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Women, from State Statistics to Our Own Accounts

Regarding the matter of gender roles and gender-based violence in Ecuador, I could begin by saying that according to official statistics, 6 out of 10 women have experienced some degree of violence; 1 out of 4 women have survived sexual abuse. Between 2009 and 2016 more than 17,000 girls under 14-years-old have given birth after being raped. In 2017, there were 151 femicides. In 2018, a woman is murdered every 86 hours. In national statistics reports, women are seen as figures. Numbers do not necessarily reflect reality though, since not everyone has reported all of the harassment and abuse they have gone through.

Historically, women have been kept in private spaces, usually inside home taking care of others and house chores, while men went out to work, to provide. Feminism has promoted for women access to education, voting, working and, therefore, occupying public spaces. However, a woman and a man on the street don't experience the same conditions. Since I'm a woman, despite my privilege, in addition to the risks associated with crime in my city, I also face harassment in public spaces more often than not.

While living in a female body, I have received many rude and unsolicited "compliments" about it and sexually degrading comments—mostly from men. Sometimes these words have left me speechless, and my own words hid somewhere they could not be found until later. The words men have thrown at me have chased me on the streets of my city, and also through the internet. They arrived in threatening messages and poems for me, sentences filled with metaphors describing disgusting fantasies. Over the years, I acknowledged these were not "just poems," those words implied violence towards me because I was a woman who was not interested in that man. I realized, after sharing my story with colleagues at one of my first jobs, that online harassment towards women happens to be more common than I thought.

#MeuPrimeiroAssedio and #MiPrimerAcoso (My first harassment) were a few of the movements that began in South America in 2015 through social media, which showed that most women experienced their first instance of gender-based violence while being harassed as children, usually on the street or in public transportation. The testimonies also informed that abuse frequently takes place in spaces that were supposed to be safe, such as home and school.

In Ecuador, #MiPrimerAcoso and #NoCallamosMás (We won't remain silent) began in January 2017 after Polina Cold, a musician and model, publicly revealed details of an abusive relationship with her former boyfriend and band partner Efraín Granizo. A secret group on Facebook amassed more than 25,000 women merely a few weeks after the incident. For some of them, sharing their stories online was the first time they ever talked about their abuse. In the group, some found support and a sense of community, others said that testimonies triggered memories of their own experiences and it led them to seek for help. Anyhow, we recognized similar stories, and even aggressors in common. Further than an attempt to find justice, speaking up was a sort of a narrative, a collective exercise of memory to recognize when we felt vulnerable for the first time, which was not necessarily the only event or the worst.

ICPL and the International Writing Program Panel Series, October 19, 2018

Ganieva (Russia), Kaziliūnaitė (Lithuania), Timol (Mauritius), Borja Enriquez (Ecuador)

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While sharing with (mostly) women in my academic and professional environments, it has not been unusual that we speak about our own experiences related to gender violence with friends and colleagues as well as in therapy. A friend once said, half-joking, that men seemed to think of her body as if it was a house they could break into, poke around in the drawers and take whatever they liked. This sums up the self-perception many survivors end up with: the feeling of being a dehumanized sexual object. Objects do not have a voice. This is where the importance of speaking up comes in.

Women I've worked with as a therapist during the last few years have struggled to survive the horror of being girls and women (biological or trans) in the context of the Colombian armed conflict, a less privileged condition than mine in Ecuador. Gender is especially a factor of high risk in a land in which power is held by armed groups and options for justice are minimal (if that). Sexual abuse is usually a weapon of war, and female bodies are treated as objects for the use of men. It is particularly triggering for these refugee survivors when, after migrating to a new country for safety, instead of finding safety they find men that harass them on the streets of their country of asylum. Both violent words and actions leave wounds or re-open them.

I remember one of the first survivors I listened to. She mostly cried and she apologized a lot because she thought that her crying would bother me. I told her to cry all she needed before she could speak, as I was told once by my own therapist years ago. She brought copious tears to more than one session, until she was finally able to come out with words too. She was not a number or an object anymore, and she was able to speak because she was an individual, a living woman, despite all the pain and the scars. She talked, and through words she tried to find a way back to her own body, a home in which it was still possible to keep on living.

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