

## CONFRONTING VIOLENCE AT HOME

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In my research on the main changes in Portuguese women’s lives in the last twenty five years, their own experiences and subjectivities are central. I found my self listening to many episodes of violence against women. I was aware that in Portuguese families, in the private world of our society, violence against women and children is quite common, unfortunately. But my surprise has grown when, instead of simple stories about violence, I have found stories about the way women have confronted the violence of their own husbands and were able to stop them.

The life histories of these women have began to tell me more about Portuguese society in respect to women’s life conditions, as well as their hidden struggles (see also Ara jo 2000).

As I am concerned with family education, it is relevant to think how and what children learn in these contexts. The research already available has shown that families are powerful cultural transmitters of behaviour, both positive and negative. Family members may learn unhealthy ways of coping, such as suppressing anger and other emotions (LaViolette and Barnett 2000 : 26). Children tend to accept family standards, whatever they are, as normal, and they often go on to practice them, regardless of their later usefulness (LaViolette and Barnett 2000 : 26). However, family socialization is not a deterministic one. Other authors have argued that, during human lives, there is space for either family or individual resilience (Hawley and DeHaan 1996 ; Walsh 1996).

I am also concerned about women’s movement and feminism and I have argued (see Magalh es 1998) an existing feminist movement in Portugal in spite of its low visibility. Women’s groups have claimed for reproductive rights, equal educational opportunities for girls and women, labour rights, and better life conditions for women. Sometimes they had left parties as allies, sometimes they were alone. The issue of ‘violence against women’ was one of the claims women’s group find themselves alone fighting against the status quo. It remained almost untouched until the end of the 1990’s. That one of the reasons I was surprised by the women’s narratives about the way they confronted their husbands’ violence. They didn’t wait for the change of the law, neither for the social condemnation of the behaviour of their aggressors. My actual research concerns about understanding when and why women accept subordination and when and why they fight against oppression and discrimination.

### 1. VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AT HOME

In this paper I only discuss data from working class women, due to questions of space and time. I do not share at all the view that accepts that middle class women are not victimized or that they do not confront violence in their homes. The short testimonies

presented here are from working class women (paysan or factory workers) from a little town in the North of Portugal.

Since violence against women is now a public crime, the complaining of the victimized woman is not a necessary step for the intervention of the police or the legal system. Although, since the revolution of the 25<sup>th</sup> of April 1974, our legislation according to the equality between men and women is said to be one of the more advanced, the fact is that feminist consciousness has not been pervasive in Portuguese society and so, many of the feminist issues are, in this moment, on the public agenda. Violence against women at home is one of them.

As focusing on violence against women, it is important to begin to consider the semantic and conceptual scope of the term. Dobash, Dobash Cavanagh and Lewis put the question of what is violence within a relationship :

« While many couples may have had an exchange of slaps or minor blows at some time, and this is unfortunate and regrettable, this does not necessarily constitute a pattern of systematic and sustained violence meant to harm, intimidate, terrorize, and brutalize. It is the latter and not the former that constitutes a violent relationship ; it is the latter and not the former that inflicts high costs on victims and witnesses, including children ; it is the latter and not the former in which the intent is that of intimidation, injury, and harm ; it is the latter and not the former in which the consequences are likely to necessitate a host of interventions aimed at assisting the victim and dependent children ; it is the latter and not the former that necessitates effective interventions aimed at stopping the perpetrator from repeated and escalating episodes of violence. » (Dobash et al. 2000 : 4)

These authors continue :

« While any and all conflicts between partners are regrettable, not all escalate to the type and level of violent relationships necessitating public or private concern or active intervention. The focus of attention here is on those relationships characterized by systematic or severe violence, by injuries, by fear, by intimidation, and by various forms of intervention. » (idem)

Women's Movement in the 1970's claimed for a new concept of violence at home - the concept of 'violence against women' - which stood for the view that rape and battering are not caused by individual personality or behaviour patterns, but are rooted in a patriarchal society. Raising the inequality of power relations between men and women, feminists argued that violence against denies the individuality of the victim, reducing her, as Hageman-White argues « to the fact of being female and as such violable : it is this that hurts all women in attacking one » (1998 : 178). This author also says : « violence against women does not arise on the dark edges of a largely civilized society, but in its center ; it does not controvert the norm so much as extend it to its logical consequence » (idem). Making public private violence has contributed to raise the collective political consciousness of women as a group (see Hageman-White 1998).

As far as institutions and professionals (police, law, social services, psychological services, sociological research, policy makers) working with this issue are concerned, we may say that there is a lack of feminist consciousness : without it, violence against women at home is subsumed in a big group of deviant behavior, so the exact point of the issue is missed. As Hageman-White puts it :

« It is not strictly true that gender-related and sexual violence were non-existent for social services, the law, psychology, or sociology. It is rather that violent acts were perceived as part of a problem with another name and melted into that background. Thus, when men beat their wives, this was but one example of marital conflict, or perhaps one aspect of family breakdown, alongside alcoholism, child neglect, and divorce ; and indeed the term 'violent couple' could suppress entirely the question of who beats whom. Rape turned up as a particularly piquant form of aberrant sexuality, or as a special case of deviant or criminal behavior, inviting comparison between different types of criminals. Sexual abuse of children lurked under the surface of discussions of incest, whose traditional concern seems to have been what keeps adolescent sons from possessing their mothers, with a - not incidental - tendency to ignore both issues of age and issues of consent all together. » (Hageman-White 1998 : 180)

This testimony shows very clearly that what was at stake was the work she could perform until that moment. So, the violence was purposeful in the sense that the husband wants her to work the same, regardless her health and physical conditions. As Dobash and colleagues could found in their research about violent men, « violence is functional and purposeful » :

« While many men claim a lack of knowledge and control with respect to their use of violence - it is a mystery ; it just happens - some do articulate what they want to obtain through its use and reflect on whether they have been successful in achieving that end. In this sense, violence is functional even when those who perpetrate it may not be aware of what they hope to achieve through its use. » (Dobash et al. 2000 : 35).

This woman recalls, in her life narrative, how was the life with his husband since they married and how and when he began to be violent with her.

Quoting a testimony of a woman's narrative :

« He was happy because he had everything done ! »

Then, I've married and during two years everything was all right. When our first son is born, everything was going wonderful. I did everything : when I arrived at home, after working in the land, I did everything needed to be done. If it was necessary to feed the cows and all the work, I did everything alone. Alone. And he got used to it. When our second son came, of course, I couldn't do everything by myself.

Till that moment, he was very happy, because he had everything done. If he went out to work for other people, when he arrived at home, everything was done.

One day, he began to be piss off. When I got pregnant of my second child, I didn't feel well. I got sick, I didn't eat enough and I couldn't work as I used to do.

He began to ask me : « Now, You do nothing ? » I answered : « I don't do it because I can't ». But he said : « But you have to do. » In the ground, he marked half for him, and half for me. But I was slower then I used to be. That's how the problem at home began.

(Interview3)

As we can see, the question is about the *work she has to do*. It is very clear that the husband was concerned about the exploitation of her labourforce. In spite of her second pregnancy, he demanded the same amount of work, concerned only about his profit. The purposefulness and functionality of this violence is very clear.

Quoting the same woman :

« He punched me and I stayed there on the hill »

Once, we went to my mother's. We always go by foot. More or less 12 kms. He began arguing with me, calling me bad names... He argued and screamed all the way. He carried my little Tiago on his backs and almost let the child fall down because he was beating me on the street ! The child cried and cried. He didn't want to go with his father, he was afraid of his father. For me, it was difficult to carry the child because he was quite heavy. But the child cried so much that I had to take him with me. He argued, and argued, saying I was lazy, I didn't do anything. I didn't know what to do. Something inside me broke down and I wiped, and wiped and wiped. (...)

But he didn't shut up. He argued all the way. He called me awful names : « You are a beast, get out off my way. Go ! » Then, he punched me and I stayed there for a while, with my son. He went on and I stayed there alone, on the hill, tired, hurt, alone with my little Tiago.

(Interview3)

## 2. COPING OR CONFRONTING VIOLENCE AT HOME

In this lifestory of a peasant woman I have just cited, battered for a long time, one day she decided to defend a son who was being physically abused by her husband. She confronted him with a stone and then went to her mother's house. Later, the husband re-approached her for almost 6 months. Without telling all the story and although she and us fear the situation go back, today they are together again, without domestic violence (until now), for about four years.

It was the feminist movement that put on the public agenda the issue « personal is political » and kept an emancipatory look to the notion on the 'individual'. In this issue of violence against women at home, feminists researchers and professionals have wonder for almost twenty years why and how women stayed in violent relationships and supported oppressed live conditions (not only at home) but also when and why they decide and come to terms to fight this violence or their bad life conditions. That is, they seek for a comprehensive theory that takes into account the role of the subject and the articulation between the subject and social structure. As Barbara Marshall puts it :

« Any theory of social reproduction must include explanation at the level of the subject — thus accepting the weberian insight that 'structures', no matter how compelling, 'act' only through individual subjectivities » (1994 : 95)

The same author, examining some of the debates around the 'subject' — specifically the subject of feminist theory but also, in a broader way, the subject of social theory, asserts :

« The word 'subject', of course, has a dual meaning — as the signifier of the individual who has a subjectivity, and as the signifier of one who is under the authority of another. (...) The notion of 'gendered subjectivity', in both these senses, had garnered considerable interest in feminist theory, and is central to an understanding of the way in which gender becomes embedded in both subject and structure, and their relationship » (1994 : 94).

It is the notion of 'gendered subjectivity' that I am looking for in lifestories of the women I have been interviewing, seeking for an understanding when and why they fight back, resist or accept their life circumstances.

Quoting part of another woman's life history :

« We can be a very good person, but it comes a time a woman gets tired ! »

Thus, now he doesn't beat me anymore. He used to beat me very hard and call me names... I don't make decisions for my life influenced by other people. « You should ask for the divorce », some of my friends usually say. But I like to decide for myself. But you are a good person, you are a good person, but then you get tired. Look, once, I lost the respect, he came to beat me and I beat him to. I know it was a bad example for my children, they were there, they came to separate us... But you know, we, women, it comes a time that we get tired. « Oh, it was a scandal... » some people said. But the person who is involved is the one who knows what really is happening. He never beat me again. But before that, he beat me many and many times ! Now he only call me bad names but he doesn't touch me. I think a woman shouldn't be her own slave... He goes to the tavern, I stay at home, children are growing up and going out... So, why can't I go to an exhibition or else ? My own children, they don't accept when I go out ! They don't accept ! But I think I must go, even in my age.

(Interview 2)

With this episode, we can see how the woman is uncomfortable for having used force against her husband : « I've lost the respect ». LaViolette and Barnett, quoting Lois Wyse write : « Men are taught to apologize for their weaknesses, women for their strengths » (2000 : 15).

### **3. A FINAL AND BRIEF NOTE ABOUT VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AT HOME AND FAMILY EDUCATION**

Listening stories of violence is difficult for the researcher, the activist or the victim. But confronting it can be a way of healing. As Hageman-White puts it : « Both for the feminists activists, with their high risk of burnout and for women facing years of violence with their high risk of resignation and return, it seems vital to experience some signs of hope that an end of the violence is conceivable and the hurt and damage may heal. Healing, wholeness, is not really an individual process. » (1998 : 187-8). Implied in feminist project is the vision of a community of women and men in which violence is to be neither expected nor tolerated.

In my research I also found that in our country, institutions are still thinking about this violence as 'neutral'. They still inscribe their action in the model that turns against the woman, almost 'blaming the victim'. Feminists are claiming for internalizing equality strategies in state departments in the way of introducing these concerns in social policies (*mainstreaming*). However, this work is only beginning.

Finally, I would like to argue that it is possible, even if it is difficult, to conceive a nonviolent and nonsexist society. The remaining violence against women even after decades of political, feminist, legal and therapeutic interventions, it is, we can argue according to Hageman-White, profoundly related to the cultural construction of the female as inferior, since women have carried the burden of the community and morality values.

The issue of 'violence against women' can be an aspect of the changes in women's lives in Portugal denoting at what extent are portuguese women feeling more safety and more autonomy in our society. Their agency can be more visible in the way that women are not simply subordinate but they at the same time reproduce, resist, confront and produce social life.

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