

## **The (irascible) basis of gender binarism**

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Gender violence is incubated in the cradle, probably even before. These words may sound a bit over-zealous, perhaps even alarmist, but I don't think so. Let me explain. A broad look at the current situation of women in the world allows one to acknowledge, after looking at the data,<sup>1</sup> that laws have been enacted and policies implemented to promote equality between men and women in some countries, especially since the 1990s. Never before in the history of mankind has so much power been in the hands of women: Dilma Rousseff in Brazil, Cristina Fernandez in Argentina, Angela Merkel in Germany, to name only three who have reached the top. Never before have the contributions of women in science, culture, art and other areas of creative endeavor been as widely recognized nor have there been so many exhibitions reflecting on the contributions of women and the legacy of feminism. Never before have so many prominent women activists been awarded the Nobel Peace prize, as was the case with Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Leymah Gbowee, and Tawakkol Karman in 2011. Yet incidents of violence against women do not cease. They haven't stopped in the many countries in which there are no laws to eradicate this scourge nor legal foundations to assist physically or psychologically abused women in denouncing their aggressors, but neither has this violence declined in countries like Spain, where there is such a law, passed in Congress in 2004 at the initiative of the social democratic government of Jose Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, and where there have been a number of public awareness campaigns to enable women to make the decision to report their abusers and feel protected (at least in part) through guarantees of their economic rights. This is a very significant law; however, it should be noted that it has focused almost exclusively on cases of violence in the private sphere between heterosexual couples, leaving unaddressed other cases of violence, such as those occurring in the workplace, e.g. harassment.

It is also true that for the correct application of this law, courts specializing in gender violence have been established, but women often still face innumerable obstacles when reporting at certain police stations and are actually discouraged from doing so, which implies the lack of preparation and training of some police agents and the persistence of macho behavior in the so-called forces of law and order. Even so, the

increase in the reporting of violence is remarkable compared to the years prior to the law's passage. Unfortunately, these reports often fail to prevent many cases of abuse, including murder, rape, harassment, and coercion, against women of all ages that occur year after year with no apparent improvement in the cause of all this pain. Without going too far afield, on May 2, in Elche, in the Autonomous Region of Valencia, Spain, police announced the death of a twenty-five year old woman at the hands of a fifty-eight year old man. There had been no prior recorded complaints of ill-treatment, although several media outlets indicated that the couple was known to argue and even fight with each other. These same media outlets, especially the more sensationalist television programs, which reported the atrocious murder of Ana Orantes<sup>2</sup> in 1997 with vociferous moral outrage, are now reporting such incidents laconically, in a monotone fashion, almost as if they were singing a ballad. Nothing comparable to the tone and priority given when it comes to reporting a terrorist attack. This informational asymmetry has led some feminists to employ the term "gender terrorism" to draw attention to a type of violence that does not attain anywhere near the same resonance or level of media attention that ETA terrorism or jihadism does.

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I have used an example that is close to home, one that occurred on Spanish territory and which has been played down by those responsible for reporting the news (only half a minute was dedicated to the Elche case on the midday news on Channel 1 that Wednesday, May 2). Still, such things don't only happen in Spain; we are facing a global emergency from which no country is exempt. Given the gravity of the issue on a global scale, regardless of culture, religion, or social class (these factors play a role in different ways and to varying degrees), we can speak unambiguously of a type of

structural violence that forms a continuum along time. This is not to deny the specific characteristics of each individual socio-political context or the influence of specific policies. Taking all this into account, however, it can be inferred that if that gender violence is still occurring to such a degree despite legislative changes (sometimes carried out without any real enthusiasm, especially with regard to their application) that seek to provide greater protection for women, and despite increased social awareness and the fact that the key positions of power (political, economic, religious, and military) on which the patriarchal system depends are no longer exclusively in the hands of men (although mostly), how is it that these tragic events continue to occur, sometimes even giving the impression (backed up by statistics) that such violence is actually increasing? I am not only referring to Mexico and Guatemala, both of which are often named as countries of extreme violence and where the talk is of femicide or feminicide, as Marcela Lagarde has noted, but of many other places that supposedly have achieved higher levels of equality, such as Sweden or Germany. Has the feminist struggle been useless? Of course not, for without it, the situation of women would undoubtedly be much worse, as would that of sexual minorities and for men who struggle for an egalitarian world.

That said, and here I return to the beginning of my argument, what has not changed is something that would require a far-reaching, long-term educational policy that no educational system has yet implemented. I insist, what has not changed is the binary system of gender that continues to brand relations between men and women from birth. What has not changed is the type of violence that is not perceived as such, the type that resides, for example, in the use of entertainment devices, i.e. toys, that are largely conceived as different for boys and girls, as well as in the functions and behaviors established for both genders. Each Christmas season, when toy companies decide to produce dolls for girls and soldiers for boys and the stores prepare different sections for each under the exclusive pink or blue signs, marks a failure for equality. These childhood playthings, publicized *ad nauseum* through advertising in newspapers, magazines, and television and endorsed by the support they receive from gift-buying parents and relatives, perniciously infiltrate and take a toll on the child's imagination, with lasting effects.

If it is impressed on a child's mind that painting one's nails, putting on makeup, dressing up in princess outfits, and continually looking in the mirror while receiving compliments from family members is typical of girls and that running behind a ball, playing with guns, and driving trucks and miniature cars while being encouraged and cheered on by one's elders is typical of boys, both sets of circumstances will invariably continue lead to the view in the eyes of society that women are weak and scatterbrained<sup>3</sup> and men have the ability to control and exercise force. Child play is no joke;<sup>4</sup> its influence is immeasurable. Some games in the socialization process will gradually lead to a gender divide that in no way respects human diversity. Needless to say, I'm not talking about individual cases but in general, of habits, proceedings, and behaviors that apply to the immense majority of countries, cultures, and contexts, all with the consent of parents, families, schools, religious communities, and other social circles in which child development occurs.

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The importance of play in the shaping and forging of behaviors in children and in the configuration of their future lifestyles (the expectation of motherhood through the use of dolls is a crucial indicator) should not be underestimated; likewise, the displays of power involved in certain recreational activities such as competitions or contests of physical strength or ability, very common among boys and from which girls are often excluded, must also be taken into account. It is precisely this spirit of submission and passivity that is continuously instilled in girls, not only through such games, but also through socialization, language, and clothes (pink versus blue), so that girls can adjust themselves – consciously or not – to this fictional *parti-pris* based on social and cultural ideas of how to be and act like a girl (think, for example, of Fina Miralles' 1976 performance in Barcelona entitled *Standard* in which a woman dresses a girl as the artist observes the projected image while tied to a wheelchair). This is important because it distinguishes her from her opposite (in fact, in hegemonic heterosexist discourse one talks of the opposite sex as if femininity and masculinity could not

coexist perfectly in the same individual]), thus negating the possibility that, in practice, there are many types of boys and girls.

Establishing strict gender differences, whether apparent or not, sets the stage for future failures, some of which can be insurmountable. And because this is discriminatory, it becomes a breeding ground for boundaries which in adulthood are observable in the different roles and responsibilities offered to boys and girls, for example, in the perception that men are more endowed for certain careers or studies than women and vice versa. There are plenty of examples: engineering for men, child care and pediatrics for women, and so on. It should be noted here that one of the keys to sexual differences that has been converted into a constrictive cultural fact is the separation of the feminine and masculine spheres. This especially affects the social mores surrounding childcare, with the caregivers being almost always women. The reality is far from the ideal, even though in art, romance novels, movies, and television, parenthood has always been portrayed as something soft and fluffy. In real life, caring for children is not only a tough test of one's love, but also a job that entails both time and effort and which is performed almost exclusively by *bio-women*, not because women are driven by some dubious, assumed *maternal instinct*, so criticized by various feminists, but rather because of cultural imperatives.

In the words of Dolores Juliano:

"In reality, the idea of the existence of a maternal instinct, which determines the behavior of women in this regard, can be challenged on two fronts: from the perspective of anthropology, which shows the different manifestations of maternal love in different cultures, and from a historical perspective, which shows trends and changes in this sentiment over time. In the former, Mead debunked the alleged universality of maternal behavior by showing how women of the Mundugumor tribe in New Guinea considered it a burden and a misfortune to have children and put them in the care of their older siblings with no sense of shame or guilt"<sup>5</sup>

There are still very few *bio-men* who embrace the social responsibility of childcare. Few renounce their careers to attend to parenting. Even today it is assumed that what women do and who they are is governed by a natural mandate, an innate impulse, as if nature were stronger in women than in men, ignoring the fact that each subject is

formed by countless unequal power relationships and patterns throughout a process of training and education that makes distinctions and imposes rules of conduct based on strict gender criteria. This is another barrier that must be broken so that parenting can become a shared activity in each pair, in each mode of human coexistence. Except for breastfeeding, there is no element of childcare that a man cannot perform.

Because this task of raising newborns and lavishing attention on them until they can stand up for themselves, a job that is crucial in human evolution, has been delegated almost exclusively to women, it serves as a differentiator that is unjust at its core because it is segregationist. Furthermore, it creates a harmful collective imagination. If men devoted themselves in the same way, with the same intensity and dedication of time and effort in sharing parenting tasks, the whole world of adult relationships would change. The unfounded and biased belief that women are more equipped for certain functions and men for others is the germ of inequality and false distinctions. It is obvious that any human activity can be learned.

Another primary element that different cultures and civilizations have constructed with many variations and nuances is the glorification of the myth of love. A myth that sometimes covers up violence and abuse, as can be seen in various stories and narratives that history has bequeathed to us. I refer not only to the so-called crimes of passion reported both in the Franco-era tabloids as well as in the mass media of proud postwar democracies like France, Britain, or the United States, but to the many texts, representations, and images in which women do all they can to the point of sacrificing themselves on the altar of love. An altar previously extolled *ad nauseum* as a space in which women were allegedly fulfilled, reaching their one goal in life: to love a man. A goal that often masked economic dependence and the subordination of women in relation to men, whether they be Prince Charming or not.

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In the socialization process, the logic that separates love and sex results in the fact that for men, this divide is continuously emphasized in various types of discourse and technology (of which film is a major element, but which also includes literature, music, comics, TV shows, etc.), while in women the union between sex and love is prized. To put it graphically and eloquently, women are portrayed in the vast majority of cases as people hooked on the feelings and affections. This is the argument that Anna G. Jonasdottir develops and puts into question in her book *The Power of Love. Does Sex Matter in a Democracy?*<sup>6</sup>

Even today, demonstrating or having tender feelings, affections, and emotions is seen by men as a sign of weakness, as if it would entail the loss of their autonomy as subjects or of their virility, which is what differentiates them from the feminine, a construct that has been created as a sphere subject to affection and therefore to a lack of self-control.

The casuistry behind this phenomenon is broad based, with even enormously successful examples such as the novel *Three Meters Above the Sky*, by Italian author Federico Moccia, which has generated the paroxysmal phenomenon of using padlocks as a symbol of eternal love (others would call them a symbol of bondage and a lack of freedom), portraying the appeal of love as being different depending on gender. Cultural products like this book, which have a high impact on teenagers, reinforce sexist stereotypes of the most exalted type of love, namely heterosexual love. Moccia, who is the author of several more sickly-sweet best sellers and mayor of a town in Abruzzo, recently said: "I promise to marry all my fans."<sup>7</sup> Years go by and little changes. Even in these times of economic crisis, the marriage ceremony remains mired in atavisms that produce disparate demands on each gender. The trousseau, depicted so derisively by some artists, including Hannah Höch (*Die Braut* or *The Bride*, 1927) and Sophie Calle, is far from dead. Weddings do not have the same meaning for the bride as for groom, with the value of the clothing vividly

reflecting this reality, as demonstrated with icy irony by Robert Gober with his starched *Wedding Dress* (1989).

The symbolism of the wedding dress and the espousal ritual (the veil, the bouquet, the rings, the dowry) as a significant event for the couple continues to fuel the difference that shapes heterosexist thinking, to which gender transgressions are anathema. The contractual ritual, with its facade of social respectability hiding what we know to be lies and deceit, as amply demonstrated by the number of divorces and separations of the famous and not so famous, continues to enforce gender barriers which in the 1970s seemed doomed to disappear. Surprisingly, they remain, even after the liberating onslaught brought on by the May 68 movement in France and the emergence of the feminist, gay, lesbian, and transgender movements and the questioning of patriarchal paradigms and the nuclear family model. While it is now easier to break this prison of love,<sup>8</sup> what good this pantomime? Is it necessary to perpetuate the power of love or is it a way to maintain the status quo of the gender divide? Why have these rituals not changed? Why are the wedding nuptials apparently more meaningful for women? Why do children play games enacting that magic moment? One could argue that all human communities require rituals to recognize themselves over time, to find their identity, although this can change over the years. Still, why should such customs be based on the segregation of functions, protocols, and habits that basically ascribe to the feminine symbolic values that harm women in that they are depicted as being diametrically opposed from those of men and almost always fall into a glorification of the superficial? Argentine director Maria Luisa Bemberg saw this with an acute sense of irony in her 1972 short film *El mundo de la mujer* (*Women's World*).

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It seems unlikely that the violence perpetrated by one group against another, a violence based on the belief in the superiority of men over the subordination of women, will disappear until the impassable boundaries of binarism do not fall, thus



changing the basis of the symbolism which forms the structure of contemporary society. However many laws, regulations, legal, and palliative measures are put into place (and these are undoubtedly important and indispensable as marks of social progress), until the mixing of the feminine and masculine is not further strengthened to the point that there are no culturally constructed gaps between the behaviors, conduct, and lifestyle of individuals, until the diversity of each subject is recognized, violence will thrive. It will do so because it lies at the very base of this distinction, in both language and a social structure that considers the female sphere to be below that of the male. Now is the time to tear down these "naturalized" and harmful binary ideas of gender that have implanted themselves in people's attitudes and actions like an asphyxiating burden. These ideas must be changed because although they are not perceived as being violent, that is what they are at their very core.

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#### Footnotes

1. See: <http://www.globalissues.org/article/166/womens-rights>.
2. This event was considered the trigger for the onset of media-driven public awareness of violence against women after many years of struggle from the feminist ranks.
3. The construction of the image of women as subjects that depend exclusively on their appearance is in large part the result of a campaign undertaken by the advertising sector and the fashion and cosmetics industries over decades.
4. See: Clark, Beverly Lyon, Higonnet, Margaret R., (eds.), *Girls, Boys, Books, Toys: Gender in Children's Literature, and Culture*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000.
5. See: "El mito del instinto maternal" by Dolores Juliano en [http://www.taringa.net/posts/info/11090033/El-Mito-del-Instinto-Maternal\\_.html](http://www.taringa.net/posts/info/11090033/El-Mito-del-Instinto-Maternal_.html). Consulted on May 14, 2012.
6. This study was analyzed by Professor Raquel Osborne in her astute *Apuntes sobre la violencia de género*, Barcelona, Bellaterra, 2009, pp. 44-46.
7. See the article by Pablo Ordaz en *El País*, May 10, 2012, p. 51.

8. This is also the name of the Project: *Cárcel de amor. Relatos culturales sobre la violencia de género*, Madrid, Museo Reina Sofía, 2005. The project was conceived by Berta Sichel and Virginia Villaplana, who analyzed the causes and the origins of abuse in various artistic, cinematographic, and cultural productions.