

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

The heteronormative couple is the bulwark of macho violence. Therein are perpetuated mechanisms of masculine domination, well-guarded behind the boundaries of the intimate. If we want to change sexist relationships that underpin our social system, we have to show particular attention to what lies behind the « private ».

Because we are all impregnated with social constructs that make us man or woman, we all reproduce them. It's on all of us to accept to look at them, question them in our own relationships as well as in the ones that surround us.

Patriarchy won't fall on its own. Let's help him.

This text was written after non-mixed gatherings organised in November 2007. During those gatherings, many discussions led us to the question of domestic violence and the one of collective management of such situations.

Thanks to FFO



Domestic violence

inspired by Marie France Hirigoyen's book "Femmes sous emprise";

and unfortunately by our experiences as women and those of other women we've spoken with.

domination, he doesn't exercise it in a conscious and calculated manner but spontaneously, as if it was normal, as if it was the only possible way. It is also suppressed by the close circle who sees nothing, since the man takes good care of preserving his public image, and that in everybody's mind it is impossible that the friend they think they know so well would behave that way. The close circle that doesn't intervene because it's private, because it's not their business, because they perceive situations as isolated cases where the man and the woman are equals, where she could have the possibility to stick to her positions, like in any situation of inter individual conflict. This leads the woman to doubt her own perception, simply because she has no space, neither in herself or in her couple, or in her environment for it to exist, to set things straight. Because there is nowhere she finds echo to what she experiences, because there is no recognition of what she suffers, no acknowledgment that would state « no, you're not tripping, what you're living is unacceptable ».

Violence is a slow process during which the systematisation and the crescendo effect that rises restlessly in intensity leads to a spiral that repeats and reinforces itself all the time, until the woman becomes so weary mentally that she is deprived of means to fight back.

It has different shapes, different scales, an infinite range of reproduction's mechanism that imbricate themselves one into the other.

In countless situations, the man doesn't even need to say things, to express them verbally in order for them to still have an impact. For instance when it comes to affective blackmail, the man doesn't need to say « I'm unhappy and it's your fault », everything about his attitude expresses it. He doesn't show it, he makes it transpire. He can also say things less clearly: « Do you realise what you're doing » can very well replace « you're a real bitch ». It can even not be aggressive at all, more like an advice, with a sincere and fair tone: « you know, I'm worrying about you. Lately I feel like you're being incoherent » reflects back to the woman the image of the hysterical freaking out. It's not because the form is a euphemism, because the words are less harsh, that there is no violence for the woman.

When we say "domestic violence" we usually have the image of a woman covered with marks, beaten by her husband or even killed. That is just the visible part of the iceberg. The paroxysm of insidious and daily abuses embedded in the couple's story. Physical violence always comes along with psychological violence, when the woman is already trapped in a deeply unequal relation.

"I believed for a long time that domestic violence didn't apply to me, because my husband wasn't beating me. But I was actually so submitted that he didn't need to beat me for me to obey him. Physical violence only came when I started to resist"

Domestic violence is in all the small acts that debase the woman, put her under the grip of her partner, enshrining status' inequality. It starts with the "micro-violence" that paves the way, then it escalates into a vicious cycle where the man always imposes more, the woman always accepts more.

We speak about psychological violence when the man, through a set of attitudes, behaviours and remarks, slanders and denies the woman's lifestyle, destabilises her and hurts her. In this manner, the man imposes his power and takes control of the relation.

If this violence is sometimes hard to differentiate it is because it plays on people's subjectivity: some things can appear trivial to the eyes of others but the women feel the violence. This violence can start very subtly: threatening tone, mocking, disapproval or contemptuous looks, etc ... but all these forms contribute to the woman's depreciation, making her feel ill at ease, scaring her, putting her under pressure.

Often, in public the man looks irreproachable, because he cares about protecting the image the others have of him. He hides himself behind humour, irony, pretending that "it's just a joke". It is in private that the violence is fully revealed.

When the woman tries to react, the man explains her that she is mistaken: "I was joking" or "I was angry but not at you" or "No I'm not jealous, I was worried about you". It works so good that the woman ends up doubting what she lived, thinking that her perceptions are mistaken, that she is paranoid, that she is becoming crazy, making things up.

We can try to differentiate many axis that domestic violence revolves around, many mechanisms that sustain them.

Control

It refers to possession over the other. It's about intrusion in the woman's activities, her social relations, her personal choices. It's when there is no space left in the life of the woman in which her partner is not involved. « You know, your girlfriend, I think she's using you », « are you sure you wanna study sociology? There isn't much career prospects ». It can be just through showing interest about « what did you do today? » but in a systematic manner, leading to a point when there is nothing that the man doesn't know about the woman's life. It's speaking in her name « oh, she doesn't like skiing much », « I believe tonight she doesn't wanna go out ».

Isolation

To keep perpetuating violence, the woman has to be separated from her friends, her family. Deprive her of support and ears to confide in what she is going through. Sometimes, it takes depreciating others: « your mother doesn't respect you, she doesn't care about you », « your girlfriends are really unbearable! », « X thought you were exaggerating the other night ». The man can also play the reverse game: go to the friends to discredit his partner to their eyes.

The woman's life needs to revolve solely around her partner, he needs to be at the center, she has to take care of him, to always prioritise him, to constantly think about him. Like when the man explains to his partner that he is feeling low, that she needs to stay close to him, and that therefore she naturally cancels her girls' night. It is as if when the woman is out living for herself, the man always conveniently needs her and makes her come back home.

It is all that deprives the woman of her independence, making it impossible for her to live without her partner. The social isolation in which the woman then finds herself set the stage for total control.

Jealousy

It is a form of control, linked to the desire for possession. What the man wants is exclusivity: sexual of course, but beyond that, relational exclusivity, exclusivity of mutual trust, of feelings, of thoughts. Under more or less diffuse forms, it is about the will to be at the center, to be the only one: the one she sleeps with, she talks to, the one she does this or that activity with, the one she thinks about, to whom she gets presents. The one that always takes precedence over the rest of the world. In the exacerbated form, it goes to control over phone calls, activities, social interactions. Though jealousy can also be more subtle: « You told X about that but you didn't tell me? You don't trust me anymore? ». It also encompasses all the strategies that a man can put in place when he feels like his partner is attracted to somebody else: depreciate the competition (« frankly, I think X is uninteresting/manipulative »), monopolise the woman when the other man is around (« hey, can you come for 5 min, I need to tell you something super important »), mark territory towards the rival (come to sit next to the woman, kiss her, touch her).

maybe pay more attention to him, you're being really selfish ») or by the woman herself (« I'm being unfair, I'm hurting him, every time I love someone I make them suffer »).

Also because the woman feels responsible of the good development of the relationship, of the relational harmony, because somehow her role as a woman is to hold it together, to listen, to find solutions.

Silence

All of this is sustained by the woman's silence, which by itself reinforces the isolation she finds herself in. She doesn't bring it up to the man concerned, of course, but not even to her friends, an environment in which she could find support. At the heart of this silence, several mechanisms can be found. The infamous separation between private and public that make the woman thinks that it's her affair, that she shouldn't bring it outside of the couple sphere, that it's nobody else's business. Also because, people reflect this image of « it's not our business », and that even if she takes the step she'd have a hard time finding someone who'd listen. It's also the fear of retaliation, the fear of the man's wrath, of how he'll make her pay for having spoken (« aren't you ashamed of going public with this? » « you're enjoying making me the bad guy of the story »). It's when the woman still tries to protect the man, when she refuses to speak because she's scared to scatter his image, to ruin his reputation, his social recognition, when she doesn't want to expose her partner to the judgment of others.

And at the deepest point, there is shame: shame of being the one that went through all this, who accepts it, let him do it. The shame of feeling lower than low and not daring to leave. Because the humiliations and the depreciation work like a charm, the woman cannot stand the idea of the others gazing at what she thinks she is. Because she feels like shit and is too scared that the others see her that way. Because too often we hear at the back of speeches that the woman is guilty of the violence she receives, that if it would really bother her she'd leave (« she asked for it that bitch », « if it was me, I'd leave him right away. If some stay it's because they like it »).

Unconsciousness

There is escalation of violence as long as it isn't denounced, as long as the woman doesn't set boundaries, and often, it takes a lot of time, and a « breaking point », an event perceived as more serious than the others, as a point of no return in order for her to eventually be aware of it. Frequently the woman doesn't see violence as such, she doesn't identify it that way, and she finds others explanations to these behaviours, other justifications (which often makes her responsible and not the man); simply because it is extremely difficult to see yourself as a victim.

This violence is denied by the aggressor (« but you're completely crazy », « but no, it's not jealousy », « stop it, I got a bit upset okay, but I still didn't insult you »), also because himself doesn't perceive himself as violent and rather simply behaves as he's been taught to do, because often he's not conscious himself of this process of

to leave. The fear of material difficulties triggered by the separation constrain the woman to stay.

Exploiting weakness of the other - hit where it hurts

Romantic relationship give a privileged access to the other's intimacy. It is de facto a privileged position to do damage. In all this process of depreciating, undermining the woman, the man has this particularly efficient weapon: to know the fragilities of the woman, her weaknesses, her emotional cracks and exploit them. It's when what use to fall under questions of trust becomes a destructive power. It's for instance when the man uses the confidences the woman shared with him against her: a woman who has a particularly complicated relationship with her mum and who gets told in a fight « you sound like your mother »; a woman who has been through a painful affective breakup and to whom her partners says « no wonder X doesn't speak to you anymore ». It's everything that can hurt and let him knows precisely where to hit. It's when a woman lacks confidence in herself and the man keep pressing on this weakness.

Emotional blackmail

Because it is in the frame of love relationship, the violence is even more accepted because affects are engaged. Because the woman is in love, she cannot end the relation after the first signs of violence, she wants to preserve the relation, save it at all costs. All this exerted blackmail like “look, you makes me sad”, “I love you, I don't recognise you anymore”, “I need you, I cannot live without you”, “Come back I'm sad” ; Where the woman feels like she has to give him a second chance, give chance to this relation. Every situations where the woman doesn't react because she is afraid to hurt, to harm.

Guilt-tripped woman - victimised man

Among the mechanisms on which relies the perpetuation of those violence, there is the woman's feeling of guilt; because she doesn't want to make the other suffer, she justifies these behaviours. It's when a woman gets called a bitch and gets screamed on because she's had another romantic relation, and instead of setting her boundaries by saying « stop, you can't talk to me like that », she legitimises the behaviours by thinking « it's my fault if he's angry, I hurt him ». Ultimately, instead of refusing those violence, she ends up considering herself responsible.

This guilt is fuelled by the man: it's this very common attitude of simply staring at the woman saying nothing, showing well that he's suffering (« you don't see that you hurt me? »), and therefore it's the woman who will try to appease him, to find answers, who will take it upon herself to solve things. It's the « you were not there for me when I needed it, while I was there for you », which feeds back to the woman that she is the selfish one.

It's all this process in which, whatever happens, it is eventually the man who is perceived as the victim, whether it is by himself (« you don't give a shit about me, how can you do that to me »), by the people around (« you're hard with X, you should

Often, the man doesn't admit jealousy - useless to say « you're being jealous », he won't recognise it and will always find good excuses: « I just wanted to be close to you », « if I got upset, it's because I can feel that this guy is only after your ass », « sorry, I was in a bad mood », « it's not the fact that you spend time with him that bothers me, it's just that at this moment, I needed you, I wasn't feeling well and you couldn't care less, you tossed me aside ».

Harassment

Repeating to satiety a message to someone we achieve to saturate their critical capacities and to make them accept anything, as for example endless discussions that until the woman, exhausted, gives up and says or does what her partner wants. This kind of mechanisms can be applied to many things: An interrogation with the purpose that the woman confesses that she had sexual relations with someone else; The man always doubting the woman's feelings so that she reassures him, telling him how much she loves him and how she cannot live without him; The guy that never stops speaking about anal sex to his partner when she doesn't want it, using all possible arguments until she gives up; Every time the woman, out of boredom, finds it easier complying; Or, even more vicious, every time that, after hearing again and again the same speech, the same arguments, she ends up being persuaded that her partner is right.

The harassment comes up very often after the break up: it's a way for the man to stay omnipresent in the women's mind, to remind her that he's waiting for her to come: they are the 10 phone calls per day, the letters, the surprise visits, turning out right to meet in the same places... There can be insults, threats and also guilt-tripping: “if you don't come back I will do bullshit, I will kill myself”. But they can also be a declaration of love, the “come back, I will change, I realize now” in order to prevent the woman to take some distance.

Disparagement - depreciation

It is about harming the woman's self-esteem and weakening her self confidence. It's showing her that she is worthless, that she is incapable. It induces several things: the woman doubts herself, loses confidence; she internalises a feeling of inferiority that sustains the man's domination. It feeds back an image of the woman in need of her partner: « what would you do without me? Really, you would be lost without me to guide you, advise you, be at your side and support you ». Or « nobody else would want you. I'm the only one you can feel good with because I'm the only one who can bear with you ».

Here again, a whole panel of strategies exists: doubting the woman's mental health (« but are you losing your mind, you're completely hysterical/crazy, you're making stuff up »); undermining her intellectual faculties (mock her point of views, her opinions, take a very professorial or intellectual tone to explain her things, highlight that he obviously knows better than her, that he's got it all, all the small « but what do you know about that? »). It is also criticising her body, her looks and the image she

reflects (« you don't intend to go out like that, do you? »), accuse her of having inappropriate behaviours, question her sexual, professional, maternal and affective abilities; accusing her of a thousand and one flaws. It's the « you're a silly cow » or « you really behaving like a bitch ».

It can be using the others, their gaze and their judgement: « X told me he found you vulgar », « I think you've shocked X », « Did you see how you talked to X? ». Showing that he's not the only one to think so, that everybody is on his side, which therefore confirms that she's wrong. It can be lies, but it can also be genuine, by teaming others against the woman, going around telling how much she's exaggerating for instance.

It's also reinforcing the woman's sense of weakness, that makes her feel like she doesn't have the means, the strength to act.

Humiliations

It is essentially the same process, it's about devaluing the woman until she feels so miserable that she wishes to disappear, to ridicule her, to strip her of all dignity. It's showing her contempt, denying her right to respect. Humiliating her so much that she feels ashamed. It's even more violent when it's public, when it's in front of the gaze of others. To insult, to scream to the woman, to spit on her face, to force her into submissive positions (for example, throw something on the floor so that she has to get down on all fours), to make a mockery of her (for example, making her the ridiculed one when she shouts).

Intimidation

Slam the doors, break objects, get mad on his own account, scream on the pet. If this violence is not directly addressed to the woman, they install a climate of fear: fear of being hurt, or simply fear of getting screamed at or told to piss off.

It is a form of violence very easy to deny for the man: « but you know very well that I'm not getting mad at you. I would never talk to you like that »

Indifference to affective demands

Moral violence can also be refusing to feel concerned by the other. Showing insensitivity, inattention towards his partner, not taking her seriously, not giving importance to the things that matter for her, ostensibly displaying reject, contempts. Being cold, distant, push away the other, tell her to piss off. Rejecting her demands, her expectations, without explanations or discussion. And after it's again the woman who doubts, that looks for what she has done wrong, what she is not doing right. It's refusing to talk, to explain. It's the guy who is sulking but refuses to say a word, and the woman that wonders in what ways it's her fault. It's also ignoring her needs, her feelings, her fears of the other, not taking them into consideration. It frequently happens in relationships that two people don't share the same needs, the same expectations, it is not a problem. The relationship is violent when we refuse to hear them, to give them substance. When a situation of crave and frustration is created in

order to maintain the woman's insecurities. When he's not taking into account the physical or psychological state of the partner, but ignore it. When one denies the other's subjectivity, and pretends it doesn't exist.

Threats

Threats can be about dozens of things. They take as qn object all that is important to the woman's eyes. Threats to hit, to take the kids, threats to cut them off financially. Threats to kill himself.

Physical violence

Usually, it comes up from the moment the woman starts resisting to psychological violence. When this violence isn't regular but happens in isolation, the woman often doesn't admit it herself and finds explanations to justify it: « he was tired/upset », « he didn't do it on purpose », « he didn't control himself ». Physical violence doesn't burst from nowhere, it is the culmination of a violent process that started way upstream.

Sexual violence

It is a widely encompassing form of violence, ranging from conjugal duty to rape passing from sexual harassment or exploitation. At the base of all its forms, the same schema is repeated: the desire and the body of the woman are subordinated to the man's. It's when the woman's sexuality is submitted to the man's. It's when the woman is forced to have sex when she doesn't want to. It is of course rape performed with the use of physical force, where the woman's expression of refusal is discarded. But it is also many other things.

It is conjugal duty. When the woman is not willing but she doesn't express it and forces herself, because she is scared of hurting her partner, because she doesn't want to make him feel rejected, to make him doubt of her love. It's every time that the woman has to justify herself because she doesn't want to have sex: « you don't want me anymore », « you don't love me anymore », « anyways, we're not making love ». It's when the woman doesn't want to perform some sexual practices but ends up agreeing to it. Because she doesn't dare to say no, because she doesn't want to make her partner see her as a lousy lay, because she wants to please him. It's when the man obtains what he wants through insistence, when he always brings up the topic until satisfaction. « I don't understand, every other woman I slept with liked it », « you're a stuck up », « you trust me, don't you? ».

It's when the man uses suggestion, guilt-tripping or threats to obtain a sexual act. It's when sexuality is not a matter of desire but rather of domination, when it is a way to say « you belong to me ».

Economics and material pressure

These are the concrete ways that bring the woman in a situation where she is dependent to the man, where beyond emotional questions it is difficult for the woman