

Sexual and gender based violence: everyday, everywhere, and yet ...

Daniel Moshenberg

The mathematics of contemporary sexual and gender based violence offer a grim graph of today's world. In a number of countries, evenly distributed across the globe, up to one-third of adolescent girls report forced sexual initiation. For example, a recent study suggests that in the United Kingdom one in three teenage girls has suffered sexual abuse from a boyfriend, one in four has experienced violence in a relationship, one in six has been pressured into sexual intercourse, one in sixteen say they had been raped. Mass rape of women and girls continues to be seen as somehow a legitimate military weapon. Reports suggest that, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in a war that lasted a mere three years, somewhere between 10,000 and 60,000 women and girls were raped. Sexual violence against men and boys continues undaunted, unreported, understudied, and too often a source of ridicule and derision. According to a number of studies, somewhere between 5 and 10% of adult males report having been sexually abused in their childhood. Women suffer violence in health care settings, "including sexual harassment, genital mutilation, forced gynecological procedures, threatened or forced abortions, and inspections of virginity." Sexual violence in schools is off the charts. In Canada, 23% of girls experience sexual harassment.

In Iraq, which is engaged in a so-called nation-building exercise, part of that nation-building seems to involve, or require, sexual and gender based violence: "An increase in "honor" killings currently haunts the Iraqi political landscape but is receiving little U.S. media attention. Such killings are rooted in ancient patriarchal culture and represent the most severe expres-

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sion of a rebellion against modernity, the secularism of the global market. They bespeak Iraq's mounting social crisis." Women's corpses, and some men's, are the collateral damage, not of warfare but of so-called peacetime reconciliation and reconstruction. If this is peace, what constitutes war?

Meanwhile, the engineer of that nation-building project, the United States, experienced a 25% rise in rape and sexual assaults between 2005 and 2007: "Among all violent crimes, domestic violence, rape, and sexual assault showed the largest increases. Except for simple assault, which increased by 3 percent, the incidence of every other crime surveyed decreased." From this perspective, which is the developed and which the developing country?

Across the border, women, especially low-income women workers, disappear, repeatedly and violently. The State finally calls it femicide and passes a law. Women continue to disappear. Over 400 women have been murdered in the border city of Ciudad Juarez. The numbers of women, mostly low-income workers, who have been murdered in the state of Chihuahua, where Ciudad Juarez is located, qualifies the entire state as a femicide hotspot. And it's not alone. In Mexico, Baja California, had 105 women murder victims in 2006 – 2007. Chihuahua counted 84. Since 2005, over 650 women have been murdered in Mexico State, and the state of Guerrero has the highest murder rate of any state in Mexico, 5 of every 100,000 women.

And Guatemala continues to experience a femicide crisis. In 2007, over 700 women and girls were reported murdered.

Around the world, the numbers speak for themselves, but to whom do they speak, and who is listening, who is taking the count and who is assessing accountability? It seems the whole globe, in its entirety and in each

of its parts, is haunted by sexual and gender-based violence. Around and about the world daily, reports and studies on sexual and gender based violence are published.

Other reports look at the ways in which sexual and gender based violence spike in conflict zones and persist in post-conflict zones.

Some consider institutions. For example, many, and yet not enough, consider prison rape. There are reports of rape of juvenile offenders, rape of immigrant detainees, rape of remand prisoners, rape of convicted prisoners. And rape is only a small, if critical, part of the picture of sexual and gender based violence. Others look at workplace violence, such as sexual violence against domestic workers. There's sexual and gender based violence in schools, schools of all sorts. Physical households as well as family and kin structures are sites of sexual and gender based violence. The public is regularly scandalized, or not, by clerics and clergy of any and all denominations engaged in sexual and gender based abuse, of parishioners, of acolytes, of one another. Women in the military generally suffer sexual and gender based violence. Women in offices, women on farms, women on streets, women on public transport suffer sexual violence, suffer gender based violence.

Women, gay men, lesbians, transgenders, transsexuals, intersex, girls, boys around the world suffer sexual and gender based violence because of their attire. In some places, it's State policy. Wear a burqa, suffer both humiliation and State sanctions. In other States, don't wear a veil and you could end up in jail ... or worse. In other places, it's culture. Wear a short skirt, and be prepared for violence. Be prepared to be treated as a sex worker, because of course violence against sex workers is, if not acceptable, understandable.

Honor killings haunt the world, although they're not always referred to as such. Indigenous women disappear, other women disappear as well. This is but a partial picture, but it will suffice.

There is no geographical border to sexual and gender-based violence. It happens everywhere, and all the time. This is neither paranoia nor dystopia, nor is it an invitation to panic or despair. It is merely descriptive, and, again, barely so. If sexual and gender based violence is so prevalent, can it really be said to haunt

the world, or is that statement itself a specimen of naive optimism? Perhaps it should be said to constitute the world. Either way, whether a specter or a basic element, or both, the absolute ordinariness, the everydayness and everywhere-ness, of sexual and gender based violence suggests many questions, many avenues for research, many possibilities for collaboration and action.

Do sexual and gender based violence have a history, globally? It's one thing to say that in a particular place at a particular time, there was an increase or an abatement in sexual and gender based violence. It's quite another to look across the expanse of the world, or even a continent.

And what if that continent were Africa?

This Bulletin began in response to news reports of "corrective"

and "curative" gang rapes of lesbians in South Africa. These were then followed by news reports of a study in South Africa that found that one in four men in South Africa had committed rape, many of them more than once. We wanted to bring together concerned Africa scholars and committed African activists and practitioners, to help contextualize these reports. We wanted to address the ongoing situation of sexual and gender based violence on the continent, the media coverage of sexual and gender based violence in Africa, and possi-



Fikile Vilakazi (South Africa) Director of the Coalition of African Lesbians

bilities for responses, however partial, that might offer alternatives to the discourse of the repeated profession of shock or the endless, and endlessly reiterated, cycle of lamentation.

To that end, we have brought together writers of prose fiction (Megan Voysey-Braig), lawyer-advocates (Salma Maoulidi, Ann Njogu), poets (Chinwe Azubuike), trauma scholars (Sariane Leigh), human rights and women's rights advocates (Michelle McHardy), gender and transgender advocates (Liesl Theron), activist researchers (Sasha Gear). These categories are fluid, since every writer here is involved in various activist projects, advocates in many ways. The writers do not pretend to 'cover Africa', and neither does the collection of their writings. The writings treat South Africa, Nigeria, Zanzibar, Kenya, Sierra Leone. They are meant to continue certain conversations, to initiate others.

Methodologically, the authors argue for the importance of respecting the multiple intersections and convergences, the multiple layerings, that underwrite and comprise any single event of sexual or gender based violence, and that necessarily complicate any discussion of these at a broader level. For example, the study that reported that one in four South African men had raped women or girls, the study the news media reduced to that simple formula, actually was a research report that attempt to understand men's health and the use of violence in the context of the interface of HIV and rape in South Africa. In the end, the report came up with three sensible recommendations: "1. Rape prevention must focus centrally on changing social norms around masculinity and sexual entitlement, and addressing the structural underpinnings of rape. 2. Post-exposure prophylaxis is a critical dimension of post-rape care, but it is just one dimension and a comprehensive care package needs to be delivered to all victims and should include support for the psychological responses to rape. 3. HIV prevention must embrace and incorporate promoting more gender equitable models of masculinity. Intervention that do this effectively must be promoted as part of HIV prevention" That is, sexual and gender based violence begins and ends at the intersection of sexual inequality and gender inequality. Health and well-being begin with the work of transformation.

From varied perspectives and in different genres, each of the authors speaks a single truth. Conjuring away

the specter of sexual and gender based violence is not good enough. Professing shock at the discovery of sexual and gender based violence is worse yet. Treating sexual and gender based violence as exceptional likewise leaves the conditions and situation intact. The work of transformation, in Africa as around the world, is slow, long, and necessary.

About the artist Gabrielle Le Roux and her portraits in this bulletin

Gabrielle was born in London, raised mostly in South Africa and has lived in the Caribbean, London, Amsterdam and the Canary Islands. She is self-taught as an artist and started drawing portraits of people in her community when she lived in the Caribbean in the 1980s and then stopped drawing for many years. On returning to South Africa in 1992 she worked as an activist with women's rights, AIDS awareness and gay rights through various NGO's and institutions until 2000. During her four years running the Women's Media Watch doing advocacy, training and activism around the representation (and lack of it) of women in the media, she travelled to Cuba, Philippines, Montreal, Zimbabwe and London to give input in conferences and workshops on media and human rights issues. In 2000 she went to New York for the UN Beijing +5 Women's Assembly as part of the Global Women's Media Team. In 2001 she developed the concept of portrait and story projects on a return visit to the Caribbean and her first project was about women over the age of a hundred including the world's oldest woman. She drew and interviewed ten women in the island of Dominica and the result is Living Ancestors, a portrait and story project which she sees as a continuation of her activism.

More on Gabrielle and these portraits, go to <http://www.pambazuka.org/blogs/wsf2007/?cat=5>