the pain that this act of violence could effect on Daiana, a much bigger pain than it would be experienced by her fellow male officers. It was clear, by seeing the consequences, that she was more skillful and strong than her three male co-workers. The three of them together had barely managed to subdue one of the detainees, while the policewoman alone addressed the situation successfully. Even though in the training sessions the situation had been different, appealing to a weak femininity was useful for the police officers to justify the use of force on the two detainees and their subsequent holding in the police station.

4. Strategic uses of Femininity in interactions with the Judiciary

The police are in constant communication with the judiciary, since one of the tasks carried out by the police is “law enforcement”. The police reports are sent to the Office of the Prosecutor, where the investigations continue. What is more, in some cases, bailiffs assign additional tasks to the police, such as getting a more detailed declaration, taking photographs, calling in someone involved in a court case for questioning. This section describes police’s strategies for dealing with the supervision of the Judiciary and shows how they are justified from the native perspective.

In the different Argentine police agencies, there is a special sense of respect towards the judiciary world, combined with some sort of awe towards its members. The reason for this appreciation lies in the fact that the police, while they have some knowledge about the legal field, are not experts in the matter, and it is not uncommon that they make mistakes in relation to it. These mistakes are omissions, neglect and confusions that frequently turn unlawful the investigation processes (which nullifies the procedure), and constitute a reason for convicting an officer due to aiding and abetting, or neglect.

In that context, police officers pay close attention to everything they officially write in reports that will be sent to the prosecutors. They believe they have the responsibility to “protect” their partners, so that everything they register in writing cannot be used against other officers. With this consideration in mind, during the night we described above, Daniel and Gabriela read out loud, in the judicial office, the formal designations of cases that they could use to define the attitude of the detainees: *“Resistance to authority? – said Gabriela with her fingers on the computer keyboard, ready to start typing – also aggravated damages, because they damaged the patrol car. And injuries, but we need to check if they are minor or severe.”*

When I asked how they were going to develop the account of the facts, they answered that they were going to gather the statements of all the officers involved,

making emphasis on Daiana's statement. This choice was rooted in the use of the traditional conception of femininity to justify the use of force, something that would appeal to the prosecutors' common sense. These police officers made the report revolve around the insults, struggle, and spit that Daiana suffered, at the same time that they made her responsible for the beatings that the detainees suffered. The reason behind this is that prosecutors, in the police perspective, find physical force to be more brutal when exerted by men than women, especially if the latter have physical builds culturally associated with femininity. And, even though the officers did not believe this to be always the case, they used this hypothesis to justify their conduct.

At this point, as we saw in the previous section, we should include a dimension that is different from moral expressions that justify and guide people's actions. The interactions between the police and the judiciary exhibit the idea of a strategy in the framework of action. The strategy is the development of one or more actions guided by actors' volition and competence, within a general conditioning structure. This conception of social action supports on the theoretical developments of Anthony Giddens (Giddens, 1984). In his theory, social action is based on actors' knowledge and supervision, although it is not exhausted only in that. Even though external circumstances limit action, subjects are able to guide, within those frameworks, their competencies towards the pursuit of certain aims. The concept of strategic behavior allows us to emphasize that action is not automatic, unconscious or a mere reaction. In fact, in this case the action is specifically aimed at obtaining advantages over the judiciary. It is an action thought and developed to achieve an objective, although in a different space are able to explain the same action in a very different way (for example, between police, having a moment of fun, oriented the story to humor incorporating different details). Supporting this, means asserting that the differences between narratives and explanations offered by subjects are not simply lies, but that they strategically adjust their discourses according to the public, purpose and environment.

The actors position themselves strategically according to the context and their aims. In this case, they do so by selecting action repertoires that prevent possible complaints, claims or sanctions against their professional activities. In this way, officers appeal to moral evaluations that, according to them, are shared by the prosecutors and judges in charge of processing the files written in police stations. Femininity as a font of fragility and piety is the most important of these considerations.

This tendency occurs in the general workings of police institutions that have appealed to the integration of women in their ranks, with the aim of generating a less violent image of these institutions themselves. Supporting this argument, we can find papers about the Brazilian police, in which the admission of women contributed to minimize the image that society had about it, particularly in relation to the perceived corruption and authoritarianism of the police (Musumeci Soares and Musumeci, 2005). The advances in the democratization and modernization of the Latin American armed and security institutions included gender policies, among other reasons, because women provide a less violent profile, one that seems more

empathic, closer to the people. What this perspective, brought about, was a bias of the Social Sciences towards two different directions, according to the interesting research carried out by Cardi and Pruvost (Cardi & Pruvost, 2012). On the one hand, violence exerted by women became a taboo over which the studies kept deep silence or, on the other hand, this kind of violence was stigmatized and treated as a female hypertrophy. Following the steps of Cardi and Pruvost, in this paper, we set out to study and analyze the physical force exerted by women as a complex social phenomenon in which different and coexisting conceptions of femininity merge together. An example of this is the double movement: first, appealing to a general vision of femininity as weak and sensitive; then, the exercise of a strong, brutal and active femininity in the context of the police station being thought of as a “superpower”.

5. Firearms

The initial approach to guns takes place during the course of the basic training sessions as well. In general, it starts with the technical examination of this weapon and its component parts. After this first step, the trainees devote themselves to the knowledge of gunshot thermodynamics in a practice known as “dry fire”. This exercises use guns without ammunition to practice “marksmanship” and incorporate the gunshot movement as a corporal technique. Only after these exercises, the instruction with loaded weapons begins: guns and, occasionally, shotguns, loaded with the same ammunition used during the career in the police⁵. Several people keep a vivid memory of those initial practices and, especially women, express how novel it was for them to handle and item of that sort.

Jimena: At first, I was also afraid of guns; but then, when you learn how to use them and know the safety measures, you overcome that fear. The [Police] School has an indoor and an outdoor shooting range. We would always go to the one outdoors. The first day we were given the guns, I was so scared... You can't imagine! I had never ever touched a gun before, but I finished the training with a 10 in the shooting section, the highest mark. Instructors train you well and they will not hand you a gun unless they are completely sure that you are ready to use it. They are very strict as regards gun safety.

Jimena looked both a currently experienced person in the handling of guns and a person formerly fearful of guns. This seems to be one of the characteristics that distinguish men and women as regards the use of guns and shotguns. While women highlight their past ignorance and former lack of contact with this kind of devices, men did not regard their joining the police force as a change in their relationship with firearms. This difference is probably due to the fact that the initial fear reported

⁵ In some cases trainees also practice in paintball shooting ranges with paint bullets, dummy ammo (bullets without gunpowder) and virtual shooting ranges with compressed air guns.

by most policewomen is not a feeling that can be put into words, according to the stereotypes of masculinity that men face.

Moreover, Jimena believes that most young male officers that join the police force are “not responsible” as regards the use of firearms, and she identifies “responsibility” as the most important skill in the handling of this weapons.

It is all about responsibility. I don't let anybody use my gun, nobody touches it, and I don't show it either. Showing your gun is like showing your butt... I do not go around showing my gun. I keep it safe, it is my responsibility and I know how to handle it... I am familiar with it, but I do not need to go around showing it or saying I have a gun like my [male] partners do.

To Jimena, complying with safety measures, knowing the gun like the back of one's hand, not borrowing it and keeping it safe are the fundamental actions that the skill of responsibility entails, even if using the gun means not only shooting it, but also carrying it in the waist daily. Concealing the gun, as one does with the most intimate parts of one's body, is a key aspect of *caution* in the exercise of the police duties; the exact opposite behavior than that of her co-workers: showing it off, letting others borrow it, carrying it everywhere they go.

Jimena's view on the proper use of a firearm is not the only one. It coexists with other views that have shooting technique at their core. This is Julieta's case, who had her first shooting experiences during her childhood, with her siblings and cousins. Nevertheless, she only told me those childhood stories once I had told her mine because, once again, she feared she was going to be judged according to a certain gender morality that does not allow the use of firearms as a “leisure activity” for women. In Julieta's opinion, the fundamental tools for proper shooting were body stability, balance and steady arms. For her, the most important thing is not the ability to hit the target once, but repeatedly; continuity is a must in this activity. She associated this skill with another one, typical of the classic femininity: knitting. “*In order to say that you know how to knit –she said to me–, what really counts is not the ability to make a stitch, but to make several coordinated stitches. It's the same with shooting.*”

Both the technical specifications and the responsible use are abilities that make up the professional skill of lethal force among policewomen. Nevertheless, a difference between them can be found. While highlighting care is an attitude coherent with the socially enabled expressions of femininity, the concern for the technical details generates a departure from such expressions. On the same line, accepting the contact with firearms outside the police (in a country with strict regulations as regards selling and carrying this type of devices) also distances these women from socially legitimate expressions of femininity. Therefore, in order for me to approach them, a specific field strategy was necessary.

The authorization to participate in activities of public security forces was an achievement accomplished by policewomen in their struggle for equality with their male co-workers inside Argentine police institutions. Ever since they were first admitted in the police, they demanded equality as regards working conditions and

professional capabilities. The improvements in the integration of women into the use of physical and lethal force were partly due to the technological advances in firearms. Since 2007, Argentine police institutions added to their arsenals a line of Thunder automatic handguns, which are referred to as “*Bersa for women*” by the officers. This gun is lighter, shorter and with a smaller grip, compared to the previous model, but with its same reach and load capabilities. These changes into the gun allow for its easy handling by people with smaller hands and arm muscles, two characteristics of many women. For this reason, this model was given to them, granting them a tool that works towards equality in fire power among women and men.

The technology applied in the production of weapons reduces more and more the importance of the shooter’s build. In this way, this technology partly blurs one of the gender differences that often make a distinction between male and female officers’ performance. It includes policewomen in a domain that was exclusively dominated by men until very recently. In this way, police institutions have open themselves to, quoting Cardi and Pruvost, “think women’s violence”.

6. Good manners appropriate for female officers, according to native perspective

Authority is constructed in the exercise of several skills. Together with body language and the use of firearms, we can find the physical appearance or visual image that the officers have and show. The way they dress, the gestures they make, the words they use when they speak, all these contribute to or undermine (from a police-woman’s stance) their entitlement to exert physical force towards the citizens. We draw upon authority in its broad meaning, typical of political anthropology (Evans-Pritchard, 1940, Pitt-Rivers, 1971, Leach, 1954) and heir of political sociology (Weber, 1978 [1922]) which refers to the ability to impose one’s own disposition and find discipline. Generally, authority implies inequality among subjects and establishes according to certain rules and forms of legitimation that justify it. In this section we describe the actions and perceptions that police consider correct in order to edify and maintain female police officers’ authority. At the same time, we mark the differences they find in front of their male partners’ authority display.

It has been known from some time –thanks to the renowned texts by George Simmel about fashion– that, in contemporary societies, the way people dress is a form of habitual distinction among them. Particularly, in the police, the uniform is an authority token that distinguishes officers according to their hierarchical rank and functions. At the same time, the uniform distinguishes officers from people who are not officers. In this latter case, the sole evidence of wearing a uniform reveals the character of public authority of the officers. As regards the distinction between officers, the uniforms contain epaulettes which express the officer’s rank; its cords and shields indicate the officers group or specialty and the weapons or radios that allow us to identify the specific task. In commemorative ceremonies and public holidays, even today, the uniform also distinguishes women with skirts and slouch hat from men with pants and cap.

“*People don’t respect me because I don’t wear the uniform,*” said Esther, a 50 year old officer, who wore a dust coat because she carried out administrative tasks. This meaning of the uniform was encountered countless of times: as a sign of public authority. One afternoon, I was walking in the street with a female sergeant to whom I was interviewing while she was on duty. Several neighbors asked Sandra if there was something wrong. Sandra replied, joking, “*I’m arresting her*” (referring to me). A person in uniform standing with a person without one constituted a sign of an unequal relationship as regards force. Such was the situation that it even allowed Sandra to joke about her capacity to detain and arrest me. This capacity became evident just from our different garments.

Nevertheless, some details or minor alterations may cause the opposite effect. For Marcela, a police lieutenant, wearing the skirt as part of the gala uniform made her feel like a *gato*, an Argentine slang term used to refer to women easy to approach, physically exuberant, or too sexually available. On the same line of thought, she celebrated the change that the uniform experienced during the 1990’s: mid-high heel shoes, clearly uncomfortable for running and walking during long shifts, gave way to robust hiking boots, which provide better feet protection. Also, the thin cloth wide cut pants were modified to resemble those of male officers, with adjustable cuffs. Marcela believes that policewomen in skirts and heels looked like *gatos*, an image that undermines their social legitimacy and gets in the way of the correct carrying out of these women’s duties.

It is important to notice that self-downgrading is a combination of not only technical and professional, but also moral reasons. In Marcela’s eyes, looking like a *gato* likens policewomen with other women whose erotic and sexual behavior she does not approve of. In the native police perspective, sensuality is an extremely important matter in the definition of an acceptable and worthy gender morality. The reason behind this is that, at the same time its excessive presence is deemed undesirable, its complete absence is perceived as deceptive. “*I like to look pretty; women do not stop being women when they join the police*” Mariana explained to me while she was telling me how she liked dressing nice, with her uniform well fitted to her body, wearing makeup and nail polish. All this was done with the purpose of “*not ceasing to be women*”. In this way, policewomen advocate a proper management of sensuality that inspires respect from the citizens in two different directions: because they are women, and because they are police officers.

One afternoon, while she was on duty, Guillermina could not find a bulletproof vest of her size and because of this reason, she had to wear a larger one. Seeing her with this vest, Julieta started to laugh and said to her, joking, “*You look like Robocop*”. Julieta advised her partner that, if she was going to be dressed so ridiculously, the best thing to do was to not wear a vest. This attitude is part of the “good appearance” these women officers practice and care about. This “appearance” includes the neatness and tidiness, personal hygiene and the security with which these women walk. In some instances, such as the one I have just described, the “appearance” conflicts with safety measures, and each officer chooses to prioritize one or the other. To Julieta, appearance predisposes the citizenry to respect the police or not, that is why she would rather modify the uniform and defense devices instead of looking foolish.

Force and strength also manifest themselves through the words spoken, the kind of language and tone of voice used. Even though this phenomenon can be seen in several social spaces, it is in the police where it acquires special relevance and where it can give us narratives to understand gender relationships, such as McElhinny's papers (McElhinny, 2003) propose. In this sense, Miriam dramatized the differences between her behavior in police operations and the way she address people in general: *"I speak to you calmly, like now, but if I have to arrest somebody or search them, I can do it like this. I have to stand firm and yell to them if necessary. I can't let them walk all over me"*. As regards the use of words, a policewoman with nearly 30 years of service said she became a *"jetona"*⁶ and that it did not happen only when she was at work, but also at home. Mirta, this officer, explained to me: *"my daughter doesn't get it. At first it was very difficult for us to understand each other because I became so 'jetona' and that gave us a lot of trouble"*. In a different direction, Linda, a police superintendent with 31 years of experience, spoke about this curious quality as a strength for the job: *"here [at the police station], people respect me because they know I'm jetona and I start yelling at once. These dudes [male officers] don't intimidate me"*. It is interesting how this native Argentine term *"jetona"* is used to name a speech technique that goes against *good manners* but that also guarantees effectiveness in the interactions that take place inside the police institution.

Willingness to exert force is coherent with the ways these women show and present themselves in public, and these ways highlight the moral regulation imposed on femininity to which the female officers ascribe. It is worth noting that, just as we saw in the figure of a *jetona*, female officers shift between moral qualities depending on the specific contexts. In this way, they approve of the behavior in relation to the professional commitment in the police station context, while acting in this same way in the familiar context creates conflict. This attitude shows us that morality regarding gender attributes is defined in relation to the situational context in place.

7. Conclusions

In this paper, the notions of use of physical force and gender moralities have been developed, particularly the moral standards as regards the different kinds of femininities in the practices of training and interventions of Argentine police-women. This text is the result of a five-year ethnographic fieldwork in different police contexts.

We have focused on the femininity forms of expression in a profession that demands the use of physical force for its correct performance. In the first place, we presented cases in which women learn and train the use of physical force. Through them we concentrated on the association between the requirement to practice

⁶ This word comes from the word *jeta*, a colloquial way to refer to the mouth. A *jetona* is someone who has a big mouth; however, this does not make reference to that person's anatomy, but to the figurative meaning of the mouth. It makes reference to somebody who speaks too much, too loudly or uses strong words (such as insults).

violence and the socially established femininity standards, in which weakness, kindness and docility are preponderant. The policewomen views on the adjustment to these gender parameters are modified in the different instances of their career. During the early times, women avoid separating from traditional femininity. Then, over the years they get capable of acting more freely and develop situational manipulation of the weakness they are supposed to carry. At these times, they renew the idea of femininity, as it unfolds a way of being a woman associated with strength, efficiency and power.

Being assertive with words, the brutality and the physical strength, which are taken as characteristics of masculinity in other professions, are necessary characteristics to exercise the role of a police officer. In this sense, references to and signs of classic femininity hinder the development of policewomen's careers. If policewomen strictly adhere to the standards traditionally associated to the "feminine way", they would lose a central skill that characterizes every police officer: the capacity to use physical force accurately.

Nevertheless, things become more complex because physical or character weakness that are typical of femininity in other social contexts are not taken in the same way in the police. The police institutions make strategically use of this classical and extended figure of femininity to justify the use of unreasonable force, especially when presenting their cases to the judiciary. In these accounts, women appear as the banner of a less violent force than, naturally, that of men. It is in the interactions with the judiciary that traditional masculinity and femininity ideas are reinforced and place women into weakness and disadvantaged positions.

The use of firearms is a central instance in the police and for police women particularly, as it confers the striking power of killing another person. In this article, we described how policemen evaluate the attitudes regarding that knowledge in different ways, if it is male or female agents who display it. Women are identified as ignorant about those techniques before joining the police, while men express to have been socialized in the use of firearms during their childhood. Recently, police women found pistol designs that favor their bodies and developed metaphors or signs that allow them to match shooting practice to others undoubtedly considered as feminine. In this field, gender equality is a visible and accelerated process.

Finally, the effective or potential use of force requires a corporal expression. Dressing choices, the words used, the way of walking or the tone of the voice legitimize (or not) the women's power to use the physical force. In this field, women choose esthetic tastes that reinforce their beauty and sensuality. They ascribe to an active and decided femininity, that remarks the differences respect to men. Nevertheless, police women count on accusation moral categories which limit that freedom. What is new in these scenes is the sensualization of the traditional policeman that identified the police profession.

From the production of empirical data, we contribute to the visibility of the pluralism and diversity that exist in the police medium. Moral definitions are created by, legitimized by and adjusted to the encounters between officers, judicial agents, and common citizens (retailers, neighbors, employees). These definitions do not constitute an exclusive domain of police officers as such, but are shared in

social spheres beyond the limits of police stations. This is what can be seen when we appeal to double standards (Strathern, 1997) in order to understand the moral judgments made by police officers, distinguishing whether the actors are men or women and if they are directed to men or women.

Women are also conscious about those double standards with whom they are evaluated and, in function of them, they develop strategies to strengthen at their jobs. They learn to use violence, to build a respectable image of themselves, embodying the good manners, strength and autonomy. At the same time, they learn how to invoke feminine weakness, to use it in a scene and to remember it to their male work partners.

Certain attitudes or skills (such as games of strength) are practiced and acquired prior to entering the police academies, in schools, during family interactions or at a sports club. Some are specific to the formation of a professional body that undergoes learning and training experiences, updates its work methodologies and is controlled by a single judiciary.

Finally, the assumption of the weakness of femininity contributes to the reproduction of hegemonic masculinities. However, when women leave this image aside and assume a strong, tenacious and even brutal femininity, traditional canons of gender are interrupted and suspended. The strategic use of femininity idea remarks that nor weakness nor extreme strength are stable or permanent behaviors. On the contrary, many femininity notions coexist in the police institution, and they are activated according to the circumstances. In this way, the general circulating definition of femininity is plastic, flexible and adaptable: it must be a weak femininity when it is facing the judiciary, and needs to be aggressive when it's at an intervention involving female criminals; it can also be brutal when it is in front of male delinquents.

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