TWO EDUCATIVE EXPERIENCES TO CONTRIBUTE TO A CULTURE OF PEACE THROUGH THE PERSPECTIVE OF GENDER STUDIES

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Abstract

Rita Segato remembers that there can be no real peace if there isn’t gender peace. Violence against women, far from being eradicated has intensified and taken new forms. In Peace Education terms, according to Rita Segato, the challenge is to dismantle the pedagogy of cruelty. This idea can be linked to Irene Comins interest in feminizing culture through a pedagogy of care. The objective of this text is to introduce two educative experiences which aimed to contribute to peace building through reflecting on gender violence and on the relevance of regaining other faculties for peace. The first one took place with high school students enrolled in the class “Challenges for Current Mexico”. After an explanation of the different subjects related to gender inequality, they were asked to observe and reflect on these inequalities while going on a field trip through the city riding public transport. The second one was carried out by students enrolled in the class “Ethics, Person, and Society”. After explaining to them the different implications of the concept of care, they were asked to photograph situations where such concept could be identified.

Keywords: Peace Education, Pedagogy of Care, Gender Violence, Experiential learning.

1 INTRODUCTION

In spite of the emphasis placed on the importance of gender equality in building a culture of peace, there is still a lot to do, especially for educative institutions because of their role in changing society. In Mexico, it is shocking what still needs to be done in the field of gender equality. For example, according to the Global Gender Gap Index 2015, Mexico is 71 out of 145 countries [1]. Some of the data that account for the scale of the issues are: with respect to direct violence 46.1% of women 15 and older have suffered some form violence that was inflicted by a romantic partner and the alarming numbers of killings of women. Mexico is among 25 of the countries with the highest number and average of murders of women in the last 15 years; an average of 5.1 women murdered every day, and 68 sexual crimes are committed every hour in the country [2]. Looking at it as structural violence: illiteracy among indigenous women is at a 35.1%; women make 30.5% less than men in industry jobs, 16.7% less in commerce, and 15.3% less as professionals; domestic labor without pay is at 21.7% of the national GDP, and 79.5% of that wealth is produced by women. Only 4.7% of the Mayors in the country are women. Finally, as a token of the culture of violence exerted towards women, we would highlight that the idea that it is commonly believed that a man has a right to be violent with his girlfriend or wife if she decides to leave him. All these stereotypes are daily replicated in the media, even on speeches of politicians [3].

These issues show that several forms of violence continue to exist and, in spite of some achievements in gender equality through the efforts of people like public policy planners, violence against women has taken into new forms and can’t be eradicated if they are dealt with superficiality, as Rita Segato declares. Violence against women should not be approached as something isolated that a man does to a woman, commonly associated with sexual violence. In contrast, violence against women responds to the hierarchical structure under the command of masculinity, which attempts to express and consolidate itself to dominate everything it can [4].

In this analysis, gender is the elemental historical form or configuration of all power in the species and, therefore, of all violence, since all power is the result of an inevitably violent expropriation. Dismantling this structure will be the state of the possibility of every and all process capable of redirecting history towards the sense demanded by an ethic of dissatisfaction. […].

This makes us think that if we don’t dismantle the patriarchal foundation where all inequalities and expropriations of value that put up the building of powers –economic, political, intellectual,
artistic, etc.—if we don’t crack for good the hard glass that has stabilised the prehistoric patriarchal humanity since the beginning of time, it doesn’t appear that any relevant change in the structure of society could be possible—because it hasn’t been possible—[5].

From this approach, gender violence is not another wall to overcome to consolidate peace, but it is a hindrance because it responds to an expression of power that cuts through gender relations as well as aspects of life which educate people. Because of this, Segato points out:

To the question of how to stop the war—meaning the current informal warlike scene expanding through Latin America—, I have answered: by dismantling together with men, the governing of masculinity; by dismantling the patriarchy. It is the pedagogy of masculinity what makes war possible and without a peace of gender there can’t be a real peace [6].

Here we won’t go deeper into the rich theoretical debate that emerges from Segato’s comments. Instead, we will introduce both educative experiences we mentioned above, which tend to the need to dismantle what Segato calls a pedagogy of cruelty [7]. Both of them were carried out within the framework of a project whose goal is to transversalize gender studies in its connection with peace studies. The results presented next are preliminary, the educative experiences took place during 2017’s January-May semester, and they will help us design better interventions for the future. The aim set for both was to contribute to building a culture of peace through reflecting on gender violence and the importance to recover other faculties for peace, such as care.

2 METHODOLOGY

For the first of this educative experiences, the students who participated in this exercise were High School students, enrolled in the class “Challenges for Current Mexico.” For that class, besides topics relating to Mexico’s economic, social and political structures, as well as the great national challenges such as migrations and human rights, two sessions were used to present the subject of gender, violence and their connection with public policies. After that, there was field work assigned so they could acquire experiential learning about this issues.

The central axis of this sessions was for students to recognize different forms of gender violence and the public policies that have been implemented to solve such problems, from a gender perspective. When talking about gender perspective, we found an enormous diversity of information both from private as well as public space. However, the killing of women and the violence against them is still firmly connected to Mexico. The efforts made through public policy don’t seem to have a real impact in changing a problematic public situation, that is also present in private spaces. Even though there is a large amount of production and dissemination of information on gender equality, sensitizing people on the subject is crucial so men and women can work towards building peace.

After the two sessions on the theory, the design of the field work was that the students would attend the Museo de la Memoria y Tolerancia [Museum of Remembrance and Tolerance] at Downtown Mexico City, to visit the exhibit “Feminicidio en México, ¡Ya Bastó!” [Female Gendercide in Mexico. Enough!] [8]. Part of the task was to arrive at the Museum riding public transportation, which meant they had to ride the subway, besides taking different buses. During their trip, they had to critically observe the way in which men and women handle themselves in public spaces. Based on a series of questions that was meant to function as a guideline, the idea was for them to see in their trips on public transportation examples of the public policies which are focused on gender, and they were supposed to write down any situation that called their attention on gender issues. Once they were at the exhibit, they had to reflect on what they saw and make the journey back, again only using public transportation. The students were asked to turn in a report where they had to answer to the questions from the guideline. These questions were about their personal experience, what they saw and the relation that they think exists between what they saw and the female gendercides in Mexico (in correspondence with the exhibit). They were also asked to describe one public policy they thought could contribute to a stable solution, with respect to what was learned through the experience they just had. Finally, in a brief paragraph, they were supposed to summarize what they thought was the most relevant thing they experienced with respect to gender and public space.

The second educative experience took place with students enrolled in the class “Ethics, Person and Society,” which is part of the core curriculum, and every professional student must take it. The syllabus covers the importance of ethics in life, some of its fundamental problems and the principal lines of ethical thought, which includes “The Ethics of Care.” Along this line, the activity for the students consisted, firstly, in a theoretical revision of some of the basic concepts of Peace Studies [9],
such as: Positive Peace, Negative Peace, Imperfect Peace, different types of violence, the way to perceive conflict and then to connect it to the relevance of recovering faculties for peace and ethical transformation, which encompasses the reexamine the concept of Care. Thus, Care is seen as something characteristic of –and involved in– the improvement of humans in any area [10]. Under these lights, Care would not only be something secondary, but something that creates a bond between a person that provides it and another one who receives it, and another part of it is moral development, delight, and empowerment [11].

We considered that to begin a pedagogy of Care people would have to become aware of the multiple dimensions that it involves. In this activity, we were more interested in working on the students’ perception, and not as interested in them memorizing concepts: The procedure consisted of two phases: The first one connected to people who receive Care from others; and the second one about the Care providers.

During the first phase, prior to explaining the theory that links peace studies and the concept of Care, students were asked to take photographs of situations or things that they thought represented Care. After the explanations, in class, they were asked to classify the photos according to different types of people who receive care: in private, in public, particular individuals, self-care, care for nature. The next step consisted of them becoming aware of those care receivers they hadn’t originally identified, and spend another week looking for the ones they missed. Then, the photos were classified as representing a specific type of care receiver. After that, the students formed small groups and discussed whether the photos belong in one category or other.

During the second phase, with the photos already categorized, the students were told about the multiple providers or sources of care, like the women's unpaid work, men's unpaid work, public services, private markets, and a new provider, in somewhat negative terms: the globalized system. Students had to pick a photograph from care-receivers and then, through simple photo editing connect it to one of the providers. This simple exercise attempted to combine perception with the poetic faculty through the writing of mini-narratives of care. Previously, to train them for this task, they were introduced to Cristina Rivera Garza’s photonovels, and also did exercises on haikus, to practice the tension between voice, emotion, and landscape.

3 RESULTS

3.1 First Educative Experience: Public Transportation, Gender Inequality, and Public Policies

After this first experience, we received the reports and learned that there were students who had never ridden on public transportation, thus to experience with the added focus on gender issues was very insightful for them, and the way they perceived these problems changed completely. Other students, who are used to riding public transportation, mentioned they were not aware of all the things that were going on in that public space and through the activity they were able to see differently the issues relating to gender, as well as the public policies that have been implemented to deal with these matters. On the other hand, there was a small group of students that failed to see a connection between what they saw on their public transport journey and what was exhibited at the museum, or they were in complete agreement with the public policies they witnessed and proposed no modification were made to them.

One of the questions in the guideline was: “How was your interaction with the other people using the public transport with respect to gender (violent; kind; helpful; protectionist)?” Most of them answered they had witnessed kindness or indifference from the others. Several of them saw gestures of kindness between men and women, though rarely there saw kindness amongst the same gender (that is, men were not kind to men, nor women to other women). It is also important to mention that in most cases the students were with someone during the activity, most frequently they were accompanied by their parents, boyfriends or girlfriends. In a couple of cases, the students question their own attitudes with respect to the topics set in the guidelines, paying attention to how the people accompanying them behaved towards them and realized that they are not exempt from the gender issues they were studying and that their companions had a particular behavior towards them.

On the female gendercide exhibit, it was important that the students became aware of the “downward spiral of violence,” that is at the center of the show, where the different levels of gender violence, arriving at the end to the murder of women. After the exhibit, the students were asked: “Before
attending the show and receiving the information, were you aware of any situations that might be connected to gender inequality? How does everything you saw on your ride on the public transport relate to what you saw at the museum?” While some of the students failed to see the connection between what they saw and the final stage of the downward spiral of gender violence, all of them rejected the violence and spoke of a meaningful change in the way they perceived the gender issues.

Other items in the report were: “What features should a public policy have to help substantially in finding a solution to some of the gender issues that you witnessed during your journey?” Although there weren’t any answers that included public policy design, most of them focused on the different levels of government to think about possible solutions, and they also proposed policy eradicating sexist language in the private sector. This part is interesting since it lays out a change in the way they perceived the problem, leaving behind the notion of just complaining to an anonymous authority and getting into understanding the different levels of complexity to gender issues and how it relates to the life of each student, even if they are not directly the victims.

Next, we present three meaningful examples of the short narratives portraying their experiences: In the first one we can appreciate the gaining of awareness with respect to how gender violence is not something isolated, but it’s a part of structural and cultural violence that open the door to extreme violence, such as women gendercide, and also we can see the development of a critical position towards the actions carried out by the government.

In Mexico, public transportation is the most used form of transport. However, there you can see a lot of gender inequality. When I went to the Museo de la Memoria y la Tolerancia [Museum of Remembrance and Tolerance], I realized things I had never noticed (although I have ridden public transportation before). The way people relate to each other [in public transportation] was very similar to the things exhibited on female gendercide at the Museum. I lived, saw, and heard experiences that portray the real life of millions of people. Men in private treat women as inferiors and this actions can be seen in public spaces. I firmly believe that overcoming gender violence is important because it’s an issue that attempts against women’s human rights. Our country has been warned by very important Organizations about the female gendercides that are happening and are not being investigated. We as citizens have an obligation to pay attention to those cases, and the government and the institutions must follow up and solve them. Even though this is the 21st century, many women in the world are victims of gender inequality. So we can grow as a society and as a civilization, it is important to solve this great problem that attacks the dignity of a majority group of people (Man, 17 years old).

The second example expresses in first person narration the vulnerability facing people that suffer gender violence on public transportation. The testimony also relates that the graveness of the problem isn’t only that it happens in a public space, but that it happens at all, thus radically questioning the patriarchal culture where violence against women is recurring, normalized, and has little possibilities of ever being resolved by the authorities.

I live in Mexico –Estado de Mexico that is–, however, I only ride public transportation in Mexico City. I have seen several cases of abuse towards women while in public transports, and I’m not sure what of everything that surrounds these situations is worse. I’m not sure if it is worse when it happens in a mixed gender wagon of the subway or in one that is for women only. I don’t know if it is worse that it occurs in public or just that it happens. I don’t know if it is worse that happens to me or that I see it happening [to someone else]. Many times I have been told to use the wagons exclusive for women, but I have seen risky situations there too. Once I rode on a “Family Wagon,” where families ride, but still, I don’t know if I would feel safe in it... Actually, I’m not sure if I feel safe in public transportation. Aggression happens every day and, though reported, they keep happening. But so far the solutions aren’t good enough to really solve the problems we faced every day. Even though I think Mexico City’s Subway is efficient (because it has many lines, it is inexpensive and provides public access), I also think that the larger obstacle for those of us who use it, or try to use public transportation (especially if we’re women) is the insecurity, because we all face it, but there are situations that make us more vulnerable to it (sadly, like being a woman) (Woman, 17 years old).

In the third example, we can appreciate how gender violence creates the challenge to come up with public policies that carry out a cultural change because without them they end up being artificial and insufficient.

It seems disturbing to me, it makes me feel out of place and far away, this divide that instead of ending it only creates an obstacle and, just for a moment, during the journey. When everyone...
leaves the bus behind, the divide no longer exists, outside the bus, we are all vulnerable again. Any gap created is unnecessary, there shouldn’t be any divide, that instead of protecting it separates us [...] They should stop dividing us and promote an egalitarian relationship, probably through advertising that breaks the gender roles, and workshops as well to help the parents stop promoting the superiority of one gender over the others, as well as the ideas of other being inferior (Transgender, 17 years old).

3.2 Second educative experience: identifications and narratives of care

Two points that emerge from this activity are pertinent of being discussed: The capacity to identify the action of Care and the ability to create new narratives of care.

After learning about the different receivers of Care, the students declared that they identified in their photographs the following: 78% of private sphere and nature; 61% of particular individuals and self-care; and, finally, 28% public domain. According to Comins, this was to be expected, since traditionally taking care of someone has been something pertaining to the private space and one of the challenges to achieve the feminization of culture is to turn it into a public matter. Likewise, this accounts for how difficult it is to perceive caring for someone in public realm since the photographs that initially were placed by the students referred mainly to transit signs, or extinguishers or fire alarms; one student hesitated over if a teacher giving a lecture could be considered an image of care in the public sphere. With respect to the new photographs the students provided once they understood what a receiver of Care in the public space meant (probably because they saw their classmates’ photos while editing their folders) again they focused on transit signs, forbidden turns, elevator symbols, bumps, emergency exits.

Comins points out that to see relationships of Care in the public space is difficult, since one of the characteristics of care consists in proximity, the priority of the closeness of people [12], however, it states that this is not possible, since caring can be compatible with justice, and through telecommunication it could, in principle, be an opportunity to go outside of the boundaries of the society one lives in. Thus, one way of thinking about care in the public space is to attend to those who need it the most. It is strange that the majority of the images were directed at generic receivers (a driver, a pedestrian, someone in danger), and fewer times they show the action of the persons for the common good (except when a worker fixes a road, and, as we said before, a teacher teaching). If recognizing Care in public spaces is a challenge, perhaps one bigger is to represent it. Some of the clues for their activities in the classroom would have to be related to the historical causes that have been accomplished, social movements, marches, institutions, all of them not just local but potentially global, like capturing images of people who become latent symbols of care, or a lack of recurring care.

Other interesting data are that only 11% said they identified the five receivers of care; 22% four; 39% three; 17% two; and only 11% just one. This shows a vast potential to work and gain depth in the different receivers of care, be it through images that attempt to change their perception of everyday life, of present or absent care, or one of the other educative strategies.

Continuing with receivers of care identification, it is also important to mention that during the process of reviewing the photographs classified as “receivers of care” in small groups, the students felt that the receivers of care clearly identified were those of “Nature” and “private space,” while there was confusion with the receivers in the “private individual” category, because the type of care wasn’t evident as the photos showed particular individuals. With respect to the category “care in public spaces,” the team in charge of the overview of the activity accepted them because they carried a sense of order and preventive measures the photos about transit signs were pertinent.

With respect to the second phase of the activity, while at some point it seem promising that the complications to identify care in public spaces directly through the image could be resolved to reconstruct them through their connection with the providers of Care using photo editing tools to give a voice and a point of view, few of the students selected both the receivers of Care from public policies and the ones of public service. The vast majority focused on the Care of nature without being clear on the receiver. Thus a big part of the photo editing exercise lost its critical sense.

Another thing that the tasks focused on were the connection between the receiver of care in the private place –almost entirely they were children– and the provider of nonpaid care were mainly men, which can be considered interesting as a narrative change in care.

In this second phase, every student met all the technical requirements, like establishing a point of view, or “give voice” to an image. However, the narrative and poetic faculties; the developing of certain
taste and aesthetic appreciation, which are also connected to the development of peace cultures and that are commonly associated with a feminine space, might take more time to develop, and also the may require a more gradual development of the sensitivity –beyond the previous work done with examples and exercises like the one with haikus– and other alternative forms of communication, perhaps outside the classroom.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Through these two educative experiences, we believe we found a way to continue transversalizing peace studies in connection with gender studies, even though we still need to reflect on some of its reaches and learnings.

With respect to gender inequality, we think that one of the principal obstacles to solving this problem is that many of the situations are not identified as problems. When one talks about gender issues, the conflicts, and possible solutions, to a lot of people this issues may seem extreme or pointless because they don't have a clear notion of the conflict. Usually, it is because inequality is seen as the norm, what is natural. In the first educative experience, the one about the public transportation exercise, gender inequality, and public policies, the students had a personal experience relating to the theories studied in class, which reinforced their learning and brought the conflict to light. This was fundamental for the change in perception towards gender violence and to achieve a greater rejection of violence in general. However, there were cases when they were not able to recognize gender violence although in their reports they do reject violence in general. It may be worth to go back to the issues of perception of gender violence and include in class examples of the more subtle ways in which inequality is promoted.

In so far as the other educative experience, connected to care identification and care narratives, even though the results from the material produced may be disappointing, the environment in the classroom was very creative. The students were very excited to see what was said about their photos, to see them classified and edited, and many of them stated that they didn’t imagine that care could mean so much more than they initially believed. This axis of research can be improved, but the difficulty to place Care in public space deserves new efforts: experimental, conceptual and in practice. One thing we have to think about is that after making care in the public space an axis of the classroom, the way in which we study the learning process of the students, and the change in perception with respect to it may require other methods to measure, beyond what can be plainly seen in their reports or presentations.

Together, both these experiences allowed the students a different approach to the contents in their classes, and they were able to go from the theoretical to the experiential, and barring the results from the measurement instruments developed for these activities show otherwise, we feel confident that a change in the perception of abuse and care, and also that an impact was made towards the rejection of conflict.

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REFERENCES


