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Victim Blaming and Resistance to Victim's Resistance within Discourses of Sexual Harassment as revealed through Algerian Teenage girls' Personal Experiences.

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Abstract: Central to this study are oral personal narratives, it examines teenage girls' experiences of public sexual harassment in the North West of Algeria. Although their experiences varied, their responses revealed that girls' resistance to sexual harassment and their self-defense in particular often encounter significant resistance from others. Drawing on resources from CDA and feminist approaches that take the constitutive nature of discourse as its focus, the analysis of every case is representative of three major types of resistance presented by Jocelyn A. Hollander (2009). Teenage girls' sense of the self, developing their own embodied agency and being defenders of themselves is not possible, aggressive, unacceptable solution to sexual harassment and risks blaming the victim. Evidently, as having fixed occupied identities of sacrificial daughters and pretty sisters who are doing honourable and correct things, teenage girls define themselves in relation to their families and show no sign of agency because the patriarchal culture of honour has strongly legitimizes males' sexual harassment against them and limit their abilities to resist it

Key words : victim blaming, resistance, self-defense and discourses of sexual harassment

1- Introduction

'The story does not end here !' From the time we first began doing some research on women's self-defense and women's resistance to public sexual harassment more generally; we assumed that many participants would be very supportive of this project, however it was not the case. The point was that resistance to women's self defense is so strong. In brief, it is believed that women's resistance is impossible, too dangerous and it risks victim blaming (Jocelyn A. Hollander, 2009). In line with this, we employed what we called 'discourses of resistance to sexual harassment', meaning that which makes it possible to investigate how talk on harassment and victims' self-defense more particularly is used as a discursive resource to produce identities. In fact, while this particular task is based on interrogating one's own taken-for-granted assumptions, we feel that such study is quite justifiable in its own terms. It is about many things and more importantly about stories of public sexual harassment, or to cite

‘Kenneth Gergen’: *“a story about stories – and most particularly, stories of the self”* (2001:247).

The overall questions that have mainly guided us here are *how* questions: *how* is public sexual harassment talked about; *how* is blaming manifested in these narratives and *how* is talk about it can be used as a means to increase people’s openness to and understanding of resistance and self-defense. Talking about resisting public sexual harassment is of great importance, it helps understand the norms, concepts, beliefs and ideologies that define what is perceived as reality on this subject.

The theoretical part that follows is chosen for the purpose of giving a description of the background and a point of departure for the following analysis.

2. Victim Blaming: The Problem of Passivity

It is hard to escape the conclusion that women are always reminded of their vulnerability to sexual harassment. It causes them to choose to quit their jobs or drop a class, to stay home at night, avoid going out in public alone, stay on guard, opt to exercise indoors, take longer routes to their destination, and it is not a coincidence that it restricts their clothing choices. Besides, there is a general apathy toward women’s concerns about public harassment; it extends from police to the general public. In picturing the scene this way, public harassment is an invasion of women’s privacy without consent; it keeps them from having equal access to public spaces and resources.

It is also argued that leading many women to restrict their independence and alter their attitude, behaviours and talk for the sake of avoiding being the victim of male harassment, ironically, is only to coerce them into accepting ideologies that reinforce patriarchy. More precisely, many gestures and movements that are required from women have to be internalized as being “the self”. The body is absolutely controlled not by external means but through the internal control of the person himself. That is the reason why human subjectivity is conceived in terms of passive docile bodies and claims that the effect of power on these bodies results in reducing social agency and autonomy as well. Women; unlike men; must view their bodies as objects that need self- surveillance within panoptic patriarchal societies in particular. They follow these norms because of the way they looked at by others besides to the threat of being sanctioned by male patriarchy. We may suggest that they do not want to bear this burden; they refuse to be those victims who receive blame and the threat of annihilation. Indeed they do not want to chock because they realize that being a woman means being continually noticed and

assessed. As a result, they naturalize and justify these disciplinary practices against themselves. Their self-control then is achieved through the lens of man's perception of the ideal female body. Indeed male gaze and judgment make them confine to some stereotyped gender roles and just feel as if they are behaving naturally. In other words; because of the unequal power relationship between the watcher 'male' and the watched 'female', women lose their sense of autonomy when trying to appear desirable to men. Thus, this representation helps to maintain a series of unequal power relations between those who usually have an unnoticed normal body and those who constantly have more docile objectified body.

If women are held to be somehow responsible for their own traumatic experience, this may be suggestive that public harassment is explained or justified by the argument which perpetuates the myth of women's provocative style of dressing, walking... There is no kernel of truth in this, victim blaming is absolutely a part of an unfair culture of honour which reflects a system designed to control and trap women into a narrow range of behaviours. Evidence shows that many of the recipients' descriptions of the reasons why they do not label their experiences as 'sexual harassment' draw on victim blaming discourses. Now for this, they are also unwilling to identify themselves as victims because of the negative depictions of the label 'victim' which include being weak, vulnerable, frightened, emotionally needy and out of control. Similarly, other researchers have justifiably argued that some females refuse to identify themselves as the victim in sexual harassment scenarios because they wish to avoid particular connotations of powerlessness, passivity, vulnerability and subordination associated with victim status. Exactly like this shared view, Kitzinger and Thomas (1995) made it clear that those recipients who reject victim status by refusing to use the label 'sexual harassment' to describe their experiences, may inevitably lead them to cope with sexual harassment by making a joke of it, playing along or by ignoring it and thus normalising its acts. It may lead also to the adoption of particular coping strategies which fail to challenge sexually harassing behaviour. To fully elaborate this claim, Burt and Estep acknowledge that whilst the victim role can have negative connotations, they conclude with the view that victim status allows women recipients access to a range of benefits that are more difficult to obtain without it. These benefits, to quote them, may include *"the right to claim assistance, sympathy, temporary relief from other role responsibilities, legal recourse and other similar advantages"*. Consequently, the adoption of victim status allows women recipients to be recognised as unfairly and unjustly treated people.

This explanation still begs the question of whether the true nature is reflected. If there would be no need to give a recap on the presentation of victimhood as a tool for resisting sexual

harassment, too much, of course, can be said about the accordance of victim status to women. Owing to its connotations with weakness, powerlessness and dependency, the label 'victim' is seen as a problem. As Elshtain (1986) points out, conceptualisations in which women recipients are treated as victims in need of protection from sexual harassment perpetuate the idea that women are helpless and incapable of fighting sexual harassment on their own. So far as we can tell, since women have been traditionally represented as weak and passive in relation to men, the adoption of victim status is seen to reinforce such depictions of femininity and this only serves to strengthen the image of women as weak and powerless. According to Gavey (2005), the construction of women recipients of gendered violence as helpless victims may worsen the situation. It makes behaviours like rape, sexual coercion and sexual harassment possible. In other words, discourses of female victimization and passivity seem to perpetuate conditions for the (re)production of sexual harassment.

3. Resistance to Victims' self-defense

With a view of changing current relations of power, an intriguing question here is that: are females breaking gendered stereotypes and cultural norms or do they believe resistance is impossible, too dangerous and that it leads to blaming the victim? In her article published on February 10, 2009, Jocelyn A. Hollander wanted to know whether learning self-defense increases women's safety or it affects their self-perceptions, interactions with others and their understandings of the world around them. But to Hollander's surprise, when searching, it appeared that self-defense training was in effect invisible as a means of violence prevention. The point at issue here is to understand better why people ignore self- defense training as a viable method of sexual violence prevention. In other words, understanding why people resist effective violence prevention strategies helps us understand one way gender inequality is maintained, Holland keeps saying.

As directly as possible, Jocelyn A. Hollander (2009) discusses three major forms of resistance to women's self- defense, that successful resistance is not possible, that to resist is dangerous and that it makes women responsible if they do not succeed. The first form is called 'it's impossible' reaction. One source of this reaction is the taken-for-granted beliefs about gender, the beliefs that men are unstoppably strong and women are inherently vulnerable. Using this argument, this indeed prevents women from being able to conceptualize themselves as strong and competent social actors and therefore limits their ability to understand research on resistance and self defense.

The second form of resistance is summarised as ‘it’s too dangerous’ which is, to repeat Hollander’s words,

‘ if one teaches women’s self-defense or gives credence to it through research, then women will get the crazy idea that they can defend themselves and will proceed to go out and (a) put themselves in risky situations or (b) start beating up men. In either case, they will get hurt, and the result will be more danger for women, not less’(2009 :6)

The most important in what is being discussed here,Hollander (2009) expands on,is the idea that this form of resistance is simply an elaboration of the first since it reinforces the belief that women cannot really defend themselves. While we certainly would not claim that this is a restrictive conclusion, we see the focus on the question ‘what else could this type of reaction possibly be?’ as still immensely important.

Russell, McCarroll, and Bohan (2007) lay stress on the fear that women might actually enjoy using self-defense skills as they will become overconfident, aggressive, or lose control, and the consequences will be dangerous. They go into some detail about this view: *‘women who are not vulnerable are dangerous to themselves and to others’* (2007 : 4) . To put it another way, women need to be safe from sexual harassment with no necessity to self-defense. Considering all these claims, we would like, above all, to emphasise that there is no distinction between being aggressive, violent, hysterical and learning self defense strategies. There have been debates as to what self -defense is however. Hagan (1993), Madden & Sokol (1994) and Rentschler (1999), for example, do not want to suggest that self-defense is violence because it is not. Exactly like the view has already mentioned in the first type of resistance, these fears help maintain gender norms and keep women from learning self-defense.

If that is the case then, encouraging women to protect themselves implies that they are responsible for controlling men’s violence, critics argue. In other words, this kind of resistance is about ‘victim blaming’ if resistance is not successful. Women are responsible for being sexually harassed and even for preventing sexual harassment. Let us repeat if not emphasize that sexual violence is always the responsibility of the perpetrator and that it is not women’s responsibility to stop it. As Marcus convincingly put it: *‘while the ethical burden to prevent rape does not lie with us but with rapists and a society which upholds them, we will be waiting a very long time if we wait for men to decide not to rape’* (1992:400). Women must have access to all the strategies that may improve their safety. Learning self-defense is beneficial; it is a

form of prevention. It reduces fear, increases self-confidence; more positive feelings about one's body and a general sense of empowerment.

4. Research Methodology

As is extensively discussed elsewhere, the qualitative research has become the favoured methodology for many scholars doing feminist and cultural studies. Its focus is to give voice to people at the margins of cultures; people who are not represented in reports of quantitative research (Scott W. Vanderstoep & Deirdre D. Johnston, 2009). More specifically, we aim to describe the meaning of Algerian teenage girls' experiences that represent truth and reality of the social systems within which they interact. We have realized that their narratives needed to be documented and shared with a wider audience. For this purpose, we interviewed about twenty teenage girls (The minimum age is 14 years and the maximum is 20 years) from various areas in North West of Algeria and they were guaranteed anonymity for ethical reasons. The questions we asked were related to what they felt they could talk about concerning problems they had faced in public spaces; including but not limited to streets, sidewalks, alleys, public buildings, such as hotels and restaurants, and common carriers such as buses and taxis; elaborating on how they had coped with. Of course, this was a question that we purposefully included to explore issues of self-defense, resistance, agency and the construction of the self. .

Based on resources from CDA and feminist framework, this research takes as its focus the conceptualisation of language/discourse as actively producing and constituting social phenomena: "*discourses are "practices that systematically form the objects of which we speak"*" (Foucault, 1969:49). Consistent with this, after several readings of the collected stories, four excerpts were selected based on the criteria identified by Labov and Waletzky's (1967) definition. They illuminate the overall picture afforded by the interviews and illustrate important forms of resistance to victims' resistance. It is worth noting again that the emphasis here is on understanding in depth the viewpoint of the participants, realizing that taking an inductive approach, without a preconceived idea of what we will find, will let the data speak for them.

5. Data Analysis : Forms of resistance to girls' resistance of sexual harassment

5.1. It's impossible

Excerpt 5.1.1. : Kenza, 13 years old from an urban city, Tiaret

Kenza: *On my way to school at midday, two unknown men came creeping up behind me and pulled my school bag. They asked me if I had known anything about my period, I was so shocked that they used the word "period" [...] I had never heard it from men before. Following their question, they slapped me on my [...]. They laughed and went away. They made my blood run cold. There was nothing I could do, I didn't know who they were, I was so embarrassed; I ran all the way home.*

Int: *Did you tell your parents?*

Kenza: *No, never, impossible. I told my mother that I have got a headache and I am feeling a bit feverish, I didn't go to school that afternoon.*

Kenza's narrative echoes with the first type of reaction in terms of the way she responded to public sexual harassment; she kept silent. With respect to time of day, Kenza, the newly arrived teenager, faced harassment during broad daylight. She finds herself alone with two unacquainted men whose comments are not only derogatory but also have profound consequences (lines 5 and 6). Besides, it seems easy for us to judge whether their behaviours are intentional or not and therefore to question them. It does get us thinking: why did these guys think it was OK to just harass strangers? If we still sometimes use girls' sexuality as an excuse when a strange man is being inappropriate, the two men had made a slap and walked off, not waiting for any sexual advance or expecting Kenza to respond at all.

When Kenza was asked whether she told her parents, in line 7: "*no, never, impossible. I told my mother that I have got a headache and I am feeling a bit feverish*", she said. Her three negative answers 'no, never and impossible' show that something is not allowed. Her silence is so accepted that her mother does not even notice it. To the point, silencing Kenza does not mean to prevent her talk but rather shaping it, to restrict the things she may talk about and the way she expresses them. It all start with no communication, no room for claims of "it's demoralizing, I feel so embarrassed, humiliated and my blood run cold..." because of those unwanted behaviours. Kenza thus is learning how to become so skilled in brushing off lewd comments and feels ashamed if she draws any attention. Her silence however not only does fortify harassment but also promotes the system of exclusion from public spaces (line 8).

5.2. It's victim blaming /Self- Blame**Excerpt 5.2.1: Sabrina, 19 years old from an urban city, Relizane**

Sabrina: *er: just I want to say I am always veiled when go out in public. Few months ago, one man in his thirties boarded the bus. He came and stood near me. Whenever the bus was coming to a stop or taking some turn he seemed to lose balance [...] I didn't find it a bit strange. I told myself he had probably done it by accident.*

Int: Yeah?

Sabrina: *It didn't end there. A few minutes later, his next move was to put his arm around me and gave me his phone number. Rationally, I knew it was something abnormal and I wanted to do something about it. I was uncomfortable with the several things he did, so, when he came near me again, I held the pin used in my head veil and I pricked his arm. "Next time, I would shout out loud and tell the whole bus", I said to him.*

Int: How did he react?

Sabrina: *He gave me an angry look then he said: "how dare you!". Another day, he stopped me when I was walking home and asked me if I had a boyfriend? Then he said: "I like you", he gave me money and tried to touch my private parts.*

Int: then, what did you do?

Sabrina: *I run crying all the way back home. I blamed myself; it was my fault. Every time I think about something like that I feel disgusted... If only I had kept silent in the bus that day.*

In describing these events, it is interesting to note that women are generally harassed regardless of what they are wearing; though Sabrina is always veiled when going out, she has been touched inappropriately. Actually we may already know similar horrific stories, if a female travels by herself; mostly she will see a very different street than males. Sabrina was fondled on a bus, she thinks it a coincidence (line 4) but for a moment she was expecting the usual, partly because this is shaped by her previous experiences: '*Rationally, I knew it was something abnormal and I wanted to do something about it*', she said. Sabrina is conscious of her body, she understood this is a sexual harassment and this is indeed a statement of power.

The clauses expressed in lines 6, 7, 8 and 9 are ways of letting us know that no one has the right to Sabrina's body, a right to discuss it, analyse it or appraise it whether they like or not. She tried to start self-defence; her tactic is to make a scene, making it harder for men to harass her both physically and orally. As it is evident in her story, when the perpetrator came near her again, she held the pin used in her head veil and pricked his arm. Not only this, Sabrina uses direct speech to revoice the displeasure of many victims: '*next time, I would shout out loud and tell the whole bus*', her best weapon here is public shame. She wants to be just loud enough so that people know that she is not ok. We can tell she will execute this successfully if the crowd

is looking at her encouragingly; we mean it is on her side. In line with this belief, things are much worse than that, so it appears in lines 12, 13 and 14. For a reason which is clear, Sabrina considered it her fault. If she avoid self-defense, she would not be harassed again, she stated in this way unfortunately. Consequently, the final line expresses the outcome of her strategies; the result of her actions, in particular feeling guilty or self-blame.

5.3. Is it too dangerous or is it Perpetrator Blaming?

Excerpt 5.3.1: *Djamila, 19 years old from an urban city, Oran*

Djamila: *I, through experience, try to avoid certain areas, do not stay out late, limit my movements in public and wear loose clothing.*

Int: *Keep in mind that you do not dress provocatively, does it help?*

Djamila: *Sure not enough, I often took the bus to and from university. Well, one day, I wanted to take a taxi from the station. Without permission, a strange man took a picture of my entire body [...] on his mobile phone. That time, I felt a surge of anger. I approached that man and said loudly and firmly: “Hey, I know what you’re doing, you photographed me and this is sexual harassment, I’m calling the police.”*

Int: *How does he react?*

Djamila: *He said: “I didn’t do anything. You misunderstand my gesture”. “I was busy on my phone so I did take no picture of you”, he continues saying. He then showed me his mobile but I am sure he deleted it. After that, he said: “you really don’t please me in anything, look at yourself in the mirror”.*

In line with our expectations, we found that Djamila too is always staying on guard; public sexual harassment by strange males is extremely influential in determining how she approached her life. In trying to delve further into examples of this, without her permission, Djamila was having her picture taken. But Djamila thinks more overtly about matters and abandons, if only for the time, the typical picture we had in some of the previous narratives. She felt a surge of anger and did not hesitate to approach that man and said directly, openly and publicly: “Hey, I know what you’re doing, you photographed me and this is sexual harassment, I’m calling the police” (lines 6 and 7).

Definitely, we do not think Djamila is going to be over-confident and aggressive, we mean she does not walk out looking for fights. The focus must be on these lines, lines of agency (6

and 7). Djamila is not that easy target; she immediately views the gesture from that man in the station as a potential threat. She did not allow acts deemed unethical to become a daily experience. As she has gained more knowledge of herself and her position in her society, she acts as a subject rather than an object. By and large, there might be a significant relationship between awareness of sexual harassment and the tendency to respond to it. While this explanation is possible, as a further check, the choice to remain silent and ignore the harasser is also a difficult one for Djamila, perhaps because she felt that really this is the limit or she might believe the protection is guaranteed. We are not here to surmise that this is the way to do it; we attempt to shed light on street harassment as it is perceived and understood by Djamila.

Later in the same narrative, the harasser did not admit to have made a mistake. Ironically and tragically, that man who extremely sounds authoritarian in his relationship with women attempted to control everything he did. As we have read and reread his words: *“you really don’t please me in anything, look at yourself in the mirror”*, Djamila, with her liberated behaviour and attitude, does not give him pleasure (the object pronoun ‘me’). That man shows no fear of confrontation; he rather feels he is in a position to use a violent discourse to punish Djamila who fails to meet his unspoken sexual and emotional needs. He tells her what is best for her, assuming that Djamila cannot have her own opinion and, in addition to that, he turns a question of his personal preference into a question of her physical inadequacy. It also leaves it open to interpretation whether he would admire her if she kept silent and did not call too much attention to herself; and therefore this discourse contributes to the construction of Djamila as a subject who is always associated with sex and not with other relationships.

6. Discussion and Summary

One possibility is that understanding the conceptualization of power simply requires moving beyond the idea of it being merely repressive to it also being productive, causing new behaviours, identities and knowledge to emerge, but usually through discourse. Discourse itself acts as a kind of surveillance, Foucault argues. He gives reasons that with power comes the possibility of resistance, of course according to the ways various discourses are used because *‘[d]iscourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it’* (Foucault 1979: 101).

Having said so, what remained to be explained is about discourses of resistance to public sexual harassment and not to victims’ resistance. Some informants’ language use indexes an identity of deference and inferiority, others put up a fight against this enforced

identity, they provide examples of those who are trying to claim a different identity for themselves. Though they may be considered as violent hysterical and dishonourable females; they decide to be no longer victims and defend themselves. Multiple ways they resist, such as: expressing particular outrage, responding to verbal harassment, using public shame, blaming and confronting the harasser and so on. In fact, it must be acknowledged from the very first that telling their narratives is an important way of resisting. It makes sense of themselves and their world. This argument may become easier to understand if we check out (#MeToo).#MeToo is a phrase that was created on the social work to provide women and men a platform to tell their harrowing stories of sexual harassment and assault. Millions of women come forward with their experiences, spreading the phrase as part of an awareness campaign to show ubiquity of the problem, tweeting: "If all the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote 'Me too' as a status, we might give people a sense of understanding self-defense. Understanding women's self- defense requires that women have to be seen as strong and powerful not as it is expected to be physically and emotionally weak, fragile, obedient and easily subjected to these kinds of violence. Using few words, instead of screaming 'Help', 'Please No', 'Please do not hurt me', women must assert their right to safety and agency through their body language, their words and perhaps other techniques. To defend themselves has nothing to do with becoming aggressive or becoming just like male harassers but to value themselves, to overcome stereotypes and reclaim the right to exist without public sexual harassment. Those who use 'self-protection' have an increased chance of avoiding dangerous consequences (Djamila is a case in here).

Since they resist these dominant discourses about what they should be and do not consider their behaviour as being wrong, their conceptualizations of what counts as self-defense might be diverse and wide-ranging and do not always correspond to common-sense definitions or understandings. As they participate in resistant discourses, they become part of a process of changing perceptions of experience, forming new perceptions and reconstructing their own and others' identities (Horsman 1990 and Weedon 1987).

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