

# Becoming a victim, from pain to empowerment

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*If I did not believe in those who listen,  
If I did not believe in what hurts,  
If I did not believe in what is left,  
If I did not believe in what fights ...*

Silvio Rodríguez

## Abstract

The following work is the result of an experience held in the city of Barquisimeto Lara state during 2016, which I define as an encounter with the dignity of family members victims of police abuse, who in the midst of the pain have undertaken a fight for justice, building together and together spaces of protest and mobilization for activation and training in human rights. The testimonies contained in this article were made through in-depth interviews and exploratory conversations with five members of the Argimiro Gabaldón front, within the framework of the training of popular therapists to care for victims of police abuse and violation of rights with the Organization No Government "Support Network for Justice and Peace". Keywords: pain, victim, human rights activism, police abuse.

## Introduction

This article stems from an initiative carried out by the Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) "Support Network for Justice and Peace" in the city of Barquisimeto, State of Lara, Venezuela, between 2016 and 2017. The initiative, which I joined as facilitator, consisted of a program designed to train "people's

therapists" to care for victims of police abuse and human rights violations. This experience allowed me to engage with a group of wonderful people that I will introduce throughout this article as relatives of those killed by police forces. They are people who, in the midst of the pain of a loved one's loss, have begun to build new families and relational spaces:

*at the head of this family that we are, is a mourning that seizes us; it is not a painful mourning, but a mourning that brings us together; before, I was all pain, I was lost in melancholy...but now my mourning is a joyful one (father, 45 years old).*

I was captivated by the paradoxical way in which a space held together by the pain of murder - death being a recurrent image - could be so infused with a sense of life and with the strength of love and solidarity. My desire to put these experiences into words stems from the wholehearted gratitude my contact with suffering has brought me, by allowing me to feel the simplicity of emotions and the weight of earthly life. I also feel bound to the ethical duty of capturing these people's testimonies, which show their firm belief in justice expressed through their daily struggles. As we moved forward in our training process, my conversations with some members of the Clasiista Argimiro Gabaldón front deepened. Through the mourning stories of two fathers, two mothers and an aunt, I began to explore the transit from the pain of losing a loved one to the empowerment found in the daily struggle for justice.

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## The research problem

Violence - specifically, police violence - has been a constant in recent decades of Venezuela's history, as is documented by Provea's<sup>1</sup> 1989 report, [1] which details right to life violations between 1988-89:

In Venezuela, there is a large number of cases where individuals are deprived of the right to life by State security forces in an arbitrary or intentional manner. On a daily basis, the media inform of alleged delinquents dying in alleged clashes (Covicil, 2012: 50).

Andrés Antillano (2010), in a review of 52 inquiries into the Venezuelan police's performance carried out during the last 2 decades, found that one-half of policemen use physical force. In one these studies, Tosca Hernández (1986) claims that during the 1980's, use of repressive force by police responded to the dominance of a rhetoric of war against the underworld.

In the early years of the Bolivarian process, the dominant discourse on crime and violence understood these to be the result of inequalities and social injustices prevalent in conditions of poverty. The solution was thought to lie in the transformation of certain social structures. However, despite the advances in redistribution policies<sup>2</sup> and an increased access to goods and services, the homicide rate increased from 20 in 1996 to 57 in 2010 (Briceño-León, *et al.*, 2012; National Institute of Statistics, 2010).

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<sup>1</sup> **Venezuelan Program of Education-Action in Human Rights** (PROVEA) is an independent [non-governmental organization](#) (NGO) dedicated to analyzing [the human rights situation](#).

<sup>2</sup> Authors such as Andrés Antillano (2016) highlight the efforts of recent social policies to reduce poverty and promote the social inclusion of traditionally excluded sectors. Among these are: protection policies; those targeting different social missions, protection of wages and price control; and redistributive policies that increase access to goods and services. These measures are expressed as a decrease in inequality, reflected in the Gini coefficient, "which went from 0.498 in 1999 to 0.394 in 2010, decreasing 0.104 points" (Briceño-León, 2016: 79), or a decrease in poverty, which dropped from 49.4% in 1999 to 27.8% in 2010.

In order to protect citizens' safety, the state promoted increased regulation of police forces and of torture, among other illegal practices. Paradoxically, inadequate actions by police forces, including extrajudicial executions, increased, according to Cofavic (2005). Regarding this delicate scenario, Andrés Antillano (2010) surmises that precisely such restrictions may have influenced the incidence of informal actions on behalf of police.

Violence has become an everyday site that speaks of daily uses and abuses, generating high-tension scenarios. The Bolivarian government has made great advancements in the professionalization and humanization of security forces, such as the creation of the National Police University U.N.E.S, and the 2006 police reform, among others. However, these remain insufficient in countering the effects of a stigmatization of poverty that has taken root in the Bolivarian government. According to Antillano (2016), the initial discourse which situated violence as a structural consequence of poverty, inequality and social injustice, gave way to a discourse that privileged moral and individualistic explanations. This, ultimately, led to a focus on security and the criminalization of poverty. Subsequently, public security policies became characterized by the ambiguous "metaphor of the hands": one heavy hand to attack and punish, and another to include and contain. Thus, oscillating between strategies of social inclusion and strategies of criminal control, such policies ultimately allowed for "repressive measures that legitimate heavy handed policies towards precarious subjects perceived as sources of danger and unrest" (Antillano 2016:135).

It is within this context of long-standing, systematic human rights violations by police officers that the presence of organizations such as the Support Network for Justice and Peace becomes significant. This NGO, which has its origins in the 80's, has focused on accompanying families who have been victims of human rights violations. Through a close accompaniment based on legal and psychological attention, this organization has made visible the realities of those affected by police violence. Such realities,

according to Villa (2013) and Beristain (2012), reflect experiences of coping with fear, reformulating pain, managing anger and guilt, and the fragmentation and rupture of social ties.

The condition of victim is signified by the social imaginary as an experience of passivity and impotence. This often leads to the essentialization of victims, which reinforces and deepens their dependency and crystalizes their identity as victims (Villa et. al, 2007, 2016). Quite to the contrary, the Support Network for Justice and Peace, and researchers such as Martin Beristain (2005), Villa (et. al, 2007), and Das (2008), highlight the tremendous capacity and energy of victims to fight and resist, to give new sense to their lives and demand justice. Likewise, they view accompaniment and support as mechanisms for the strengthening of social bonds. Such mechanisms constitute subjective, collective acts of reconstruction, facilitating the transformation of victims into citizens.

From a psychosocial accompaniment approach, we will delve into the stories of five members of the Argimiro Gabaldón front in order to traverse the journey from the pain of becoming a victim to the empowerment conquered in the daily struggle for justice. Through their stories, we reclaim the power of groups as spaces of supportive and affective encounters, spaces "characterized by close and affective relationships, by frequent and personal communication, and by the feeling of unity that is experienced through the concept of "us"" (Martin Baró, 2001:73).

## Methodology

Through this research, I seek to understand the trajectories and transits of a group of people who were victims to the loss of a family member due to police abuse. I am interested, specifically, in how the initial pain caused by the murder transformed into a source of accompaniment, taking different forms, expressions, sensations, etc. This qualitative research was developed from exploratory group conversations and in-depth interviews. In total, 4 group discussions and 5 in-depth interviews were conducted with 5 members of the Frente Argimiro Gabaldón. This front came into being following an unfortunate

event that occurred in 2008 in the city of Barquisimeto, where the ill-exerted power of police authorities caused the death of Alexander and Douglas, two young men - like many others - full of ideals and potential. The murder moved Ivan Perez Ortiz, their father, to initiate a crusade for justice that opened up spaces for hope, for mutual encounter, and for "justice", from which emerged the Clasista Argimiro Gabaldon front.

As for the analysis process, we used the constant comparative method. One of the basic processes in our dynamic of data gathering and analysis was the categorization of data after repeated readings. We began to systematize the data with Open Coding, reading the interviews line by line to identify ideas and concepts, to which we then attributed a code. These were then grouped into 3 main categories: 1) becoming a victim, 2) the strength of testimony and 3) the power of the collective, fueled by the conviction that without justice there is no revolution.

## Analysis of results

### *Becoming a victim*

When a fatal event befalls us with unexpected severity, we enter into a state that is described by many as "learning to live in the midst of pain". Becoming a victim brings new ways of being, feeling and existing that situate victimhood as a basic condition of life. It implies the creation of new meanings that will, inevitably, accompany those affected by murder every day for the rest of their lives.

*they say that you have to overcome death, but it is impossible to overcome, you learn to live with it, to look out for the beautiful things, the examples, and to search and search, you do not get tired of searching(father, 45 years old).*

*they say that time heals; time does not heal, when there is a deep feeling, that is never forgotten, never (mother, 52 years old).*

In the midst of such pain, "the semantic and social continent that organizes our vision of ourselves and the world" takes shape (Sluzki , 2006: 13). This is the site where narratives or

stories are formed. Sometimes, these stories are shaped by the presence of hopelessness or fatalism, a condition which deprives victims of their capacity for action. This reality is described by Iván (father, 69 years old), as a "...double moral death...". His statement is reinforced by that of another victim who lost a family member to police abuse:

*he was a high school student, he died at the age of 16 and they gave him a coup de grâce, in the midst of his pain; many families are hurting, but suddenly we start doubting: Could it be that he did something wrong? Does he have dealings with the wrong kind of people? (Aunt, 36 years old).*

Death and doubt function as mechanisms in many human rights violations - products of police abuse. First comes death, and then, doubt - together, they have a direct social and collective effect: the "double moral death". In this way, the harsh news of the death of a loved one becomes compounded with the doubt of whether their death was deserved because of "something done", thus convicting the victim without the right to due process authorized by justice.

*they believed they were free from all guilt, because people believe the police have the law in their favor; therefore, they would do whatever they wanted, because they were given a lot of power to perform many actions that were not correct (father, 69 years old).*

In this context, each family member undergoes a challenging process in order to become a victim. First, they must transcend the "double moral death", and, afterwards, the fear of facing - or, more precisely, placing their bodies vis-à-vis - the abusive proceedings of certain police officers. Overcoming fear is a crucial step in the path of vindication, since it is only by bearing witness to what happened that it becomes possible to speak about pain.

*... as I became acquainted with the fear of security forces, fear because they see you, they blacklist you, 'this one is protesting, that one is complaining', so be careful, do not complain, make sure you do not appear in the newspapers ... but I learned thanks to all the front's members that we have to*

*denounce, we have to face, we have to talk, we have to make public every event regarding those abuses (father, 45 years old).*

## **The strength of testimony as persistence in the midst of pain**

### ***Making pain public***

Testimonies are a fundamental resource in processes linked to experiences of violence. They allow us to situate, that is, to trace, in a text formed by language and body, the reality as experienced by its protagonists. In this way, testimonies allow us to make contact with the subjective and collective events of subjects' everyday lives.

*I did not believe in anything, in what the government said, in what the laws said, there was no hope, it was naturalized, adapted, 'if it can't be done, it can't be done'; why should I denounce if they won't do anything about it, there was no justice, that word had been violated because nothing existed (mother, 42 years).*

Testimonies speak to us and open us up to the rawness of the real. They also reveal the social contexts that operate as regimes of truth by - according to Ana María Fernández (2007: 104) - "establishing semantic frames and producing narratives that configure people's priority systems". These semantic frames configure social contexts in which people become used to violence and death. Furthermore, there is a loss of social referents, as subjects begin to assume that those responsible for providing security and safeguarding life are precisely those who violate the right to it.

*There was always anxiety in the community; that night officials dressed in black arrived, they knocked down the door, he was already sleeping, they took him out in his underwear and they took him away. My sister quickly went to the shooting range, which was the headquarters of the GOP, she found them washing the patrol car. It was an anguish that lasted three days, of the many things that one starts to imagine, it could be that he is not alive, because we are used to police doing that.*

*First, we looked in the polygon, then, mamón gorge, and afterwards, the road by the bypass, which were strategic points where they would take young people, and jokingly people would say "look for him in mamón gorge" and they would be found dead (aunt, 36 years old).*

Veena Das (2008: 219), an Indian anthropologist, has identified how testimonies account for the senselessness of social suffering. Furthermore, she demonstrates how, "through complex transactions between body and language, subjects are both able to give voice to and show the pain that was inflicted on them and, likewise, offer testimony of the damage inflicted on the entire social fabric". Following this author, it is possible to appreciate how the wounds that afflict victims are also deep wounds in the collective body. From the site of a murder emerges a collectivity that recognizes physical spaces as referential points inhabited by death and impunity.

Testimonies give an account of the complexities victims face in the process of rebuilding their lives and reformulating individual and family meanings. Victims must rethink themselves on the basis of an absence that does not go unnoticed but, rather, is overwhelmed by memories.

*In our family, it was like in many new years' eves: we would cry because he was not there, my sister would lock herself up; we spent many years with his absence, what's the purpose of celebrating the new year, it was so much crying, so many memories (aunt, 36 years).*

### ***In the midst of pain***

In this new context, characterized by the inhabitation of the world from within pain, it becomes necessary to learn to exist in the midst of weeping, of fear, of impotence, of exhaustion, and of the many other emotions, sensations and thoughts that emerge from pain.

*... I did not sigh, I did not have peace; I sighed, moaning from so much crying, damn police. Why did they kill my son? Why can't I? (mother, 53 years old).*

Memory becomes the gap that evokes the absent body in the midst of pain and fear. This

allows for the circulation of language and the irruption of testimony, an important part of the struggle for memory. This concept has been worked on by Elizabeth Jelin (2002) in response to the crisis of truth caused by the imposed banalization of violence and its daily expressions.

*Fear is linked to never-ending pain, we will always remember it; usually one is born and then dies, but here they take your life when it's not your turn yet (mother, 42 years old).*

Testimony, as such, operates as an act of protest in social contexts dominated by impunity, spaces made up of generalized indifference. And in this context of trivialization and naturalization of violence there are gaps, collective reactions that constitute a common space, allowing for hope to be born in the midst of pain.

*We filed the complaint and a month later, on April 29, another event which also involved the state police took place. It involved the Pérez-Heredia brothers, children of Mr. Iván Pérez, a man recognized by the community. From this came a great demonstration of pain and support, and it was from that process of mourning that we united. We got to know each other, we went, and learned of the importance of filing a claim, of fighting. And in this way we got united as a front, we became a family. We would get together, all of the victims, to do activities, in the midst our pain and unease, but with the hope that it is possible to file claims. And we started to talk about human rights, about the fact that we all have a right to life, and that this police culture cannot continue. In this way, we started to understand many things. And, in the midst of pain, hope emerges, and it is possible to guide and accompany victims (aunt, 36 years old).*

We can see, by looking at the accounts of family members of victims of police abuse, that their testimonies are related to three important functions: "to name the violence suffered, to undergo and accompany the process of mourning, and to establish a relationship with others" (Veena Das, 2008: 40).

This relationship with others operates as an anteroom, a kind of transitional space that allows us to begin to move from pain to empowerment. In the case of our subjects, this becomes possible in the interstices where the pain of others seeps in, mingles and cohabits with their own.

*Spaces that bring us closer and allow us to see that we are not alone, and to see that our commitment is to fight every day searching for justice. This unifies us and also transforms our thinking and the way we see ourselves. And even if tears arise among us, we share joy as victims that we are. This joy makes us think and gives us much encouragement in the sense that we are not alone: here are many faces, many stories of victims of police violence. That unifies us all, and it should also make our struggle more forceful, more coherent and lead us to a final goal, and this we have been achieving (father, 69 years old).*

### **From pain to empowerment**

The murder of the Pérez-Heredia brothers, in 2008, moved Iván Pérez Ortiz, their father, to initiate a great crusade for justice that opened up multiple paths. This movement generated spaces for hope, for gathering and, above all, for "justice", from which emerged the Clasista Argimiro Gabaldon front in the city of Barquisimeto.

*The front was born from the pain of a mother and a father (Gladys and Ivan), but a pain transformed. And from that pain revolution is born, which means that things no longer stay as they are, that it is not enough, which is a change that does not stop here, that does not. It is enough just to cry or go to a grave to bring flowers, but you have to do and go further (aunt, 36 years).*

The example of perseverance set by Iván's actions, along with the support of a group of comrades committed to justice, made it possible for other families seized by mourning and pain to receive the necessary accompaniment to cope with the death of their loved ones. From within this collective space of containment and accompaniment, they joined forces to expand the

tools with which they continue to fight for justice in the midst of pain.

Reality, bursting through with the forcefulness of violence, seizes our days and nights, rupturing the everyday. It is in this rupture that we are able to find awakening, which transforms pain into a catalyst in the struggle for justice.

*The pain was an awakening, the pain after they killed my son, was an awakening, because before I lived in a routine, I was in a vacuum, in a bubble ... when this happened I did not know where I was going and when I arrived here, I saw what I could understand and what I could do ... (father, 45 years old).*

### **Without justice there is no revolution**

In the transition from pain to empowerment, words that were previously rooted in an individual substrate become part of a collective discourse of belonging that overcomes fear.

*... we told ourselves: "here, no one must be afraid", because if anyone who violates human rights comes, we have to face them. Being part of the front changed my whole person, now I believe in the hope that there is justice, which takes time, but eventually arrives, justice has short legs, short hands, but is able to reach them and catch them, the struggle is for social justice and, therefore, we say that without justice there is no revolution (father, 45 years).*

Justice begins to take the shape of a collective, held together by the strength of the support found by victims in "hands that in the midst of pain" open up the spaces necessary to understand individual pain.

*From his pain, we saw that he was the one who would help us, that hand that in the midst of his pain helps us to understand that we have a pain, but we already see a kind of transformation, a hope for justice (aunt, 36 years old).*

A slogan that accompanies the struggles for justice is: "neither forget nor forgive". "Neither forget" speaks to the importance of keeping memory alive, while "nor forgive" speaks to the struggle for justice.

when we say: "neither forget, nor forgive" we are alluding to something we feel; "neither forget", for us, is always remembering, and when we say "nor forgive", we are talking about asserting our rights as Venezuelans, to exert them in order for these crimes to be brought to justice (father, 69 years).

### **Protest is union**

Pain begins to circulate through new landscapes, now part of a collective construction woven from our doing together in resistance.

... it was, come, let's talk, let's hear how it happened, it was tears in the middle of narrating, it was crying together, fighting together, the slogans were shouted together, we marched to Caracas together (mother, 42 years old).

Protest as a necessary action that is born from - and develops through - the forcefulness of a unison of voices. Voices capable of challenging, and of thrusting their faces and bodies in the face of institutionalized fear and impunity.

*Protest is union, it is so strong that I went in the frontlines, that without justice there is no revolution, it is fighting until victory and is shouting the slogan "alert, alert, alert, Bolívar's sword is walking in Latin America" and it was going all of us together (aunt, 36 years old).*

The front as a social support that steers clear of the figure of the specialized therapist that cures individual malaise. The front threads together wills, weaving a social space from which to think and push forward processes for the support and deployment of pain.

*Yes, it is true, we do not have a professional title, we are not doctors, nor psychologists, our only title is human beings (father, 45 years old).*

The front becomes a space of openness to experiences. A provocative example of this is Iván Pérez, who, from within the legitimacy of his actions, invites others to feel freedom. With respect to this openness, Martín Baró (1997: 48) points out that: "the better the knowledge, the more clarity gained by the subject to decide

and act consciously, that is, the broader the field of true social freedom".

*Mr. Ivan would say assert your claim, manifest, speak, say, and little by little I will teach you. How do you feel? How are you doing? Document that part, EDUCATE (aunt, 36 years).*

*Right now I feel a very big peace, because before I was alone, alone with a family, alone with friends and everything, but I did not value, I did not see them, but right now if have a friend, I build that friendship, I build my family and now I feel more accompanied, that, for me, is very nice. even though things keep happening, those in the front know everything that is happening to me and I feel happy (father, 45 years old).*

As we can see in this last account, it is fundamental for the support group to highlight and assert the political and historical moment in the individual trajectory of the "person-victim" that is marked by the rupture of everyday life by violence. Furthermore, it is also fundamental that the support group promote the imperative of justice, as well as the desire to start anew through the reclaiming of meanings attached to life.

### **Conclusion**

"Our only title is human beings", is a very significant phrase shared by one of our subjects. I use it to open this conclusion with the intention of reflecting on the need to connect and resonate with spaces of humanity, taking an ethical stance for others and their communities. Such experiences reveal the ways in which those "in the midst of their pain" weave spaces and moments of encounter and support. Here, pain functions as a kind of threader of wills from which emerges the social space that allows us to "shake hands and lend our shoulders". In this way, through our caress, we generate processes that support and mobilize others. This is understood by Martín Baró - Salvadoran social psychologist - as a linguistic act encased in flesh and modulated by movement: like words, it vibrates, transmits and allows for communication. This caress propels us towards

reparation by rebuilding the social and affective ties that violence, with its impudent presence, destroys.

*the day we remain silent about the pain we feel will be completely lost (father, 69 years old).*

Thus, I conclude with the strength of a testimony that reflects the power of a collective space in which relationships are forged through accompaniment and support, fueling the transition from pain to empowerment.

*I advise from the pain, from the mourning, as we can see in this family that we are, that mourning that overwhelms us all, that is not a mourning of pain, it is a mourning of family union, before I was pure pain, i would become all melancholic, and right now it is a mourning of joy to see this didn't only happen to me and that many people have gone through it and we have to overcome it and that there are other people who need us so they can also see that there is hope (father, 45 years old).*

This final account operates as a non-conclusive ending, since it is an agencement of struggle and dignity that responds to the need to go on in the midst of pain. This need is embodied in a group of men and women that begin to walk together, mourning in joy and hope.

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