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## Plural visions on gender inequality

Some faces of exclusion and social assymetrie

*Visións plurais sobre a desigualdade de xénero  
Algunhas caras da exclusión e asimetría social*

**Abstract:** This article is a reflection, more than an analysis, about the theoretical framework we have to use to focus on gender violence beyond a feminist point of view. At the end gender violence is a specific way of violence in general. Actually what we expose here is a quite simple theory consisting in the belief that a violent world generates a generalized violence. Generalized violence is connected to a lack of solidarity, where we systematically experience situation of people not being involved with each other. And this is our starting point. After that we give some data to confirm this globalised and generalized violence against women but also against all kind of victims of a society where human links have become feeble. At the same time we emphasize the fact that violence, including gender violence, is now more visible since in several occasions it exists when it exists in an image. The violence is not only important by itself but also because it is reproduced and consumed as a cultural product.

**Keywords:** General violence, gender violence, solidarity, feminism, globalization, images, mass media.

**Resumo:** *Este artigo formula unha reflexión, máis do que unha análise, sobre o marco teórico que debemos utilizar para achegarnos á violencia de xénero, alén do punto de vista do feminismo. A fin de contas a violencia de xénero non é máis do que unha forma específica da violencia en xeral. De feito o que aquí se expón é unha teoría moi sinxela que consiste na convicción de que un mundo violento xera unha violencia xeneralizada. A violencia xeneralizada está ligada á ausencia de solidariedade, en situacións recorrentes nas que a xente está desvinculada entre si. E ese é o noso punto de partida. Despois introducimos datos que confirman a violencia xeneralizada contra as mulleres, máis tamén contra todo tipo de vítimas dunha sociedade onde os vínculos humanos son cada vez máis débiles. Ao mesmo tempo enfatizamos o feito de que a violencia, incluíndo a violencia de xénero, é agora máis visíbel debido a que en non poucas ocasións existe cando existe a súa imaxe. A violencia non é só importante por si mesma, senón porque se reproduce e consume como produto cultural.*

**Palabras-clave:** *Violencia globalizada, violencia de xénero, solidariedade, feminismo, globalización, imaxes, medios de comunicación.*

## INTRODUCTION

After many years analyzing news that portray violence against women and after even more years involved in the fight against the situations of inequality that women suffer around the world it has happened something which allowed and compelled to me to a reflection. I was starting a lecture in a college; my public was mainly constituted by parents of students. All of them apparently very interested in learning more about gender inequity, forms of gender violence and strategies to fight them. My first words, as far as I remember, were: "We use to circumscribe violence to our own cultural context. In the last years the only violence against women we admit and recognize is that one originated in the frame of the family relationships. We are absolutely conditioned by our privileged position of Western citizens conveniently accommodated in the arms of a welfare state...But at the same time we are blind when we have to look back at the others....For instance Africa, so far away from us. For instance the rest of the world -so far away too- not included in the reassuring "us" category.... Let's give some illustrative data: almost an 80% of the women from all continents -which is a large majority of the human totality- dedicate practically 24 hours a day to collect drinkable water. In other words: 80% of all women dedicate their time and their lives to survive"<sup>1</sup>. My public was silent and uncomfortable. A mother finally said: "But this is not our problem and you are here to explain and identify our current and real troubles and to propose some solutions". I have understood, in a few seconds and for the first time, several aspects I had ignored maybe for too long: first, my theoretical role there had determined that I had to be able to solve problems that sometimes are even difficult to be explained, understood and identified. Second, and more important, the link of common people with their own local community -this strange living organism in which

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<sup>1</sup> This activity of collecting water is grievous in itself since it means a serious factor which damages womens' health. But on the other hand it also implies, at least figuratively, that those women whose main activity is to collect water suffer from a severe exclusion from their own time, from self-determination, from cultural life, from elementary education, from knowledge and access to public discourses. Exclusion is an act that puts out of a circuit of knowledge and of decision makers to a group, restricted or not, of people. The first step to fight exclusion is to be aware of being excluded and it means therefore a minimal contact with whatever form of knowledge. According to Philomena Essed the only way of resistance is knowledge. Knowledge plays an important role in both, resistance and empowerment. Essed, Philomena (1991): "Knowledge and resistance: black women talk about racism in The Netherlands and the USA", in *Feminism and Psychology*, Vol. 1(2). London: SAGE.

we construct the so-called “our social identity” and “our social expectations”- is much stronger than the sense of solidarity and the ethical commitment. In a globalised world the belonging to a community dictates that the problems of the own neighbourhood become more relevant and serious than those that suffer people whose homes and souls are beyond our borders. At the end I had to conclude that perhaps the patterns offered by the feminism were not enough; and even less the precepts of the intercultural vision which very often is subjected to the dictatorship of a cultural relativism that accepts violence or any form of cruelty in the name of the freedom, individual expression and diversity. Maybe we have to look at the phenomenon of gender violence with globalised eyes. Not only because of the need of being trained in a real solidarity whose limit is the real world -and not solely our beloved neighbourhood- but also because feminism is no longer a marginal movement or discourse: many times it has been articulated into the hierarchies and the dominant power and became a sort of “feminism of state”. Assuming that a part of the residuary feminism integrates now the (male, dominant) power allows us to understand to which extent it is implied in the crystallization and imposition of the political correctness: an obstacle to see the world through globalised glasses. Or shorter: an obstacle to see the world, attentive to all its nuances.

#### WHEN THE VIOLENT ARE THE OTHERS: VIOLENCE FAR AWAY FROM US

There are silent acts and silenced acts. Silent acts are committed by aggressors with no names and no faces -their names and faces are not so relevant as their position in a hierarchy-, usually representatives of some government, army or any other institutions. Their violence is part of a general mechanism of peace imposition. They have the uncommon privilege of choosing not to appear in discourses -they can choose the silence to protect themselves- that can risk their reputation and their future. Their performances are transitive. Instead silenced acts are the result of transitive actions and are forced to be marginal. It comes from a process of omission of the victims’ voices, because victims are on one hand invisible and on the other condemned to the denial of their own existence. This is by no means a case of double annihilation. Let’s see this in a more detailed way. What happens when legitimized institutions provide their men with license to kill? What happens when the enemy is the one who supposedly would have to save us? Of course we refer to the abuses committed by soldiers and peacemakers sent to conflict areas. It doesn’t matter if the soldiers and negotiators are ours or theirs. The fact is that dressing uniform brings a reality: the metaphor of a more secure and fair world. And instead we obtain pain from those who

are expected to give us protection<sup>2</sup>. There are more than 100000 girls all over the world, in countless wars, whose destiny is a forced recruitment that at the end means a total mutilation of girls' freedom and to become the personal prostitute of someone in her own army. Such is the case of thousands under-aged girls in several African countries. They go pregnant or with babies back to their communities where they are ignored or, more often, rejected. Violence is undistinguishable from other concepts like poverty, conflict and general structural inequality. Not to mention the situation of women and children forced into immigration because of a generalized context of violence in their countries. That diaspora is not yet studied and analyzed deeply. It has so many implications that in order to be fair we had to approach to violence only from a more generous and opened perspective. When political systems failed the solely visible truth -in fact the only truth- is the violence as a coda of corruption and solid inequalities. In the mid 70's the feminist Susan Brownmiller<sup>3</sup> said that women used to be the booty in a war since they were considered as a property of men. Now women are more than that: they take part of the war, they are soldiers and plunders, instruments of power and instrumentalized power themselves.

I would suggest to expose here some informative drops, constitutive elements of a map to give us an idea of the significance and reach of violence against women in the world -an image of what inequality means-:

- Women are common objects in trafficking. According to several studies since the beginning of the 70's<sup>4</sup> about 30 million persons have been abducted for and by human trafficking. For instance to the US around 20.000 women and girls are estimated to be brought every year from different countries.<sup>5</sup>
- At least one out of every three women around the world has been beaten, coerced into sex or otherwise abuse in her life. The Council of Europe adopted a recommendation declaring gender

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<sup>2</sup> A recent report published by the Security Council of the UN recognized the abuses committed by peacemakers who take advantage of their rank and victimize the people they have to help and serve. The Department of Peacekeeping operations explains that more than 221 peacemakers have been investigated, 10 civilians have been fired and 88 soldiers repatriated. Besides they have added that "Continuing to tear down the "wall of silence" was deemed imperative to restoring the reputation of the United Nations and all those who represented". In: UN-Security Council Report. May 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Brownmiller, Susan (1976): *Against our will*. London: Penguin Books.

<sup>4</sup> Data obtained from International Organization Migration (IOM), 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Declaration Statement Round Table on Trafficking in Persons -Tajikistan, September 2005.

violence a public health problem and emergency. A recent World Bank report estimated that violence against women was as serious a cause of death as cancer or traffic accidents.

- More than 50% of women in countries like Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Tanzania or Peru reported having been subjected to physical violence of some kind.

- Over 100 million women are affected by genital mutilation. In countries like Somalia, Egypt or Sudan this mutilation is performed in extreme unhygienic and inhuman conditions. In general the areas where this practice is performed are so remote that professional circumciser are not available. Improvised and eventual circumcisers, like mothers or grandmothers, use razor blades or pieces of glass for an operation that normally causes deep pain and collateral permanent injuries in the girls. Amongst the undesired effects we have to mention fistula and sterility.<sup>6</sup>

- In countries like Turkey women are forced to wed their rapist or die. When a woman is raped by a married man and she is pregnant as a consequence of the aggression the man can request girl's murder. The honour's reasons are still more important than victim's life or dignity. The idea underlying a honour crime is to avoid the gossip and to preserve the good name of male members of a family.

- In Malawi some men have killed their wives because they refused to have sex with them. The reported cases in that country increases by 4.5% each year. And this is only a small fraction of the reality of the magnitude of violence against women taking place in the frame of the intimacy. Many victims are underage because some men believe that intercourse with a child or a virgin can rid them of HIV.

- In the study titled "Minnesota Coalition for Battered Women Releases 2005. Femicide Report" her author Danielle Kluz reveals

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<sup>6</sup> We commonly believe that these practices are limited to Islamic African countries. Nevertheless we have forgotten -our memory is rather short when we have to look at our own past and when it affects ourselves- that till the 30's it was very common to sterilize or mutilate women somehow in the name of their own sanity or even, more frequently, in the name of the science. It is the heritage of a positivist, deterministic and victorian discourse: women were reproductive machines and they did not suppose to feel pleasure. Once pleasure is proven -or suspected- the mutilation was performed as the way to restrict and restrain oversexualization, morally non-acceptable. With no doubt we would need to be more critical towards our own history before judging other's barbarian manners and procedures.

that in 2005 in Minnesota “at least 17 women were murdered in cases where the suspected, alleged, or convicted perpetrator was a current or former husband, boyfriend, or intimate partner of the deceased women. At least 9 women ages 50 or older were murdered in cases where the suspected, alleged, or convicted perpetrator was a family member of the deceased woman. At least 1 woman was murdered while being used in prostitution.

- Up to 10 million female foetuses may have been aborted in India over the past 2 decades. It is a crime known as selective abortion or female feticide that reveals the deep persistence of inequality which begins giving an absolute priority to boys’ births and annihilating girls’ lives and future. Many people in India see daughters as a liability because they traditionally belong to their future husbands and husbands’ families. The custom of dowry prevails and sometimes people have to borrow money for gifts to the husbands’ family.<sup>7</sup> This medical termination of pregnancy on the basis of foetus’ gender is illegal since 1994 but statistics shows its large and exaggerated figures and it is not simple rhetoric.

- We are experiencing what Umberto Eco calls “a New Middle Age”, that is, a solid hierarchical reality of the market, of the human relationships and of the emergent authorities that determine the destiny of the bodies, souls and discourses. In fact the companies are the current owners of our bodies (they decide the best moment to become mother, the ideal image to seduce men, how to dress, how to look, how to talk, etc) and of our time (distribution and organization of free time, planning of our styles and preferences, validation of our appearance, etc). All this underlies a hidden reality based on institutionalised abuse. Instead of suffering “droit du seigneur” we became victims of the companies’ and official institutions’ right to use and usurp our time -which means our lives-.

#### SOME GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS ON VIOLENCE (A MACRO APPROACH)

We cannot give a proper answer to the question of whether violence is a learned behaviour, a successful product of a successful market or the final result of centuries of exploitation and social asymmetries tacitly accepted. At this point this is not so important. But it is not only

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<sup>7</sup> In fact girls are the worst business for anyone in India. It is proven that amongst womens’ causes of death in that country we find murder, dowry-death, abetment of suicide and suicide –euphemistically called “unnatural deaths” in the studies on this subject.

important but also indispensable to perceive that due to today's political context we have serious troubles to discern elementary aspects of violence and to put them in the proper category. Which is the difference, for instance, between violence and terror?<sup>8</sup> Is it only an etymological or ontological difference? Can we perform terror or just suffer it? Is terror an inevitable effect of a violent act, a psychological phase or a form of extreme and massive cruelty? We don't intend to approach these terms now. The goal of our text is to better understand strategies to perpetuate inequality and in this framework it is mandatory to point out violence as the main obstacle to reach a fairer world. And if we mention terror as well is because domestic violence against women or children is dealt as terror while at the same time terrorism -like put into perspective by the so-called international community after the attempts in New York- has modified the idea we had about the violence in general and its victims in particular.

- On the other hand mechanisms of exploitation, abuse and violence are globalised -they always existed but now we perceive them improved in their methods, goals and applications since market, technology and information are globalised as well. The globalization of violence takes part of a neocapitalist vision of the world which generalizes a system of the immediate benefit rather than the strategies and languages of the prevention or, at least, of the moderation. The globalization and the conflict between freedom and security inducting to the excessive control are bound to lead to a situation of generalised abuse where the number of victims increases.

- Currently it is so transcendent the experience of violence as its appearance. In other words, the real violence is as important as those acts that seem to be violence. What it is and what it seems to be become the same at a certain (ideological) point. And there is more: The imposition of an aesthetic dictatorship determines that violence has to be, has to seem to be and has to be spread out. Aggressions are registered. The aggressor has fun and offers the violent act as a form of immortality based on the confusion between real cruelty and reality-show discourse. So we could actually affirm that violence in-

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<sup>8</sup> In a letter sent by Mary McCarthy to Hannah Arendt, in the beginning of the 60's, she includes some observations about Arendt's essay on revolution. McCarthy points out the need of establishing a difference between terror and violence. Arendt, H. and McCarthy, M. (1995): *Between friends. The correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy 1949-1975*. Orlando, FL, USA: Harcourt Brace & Company.

volves aggressor and victim, but also a third eye which sees, judges and enjoys it. Since violence is no longer a private act but a public spectacle it implies the existence of speakers, spokespersons, opinion makers, factories of concepts and definitions, production of stereotypes, etc. All of them contribute to the perception we have of violence as phenomenon and as intricate component of our relationships. We have accepted, apparently very pleased, our role as witnesses in a manner that we cannot argue our innocence anymore. Since all of us are involved in general ignominy the frame and circumstances of inequality become more complex.

- According to what we exposed in the former paragraph there is no ideological or even terminological gap. There are backgrounds, senses and construction of senses, suspected and expected interpretations, etc...In this way violence assumes a legal status, which is: it is reformulated in terms of moral implications or responsibilities.

- What happens with abuses or more specifically when an abuse takes place? Are abuses a subtle form of violence or a simple excess of power with an added effect of warming, alarm or intimidation? Is this coercion always violence or a former phase or even its grounds? Could we affirm that the Portuguese writer Miguel Torga was right when he said that the darkest face of power corrupts on an equal basis the one who exercises it and the one who suffers it?

- In this same line of thought the next question would be who suffers power and who suffers violence? Which is the role and responsibility of the victim? Does the victim have a responsibility? And the responsibility of the discourse makers and of the deaf witnesses? Is the abuser entitled to exercise his/her abuses depending upon his/her position in a hierarchy? Of course it is so. But every time is more difficult to identify the abuser since a world of images, mirrors and voyeurs transforms us in something ethically more relevant than simple witnesses of the spectacle of life.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Thirteen years ago Sami Nair proclaimed that the best way to fight violence was the political negotiation. But at this point we have reasonable doubts about it. It is true that we need a social order and social order requires some democratically elected representatives. But it is also true that the combination of fear and conscience of being a loser in a global war which divides the world into winners-with-voice and losers- with-no-voice brings rebellion, chaos and disagreements. In other words: inequality starts with a biased political discourse where the rights are metaphors and belong to an intentional and declarative universe with no pro-



- I don't think we can keep analysing subjects related to gender inequality from a rigorous feminist perspective. Feminism is right when it affirms that violence is a learned behaviour. But this is no longer enough because violence is not restricted to a field, to an ideology or to a specific group of persons. It is rather an ingredient in the bottom of every simple human being, whose mechanism can be activated when the reason begins to produce monsters and the fanaticism gains ground to the ethical discourses that allow us to feel what the other feels and to be able of putting ourselves in the other's place. In this sense the way to equality needs ethical conversion, conviction and support.

Discourses reflect and talk about topics that constitute our reality. When discourse remains silent all the victims cease from existing. Unquestionably the ignominy entails a status of permanent exclusion and the violence means a recurrent background in human relationships, but the exclusion also appears and survives in the discourses, in the world of ideas and representations. Sometimes dignity begins in and with the language. But this would be another story.

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jection to the reality. Nair, Sami (1993): "La política como antídoto", in *Correo de la Unesco*.