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Crossing disciplinary, empirical and theoretical boundaries on gender and violence

Commentary on: Geographic Frontiers of Gendered Violence

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Abstract

Responding to the four interventions on gendered violence, this commentary asks why feminist geographers should be working on the issue of gendered violence, arguing that the discipline offers a particular language to problematise the discursive crossroads that violence occupies, thus making sense of the legal, moral and ideological boundaries that govern how violence is understood and responded to. It concludes with the call to not only continue working within our (sub)disciplines, but to work together to ask a range of tricky questions that need addressing if we are to claim those spaces where disciplinary, empirical and theoretical boundaries can be pushed and identify when violence can act as catalyst for effective action and organizing.

First and foremost, together these interventions on gendered violence serve as a timely reminder of the continued relevance of an overtly feminist approach to understanding violence in all its manifestations. These four interventions seek to push at the boundaries of our knowledge, and suggest alternative analytical frameworks as well as potential areas for further enquiry. They also raise difficult questions, about the categorisation of actors, issues of complicity and responsibility, the reliability of statistics, the spatial and social segregation of violence, and questions about what constitutes ordinary versus exceptional violence. However, in particular these thought provoking interventions demonstrate the insights feminist geography can provide towards an improved understanding of the mutually constitutive role of violence and unequal gendered power relations.

Underlying these interventions are questions about who carries out research into gendered violence, within which disciplinary boundaries. As the introduction to these papers points out, relatively few geographers have published on this topic in the last decade, notwithstanding some notable examples (Brickell 2008, Datta 2012, McIlwaine 2013, Moser and McIlwaine 2004, Pain 2010, 2014, 2015). This apparent absence raises questions about the gendered status of specific research areas within the academy, which academic spaces valorise which topics of research, and which are dismissed as belonging to another disciplinary area. Gendered violence tends to be considered a specialism that is not relevant to the wider academic community, where, to paraphrase loosely from Stanko, 'real' research gets done (Stanko 1990). Nevertheless, the fact that there is a need for critical social, cultural, economic and political geographers to contribute to the debate on violence and its gendered dynamics may seem self-evident to researchers already working in the field of gender and violence. However, it is worth unpacking the rationale and urgency behind such claims. To put it bluntly, why does it matter if (feminist) geographers work on these issues?

This question can be approached in different ways. We can ask why feminist *geographers* should be working on this topic; in other words, why this discipline in particular needs to make an intervention in this area. Alternatively, we can explore why *feminist* geographers should be working on these issues. The former approach implies that geographers have particular insights, and methodological and theoretical tools that can shed a distinctive light on the subject. The latter approach suggests a moral imperative, to challenge what is a clearly gendered and global form of injustice. After all, a central feminist concern is to unpack and transform practices that feed gendered inequalities and patriarchal power relations across space and scale – which violence clearly does. Given the range and breadth of research into gendered violence found in other disciplines, at worst the question could be interpreted as lamenting the idea that the research is left to others, and a parochial need to make a mark 'as geographers'. But at best, it prompts an exploration of how to combine disciplinary insights and tools most constructively. As an issue that lends itself to interdisciplinary research, it would seem prudent to constantly look out for, learn from, and critically engage with research on violence emerging from different disciplinary origins. Yet, as with all forms of interdisciplinarity, the task requires sensitivity and reflexivity in acknowledging how disciplinary viewpoints shape our methods and understandings, in order to enable conversations across the disciplines.

So what does geography offer to this debate? One contribution it offers is a language to locate and unpack the various boundaries that make violence such a slippery phenomenon. The boundaries between what is considered 'real' (Stanko 1990), 'ordinary' (Dobash et al. 2004) or 'acceptable' (Wilding 2010) violence, and what is not, are highly subjective, playing out differently across space and scale. As these institutions show, violence is managed, manipulated and interpreted by a range of stakeholders, who promote the myth of clear-cut distinctions between 'public', 'private' and 'insider', 'outsider' and 'other'; a myth that results in judgements of laws as 'just', the family as a 'safe' place, and equating the 'protection' of women with restricted freedoms..

In contrast to these myths, the lived experiences of people living in the context of high levels of violence demonstrate clearly that not only are these boundaries in fact blurred, but also shifting and contested. The state and other actors can choose to reinforce these norms, but may also decide to selectively intervene. Thus, the fluidity of these boundaries facilitates the slippage between locating a 'lack of toilets' as the cause of vulnerability and risk, instead of the more entrenched and messy reasons for why diverse forms of gendered violence persist. This convenient blindspot lets the state off the hook from promoting more radical, and potentially 'uncomfortable' responses to the structural causes and social norms that [re]produce gendered violence. To facilitate more transformative responses, as Ayona Datta argues, further investigation is needed into "the complex exchanges of gendered and sexualized violence between and across home and outside...lead[ing] to better understanding of the spaces, scales and terrains of violence and the multiples ways they lay siege on women's bodies." What geography offers, therefore, is a particular language to problematise the discursive crossroads that violence occupies, and in which violence is both perpetrated as well as managed by a range of stakeholders through defining spatial and ideological boundaries, and social and political norms.

One way in which these discursive boundaries are managed is by means of the legal frameworks, which set normative limits on acceptable behaviour. The law, as Katherine Brickell puts it, not only draws lines, but "assigns legal meanings to lines" and who is in and who is out. On the one hand, it is clear that research examining legal frameworks is crucial, given its role in setting normative boundaries. On the other, the law is only ever as good as its implementation and the hiatus between legal reform and transformative change has long been a frustration of feminist activism. As Ayona Datta highlights, the law judges different forms of violence against different criteria – in this case focusing on public rape, whilst omitting rape in marriage. Such inconsistencies raise questions about the complex and contradictory political imperatives for legal change, the need to identify easy wins, and the disincentive to introduce laws that are messy to apply, with the potential for widespread application. It also shines a light on how violence is often constructed as experienced and perpetrated by the 'other', casting rape for example as 'out there' and domestic violence as something that doesn't happen in 'my family' (Pain 1997). As I have argued elsewhere, on an individual and communal level, distancing can be functional (Wilding 2014). It does not simply represent denial of real risk, but operates as a means of constructing a sense of personal safety, the illusion of safe spaces, and of violence as something that 'ordinary' men do not do (Dobash et al 2004). When this functional distancing gets intertwined with policy it can have insidious results – resulting in the distraction from other forms of violence, as Ayona Datta and Anindita Datta show, and / or the state's own abuses, as in the case of Cambodia.

Advances in the fight for laws to formally protect women in the private sphere, and criminalise perpetrators, now in place in many parts of the world (Moser and McIlwaine 2014), disrupt the simplistic assumption that private violence

continues to be condoned or accepted by state institutions. Nevertheless, the complex ways in which functionaries engage with the rules are less measurable, and less visible, than the 'hard fact' of legislature would suggest, resulting in what Fraser refers to as 'unruly practices' (1989). This means that law in practice, its actual implementation, is often inaccessible to vast swathes of the population. Who gets access to justice is determined in part by how rules are interpreted by state representatives and social institutions at the local level, resulting in highly varied experiences and encounters. In particular, in societies with deep social cleavages, an intersectional lens allows us to ask who the law speaks to, and under what circumstances different people can appeal to justice. All four interventions hone in on the nuanced experiences of particular groups' experiences of justice, and how this relates to their identities.

Given the infinite variations of individual experience, the importance of unpacking the specificity of power relations needs careful balancing against an analytical approach that recognises structure, in order to avoid reducing gender to merely one in a range of inequalities. Although gender shapes all violent interactions, since all social relations are gendered, at least at a theoretical level we need to be able to distinguish between when gender is the primary rationale behind the violence and when gender identity is targeted as one weapon in the available arsenal to attack a wider group. Peter Hopkin's discussion of attacks against men and women presumed to be Muslim puts women centre stage as they constitute the majority of victims of far right attacks. If a fixed gendered analysis is applied, this would be interpreted as hate crime based on gender, ignoring the possibility of seeing it as a hate crime based on religion that takes on gendered forms. Opening analysis up to other axes of difference in this case allows for consideration of the visibility of women's symbols of faith, through the niqab and headscarf, as a constituting factor in their being targeted. Such an approach implies treading a fine line between naming and analysing the gendered organization of power relations and gendered regimes, which make a particular manifestation of gendered violence possible and have meaning, without making the a priori assumption that women are the main or only target. As research into gender and conflict and gender and nation has shown, women are often seen as bearers of culture and nation, and thus a target as representatives of their community (Yuval-Davis 1997). Thus, acknowledging that gender shapes vulnerability and forms of violence, should not be equated with collapsing all forms of violence against women into the same category. I believe making this distinction adds further potency to Anindita Datta's genderscapes of hate, which vividly highlights when and how women *are* targeted as a specific object of hate.

This discussion is by no means comprehensive, the selection of what to focus on was no easy task, and there many other elements equally eligible for further elaboration. However, I would like to finish by touching on the question posed of how gendered actors and networks can resist violence. On one level, the complexity evidenced in these papers expose the absurdity of assuming that simplistic measures, such as toilets, can prevent violence. However, they also raise questions about strategic moments for change, and the risks inherent in these. Since there is a lack of collective indignation about rates of violence

against women generally, we should ask, when incidents like the Delhi bus rape hit the news, why *this* case at *this* time captured the collective imagination. Questions about strategic moments are important, both not to romanticise them as moments of transformation, but also to be aware of how, in such moments, key feminist messages may be stripped of their nuance, and result in potentially adverse outcomes. Proposed solutions to protect women may produce other forms of violence and control over women's bodies. But also, intersectionality warns against simplistic causal explanations; and the mosaic of allegiances, oppressions and struggles for power shape 'insides' and 'outsides', and under what circumstances men and women can protect themselves. Ultimately, this raises the question of who is entitled to dignity? Who gets to live a life free of violence? And when does the fragile illusion of security break? As such, these four interventions constitute a persuasive argument to not only continue working within our (sub)disciplines, but to provoke us to work together to ask a range of tricky questions that need to be addressed if we are to claim those spaces where disciplinary, empirical and theoretical boundaries can be pushed, and identify when violence can act as catalyst for effective action and organizing.

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