

Editorial: Rethinking Gender and Violence

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So what is there to rethink?

In the final chapter of his book, *Identity and Violence: the Illusion of Destiny*, Amartya Sen writes of his encounter as an eleven-year boy with a dying man, at his home's gates. The man's name, he tells us, was Kader Mia and his murder was one of thousands and thousands in the Hindu-Muslim riots of the 1940's in Bengal. The chapter concludes the book's engagement with the way in which identities are implicated in violence, and the final sentence strikes home like an arrow: "We have to make sure, above all, that our mind is not halved by a horizon" (Sen, 2006: 186).

The horizon has appeared earlier in the chapter, where Sen is drawing upon a line of Derek Walcott's poetry, to suggest that Walcott's rich and "integrated understanding of the Caribbean" depends on the focus of a poet's gaze, and the ability to let dichotomization dissolve as possibilities unfurl (Sen, 2006:185). The challenge of Sen's gentle injunction to feminists working against violence, especially sexual violence, is both breath-taking and troubling. As those who have been at the forefront, in different ways, of an insistence that gendered embodiment is a political process, and has imprisoned, tortured, and wounded millions of people gendered as women/girls, the notion of a clear line between "right" and "wrong", "innocence" and "perpetration", "pain" and "dominance", "woman" and "man" is a compelling one. Such a line (a "horizon") offers a straightforward way of reading the relationship between gender and violence: becoming gendered ritualizes violence, predicting who will violate and who will be violated, seeking context merely as a backdrop to what we know.

There's a lot of empirical evidence for the assertion that this "horizon", the line which establishes where we are when it comes to understanding gender and violence, is stable. Almost all forms of rape, domestic assassination and

brutality, sexual harassment, trafficking, and sexual abuse of children are carried out by people gendered as “men”. Thinking through the connection between gender and violence has to entail a distinction, a line, between “the doers” and the “done to”. What is there beyond that?

And yet. “*We have to make sure, above all, that our mind is not halved by a horizon*”. Sen himself does not, in the book concluded by this sentence, take up the question of gender as an identity. But the invitation to imagine a future without a dependence on dichotomized zones of being is irresistible. And the hint that minds dependent on a dichotomy for vision are minds “halved” is troubling (it took us all a long time to even get the notion that “women hold up half the sky” into print!) and probably truthful.

The almost intractable conundrum remains nonetheless. In the histories we have access to, it is only the men of the southern Tuareg (see Sadiqi, in this issue) who are banished by one another for rape; in so many other, diverse, settings, we are witness to an unbearable relationship between becoming gendered as a “man” and violence, including violence targeted at women and girls.

How do we think “beyond” this reality? How do we rethink relationships between gender and violence so that we are neither deaf to what it is that is experienced, within different African contexts, nor reified into caricatures of agency, hollow at the core with grief, brittle and full of projective rage at the skin? How do we think about Western images of the “victimized African woman, ravaged by war, to be pitied and developed” while listening to the stories of African-based women (perhaps in Liberia, or northern Uganda), whose lives have been radically violated by conflict and war-mongers? How do we reflect upon the sexual assault of men and boys in carceral settings? How have discourses of gender and sexualities become so contaminated by assumptions about African women’s (in the homogenized plural) normalization of patriarchal and neo-capitalist violences, our¹ attendant sexual passivity, lack of sexual knowledges, disinterest in sexual pleasure, inability to distinguish between sexual transaction and violence, and about our ignorance of our sexual powers? What do we learn about the relationship between gender and violence from transgender activism? When Prime Minister Raila Odinga of Kenya “recalls” his suggestion that Kenyan gay and lesbian people should be arrested, do we laugh or cry?

In the past decade, African feminist activism and theory has been fully engaged with a host of discussions raising questions about gender

and violence. Recently, an escalation of state-sponsored homophobia has cascaded through African governments (Kenya, the Gambia, Nigeria, the DRC, Uganda) and included the African Union's rejection of the Coalition of African Lesbians' application for observer status². In countries in which hate crime against lesbian, gay and transgendered people is reported (such as South Africa), there are frequent reports of terrorization, murder, and rape³. While there is nothing new about public – and private – homophobia, the hysteria accompanying contemporary religious and politicians' discourses suggests alarming state fragilities, and increasing levels of ideological corruption in the fight for constituencies and status (hence, resources). Open organization against homophobia and trans-hatred is however still new, especially in East and West Africa, and raises questions about gender and violence which, at first glance, may seem shaped differently from those which understand "women" as vulnerable to "men's" violence.

At the same time, other discourses on gender and violence have arisen from a focus on militarism and conflict. The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda in 1998 made the decision that mass-rape and sexual mutilation were deployed systematically as weapons during the genocide period, and reporters, women peace activists, and researchers have all documented sexual brutality – of different kinds – as legitimated military activities in the DRC, northern Uganda, and the Sudan. What can be claimed as "new" here is the level of condemnation and publicization of this form of military violence. In an era in which feminist politics have insisted on the relevance of women's experience and where a post 9/11 global dynamic has centralized questions of "terror" and "peace" into mainstream news, the link between the dynamics of gender and violence has become interpolated into debate on African conflict zones. While this has nourished new waves of feminist activism⁴, in different contexts, it has simultaneously generated vocabularies on "women", "conflict", "violence", "healing" and "damage" which tend to circulate fairly far away from the conversations of those running shelters for battered women, or advocating for legal reform around marital rape.

And those running shelters for battered women and advocating for legal reform around marital rape (and access to property on widowhood, and post-exposure prophylaxis, and treatment for HIV) are still doing exactly that, in their thousands of thousands across the continent. As conversations about gender and violence have grown to encompass questions of masculinities, ideas about counter-heteronormativity, demands for the recognition of

militarism as gendered and dangerous, and questions about sexual pleasure and health, the old wrestles around rape, domestic assault, child sexual abuse, misogynist cultural and religious surveillance, the commodification of women's sexual bodies, and sexual harassment have not abated. They have, if anything, become more intense, and embedded in ever-more challenging scenarios: the rape of babies; the devastation of HIV, transmitted through marital infidelity; enforced teenage pregnancy in contexts of great poverty; ritualized gang-rape embedded in drug abuse. In the Saartjie Baartman Centre for Women and Children, in Cape Town (profiled in this issue), there is both a shelter for abused women and children and the only NGO in Africa which fights for the rights of transgender people (GenderDynamix).

How are we all getting on, side by side?

This issue of *Feminist Africa* seeks to take stock, as it were, of some contemporary thinking on gender and violence. The four feature articles tackle both “old” and “newer” questions: while Fatima Sadiqi's (of the University of Morocco) piece offers descriptive clarity on North Africa's current situation in terms of tackling domestic violence, Eva Ayiera (Urgent Action Fund, Kenya) critiques international discourses on “conflict” and “gender”. Anu Pillay, who has just been offered a second term as Head of Mission by Medica Mondial in Liberia, writes about her feminist activism in different areas of gender/violence work as the living theorization of process, and participation, showing how differently focussed work can draw from core principles of feminist epistemology. Jane Bennett's article is interested in the range of theoretical approaches to violence and gender dynamics in African feminist work, especially contemporary approaches to *lgbti*⁵ strategic thinking, and while the article offers no easy resolution of their different orientations, celebrates their vigour and rebellions.

The feature articles are intended, as a small group, to suggest that while there may be areas of overlap among writers and activists who take gender and violence seriously, there are myriad points of divergence and plenty of marginalized arguments, seeking entrance. One of these is articulated in Adelene Africa's (AGI, University of Cape Town) Standpoint piece on “Murderous Women”, where she asks us to think critically about women as capable of violence and as people too long constructed simply as “mad”, “bad” or “sad” if they deploy aggression or organize violent action against others.

The two In Conversation pieces continue the issue's interest in less

dominant discourses around gender and violence. Godwin Murunga (University of Kenyatta) tackles the dialogue between African feminist theories and masculinities with energy and engages directly with the question of violence. His argument rejects simple dichotomies of “men-as-violent/women-as-targets”, stressing the damage done to men and boys by militarization and what he terms “flawed processes of socialization”. The juxtaposition of Pauline Dempers’ (Breaking the Wall of Silence, Namibia) less formal talk with Yaliwe Clarke (AGI, University of Cape Town) with Murunga’s words is striking. Dempers’ story of incarceration, sexual harassment, and gendered brutality at the hands of SWAPO, during the Namibian war of liberation, chimes against Murunga’s confidence in transformational gender dynamics, and leaves the reader longing for a conversation *between* Dempers and Murunga, between powerful optimism and equally powerful memory.

The limits of a journal-length have determined the choice of themes to be explored in this issue. As editor, this has left me with some uneasy moments. In the c21, there are more ideas on gender and violence than can be enfolded into a triangle of debates (“violence against women”, “gender, conflict, and peace-building”, “counter-heteronormative activism”). There are very serious discussions around sustainable livelihoods, the security of the environment, and the role of multi-national corporations in fuelling the military business which depends so heavily on conventional gender norms⁶. Simultaneously, the relationship between gender dynamics and violence approached through feminist ICT-based campaigns, such as Take back the Tech, relies both on conventional feminist notions of gender (seeing “women-people” as being more vulnerable to technological disempowerment than “men-people”) and on radical rethinking about how digital strength can dismantle gendered norms of agency. The media, overall, deserves its own space when it comes to contemporary African-based theorizations of gender, sexualities and violence. *Feminist Africa* intends to dedicate an issue in the near future to this.

Despite the thematic gaps, however, this issue draws together voices not exactly in harmony, but certainly in mutual commitment to writing which pulls no discursive punches in terms of its conviction that the relationship between gender and violence is far from fully understood, and even further from a logic in whose terms that same relationship can be erased. The possibility of that erasure is nonetheless never far from our minds. Learned hopefulness (a characteristic, we are told, of Battered Women’s Syndrome)? Or a mind refusing to be halved by a horizon?

References

Sen, A. 2006. *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* London: Penguin Books

Endnotes

1. I use the pronoun “our” not out of entitlement (a white feminist writer’s unproblematic claim to African identity would be stupid) but out of a sense of co-location within these discourses of diminishment.
2. See Pambazuka News 506, for a special issue on this decision www.pambazuka.org
3. The latest in the main news-streams of South Africa is that of Ncumisa Mzamelu, who lived in Kwazulu/Natal, South Africa, openly lesbian. Her charred body was found in a public toilet (The Star, December 2nd, Johannesburg).
4. Such as the work of Femmes Africa Solidarite, ISIS-WICCE Uganda, and Women of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA).
5. The *lgbti* acronym is unsatisfactory in its symbolic homogenization of very diverse oppressions and experiences; it is nonetheless accepted as a temporary (or not) ‘gloss’ in many African activist circles for counter-heteronormative struggles for identities, rights, safety, and resources.
6. See, for example, www.gwsafrica.org: “Position Paper on Gender and Violence”. This was written by Felix Liersch, in 2009.