Chapter 12

Life Cycles of Spirituality, Religious Conversion and Violence in São Paulo

Introduction

In this chapter I explore the role of violence in the religious conversion of women to Pentecostalism in Brazil. Drawing on ethnographic data and interviews with female converts from a low-income, high-crime area of São Paulo, as well as literature analysing religious conversion in the Americas (Brenneman, 2012; Brusco, 1995; Freston, 2008; Lehman, 1996; Mariz and Machado, 1997; Martin, 1993; Rostas and Droogers, 1993; Smilde, 2007; Stoll, 1990 among others), this chapter finds that some women use religious conversion and continued spiritual practice as a strategy for dealing with everyday violence and especially domestic violence.

This study employs Gooren’s (2007) concept of conversion careers, a lifecycle approach to the examination of religious conversion, which highlights how women use various levels of religious adherence over time, to deal with the violence of everyday life (Scheper-Hughes, 1993) and domestic violence. Although Pentecostalism is generally considered a patriarchal and conservative form of evangelical Protestantism, this study demonstrates that some women feel empowered by their conversion and religious adherence, which allows them to create spaces of safety in which they negotiate and ultimately escape the violence they are experiencing. This also underscores a spatialized understanding of conversion, the effects of which are played out in different ‘spaces’, notably in the street and in the home.

Data for this chapter was collected in the low-income, periphery city of Mauá, São Paulo metropolitan region, much of which is favela (slums). It suffers from high rates of urban violence, including 10.4 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, considered epidemic levels by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) (Waiselfisz, 2012a). In addition, statistics reveal high levels of robbery, car theft, unemployment and drug abuse, particularly in the form of crack cocaine (Waiselfisz, 2012a). While São Paulo is the 26th most dangerous state for women with 3.1 femicides per 100,000 inhabitants, statistics show that these numbers are unequally distributed, with metropolitan areas including Mauá reaching femicide rates above 10 per 100,000 (Waiselfisz, 2012b). Although statistics are hard to gain, rates of
domestic violence are believed to be very high and Brazil is the 5th deadliest country in the world for women (Waiselfisz, 2015). There is a plethora of Pentecostal churches which have grown significantly in the last two decades, demonstrating the ease of access potential converts have to Pentecostalism and highlighting the tendency of these churches to grow in impoverished areas (Freston, 2008; Garmany, 2013).

I lived near Mauá for two years and returned to conduct the study over two months in April and May 2012. I had intimate knowledge of the area and the difficulties faced by its residents which allowed an entry point as well as access to contacts. I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews² with female converts to Pentecostal churches from Mauá (n=15). In addition, I spoke to many people in the area such as residents, church members and leaders (n=46), and attended numerous church services while living with a family in the area. Several interviewees (n=8) worked as assistants in a local health centre earning Brazil’s minimum salary of R$600 per month (around US$300) and the other women were from favela Pedreirinha in Mauá (n=7) with no fixed income.

The chapter is divided as follows: first, a brief look at current literature on conversion to Pentecostalism to set the scene and highlight the importance of this study. Next, I will turn to a section describing the reasons for women’s conversion, in which domestic violence was found to be the overarching reason for conversion. This is followed by analysis of the subsequent effects of women’s conversion from a lifecycle perspective and the way in which religious conversion and spiritual practice was used in relation to violence, before turning to the conclusion.

Religious Conversion in Latin America

Despite important contributions examining the high rates of religious conversion to evangelical Protestantism in Latin America, few studies have linked it to violence. Researchers have suggested that conversion was linked to processes of US acculturation and cultural imperialism (Lehman, 1996; Martin, 1993) or even a natural effect of the ‘religious economy’ whereby adherents are likened to consumers in a religious market (Chesnut, 2007). Studies have often focused on conversion as a strategy for dealing with poverty (Stoll, 1990); a short-term, problem-solving strategy giving converts a sense of empowerment (Rostas & Droogers, 1993) or a form of cultural agency that allows converts to gain control over personal, economic and social aspects of their lives (Smilde, 2007). These important and varied theories demonstrate the complexities around religion and spirituality, highlighting that reasons for conversion are not isolated to specific ‘sacred’ spaces or moments (Garmany, 2013).

Conversion has sometimes been considered within the context of the high rates of urban violence that plague the region, leading Brenneman (2012) to describe religious conversion as an exit strategy for men from drug gangs. Goldstein (2003) took a different stance, calling it a gendered form of oppositional culture for women against gang membership and participation in urban violence. Several authors pointed out that the conservative dress converts wear sends out a visual message that they are not part of the
violence around them (Abi-Eçab, 2011; Goldstein, 2003). Garmany (2013) suggested that in low-income areas evangelical pedestrians help to break down spatial barriers induced by fear of public spaces at night. These theories also demonstrate the spatial effects of conversion, which in these cases are played out in public spaces, in the city and in the street. This is pertinent in the context of Brazil, where conversion levels have increased concurrently with mounting levels of urban and interpersonal violence: evangelical Protestants increased from 6.6 per cent of the population in 1980, to 20.2 per cent of the population in 2010. Over the same period, there were more than a million homicides in Brazil, which is an average of around 36,000 deaths a year (Waiselfisz, 2012a).

However, statistics demonstrate that while Brazilian men are by far the greatest victims of homicide, women are the overwhelming victims of domestic violence. A national phone line set up for victims of domestic violence receives around 175 calls a day, and data suggests that a woman is beaten every 2 minutes and 1 woman is killed every 1.5 hours in Brazil (Agencia Patrcia Galvão, 2016). Domestic violence is committed mainly against women or children by an intimate partner, or family member and occurs predominantly, although not exclusively, in the home. In Brazil, domestic violence includes physical and sexual violence as well as verbal and psychological violence such as swearing, threatening or humiliating someone (ibid). Therefore, for millions of Brazilian women, the spatial distinctions of home/safety, street/danger, are not applicable. Conversion theories analysing urban violence may therefore be less pertinent for women than studies exploring the role of domestic violence. This underscores the importance of this study, which found domestic violence to be the overarching reason for conversion, although other forms of violence were also found to exist.

Not often considered in conversion theories are the intertwining effects of everyday violence (Scheper-Hughes, 1993). This includes structural violence, e.g. Brazil’s historical, political and economic oppression, creating significant socio-economic inequality, as well as institutional violence, e.g. created by agents acting on behalf of the State, such as the police and those who oppose its authority, such as armed gangs (Scheper-Hughes, 1993). Everyday violence is also the normalisation of interpersonal aggression in communities and individually lived experiences. This includes drug abuse, delinquency, domestic and sexual abuse. These forms of violence lead to the creation of an ethos of violence (Scheper-Hughes, 1993) and a culture of fear (Krujit, 2001).

One of the few authors to link conversion and domestic violence, Burdick (1996) suggested that Pentecostalism and Umbanda or Candomblé, Afro-Brazilian Spiritist religions, would be more appealing than Catholicism to women seeking help for domestic conflict. This is because they are “cults of affliction” (153) whose clienteles are drawn through the experience of suffering. These cults of affliction created spaces of social privacy, where blame for conflict could be safely articulated and projected onto spiritual ‘others’ (Burdick, 1996). It has also been suggested that male conversion elevates domesticity by limiting traditional aspects of ‘macho’ male behaviour, such as drinking, smoking, gambling and extramarital relations (Mariz and Machado, 1997; Drogus, 1997; Brusco 1995). This led Brusco (1995) to
call evangelical conversion a “strategic women’s movement, like Western feminism, because it serves to reform gender roles in a way that enhances female status” (1995: 6).

These theories demonstrate clear benefits for conversion although they fail to highlight how women negotiate everyday violence through religious conversion and spiritual practice. In addition, the concept of ‘conversion’ suggests a one-time event. I believe that a temporal analysis of women’s conversion and continued religious practice is important for understanding why and how it could be used as a strategy for dealing with violence, particularly within the private space of the home and within intimate relationships. Using a temporal lens helps to explain how women engage in the church in different ways and why they leave if they do not find an answer.

Therefore, I employ Gooren’s (2007) concept of conversion careers to analyse women’s conversion and continued use of religion and spirituality in relation to violence, using a life-cycle framework. Gooren (2007) identified five levels of higher or lower religious participation during a person’s life, the first of which is pre-affiliation, when a potential member makes their first contact to see if they would like to affiliate themselves on a more formal basis. All the women interviewed in this study went through this step as they sought a solution to their problems. The second step is affiliation, where the person refers to being a formal member of a religious group, but the membership does not form a central aspect of one’s life or identity. The next step is conversion, which all the women interviewed achieved, referring to a radical change of worldview, and attribution of religious identity not only from members of the church, but also non-members outside the group. The fourth level identified is that of confession, a theological term for core member identity, denoting a high level of participation within the church and a missionary attitude towards non-members, a position that many of the women achieved within their respective churches. Finally, disaffiliation refers to those who have rejected membership of the church or inactive members who still self-identify as believers (Gooren, 2007), examples of both of which were found in this study. This theory is helpful for analysing religious adherence particularly in relation to violence, as Brazil’s high levels of religious syncretism mean that conversion from one religion to another and often subsequent disaffiliation is relatively common (ibid). The following section will address women’s initial reasons for conversion before turning to the consequences of their conversion from a life-cycle perspective.

What were the women’s reasons for converting to Pentecostalism?

A variety of push and pull factors explain the reasons the women in this study had for converting to Pentecostalism. However, this study found domestic violence to be the overarching reason for women’s conversion. All the women turned to the church during a moment of crisis in their lives, directly or indirectly affected by alcoholism and drug abuse, domestic violence, depression, illness or bereavement. Several elements attracted them to convert: a sense of community, friendship, advice from the pastor, a safe space in which to
verbalise problems, miracle cures, divine intervention and predictive visions from other members.

Conversion to Pentecostalism was offered as the solution to all their problems, and they were told it would give them a personal relationship with God once they had accepted Jesus as their saviour, allowing the Holy Spirit to act in their lives. Pentecostal churches are therefore postulating their services as a one-stop-shop for the kind of poverty-related issues common to periphery urban areas and favelas, suggesting a lack of institutional or state-run services, which churches have been quick to fill. None of the women interviewed converted at a time when they were happy and or when their lives were going well, hence conversion to Pentecostalism can be seen as a survival strategy (Rostas and Droogers, 1993; Smilde, 2007; Stoll, 1990).

The violence of everyday life is often exacerbated by poverty. In Mauá and Favela Pedreirinha in particular, the violence of everyday life is played out through the indignity of living in makeshift housing inadequate for human living, a lack of basic services from the State, and vulnerability to urban violence. One of the interviewees, Jacinta, 48 years old, suffered from these forms of everyday violence and had converted to Pentecostalism two years previously. Her husband was in jail, she had six children, the youngest one had Down’s syndrome, and she had recently discovered that her 15-year-old daughter was pregnant and that her 13-year-old daughter was addicted to crack. Jacinta felt that no one but the Pentecostal church had offered any form of support, signifying that the church offers services that the State should be providing.

Eight out of the 15 women cited their father or husband’s alcoholism and domestic violence as the major contributing factors to their conversion. This suggests that the women were all looking for solace from a problem in their lives. Several of the women reported being on the verge of leaving their husbands due to the alcoholism and related problems, and were therefore looking for a practical answer to a serious problem in their lives. In addition, five out of the 15 women cited their own, their husband’s or family member’s drug addiction as a major contributor to their conversion. Drug addiction led to conversion for several of the women, whether it was the women’s own drug addiction, or a close family member. Therefore, domestic abuse in the form of physical violence from a spouse or family member often due to his alcoholism or drug addiction proved to be the dominant form of violence affecting the women.

Stories of urban violence were noticeable lacking. However, during an interview with Laura, she mentioned that her brother-in-law had been shot in front of her house. When questioned about whether she found the area dangerous to live in, Laura replied:

*I don’t think it’s very violent around here. We’ve been burgled but it wasn’t by people from around here. The same with my brother-in-law, he was just unlucky, that bullet wasn’t meant for him, it was meant for someone else.*
Her narrative suggests that there is a high tolerance to urban violence which has become normalised due to its pervasiveness in their everyday lives. According to Valentine (1989) this ‘othering’ of violence - locating it in ‘other’ people and ‘other’ places – is a coping strategy which allows women to operate in a climate of fear and maintain some level of control over their lives by attempting to minimise risk, because they cannot be afraid of all men all of the time (1989, 171).

What are the life-cycle consequences of the women’s involvement in a Pentecostal church and how do they vary?

Violence, intimate power relations and indeed, religious or spiritual practice themselves do not necessarily remain at the same level or intensity over time. Gooren’s (2007) theory of conversion careers and a lifecycle approach to women’s conversion stories is useful in analysing the temporal outcomes of women’s use of religion and spirituality throughout their lives, particularly in relation to the violence they experienced. The following section analyses women’s life-cycle conversion stories with levels of spirituality described by Gooren (2007) above.

Maintaining the confession level of religious conversion

Some women consciously married a Pentecostal and brought their children up within the church in order to protect themselves and their family from urban and domestic violence. Sara and Flora, currently aged 39 and 28, were the women who had converted youngest in this study, aged 6 and 17 respectively. They had both converted due to their father’s alcoholism, which had negative impacts on the family. Now married with children, they both remained very active within the Assembly of God church, attending at least two or three times a week with their families. Both reported a conscious awareness of wanting to marry a man with the same religious beliefs they had, and a strong determination to bring up their children within the church.

There is danger everywhere in Brazil, but here it’s getting worse. There are so many drugs. Here we raise our children inside the home and don’t let them play outside, because we’re scared they’ll fall into it [drug taking]. In the job we do [health assistants] we know about a lot of abuse, especially child abuse. The Evangelical church gives you a structure and that’s how we want to raise our children, so they can learn to make the right choices and be as safe as possible (Sara)

This narrative demonstrates that in some cases, Pentecostal women within the church are keen to marry men who are Pentecostal themselves, in order to maintain the tight, family
structure the church emphasises so heavily. It also reveals an awareness of violence in the form of child abuse in Mauá. These women show that core member identity is seen as a way of protecting themselves from both urban and domestic violence. This also demonstrates that conversion is spatialized, as the women felt more protected through conversion, both in the private space of the home and in the street.

Outside of the church, several women developed a new role for themselves through evangelising and proselytising in their neighbourhood (Drogus, 1997; Mariz and Machado, 1997). For all the women interviewed, conversion to Pentecostalism gave them a renewed sense of self-esteem from which they drew strength and happiness. Camila, now 47, converted aged 20 after her daughter’s tragic death and developed a new role for herself evangelising in the local area. She claimed that other people sought her out for advice, which was an obvious source of pride. Similarly, Julia, 47, who converted aged 40, took on a leading role evangelising in prisons and orphanages which she found very fulfilling.

Ana’s husband passed away but she felt moved to rent out a space in front of her home and open a small branch of her preferred church, Renewed Presbyterian. The small, but growing group of members hired a pastor and evangelised in the local area to bring in more members. These examples suggest that conversion allowed the women a voice in the public sphere they hadn’t had before (Birman, 2007), therefore pointing to social empowerment (Stoll, 1990, Smilde, 2007), and challenging traditional gender roles with the women finding roles for themselves outside the home.

Roberta, 53, who converted at the age of 40 because three successive husbands had left her, found that marriage counselling from the pastor helped her and her husband so the whole family converted. She saw it as her responsibility to pray for her neighbours and evangelise in the local area.

*You have to be careful around here at night, there are a lot of drugs and people are dangerous. The problem is crack, there’s a lot of it here, I pray for my neighbours and their children who aren’t Evangelical, spread The Word, and thank God that my son isn’t doing drugs.*

Roberta felt it was her duty to evangelise since it had given her a role in life, as it had to a greater or lesser extent in many of the women’s lives. However, her testimony also highlights awareness of local urban violence and suggests that she and her family felt more protected from that violence due to their conversion. Marital counselling had solved her immediate problem of domestic strife, but the sense of safety derived from the whole family’s conversion partly explains the continued attraction for remaining within the church. These examples show women who have remained at the highest *confession* level of religious affiliation, demonstrating that this intense level of religious participation, taking place in the church, in the home, and in the street, is necessary for them to maintain the sense of safety from everyday violence that they have gained.
Empowerment

Many women felt empowered through their conversion and that translated into empowerment within their relationships, leading to elements of change in socially constructed gender roles. Eight out of the 15 women who converted to Pentecostalism reported improvements in their marriages and in all but two of these situations, the husbands also converted. Varlene, who converted with her husband due to his alcoholism and abuse, demonstrated the ability to speak in tongue. An obvious source of pride and admiration within the family, this could be seen as a form of empowerment through religion, elevating her importance and respect within the family and in church. At the same time, her husband’s focus returned to the family, stopping the highly negative characteristics of machismo he had previously displayed through drinking, and womanising. This is what Brusco (1995) called the domestication of men, which occurred concurrently with Varlene’s own growth in self-esteem through her role in the church. Varlene’s conversion changed the balance of power within the home and she no longer suffered from domestic violence. In this case, conversion and its effects were played out in the church and in the home.

It is important to note that the Pentecostal church does not set out to empower women or change socially constructed gender roles, but its family focus and asceticism create the realignment of a family’s goals (Brusco, 1995). As these goals are family-orientated, they can be considered more feminine goals, making Pentecostalism a feminine, although not feminist, religion (ibid). In a similar way, Maria-Claudia’s conversion and the important leadership role she developed within the Assembly of God church gave her strength after her alcoholic and abusive husband left her. She opened a little shop to sustain the family and was supported emotionally by the church and visions from members that he would return. Eventually, her husband did indeed return and seeing the whole family had converted, he did too. According to Maria-Claudia, conversion therefore reunited the family, whose economic situation improved due to her entrepreneurialism and the fact that the husband was no longer drinking away the family’s income. The couple were both highly active within the church and Maria-Claudia was particularly respected for her gift of visions and premonitions.

Forgiveness of sins is a strong theme in Pentecostalism, as is the sacredness of marriage. Together with the social status many women feel they gain once married, Maria-Claudia was keen for her husband to return, despite the domestic violence she had suffered. In this case, however, the return and conversion of a wayward husband, her role as the main breadwinner and the maintenance of her conversion at the highest confession level, allowed for a change in power relations within the relationship which protected her from further violence, especially within the home.

Similarly, Yolanda’s conversion fifteen years ago, aged 20, led to her husband’s conversion and the creation of new roles for the couple as leading religious figures in the community. He became a pastor of five Assembly of God churches in Mauá. By encouraging her husband’s conversion, Yolanda’s conversion allowed her to escape the everyday violence she had been experiencing, in this case high levels of domestic violence while her husband...
had been an alcoholic. Although the socially constructed roles of patriarchal/pastor husband and submissive/helper wife were still present, Yolanda was empowered by her husband’s domestication through his rejection of his previous life of drink and drugs. There was a growth in equality between the sexes within the relationship. If the empowerment was not the kind expected by Western feminist standards, within the context of economically poor and socially disenfranchised women, this level of empowerment represents a significant, positive change.

*Conversion and problem-solving*

Conversion to Pentecostalism can also be used as a problem-solving technique (Rostas and Droogers, 1993). When Laura’s womanising husband began drinking and staying out late with his friends, instead of arguing with him, she prayed as she had learned to do at church and said that God told her she needed to find a job, having previously been a housewife.

*I used to be so jealous, my God, to an extreme! It was ruining our marriage, I was even jealous of his mother and sisters! The church cured me of my jealousy, and when I got the job, that made him start to think more about me... I’m still an attractive woman you know, and suddenly I had all these male colleagues and I was in the street, not just at home... It made him a bit insecure and he began to desire me again!*

Her new job’s working hours meant that her husband had to be at home in the evenings to look after the children, but the extra money relieved his burden as the sole breadwinner and Laura’s confidence grew because she was more occupied and earning money independently. The result was that her husband stopped his late-night drinking and staying out with friends, and the family’s focus was realigned to achieving common goals. The variation in this situation was that her husband did not convert, but the balance of power within the family became more equal, improving family life. Laura displayed signs of conversion which were all played out in church, in the home and in public spaces, but did not display the missionary zeal signs of confession the other women had attained.

This suggests that the level of confession may be more common in women whose husbands have also converted, where family life revolves solely around church life. It also suggests that conversion to Pentecostalism at ‘conversion’ level solved Laura’s problem, so she had no need to go up to confession level. This is unlike the women in the previous examples who gained and maintained their growth in female power by reaching confession level.
Conversion and Separation

In some cases, the women’s sense of empowerment through conversion led to separation. Marcela had lived most of her life in favela Pedreirinha. She had been evangelised in her 30s through the radio – media has been proven to be an important vehicle in attracting converts (Oosterbaan, 2006). Marcela admitted that before converting, she would give most of her monthly salary to a local shaman, who cast spells on her husband, to make him stop drinking and beating her. Marcela initially turned to Afro-Brazilian spirit religions, and then Pentecostalism, as a potential solution to domestic violence. Pentecostal churches strongly denounce the ‘black magic’ of Afro-Spiritist religions, which they see as the Devil’s work (Birman, 2007). In addition, the church emphasises female submission to husbands and the importance of prayer in cases of marital conflict. This would allegedly help their partner be released from the devil by whom he was possessed:

*I realised that I hadn’t been a good wife and that I must be more obedient. I went back home and my husband couldn’t understand what had happened to me, I sat on his knee and wept for forgiveness (Marcela).*

Told, essentially, that the domestic violence Marcela suffered was her own fault due to her use of shamans and lack of consistent prayer for her husband, Marcela claimed that their domestic situation improved because she learned to be less argumentative with her husband. Marcela learned that changing her own behaviour in the home could improve her husband’s behaviour, although the change entailed a greater level of submissiveness.

Over time though, the situation worsened, as Marcela’s husband refused to convert and continued drinking, which meant that the beatings continued. However, Marcela claims that the teachings of the church made her a calmer person, allowing her to finally see the need for separation. She firmly stated, “if I hadn’t converted, I think we would have killed each other,” admitting that during the violent outbreaks, she too fought back as hard as she could. Marcela maintained the ‘conversion’ level in Gooren’s (2007) conversion careers. Maintaining conversion level ultimately resolved the domestic violence she was suffering and helped her through life emotionally and spiritually. Now, living alone and unable to attend church services due to her health and fear of street crime, Marcela admitted, “I invite Jesus to come and lie down next me in bed, that way I am never alone”. Marcela’s religion was obviously a source of comfort throughout her life which brought her solace in different ways and in different moments.

Disaffiliation

The following examples demonstrate disaffiliation with the church, which happened over time once the main motive for conversion had been resolved. These examples also show that
the high levels of discipline, moral asceticism and time dedicated to the church, which led to the women’s conversion, also led to their disaffiliation.

Carla, now 38, had converted at the age of 26 because of her and her husband’s addiction to crack, and found the courage to separate from her husband, a year or so after converting. As with Marcela, Carla’s husband’s refusal to convert and change his negative habits after her conversion led to their separation and her escape from violence. Carla quickly attained confession level of religious affiliation, evangelising in the local neighbourhood. However, she later met another man who moved into her family home. As Carla still wasn’t officially divorced from her husband, in the eyes of the church she was living in sin with another man. This highlights the fact that even though empowerment is sometimes gained from the teachings of the Pentecostal church, it does not aim to change traditional social roles and holds very conservative views on marriage.

Carla was still allowed to attend services, but she was banned from performing any leadership duties due to her family situation. The church therefore demoted Carla from confession to affiliation or even disaffiliation level. Carla still identified as Pentecostal but did not go to church very often as a result. This demonstrates religious intolerance for a family that no longer fitted the married husband and wife mould, despite Carla overcoming her addiction and finding a more suitable man. This situation is unlikely to be unique to this case study in Mauá, and could therefore indicate one of the reasons for the Pentecostal church’s equally high drop-out rates.

Teresa, now 29, chose to leave the church of her own accord. She had converted aged 22, in order to remove herself from an abusive relationship and an addiction to cocaine. Over the years, Teresa worked as a leader in the church and as a missionary in favelas around São Paulo, trying to convert other addicts. But a year ago she suddenly left the church:

*It was due to problems at work, stress and too much pressure. I regret leaving because of that, it’s not that I couldn’t return, I could, but it’s up to me and I want to be selfish, I want to do my own thing, I want to make the most of things and have fun. I wanted to live something new and threw everything up in the air.*

Teresa had also reached confession level, but this time the high levels of discipline and morality as well as the personal time she sacrificed made her decide to drop out. The fact that Teresa was young, single and had friends who were not Pentecostal obviously influenced her desire to change from such an abstemious lifestyle, demonstrating how social factors are important in conversion and continued religious participation.

**Conclusion**

The study finds that the women interviewed in Mauá were using religious conversion and different levels of religious adherence and spiritual practice in order negotiate everyday violence and in particular, domestic violence. It extends current theories on evangelical
Protestant conversion in the Americas by highlighting a clear link between conversion and domestic violence. This study demonstrates that conversion can help women escape violence, and shows how women do so by employing Gooren’s (2007) concept of conversion careers, examining violence and conversion from a long-term, lifecycle perspective. Each woman’s conversion is a highly complex and heterogeneous process, although the link between conversion and domestic violence is unlikely to be unique, given the high levels of interpersonal violence in Brazil and growth of Pentecostal churches throughout the country.

Data from this study found that several of the women interviewed felt more protected from urban violence having converted to Pentecostalism when that conversion entailed the conversion of their husbands and children. They believed that it protected them and their families from drug-taking. More importantly, the subsequent involvement of the women in the Pentecostal church allowed them to negotiate different forms of domestic violence in the home. Some women found jobs outside the home or developed leadership roles within the church, while others found great satisfaction evangelising and proselytising non-members. There were visible signs of female empowerment leading to greater equality between husband and wife and to changes to their socially constructed gender roles.

The conversion or non-conversion of their spouses proved important as it was closely linked to the women’s own subsequent levels of religious adherence. Also, the resolution or non-resolution of the problem or problems that they had been facing affected their level of continued religious adherence. Disaffiliation occurred due to the church’s strict ascetic doctrine on marriage and non-attendance at social events such as parties outside of the Pentecostal group, which contributed to the loss of some of its adherents. This strict code of conduct suggests that while conversion to Pentecostalism may ‘protect’ converts from urban and domestic violence, it also alienates converts from society.

However, it is evident that while violence is a push factor for female conversion, conversion by itself does not save women. In fact, Pentecostal focus on female submission and placing the blame for violence on spiritual entities or even women’s failure to pray, allows violent men off the hook and could place women in even greater danger. This study highlighted how women used the teachings of the church, as well as different levels of religious adherence, in order to find alternative ways of addressing the forms of everyday violence they experienced. The religious effects of conversion were played out in various spaces, especially the church, the street and the home. This creative negotiation of violence and the use of faith had positive, practical outcomes in their lives and empowered the women to negotiate and counteract domestic violence.

References


---

1 Pentecostalism is a form of evangelical Protestantism and the majority of converts to Protestantism in Brazil are Pentecostal. Therefore, for this study, I use evangelical Protestantism and Pentecostalism interchangeably.

2 Participants’ names have been changed in order to protect their identities.

3 The WHO estimates 35 per cent of all women around the world have experienced either physical and/or sexual violence from an intimate partner and/or sexual violence from a non-intimate partner. In addition, 38 per cent of femicides are committed by the woman’s intimate partner (WHO, 2013).