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How to Talk about Gender-Based Violence?

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We are surrounded by evidence, consequences, and signs of structural as well as everyday forms of violence wherever we look. Imperialist policies and neo-liberal capitalist economics are pervasive with their (trans)national articulations of sexism, racism, and heteronormativity. Global in scope and reach, expressions and experiences of gender-based violence in people's daily lives are rendered specific and particular through local and regional power configurations and contestations, belief systems, and cultural norms.

Violence and its multifarious sources, perpetrators, and forms of resistance are clearly manifest in our empirical realities. Yet, as scholars and activists, we are not only engaged in the attempts to understand, challenge, and fight violence, but we also struggle with its representations. Representations of violence in scholarship, in the media, in popular culture, and, crucially, in policy discourses, reveal the complex and fraud ways our respective positionalities shape the registers we use to talk about and challenge violence. More specifically, I have been reflecting on western-based feminist academics and activists' struggle to discuss and analyse various forms of gender-based and sexual violence affecting people in the Middle East. These reflections have emerged specifically in the context of my work on Iraq, but have also been relevant in relation to my research in and on Egypt and Turkey, and I suspect that colleagues working in and on other contexts in the region face similar dilemmas and quandaries.

In a recently published article on sexual violence in Iraq, I bemoaned the various ways that violence has been instrumentalised historically and in the current context: "Sexual and gendered violence is not merely employed as a racist and othering discourse by imperialist powers, and right-wing constituencies in the west, but discourses about sexual violence have emerged at every single moment of political and sectarian tension in modern Iraq as a central polarizing and political device amongst politicians and activists" (Al-Ali, 2016: 13-14).¹ In the article, I point to the importance of historicizing gender-based violence to escape the "presentism" and myopic views that absolve a wide range of perpetrators, but also historical complicities and silences, as evident in contemporary representations of gender-based violence in Iraq.

In other words, it is not all about ISIS. The U.K. and U.S. occupation, various Iraqi governments and their militia, insurgents and Shia sectarian groups, armed gangs, and individual family members have all been perpetrators of the most vile forms of gender-based and sexual violence in Iraq, ranging from domestic violence, verbal and physical intimidation, sexual harassment, rape, forced marriage, trafficking, forced prostitution, female genital mutilation, and honour-based crimes, including killings.² Iraqi and Kurdish feminist activists, who have been at the forefront of struggling against gender-based but also other forms of violence linked to authoritarianism and sectarianism, point to the fact that international outrage about ISIS' kidnapping, enslavement, forced marriages, rapes, and torture of Yezidi women has neither translated into adequate material and political support nor into asylum rights. Similarly, those same feminists underscore that gender-based violence and other forms of atrocities are also committed by Shia militia against Arab Sunnis.

¹ Al-Ali N (2016) Sexual violence in Iraq: Challenges for transnational feminist politics. *European Journal of Women's Studies*. Published online before print, March 1, 2016, doi: 10.1177/1350506816633723. Available at: <http://ejw.sagepub.com/content/early/2016/02/29/1350506816633723?paper=1>.

² Ibid.

In recent years, I have increasingly recognised my own pitfalls and difficulties in talking about gender-based violence in Iraq. Refraining from contributing to either the taboo and silencing of sexual and wider gender-based violence within domestic Iraqi politics on the one hand, or the sensationalising and essentialist culturalist discourses so common in western media and popular discourses on the other hand, has been challenging. In the abovementioned article, I tried to reflect on the habitually impossible task of finding nuanced and genuinely intersectional ways to talk about gender-based violence. I argued that in practise, the tension is often reduced to explanatory frameworks that firmly root violence within neo-colonial, imperialist, and neo-liberal policies (particularly those linked to the U.S. and Israel). In other instances, it restrictively references national and local cultures and local manifestations of patriarchy as sources of gender-based inequalities and forms of oppression.

I do not simply want to repeat my argument that we need to escape our straightjackets of positionality in order to avoid misleading dichotomous approaches. Being based in London or New York and facing racist, Islamophobic, and imperialist media representations and policy discourses on a daily basis inevitably shapes the way we think and write as feminist scholars and activists. But, crucially, this struggle should not become our only and even main point of reference if we want to take solidarity and resistance against gender-based violence seriously. And without wanting to collapse Iraq and the Middle East and North Africa, I have found that there are similar dilemmas and false dichotomies when talking about gender-based violence. As feminist activists and scholars, wherever based, we cannot avoid speaking simultaneously about corruption, political authoritarianism, sectarianism, the instrumentalization of culture, and religion at local and regional levels and various instances of what Deniz Kandiyoti (2014) has coined “masculinist restorations.”³

Kandiyoti suggests that, under conditions of neo-liberalism, high male unemployment and increasingly precarious labour, as well as the simultaneous increased aspirations and public presence of women, many states engage in crude means to maintain and reproduce patriarchy. She argues further:

The contradictory pulls of the politics of masculinist restoration on the one hand, and anti-patriarchal resistance on the other, open up new fields of contestation for a new generation of men and women who are more fully alert to the intimate relations between authoritarian rule and forms of oppression based on gender, creed, ethnicity or sexual orientation. youth activists - male and female - may have absorbed is that as long as the patriarchal social order is taken for granted, naturalized and not opened to question, citizenship must remain imperfect and democracy truncated.⁴

Masculinist restorations refer to historically-, regionally-, and locally-specific processes and power configurations that contain authoritarianism, Islamism, and sectarianism, which all intersect with global structures pertaining to imperialism and neo-liberal economics. I previously made the case that we need to engage in intersectional analyses and politics that address both macro and micro level

³ Kandiyoti D (2014) Contesting patriarchy-as-governance: lessons from youth-led activism. *openDemocracy*, 7 March 2014. Available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/deniz-kandiyoti/contesting-patriarchy-as-governance-lessons-from-youth-led-activism>

⁴ Ibid.

configurations of power and inequalities. More recently, my discomfort about some western-based feminist scholars take on gender-based violence in the Middle East increased and broadened to non-feminist scholars after having attended a conference on “Bodies Living with Violence” in the U.S.

At the conference, I encountered two trends, which profoundly unsettled me. Both are a variation on the theme of western-based politically progressive academics who unwittingly undermine or silence local activism and forms of resistance against gender-based forms of oppression and violence. I would characterise one of these trends as academic provocation aimed at challenging established ways of thinking amongst well-meaning liberal audiences. The second trend more specifically aims to critique and interrupt U.S. media and policy discourses and practises. In the context of the conference I attended, the first trend became apparent in the keynote lecture given by a prominent politics and International Relations scholar.

I will spare you the gruesome details of the talk, which contained several factual mistakes and distortions, but at its heart was an aestheticization of ISIS executions, comparing the very movement of chopping people’s heads off in their propaganda videos with a tango move, a Tai Chi gesture, and the halal butchering of a sheep. We were also being told that western special forces have been taught the same move to kill swiftly, clearly as an attempt to show that “they” (ISIS) are not so different from “us” (who would identify with western trained special forces is a big question mark here). The keynote speaker, a U.K.-based scholar, ended what appeared to be an extremely elegant and eloquent presentation with the assessment that we cannot defeat ISIS and should start negotiating with them.

I do not want to engage in the bashing of a specific academic. Aside from the awkwardness of him being a very supportive, collegial, and charming colleague of mine, I suspect that his well-intentioned attempt at pushing back against Islamophobia – and against simplistic well established “truths” about ISIS – is shared by other progressive western-based scholars or activists who engage in similar intellectual and political acrobatics. So rather than dwelling on the very speech that profoundly disturbed me, I would like to distance myself from the wider attempt at disrupting racist and imperialist discourses and policies when it serves an apologetic discourse towards the horrific perpetrators of violence that affect people in their daily lives. In the context of ISIS, it is obvious that most women, men, and children do not experience ISIS violence as an intimate elegant stroke that swiftly kills...

A sense of déjà vu heavily weighs on me. In the 1990s, Iraq underwent the most devastating sanctions regime ever imposed on a country following its invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1990, and many British and other western-based, anti-sanctions, and anti-war activists frequently glossed over the atrocities of Saddam Hussein’s regime. Whether in relation to the *Anfal* campaign involving chemical weapons against Kurds in the 80s or the oppression, torture, and killings of political dissidents as well as various forms of gender-based violence, a loud silence prevailed.

For some reason, it seemed very difficult for many leftist and supposedly progressive western constituencies to critique, challenge, and resist their own governments on their devastating foreign policies, while simultaneously acknowledging the existence of violent and oppressive local dictators and non-state actors within the Middle East. But these shrill “blind spot” are not merely the prerogative of western scholars and activists. As we already know in the context of many diasporic communities,

radical uncompromising positions and fervent nationalism can often be stronger if you are miles away and mobilise in relative safety. During the occupation of Iraq, I was taken aback by Iraqi diaspora activists actively supporting the increasingly sectarian insurgents, who were involved in the killing of Iraqi civilians in their fight against occupation and imperialism more widely.

It is important to stress that it does not always have to be the western-based progressive scholars that become apologetics for violent local and regional actors. Certainly, the trend is also apparent within the Middle East amongst some scholars and activists who might also fall into the trap of either blaming it all on imperialism or engaging in crude essentialising notions of culture and tradition. My reflections here are in no way meant to reify western vs. non-western researcher and activists, but I do think that positionality matters.

Let me now move to another problematic feature of current scholarship which aims to disrupt western media and policy discourses. This specific strand seems to be particularly prevalent within the U.S. Critical American and ethnic studies have made exciting contributions to our understanding of the intricate and complex ways violence is represented within U.S. national and foreign media and policy discourses. In the context of the conference I attended about bodies experiencing violence, several outstanding papers provided theoretically rich and cutting edge critical analyses of the way U.S. media, films, videos, as well as policy discourses engage with, (re)produce, and counter violence. While I was inspired and humbled by several of the contributions, I felt profoundly unsettled by the fact that most papers avoided talking about the very bodies experiencing violence, only engaging with representations of violence instead.

I would like to make it absolutely clear that I have no intention of creating another dichotomy between poststructuralist and materialist approaches. Butlerian poststructuralist feminist approaches as well as Foucauldian conceptualizations of knowledge, power, and discourse are central not only to much of contemporary feminist and queer scholarship, but also extremely relevant for feminist and queer activism. Yet, there is a problem if our academic endeavor ends up engaging with representations of violence in a manner that becomes self-indulgent. It is problematic if western-based scholarship contributes to ignoring, silencing, and rendering invisible the multiple and diverse forms of suffering, survival, and resistances of people actually experiencing violence.

Academics, whether positioned within western institutions or institutions within the Middle East and North Africa, are collectively challenged to avoid dichotomous approaches in terms of the macro and micro power configurations that intersect and are constitutive of each other, but that can never be reduced to one or the other. Feminist and queer scholars trying to document and analyze gender-based and sexual violence need to avoid the pitfalls of becoming entrapped in their positionality as I discussed previously. Given my recent experiences at the said conference in the U.S., I would now add that materially-grounded work is crucial. Yes, representation(s) matter. I have no doubt about it. They have material consequences and effects. But we need to make an effort not to abuse and belittle our poststructuralist insights by avoiding messy complex empirically-grounded research. This is not to fall back into naïve or positivist notions of empiricism, but to make the case that material realities and the multiple meanings that people of all genders and sexualities attach to them, can not merely be grasped at the level of discourse and representation.