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A response to Sheila Dallas-Katzman's "Muted echoes: confronting the global crisis of violence against women and girls, including women journalists"

Una respuesta a Sheila Dallas-Katzman's "Ecos silenciados: cómo afrontar la crisis mundial de violencia contra las mujeres y las niñas, incluidas las periodistas"

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May I say a word to you Sheila, because you were asking what you can do after the tragic event involving Manja in Sierra Leone. What I want to say is this: Manja and you have already done so many things—and you are doing them even today. It is true that many people have only survived thanks to you and thanks to Manja. This is your merit and this has already happened and nobody will ever be able to undo it. So, you have done your part already in an excellent way: thank you so much!

I am very moved, because what Sheila shared with us is not just a piece of information; it is a cry for justice, and it resonates deeply within us. And I love what you said, Sheila, because we *should* talk, we should transform silence into words. Whatever our method is, this is our privilege and our mission. And I am happy to be here together with you, Sheila, and with all of you, because it means we are together. We are a group. And this gives us strength.

Now, I want to continue with my part. I want to talk about the *conspiracy of silence*, because it is a phenomenon we all know in every country, even within ourselves sometimes—because we often prefer not to talk. We may prefer to remain safe in silence because we are afraid of the consequences. We are afraid to touch on sensitive topics. We might feel embarrassed, or we might embarrass others. So, silence is a phenomenon we all share.

Let me mention the expert of this phenomenon, Yael Danieli. I knew her very well for many years. She's a distinguished professor of international psychology at the Chicago School of Professional Psychology and right now she's the founder and executive director of the International Center for Multi-Generational Legacies of Trauma, and consultant to the United Nations. Her *International Handbook for Multi-Generational Legacies of Trauma* is the leading textbook in the field. Her article "Psychotherapists' participation in the conspiracy of silence about the Holocaust," from 1984, portrays very well our possible failures and our task (Danieli, 1984). Thank you, Yael, wherever you are!

Now we must be aware, as Sheila already mentioned, that there are consequences if we don't talk and obey to the conspiracy of silence: we perpetuate harm, we hinder healing, we suppress the truth as a way of implicit complicity by a process of internal intellectual censorship, and this also affects those who engage in the practice. I was thinking, Sheila, when we talk about those women who are holding everything inside them, keeping all these stories within, how much they suffer. Ultimately, societies cannot change, because there is no open, honest dialogue.

What can we do? As you said, we can raise consciousness. We can encourage people to be honest and to communicate, to talk about these issues — but only when it is safe. There must be a safe space in which to do so. And there are countries — not now, not here — where it is very difficult to create such a safe space. This is important to acknowledge. But if we have a safe place, we should encourage people to share their stories. And if we teach, we can educate others to highlight the importance of sharing our stories. As a matter of fact, education is done for the future of all communities; education itself is the future.

We can raise awareness, including perhaps even the use of civil disobedience as Paulo Freire has demonstrated, so well calling it an "existential necessity" for liberation (*apud* Ropp, 2021), because sometimes our shared consensus prevents us from being truthful. Let me give you the example of Elie Wiesel. He survived the concentration camp. He said afterwards that the silence of those outside, the bystanders, was even harder to endure than the proper torture. It was an experience that could break the morality and courage of those who were suffering violence. So, when we raise our voices and speak out, we help those who are suffering (Wiesel, 1970).

Or George Orwell (1972), who said that unpopular ideas can be kept in the dark even without the need for any official ban. This group solidarity can produce an effect on all of us [1]. When I think for example about the conflict between Israel and Palestine, many colleagues and other people in Israel do not agree with the policy of their government. But due to group cohesion, they prefer not to speak, and this happens in other countries as well. I understand it, but in the end, it is not helpful. In the end, it only perpetuates the harm.

Like I already mentioned, there is Paulo Freire, this wonderful colleague of ours from Brazil, who always spoke about our duty to educate people to be more courageous and to break the conspiracy of silence. He has summarized the key aspects of a culture of silence and the way to overcome them by educational means in his epochal book *Pedagogics of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970)[2].

So, what can be our role? As you already said, Sheila: to hold safe spaces for sharing; to enact justice within the group; to recognize and to see with compassion; not only to listen, but to listen with action. To replace silence with a story—and even to create a story with a better ending.

This is what Moreno (2019) meant when he coined his famous phrase, "I don't analyze dreams alone, I give new dreams to people." It might be not enough merely to analyze and to have empathy for the story; we must also ask how we can improve the story, how we can offer it a better ending, and how we can empower those voices that are ready to speak. There are already different movements, groups in different regions worldwide working toward this end, and so I will mention a few of them.

There is the feministic psychodrama and sociodrama movement — unfortunately available only in Spanish so far —, yet it is a broad movement. There are Ursula Hauser, from Costa Rica and Switzerland, and her colleagues with their work on solidarity, confidence building and trust. They help communities to talk about these issues, including violence against women (Bucuţă et al., 2018).

There is the inspirational work of our colleagues in Brazil, like Mariângela Pinto da Fonseca Wechsler in São Paulo and other cities where hundreds of people come together to share their experiences in public social-dramatic community groups (Zampieri, 2011). Then there is the fantastic work of Marina Mojović in Belgrade. She and her colleagues organize spaces for reflective citizen groups (Mojović, 2018).

But there are also groups organized alongside with exhibitions. These kinds of groups could happen in every country and with every exhibition, because exhibitions have the power to move and to mobilize. So, if there are groups working in parallel with exhibition, they use the exhibition as a first spark to initiate the dialogue. This inherent dynamizing effect for the group work is very helpful. I remember that in Germany, during the exhibition about the Wehrmacht—the German army —, groups were organized by Agnes Dudler and her colleagues to deal with the high emotional impact on visitors of the exhibition (Dudler & Heinz, 2006). The same type of groups could be prepared, for example, in the wake of demonstrations against climate change, migration policies, wars, antisemitism, and anti-Islamism, with a special focus on the consequences for women. All of this raises consciousness and awareness, and we as group experts can take part. We can become active.

[1] Ideas on silence and truth: voluntary censorship: in his proposed *Animal Farm* preface, Orwell noted how publishers and writers self-censor, avoiding topics "not done," creating an "orthodoxy" of accepted ideas, even without government bans. 1984 & The Memory Hole: Winston Smith's job at the Ministry of Truth involves destroying records (the "memory hole") that contradict Party dogma, a literal suppression of facts, demonstrating how silence maintains power. Intellectual complicity: Orwell critiqued intellectuals who, due to fear or desire for power, supported totalitarian ideas, creating an environment in which free speech was undermined from within, notes https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kqknNSao500. Silence as complicity: he believed that remaining silent when faced with lies makes one a "servant of deception," enabling oppression, a sentiment captured in https://www.facebook.com/philosophyterms786/posts/to-remain-silent-in-the-face-of-lies-is-to-become-a-servant-of-deception-george-/.

2 Key aspects of the culture of silence: internalized oppression: the oppressed adopt the oppressor's worldview, seeing themselves as objects rather than subjects, believing they know nothing and should remain quiet. Banking education: traditional education treats students as empty containers (banks) to be filled by teachers, reinforcing passivity and preventing critical thinking necessary to break silence. Social and political roots: this silence isn't innate, but a product of unequal power structures that dehumanize both the oppressed and the oppressor, making silence a strategy for survival or a result of being denied means to respond. Conspiracy (unspoken agreement): while not always a deliberate plot, it's a shared, unspoken agreement to not challenge the dominant reality, perpetuating a cycle of suffering and dehumanization. Breaking the silence: problem-posing education: Freire advocated for education that encourages critical thinking, dialogue, and reflection (praxis) to transform reality, helping people find their voice. Literacy as liberation: developing literacy empowers the marginalized to read their world critically, moving beyond the oppressor's narrative to form their own perspective and sense of selfhood. Dialogue and praxis: through genuine dialogue and connecting theory with practice (praxis), the oppressed can challenge dehumanization and work towards liberation, transforming their silence into a powerful, critical voice.

There are also groups working at historical or significant sites benefiting from the special context and its meaning. I remember on this regard Jacob Naor and Hilde Gött, who organized groups for decades in Auschwitz. They explored the consequences for the second and third generations bringing dialogue and words to a place of unspeakable horror (Gött & Naor, 2010). In every country, we have historically or collectively significant sites that can be transformed into starting points to dive into the silenced aspects of the collective with our group work.

Also, there are these action-based approaches you mentioned, Sheila. I just want to share an example with all of you. For more than 20 years, my colleague Gabor Pinter, from Hungary, and I organized in Turkey in the amphitheater of Bergama a myth sociodrama project in the framework of the annual national congress. I recollect the example of performing *Antigone* with a group of participants on the stage in front of villagers who came to visit our work. *Antigone* is a wonderful story about a brave woman — braver than many men — who spoke up. This old drama mobilized even the policemen who were present to maintain order, because we transformed the plot into a sociodrama, as well staging a manifestation against government policy some years ago, in a context in which the police had shot several students. The policemen who were witnessing the plot at that very moment were so moved that they came onto the stage — there were about 1,000 people from the village in that amphitheate r— and promised not to do anything similar never again. This spontaneous reaction was deeply moving, and it is a testimony how theater and action-based methods can become powerful and helpful tools (Burmeister Petulla, 2009).

Now I want to give some protagonism to the voices of women. These women were all nominated by the Nobel Women's Committee, a committee founded by six female Nobel Peace Prize laureates[3]. They are all advocating for women—for their struggle, their voices, their rights. These are examples from some of the champions of the movement:

- Helen Mack (Guatemala): "Never give up! Fight for your rights!" In 1993, she created the Myrna Mack Foundation, with the aim of seeking justice for the murder of her sister and of citizens who lost their lives during Civil War. Through this foundation, she became a plaintiff in legal cases against military personnel and, based on these cases, obtained significant convictions and monetary compensation for the families of the victims;
- Amira Osman Hamed (Sudan): "Don't let them terrify you!" Amira's history of advocacy and protest is punctuated by several arrests, detentions, torture, and threats of rape by law enforcement. She has endured severe mistreatment despite a disability since several years ago, when a wall collapsed on her and eight other family members;
- Afra Nassar (Yemen): "Believe that you are worth listening to." As a journalist and blogger in Yemen who exposed human rights abuse and criticized the regime, Afrah had stood up to hate messages and death threats;
- Luba Akanawati (Siria): "What really helped me to survive is the women's network around me." Their homes no longer even exist. They were destroyed or are occupied, and ownership for tens of thousands of women is impossible to prove without a missing spouse's death certificate;
- Khin Ohmar (Myanmar): "I feel at peace knowing that there is a young generation fighting for their rights." Riot police brutally cracked down on us. Dozens of students were injured and died while hundreds were detained. I narrowly escaped arrest. That experience of feeling vulnerable and outraged by the police brutality changed my life forever. I went back home feeling shocked and that night I felt so clear in my head that I would fight for justice and end such brutality;
- Jamila Afghani (Afghanistan): "We should extend hands of support to each other." "I still have the nightmares," Jamila said in an interview. "I'm still afraid of the sound of bullets and other noises bother me." That vivid memory from her girlhood in Afghanistan is part of Jamila's eventful life as an education champion, peace activist, and advocate for women's human rights;
- Nada Murat (Yazidi Community, Iraq): "We don't get nowhere pacifying with politeness." Yazidi human rights activist and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate. "Conflict undoubtedly deteriorates women's rights, but women are not safe from violence in peacetime. Sexual violence does not begin or end when conflict does. So, when we advocate for peace, I think it is crucial to demand justice and equity—not just the absence of conflict. This means addressing the root causes that make women vulnerable—systems of poverty and patriarchy."
- Manal Shaquir (Palestine): "I am fighting always every day for my existence being a woman." "I am Palestinian, I am denied existence just because of who I am," she said in an interview. "And I'm always fighting every day for my existence as a woman in front of my dad in a patriarchal setting and as a Palestinian in front of the Israeli occupation." Manal is campaigns coordinator for Stop the Wall, a grassroots organization set up in 2002 when Israel began building a wall—also known as the Apartheid Wall—that annexes Palestinian land and property and restricts movement in the occupied West Bank;

3 https://www.nobelwomensinitiative.org

- Musu Diamond Nusura (Liberia): "When one woman is affronted, all of us are affronted." A Liberian women's rights activist who contributed to the Nobel Women's Initiative's 2021 blog posts for the 16 Days of Activism Campaign. Her quote, "When one woman is affronted, all of us are affronted," highlights the importance of collective action and solidarity among women;
- Meaza Gidey Gebremedhin (Ethiopia): "I always need to fight for myself, for my place in this world and to help others." Sexual violence against Tigrayan women has been described as the sinister signature of the war in Ethiopia, a brutal defining element of the conflict. Yet, there was no mention of this in the November 3rd, 2022, peace treaty between the Ethiopian government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front, says Meaza Gidey Gebremedhin, a US-based Tigrayan activist in exile. "The fact that this wasn't even part of the conversation goes to show the bigger problem, the problem that women are not at the decision-making table," she said in an interview. "They're not part of the discussion. They're not consulted or adequately represented."

So, in the end, as colleagues committed to the values of humanity, we strive to transform silence into words and muted echoes into voices—for a better world, a plea against violence.

Carry on: Love is stronger than death!

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