



WITCHES

WITCH-HUNTING

AND WOMEN

SILVIA FEDERICI

Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women

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Globalization, Capital Accumulation, and Violence against Women: An International and Historical Perspective

From the spread of new forms of witch-hunting in various regions of the world to the escalation worldwide of the number of women daily murdered, the evidence is mounting that a new war is being waged against women. What are its motivations and the logic behind it? Building upon a growing literature on this topic, mostly produced by feminist activists/scholars from Latin America, I address this question by placing the new forms of violence in a historical context and examining the impact of capitalist development, past and present, on women's lives and gender relations. Against this background, I also examine the relation between the different forms of this violence—familial, extra-domestic, institutional—and the strategies of resistance that women worldwide are creating to put an end to it.

Introduction

Since the beginning of the feminist movement, violence against women has been a key issue in feminist organizing, inspiring the formation of the first International Tribunal on Crimes against Women, held in Brussels in March 1976, with the presence of women from forty countries, bringing testimonies about forced motherhood and sterilization, rape, battering, incarceration in mental hospitals, and the brutal treatment of women in prisons.¹ Since then, feminist antiviolence initiatives have multiplied, as have laws passed by governments in the wake of the United Nations World Conferences on Women. But, far from diminishing, violence against women has escalated in every part of the world, to the point that feminists now describe its lethal form as 'femicide.' Not only has violence, measured in the number of women killed and abused, continued to increase; as feminist writers have shown, it has become more public and more brutal and is taking forms once seen only in times of war.²

What are the driving forces of this development, and what does it tell us about the transformations that are taking place in the global economy and the social position of women? Answers to these questions have varied, but evidence is mounting that the root causes of this new surge of violence are the new forms of capital accumulation, which involve land dispossession, the destruction of communitarian relations, and an intensification in the exploitation of women's bodies and labor.

In other words, *the new violence against women is rooted in structural trends that are constitutive of capitalist development and state power in all times.*

Capitalism and Violence against Women

Capitalist development began with a war on women: the witch hunts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that in Europe and the New World led to the deaths of thousands. As I wrote in *Caliban and the Witch* (2004), this historically unprecedented phenomenon was a central element of the process that Marx defined as primitive accumulation, for it destroyed a universe of female subjects and practices that stood in the way of the main requirements of the developing capitalist system: the accumulation of a massive workforce and the imposition of a more constraining discipline of labor. Naming and persecuting women as 'witches' paved the way to the confinement of women in Europe to unpaid domestic labor. It legitimated their subordination to men in and beyond the family. It gave the state control over their reproductive capacity, guaranteeing the creation of new generations of workers. In this way, the witch hunts constructed a specifically capitalist, patriarchal order that has continued into the present, though it has been constantly adjusted in response to women's resistance and the changing needs of the labor market.

From the tortures and executions to which women accused of witchcraft were subjected, other women soon learned that they would have to be obedient and silent and would have to accept hard labor and men's abuses in order to be socially accepted. Until the eighteenth century, for those who fought back, there would be the 'scold's bridle,' a metal and leather contraption also used to muzzle slaves that enclosed the wearer's head and, if she attempted to speak, lacerated her tongue. Gender-specific forms of violence were also perpetrated on the American plantations where, by the eighteenth century, the masters' sexual assaults on female slaves had turned into a systematic politics of rape, as planters attempted to replace the importation of slaves from Africa with a local breeding

industry centered in Virginia.³

Violence against women did not disappear with the end of the witch hunts and the abolition of slavery. On the contrary, it was normalized. In the twenties and thirties, at the peak of the eugenic movement, female ‘sexual promiscuousness,’ portrayed as feeble-mindedness, was punished with institutionalization in mental hospitals or sterilization.⁴ The sterilization of women of color, poor women, and women who practiced their sexuality outside of marriage continued into the 1960s, both in South and the North, becoming “the most rapidly growing form of birth control in the United States.”⁵ Violence against women must also include the widespread use, in the 1950s, of lobotomy as a cure for depression, this type of surgery being considered ideal for women destined to domestic work, presumably requiring no brain.

Most important, as Giovanna Franca Dalla Costa has pointed out in *Un lavoro d’amore* (The Work of Love, 1978), violence has always been present as a subtext, a possibility, in the nuclear family, because men, through their wages, have been given the power to supervise women’s unpaid domestic labor, to use women as their servants, and to punish their refusal of this work. This is why male domestic violence was not, until recently, considered a crime. In parallel with the state’s legitimation of the right of parents to punish their children as part of their training as future workers, domestic violence against women has been tolerated by the courts and the police as a legitimate response to women’s noncompliance in their domestic duties.

While violence against women has been normalized as a structural aspect of familial and gender relations, what has developed during the past several decades exceeds the norm. Exemplary is the case of the murders of Ciudad Juárez, a city across the Mexican border from El Paso, Texas, where in the last twenty years hundreds of women have disappeared, their tortured bodies often found abandoned in public spaces. This is not an isolated case. Kidnappings and murders of women are a daily reality today in Latin America, evoking memories of the ‘dirty wars’ that in the 1980s bloodied so many countries of the region. This is because the capitalist class is determined to turn the world upside down to consolidate its power, which was undermined in the 1960s and 1970s by anticolonial, feminist, and antiapartheid struggles, like the Black Power movement. And it does so by attacking people’s means of reproduction and instituting a regime of permanent warfare.

My thesis, in other words, is that we are witnessing an escalation of violence

against women, especially Afro-descendant and Native American women, because 'globalization' is a process of political recolonization intended to give capital uncontested control over the world's natural wealth and human labor, and this cannot be achieved without attacking women, who are directly responsible for the reproduction of their communities. Not surprisingly, violence against women has been more intense in those parts of the world (sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, Southeast Asia) that are richer in natural resources and are now marked up for commercial ventures, and where the anticolonial struggle has been the strongest. Brutalizing women is functional to the 'new enclosures.'⁶ It paves the way for the land grabs, privatizations, and wars that for years have been devastating entire regions.

The brutality of the attacks perpetrated against women is often so extreme that they seem to have no utilitarian purpose. With reference to the tortures inflicted on women's bodies by paramilitary organizations operating in Latin America, Rita Laura Segato has spoken of an 'expressive violence' and 'pedagogical cruelty,' arguing that their objective is to terrorize, to send a message, first to women and then, through them, to entire populations that no mercy should be expected.⁷ By clearing large territories of their inhabitants, by forcing people to leave their homes, their fields, their ancestral lands, violence against women is a crucial part of the operations of the mining and petroleum companies that today are displacing scores of villages in Africa and Latin America. It is the other side of the mandates of international institutions, such as the World Bank and the United Nations, that shape global economic policy and set the mining codes and are ultimately responsible for the neocolonial conditions under which corporations operate on the ground. It is to their offices and their development plans that we must turn, in fact, to understand the logic whereby militias in the diamond, coltan, and copper fields of the Democratic Republic of the Congo shoot their pistols into women's vaginas, or Guatemalan soldiers have ripped open pregnant women's bellies with knives in what continues to be portrayed as a counterinsurgency war. Segato is right. Such violence cannot emerge from the everyday lives of any community. It is 'handbook violence.' It must be planned, calculated, and performed with the utmost guarantee of impunity, in the same way as mining companies today pollute lands, rivers, and streams with deadly chemicals with total impunity, while the people who live off these resources are imprisoned by security guards if they dare to resist. No matter who the immediate perpetrators may be, only powerful states and agencies can give a green light to such devastation and

ensure that the culprits are never brought to justice.

It is essential to emphasize that violence against women is a key element in this new global war, not only because of the horror it evokes or the messages it sends but because of what women represent in their capacity to keep their communities together and, equally important, to defend noncommercial conceptions of security and wealth. In Africa and India, for instance, until recently women had access to communal land and devoted a good part of their workday to subsistence farming. But both communal land tenure and subsistence agriculture have come under heavy institutional attack, criticized by the World Bank as one of the causes of global poverty under the assumption that land is a 'dead asset' unless it is legally registered and used as collateral to obtain bank loans with which to start some entrepreneurial activity.

In reality, it is thanks to subsistence farming that many people have been able to survive brutal austerity programs. But critiques like the World Bank's, repeated as they have been in scores of meetings with government authorities and local leaders, have been successful in both Africa and India, so that women have been forced to give up subsistence production and work as their husbands' helpers in commodity production. As Maria Mies has observed, this coerced dependence is one of the specific ways in which women in rural areas are being "integrated into development" that is itself a violent process. Not only is it "guaranteed by the violence inherent in the patriarchal men-women relations," it also devalues women, so that the men of their communities view them (especially when they are old) as useless beings whose assets and labor can be appropriated without qualms.

Changes in laws and norms of land ownership and in the concept of what may be considered a source of value appears to also be at the root of a phenomenon that has produced much misery for women since the 1990s, especially in Africa and India: the return of witch-hunting. Many factors contribute to the resurgence of witch hunts, among them the disintegration of communal solidarity, due to decades of impoverishment and the ravages of AIDS and other diseases in societies where malnutrition is rampant and health care systems have collapsed. Further factors are the spread of neo-Calvinist evangelical sects preaching that poverty is caused by personal shortcomings or witches' evil doings. But it has been noted that witchcraft accusations are more frequent in areas designated for commercial projects or where land privatization processes are underway (as in India's tribal communities) and when the accused have some land that can be confiscated. In Africa, in particular, the victims are

older women living alone off some piece of land, while the accusers are younger members of their communities, or even of their own families, generally unemployed youth, who see these elderly women as usurping what should belong to them, and who may be manipulated by other actors who remain in the shadows, including local leaders, who often conspire with business interests.⁸

There are other ways in which the new forms of capital accumulation instigate violence against women. Unemployment, precarious work, and the collapse of the family wage are key. Deprived of income, men vent their frustrations on the women in their families or try to recuperate the lost money and social power by exploiting women's bodies and work. This is the case with the 'dowry murders' in India, where middle-class men kill their wives if they do not bring sufficient assets with them or in order to marry another woman and acquire another dowry. A further example is sex trafficking, a key element in the expansion of the sex industry that is predominantly run by male criminal organizations capable of imposing slave labor 'in its crudest form.'⁹

Here individual micropolitics mimic and merge with institutional macropolitics. For capital, as well as for men cast into conditions of precarity, women's worth resides increasingly in the cheap paid labor they can provide through the sale of their work and bodies on the market, rather than in their unpaid domestic work, which would need to be supported by a stable male wage, something contemporary capitalism is determined to phase out, except for limited sectors of the population. Women's work in the home and as producers of the new generations has not disappeared, but it is no longer a sufficient condition for social acceptance. On the contrary, pregnancy is often a liability, significantly increasing women's vulnerability to violence, as men resent the responsibility it entails. The newly emergent political economy thus fosters more violent familial relations, as women are expected not to depend on men and to bring money home, but then are abused if they fall short on their domestic duties or demand more power in recognition of their monetary contributions.

Women's need to leave the home, to emigrate, to take their reproductive work to the streets (as vendors, traders, sex workers), in order to support their families, also gives rise to new forms of violence against them. Indeed, all evidence indicates that women's integration in the global economy is a violent process. Migrant women from Latin America are known to take contraceptives, expecting to be raped by the now-militarized border police. Street vendors clash with the police trying to confiscate their goods. As Jules Falquet has noted, as women shift from serving one man to serving many men (cooking, cleaning,

providing sexual services), traditional forms of restraint break down, making women more vulnerable to abuse. Individual male violence is also a response to women's more assertive demands for autonomy and economic independence and, more simply, a backlash against the rise of feminism.¹⁰ This is the kind of violence that exploded in the École Polytechnique massacre in Montreal on December 6, 1989, when a man entered a classroom, separated men from women, and opened fire on the women, screaming, "You are all fucking feminists," killing fourteen. Misogyny is also compounded by racism. In the United States, where since the 1980s the murders of women have been steadily rising, with more than three thousand women killed each year, the murders of women of color are less likely to receive media attention or to be solved than the murders of white women—see the glacial pace of the investigations into the serial killings of low-income African American women in Los Angeles and other cities. Transphobia too compounds misogyny. Between 2010 and 2016, at least 111 transgender and gender-nonconforming people were murdered in the U.S, most of whom were black trans women. According to the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs, twenty-three of these homicides occurred in 2016, the highest figure ever recorded by the NCAVP. In Canada, too, racialized violence has been on the rise. Dozens of women, mostly Native American, have vanished and have later been found dead along what is now called the Highway of Tears.¹¹

These forms of violence are obviously different from those inflicted on women by paramilitary, narcos, and the companies' private armies or security guards. Yet, they are deeply related. As Sheila Meintjes, Anu Pillay, and Meredith Turshen have noted,¹² what connects wartime and peacetime violence is the denial of women's autonomy, which is in turn linked to sexual control and allocation of resources. Maria Mies has also noted, "In all these production relations, based on violence and coercion, we can observe an interplay between men (fathers, brothers, husbands, pimps, sons), the patriarchal family, the state and capitalist enterprises."¹³ Domestic and public violence (i.e., military or paramilitary violence, witch hunts) also feed each other. Often women do not denounce the abuses they have suffered for fear of being rejected by their families or being subjected to further violence. On the other hand, institutional tolerance of domestic violence creates a culture of impunity that contributes to normalizing the public violence inflicted on women.

In all the cases mentioned above, violence against women is physical violence. But we should not ignore the violence perpetrated by economic and

social policy and the marketization of reproduction. Poverty resulting from cuts in welfare, employment, and social services should itself be considered a form of violence, and so should inhumane working conditions, as found for example in the *maquilas*, the new slave plantations. Lack of health care, the denial of access to abortion, the abortion of female fetuses, the sterilization of women in Africa, India, and Latin America in the name of ‘population control,’ and not least ‘micro-credit’—so often leading to catastrophe for those who cannot pay back the loans—these too are egregious forms of violence. To this we must also add the growing militarization of everyday life, with its attendant glorification of aggressive, misogynous models of masculinity. As Jules Falquet has argued, the proliferation of armed men and the development of a new sexual division of labor, whereby most jobs open to men (as private domestic guards, commercial security guards, prison guards, members of gangs and mafias, and soldiers in regular or private armies) require violence, plays a central role in forging increasingly toxic masculinities.¹⁴ Statistics show that those who kill are often men who are familiar with and have access to arms and who are accustomed to resolving conflicts with violence. In the U.S. they are often policemen or veterans of the wars in Iraq or Afghanistan. The high level of violence against women in the U.S. military has been a significant factor in this context. As Frantz Fanon pointed out, with reference to the Frenchmen whose task was to torture the Algerian rebels, violence is indivisible: you cannot practice it as your daily occupation without developing violent character traits and taking it home. The media construction and dissemination of hypersexualized models of femininity has exacerbated this problem, openly inviting sexual assault and contributing to a misogynous culture in which women’s aspirations to autonomy are degraded and reduced to the status of sexual provocation.

Given the pervasive character of the violence women are confronting, it is clear that resistance to it must also be organized on many fronts. Mobilizations are already underway, increasingly shunning dead-end solutions, such as demanding more punitive legislation, which only serves to give more power to the very authorities that are directly or indirectly responsible for the problem. More effective are the strategies that women devise when they take things in their hands. Particularly successful tactics are opening shelters controlled not by the authorities but by the women who use them, organizing self-defense classes, and building broadly inclusive demonstrations like the Take Back the Night marches that originated in the 1970s or the marches organized by women in India against rape and dowry murders, which often led to sit-ins in the

neighborhoods of the perpetrators or in front of police stations. In recent years we have also seen the rise of anti-witch hunt campaigns in both Africa and India, with women and men going from village to village, educating people about the causes of illness and the interests motivating male traditional healers, local leaders, and other frequent accusers. In some areas of Guatemala, women have begun taking the names of abusive soldiers and then exposing them in their villages of origin. In each case, women's decision to fight back, break their isolation, and join with other women have been vital for the success of these efforts. But these strategies cannot produce lasting change if they are not accompanied by a process of revaluation of the position of women and of the reproductive activities they contribute to their families and communities, and such cannot be affected unless women acquire the resources they need to be independent of men, so that they cannot be forced, for the sake of survival, to accept dangerous and exploitative conditions of work and familial relations.

Notes

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- 1 See Diana E.H. Russell and Nicole Van de Ven, ed., *Crimes against Women: Proceedings of the International Tribunal*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: Russell Publications, 1990 [1976]), accessed May 3, 2018, http://womention.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Crimes_Against_Women_Tribunal.pdf.
- 2 Most important in this context is the work of the Argentinian scholar and activist Rita Laura Segato. See *La escritura en el cuerpo de las mujeres asesinadas en Ciudad Juárez: territorio, soberanía y crímenes de segundo estado* (Mexico City: Universidad del Claustro de Sor Juana, 2006); *Las nuevas formas de la guerra y el cuerpo de las mujeres* (Puebla: Pez en el Árbol, 2014).
- 3 Ned Sublette and Constance Sublette, *The American Slave Coast: A History of the Slave-Breeding Industry* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2016).
- 4 In a set of articles published in the 1930s in *New Masses*, Meridel Le Sueur described how during the Great Depression unemployed working-class women on relief lived in fear of being kidnapped by social workers and institutionalized or forcibly sterilized; Meridel Le Sueur, *Women on the Breadlines*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: West End Press, 1984 [1977]).
- 5 Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Vintage Books, 2016 [1997]), 90–91.
- 6 The concept of the ‘new enclosures’ was articulated in an issue of the *Midnight Notes* series dedicated to this topic, designating the consequences of programs like structural adjustment and the destruction of communal land regimes in Africa and other former colonial regions generally. See Midnight Notes Collective, *The New Enclosures*, *Midnight Notes* no. 10 (1990), accessed June 13, 2018, <https://libcom.org/files/mn10-new-enclosures.pdf>.
- 7 Rita Laura Segato, *La escritura en el cuerpo de las mujeres asesinadas en Ciudad Juárez*, 22–23.
- 8 On witch-hunting in Africa, see “Witch-Hunting, Globalization, and Feminist Solidarity in Africa Today,” chap. 7 in this volume.
- 9 Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale* (London: Zed Books, 2014 [1986]), 146.

- 10 Jane Caputi and Diana E.H. Russell, "Femicide: Sexist Terrorism Against Women," in *Femicide: The Politics of Woman Killing*, eds. Jill Radford and Diana E.H. Russell (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992), 13–21.
- 11 Dan Levin, "Dozens of Women Vanish on Canada's Highway of Tears, and Most Cases Are Unsolved," *New York Times*, May 24, 2016, accessed May 9, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/25/world/americas/canada-indigenous-women-highway-16.html>.
- 12 Sheila Meintjes, Anu Pillay, and Meredith Turshen, ed., *The Aftermath: Women in Post-conflict Transformations* (London: Zed Books, 2001).
- 13 Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*, 146.
- 14 Jules Falquet, "Hommes en armes et femmes 'de service': tendances néolibérales dans l'évolution de la division sexuelle internationale du travail," *Cahiers de Genre* no. 40 (2006): 15–37.