

One Doesn't Speak of That. Voices Against Violence

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De eso no se habla (One Doesn't Speak of That) is a video collage that we created for an exhibition proposal in which we were requested to reflect on how the issue of reporting violence against women had been dealt with in the context of art. Our response was to make a selection of emblematic works of other artists, examining the different approaches, contexts, and creation models of the moving image, following a script that demonstrates the diversity of gender violence with a global dimension. This text is a journey through this work and a reflection on the importance of its analysis.¹

The patriarchy depends on violence

The patriarchy remains a form of power, one with a long history, which establishes as a 'natural fact' the subordination of women even to the point of institutionalizing it. In strongly hierarchical societies like ours, it takes a great deal of violence and hostility to be able to maintain the supremacy of any given class, gender, or ethnicity. Male violence and aggression are thus not natural, but constructed within the historical, social, cultural (and therefore also family) context.

The *sex/gender* system describes the set of behaviors attributed to men and women of every era and civilization, from which it follows that the modes of thinking, feeling, and behaving of both genders, rather than having a natural basis, are due to a long process of social construction. This process not only produces gender differences, it also simultaneously ensures the existence of hegemony, hierarchy, and domination. This is the logic of difference that feminism, using multiple disciplines, systematized both in academia and in the social and political struggle, echoing the complaints of women about their oppression, discrimination, and exclusion from public spaces (understood as political, social, and economic spheres).

To accept the existence of gender violence is, in some contexts, to jeopardize the moral values underpinning patriarchal societies; hence, the difficulty in raising awareness of this issue. Speaking out about 'gender violence', 'domestic violence', 'macho violence', 'domestic terrorism', or 'abuse', all different terms used in this debate, has only served

to foment the battle for language on the part of the patriarchy. Domestic spaces and, ultimately, intimate/family relationships are just one of the places in which violence occurs. Various feminist analyses agree that this violence is both structural and cultural and that it extends to all areas and spheres of women's lives, coexisting alongside multiple patriarchal strategies. It is thus necessary to consider various factors, taking into account the many social, cultural, ethnic, and above all sexual differences involved. As Kate Millet said: "The strength of the patriarchy is based on a type of marked sexual violence."²

Rape, statutory rape, incest, sexual exploitation, sexual harassment, insults, vexation, humiliation, death threats, coercion, threats of deprivation, the use of sexist language, the use of sexual stereotypes, repression of female sexuality, employment discrimination, legal and moral commodification of women, lack of the right to decide over their own bodies, reproductive battles, female unemployment, female underemployment, female poverty, endless working hours, bullying, physical assaults, beatings, death – these are some of the forms that violence against women takes.

Our piece begins with images from *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained*, a performance piece developed by Martha Rosler in 1977 which shows both the social dimension and the diversity of the violence exercised on women's bodies. Rosler begins by showing us something that at first glance seems common: the medical monitoring of a patient in a clinic. She ends with photographs of bodies – counted, measured, and controlled – while an off-camera voice talks of how the different forms of violence constitute a dominant mechanism for both the representation and control of the female body in society.

The association of women with the body and its confinement is the origin of inequality, oppression, and domination. It has thus until recently been very complicated for feminism to claim the body as a source of knowledge, liberation, and pleasure. Vindication of a woman's right to her own body has been part of the feminist movement since the mid-1960s, giving rise to sexual liberation, a woman's right to enjoy and use her own body and to freely exercise her reproductive rights (through contraception, abortion, motherhood, etc.), the struggle against the conventional and normative modification of the female body as an artifact, the construction of other subjectivities,

and the fight against gender violence. Although the body has been a problem for feminism, new feminist theories have transformed the body into a privileged space from which to engage in new ways of thinking about the human subject, based on Foucault's concept that there is no "natural" body, but rather a surface meant for social inscription; indeed, a surface that must be inscribed upon. Women's and men's bodies both carry the inscriptions of patriarchy, imperialism, capitalism, and the material changes and transformations that these have produced, with all manner of disciplinary mechanisms of surveillance and control. We can either submit to or subvert the dominant discourse, since the body is a place of both oppression and resistance. Corporeality is a central instrument in policies against violence; the body should thus be understood as a field for political intervention.

Gender violence occurs in society, in the workplace, within the family, and in sexual relationships both inside and outside the home. The house, the home, is neither a safe nor often even a desirable place for many women; it is dangerous, a place of fear and abuse. Since the home is regarded as a private/intimate space in which personal relationships occur, over time an official and social tolerance has developed so that many cases of gender violence are considered to be merely 'couple fights' or 'marital problems'. In this way, this type of behavior is confined to the private realm.³ The wall separating the private from the public is a key ideological element for hiding these problems, with the naturalization of subordination serving to silence the issue. Indeed, the problem has been systematically silenced – one doesn't talk about that – both within the legal, medical, and policing system as well as within various social structures, including family, relatives, and neighbors. It was political and intellectual feminism, as a result of its deconstruction of the patriarchy and its strategies for doing so, which uncovered this 'democratic' practice.

Nevertheless, it has become part of the public domain, in part because of the spectacle of violence disseminated by sensationalist media, but also because of certain campaigns that some public agencies have carried out. The situation has thus changed in recent years. The State has adopted new biopolitical governance techniques, stepping into the role of guarantor and protector of women.

[...] violence has evolved from being a shameful secret, (...) to occupying a prominent place among the phenomena of state and media intervention. (...). The power relationships involving violence, relationships that extend from the infinitesimal to the all-enveloping and which comprise identity, culture, reproduction, language, etc., along with the resistance and opposition that results are apprehended in a new form of control over women's bodies. Governing the violence thus becomes a way of governing women by introducing the external actions of experts, judges, police, etc.. At the same time, the violence is internal, exercised by women themselves in their relationships with different authorities and with men.⁴

For uncovering, exposing, and trying to end this structural violence, the feminist political struggle was both depoliticized and instrumentalized as it became controlled by institutions and the media, both of which always see the issue as a series of individual cases in isolation rather than as part of a whole, which is the reality of gender violence. In addition, the battered woman is not only expected to end the violence, but is assured that her only alternative for doing so is through a police complaint. This ignores the fact that the victim is locked in a cycle of violence from which it is very difficult to escape.⁵ Women have lost their voice, as on many other occasions. Institutions and public agencies focus on the consequences of gender violence in figures, statistics, or the need to strengthen and enforce the penal code rather than attacking the origins and root causes of the violence, concealing the role of violence in the patriarchy, which is ultimately legitimized and left intact. For its part, the media have built an image of women as bodies that have been beaten up, wounded, battered, crushed, broken, or raped, prepared for morbid mass consumption, describing the cruelty of the physical facts with paroxysmal verve.

The list of incidents is long, daily, workaday; they settle into the collective imagination, creating diverse subjectivities, all of which cry out for government intervention. This intervention, in turn, is being subjected to major changes as a result of the collapse of the healthcare system, the privatization of public management of social welfare, deregulation, and budget cuts. While the vulnerability of women is being imposed on all fronts, government intervention is limited to prophylactic, often cosmetic, measures,

converting victims of abuse into private, tamer subjects which once again possess a depoliticized body.

It is important to remember how the feminist movement managed to expose the problem of domestic violence and put it on the political agenda, namely by demanding solutions. But feminist organizations also worked to create safe havens and centers to welcome, assist, and fight for the visibility of the victims. They considered this to be one action within a broader fight for the social and cultural changes that took place in those years. *After ...* (1981), by Cecilia and José Bartolomé, is a work of counter-information developed between 1979 and 1980. Today it is considered a political documentary film emblematic of those turbulent years of transition, one that tackled the politically sensitive conflicts of the times: the deep ideological divide between right and left, the threat of fascism, the struggles of the labor movement, but also the constant presence of the struggles of women in the political context.

However, in the late 1980s the feminist movement went from being the main mobilizing force for raising awareness about this issue to being a second order announcer, yielding to the new role of the media. In addition, women's movements have had to fight against anti-feminist reactions that consider feminism a dangerous influence in women's everyday lives.⁶ With its move to the public agenda, gender violence has undergone a process of governmentalization and sensationalization, both of which have rendered the feminist struggle invisible and re-objectified women's bodies.⁷

It was much later, in 2002, that a law against gender violence was finally passed. This constituted a legal framework which would serve to protect the victims and punish the perpetrators. Called the Comprehensive Law Against Gender Violence, it sparked huge debates between various feminist groups and judicial bodies and institutions, debates which ultimately led to the limitation of its application exclusively to the private sphere. Without making an in-depth analysis of the issue, one could argue that it is perhaps because of this that we are now witnessing a rise in the cases of domestic violence, especially if other types of data on labor, economic, social, and cultural rights issues are taken into account. Indeed, figures reflecting a step backwards in the situation of women are very significant at present.

There is an abundance of political and cultural discourse, both male and female, that proposes a model woman who, even though she is fully integrated into the public sphere, longs to return to the private milieu, rediscovering values like marriage, domesticity, and especially motherhood. The latter, which has now been rebranded as an exercise of freedom, has come to occupy almost the same place of honor that it had during the Franco era (...) What has changed is the manner in which these alleged 'lifestyle choices' are presented That is, the discourse has changed, but not the goal.⁸

The transgression of the dictates of gender brings with it a stigma. In this sense, it is seen by many as the cause, if not the justification, of violence against women. A recent inappropriate and regrettable example were the words of Justice Minister Alberto Ruiz-Gallardón, who in a parliamentary session in early March, 2012, resorted to a woman's right to motherhood to justify changes to the abortion laws proposed by the Conservative government, saying, "On many occasions in today's society, structural gender violence against women is often generated by the mere fact of pregnancy." According to the minister's reasoning, "many women feel that their right to be mothers is being violated by the pressure generated by certain structures surrounding them." In summary, he asserted that the reforms to the Abortion Act drafted by the government were aimed "to increase the protection of a woman's right *par excellence*, namely that of motherhood," going on to make the argument concerning gender violence. What the minister did not say is that at the same time the government had approved a labor reform to weaken collective bargaining agreements and undermine policies of equality.

Capital depends on gender

Economic production methods also involve the modes of production of subjectivities. Capitalism imposes a sexual (and social) division of labor, which means that the male members are in the position of being producers and owners while women are relegated to being subordinate in material, political and symbolic terms. For women, this sexual division of labor means job insecurity and instability, subordinate tasks or services, lower wages, and part-time contracts. In this way, women can develop their activity as wives and mothers while still contributing to the household economy and the

objective and subjective construction of capitalism. Gender division has always been considered an objective social fact. Indeed, the institutionalization of cheap wages as being adequate for women was legitimized by countless scientific and medical criteria bolstered by theories of political economy. Working women thus came to be regarded as a social pathology necessary for sustaining the capitalist economy. One might even say that capitalism as we know it would not have been possible without the work of both women and immigrants.

Zillah Eisenstein (1979) defined the links between capitalism and the patriarchy (the male power system that produces the inferiority of women), stating that in her opinion, women play four major roles in capitalist societies. First, they stabilize patriarchal structures, especially the family, taking on the socially ascribed roles of wife and mother. Secondly, they produce new workers, paid or unpaid. Thirdly, they stabilize the economy through their productive role, and fourthly and lastly, they themselves participate in the labor market, receiving lower salaries.⁹

In most analyses of globalization, the perspective of gender is intentionally forgotten, with research calling attention to the reality of this inequality being scarce. Poverty among women is the most notable piece of data on the distribution of deprivation, with women constituting 70% of the 1,300 million poorest people in the world according to the International Labour Organization or ILO.

The globalized economy has imposed a new domestic and sexual order affecting large numbers of migrant women, a circumstance which is ignored in all debates on globalization. And let us not forget a fundamental fact: neoliberal economic policies have perverse effects on different parts of the world, especially on people of color and women. This is the feminine side of globalization, which has been called the new global reproductive order.

Performing the Border, a video-essay produced by Ursula Biemann in 1999, takes place in Ciudad Juarez, a Mexican town on the US-Mexico border. The piece investigates the growing feminization of the global economy and its impact on Mexican women by exploring the sexualization of this region through the sexual division of labor, prostitution, and the sexual violence occurring in the public sphere. This video-

essay shows the global dimension of violence and asserts that economic globalization is generating "a return of the so-called 'servant class'."¹⁰ It is essential to analyze the socio-occupational trajectories of women and subject them to an analysis based on sex/gender, race, and class in order to understand the alarming effects of globalization on equity and distributive justice, especially on the bodies of migrant women and on migrant workers as a group. Global economic restructuring is reproduced and sustained through generic segregation of the labor market, a circumstance which allows us to assert that globalization occurs "on a gendered terrain,"¹¹ a fact which is not mentioned in any analysis of globalization. The effects of globalization on the lives and bodies of women are thus ignored and hidden. Still, we can safely assert that gender violence is transnational, transhistorical, global, and evolutionary, which means that it has mutated and taken on new and revitalized forms to subordinate women.

At the periphery of the world economy or what Sassen describes as transborder circuits of work and survival, factories for producing all manner of components (better known as *maquilas*) make products intended entirely for export. Although they are generally situated in Central America, there are others which remain relatively unknown in neighboring territories such as Ceuta and Melilla. These factories vividly demonstrate that multinational corporations employ an almost exclusively female workforce. Women are preferred by big business because they are accustomed to overexploitation, easy dismissal, and flexible work hours.

The murders of women in Ciudad Juárez¹² continue. Many have been killed and many more are missing, as demonstrated in another important documentary film, *Señorita extraviada (Miss Missing)*, made by Lourdes Portillo in 2002. The piece denounces and documents these murders, accurately reflecting the climate of violence and impunity and the lack of any concrete action to end this situation. Femicide is crime against humanity, especially when it is the product of international organized crime and involves government officials.

War depends on gender

Lucinda Broadbent, in her piece entitled *Macho* (2000), analyzes the situation of gender violence against women in Nicaragua through the work of the group Men against Violence, which has been working to change male chauvinist values, attitudes, and

behaviors since 1993. To this end, they offer men an open space for critical reflection on masculinity, violence, and related issues in order to achieve personal transformations and find non-sexist, non-violent, and non-discriminatory ways to function in society. The distinction between sex and gender theorized and practiced by feminists has allowed women to transform their lives and social conditioning. In this sense, masculinity, traditionally rooted in the biologicalization of violence that generates a fixed concept of masculinity forever, can use the same formula to transform itself and socialize men differently. It is worth noting that "a significant body of literature has arisen which specifically addresses men and lets them know how they can build an identity not rooted in sexism."¹³

One of the sad facts associated with masculinity is that of military escalation, that is, the increase in all types of wars and armed conflicts. One of the brutal effects of this escalation is mass rape, the forced prostitution of women as a weapon of war. The group Women in Black has approached the issue of eliminating violence from a pacifist feminist perspective through peace building. They have exposed all types of violence, not just symbolically, but through education, non-violence, and resistance to both war and military policy through disobedience. The movement was established in Jerusalem in 1988 by a small group of Israeli women protesting against the illegal occupation of the Palestinian territories. Their work continues and their silent vigils have grown, creating an international movement of solidarity. In fact, the vigils of Women in Black reached critical mass around 1990.¹⁴

In her piece *You Can't Beat a Woman* (1997), Gail Singer documents a day in the life of several women from countries such as Canada, Russia, South Africa, Israel, Japan, and Chile in order to pinpoint the phenomenon of violence against women and to explore the reasons behind it. She does this through interviews and personal reflections presented in a "found footage"-style montage. In our piece, we incorporated the episode that tells of an Israeli woman abused by her husband after previously suffering at the hands of her fiercely religious brothers and father. Nevertheless, she manages to face the camera and narrate how she got out of this dire situation.

Women in Black groups in Belgrade and Zagreb have also been very active, setting an important example of interethnic cooperation. They were the first groups to offer

assistance to the Albanians of Kosovo. *Calling the Ghosts: A Story About Rape, War and Women*, a film by Mandy Jacobson and Karmen Jelincic, is a first-person testimony of two women who were tortured and raped during the Balkan war. After their release from the Omarska camps, these women founded an association to help other women and fought the international courts for the recognition of rape as a war crime.

The challenge remains of recontextualizing the issue of violence according to its latest transformations. Although its aims are the same, the way of presenting them has changed. Thus, speeches abound in which regression is concealed with platitudes about the family, domestic life, motherhood, marriage, and going home. The main problem now lies in not reacting.

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FOOTNOTES

1. The exhibit referred to here was *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang. 45 años de arte y feminismo*, shown at the Museum of Fine Arts in Bilbao, Spain, in 2007.
2. Millet, Kate, *Sexual Politics*, Madrid, Cátedra, 2010.
3. In his book *Agresión a la mujer: realidades y mitos. Mi marido me pega lo normal*, Barcelona: Ares y Mares, 2001, Miguel Lorente describes gender violence and debunks the myths, beliefs, and justifications which present it as something normal.
4. Marugán, Begoña and Vega, Cristina, "Acción Feminista y Gubernamentalidad. La emergencia pública de la violencia contra las mujeres", *Contrapoder* no. 7, 2003, p. 177.

5. In her book *El acoso moral. El maltrato psicológico en la vida cotidiana*, Madrid, Paidós, 1999, Marie-France Hirigoyen analyzes the reasons that lead an individual to become a victim.
6. De Miguel, Ana, "El movimiento feminista y la construcción de marcos de interpretación: el caso de la violencia contra las mujeres," *Revista Internacional de Sociología RIS*, no. 35, 2003.
7. Marugán, Begoña and Vega, *op. cit.*
8. Cruz, Jacqueline and Zecchi, Barbara (eds.), *La mujer en la España actual ¿Evolución o involución?*, Barcelona, Icaria, 2004.
9. Cited in: Mcdowell, Linda in "El Capitalismo y el trabajo domestic," *Género, Identidad y Lugar*, Madrid, Cátedra, 2000, p. 123.
10. Sassen, Saskia, *Contrageografías de la globalización. Género y ciudadanía en los circuitos transfronterizos*, Madrid, Traficantes de Sueños, 2003.
11. Cobo, Rosa, "Globalización y nuevas servidumbres de las mujeres," *Teoría feminista: de la Ilustración a la globalización*, (vol. 3), Madrid, Minerva, 2005.
12. <http://www.mujeresdejuarez.org/>.
13. bell hooks, *Feminism is for everybody*, Cambridge MA, South End, 2000.
14. <http://www.nodo50.org/mujeresred/mdn-h.htm>.