

# Foreword: Gender and Violence in Cultural Texts of the Global South

Cecilia Menjívar

**S** EVEN-YEAR OLD JAKELIN CAAL, A MAYA INDIGENOUS GIRL FROM GUATEMALA, DIED IN the custody of the US Border Patrol after she and her father crossed the southern US border into the United States. Results of her medical autopsy have not yet been made public but if we excavate the historical and politico-economic circumstances that culminated in her untimely death, we get a picture that implicates many more actors and conditions than those that an individualised medical examination can reveal.

Indeed, if we follow the lead of the authors in this special section of the *Australian Humanities Review*, we can begin to untangle the deep and broad structural links that result in the physical death of many or in the 'slow death' (Galtung 1969) of millions of vulnerable individuals, especially women, around the world. We can begin to understand that the precarity of life in remote corners of the world is intimately linked to the tastes and lifestyles of the inhabitants of wealthier societies, as extractive industries are eroding subsistence agriculture and amplifying the vulnerabilities of rural (and urban) dwellers.

In Jakelin's case, we can start by noting the encroachment on the land that her Maya Q'eqchi' family had cultivated for generations by large agribusiness companies cultivating palm oil for export as this oil is used in a wide range of products, from detergents to lipstick to instant noodles, that are consumed

globally (Abbott and Cuffe). As agribusiness enterprises expand, rural inhabitants lose land and are then often hired to work in extracting the agricultural product at sub-minimal wage rates. These landless dwellers-turned-low-wage-plantation-labourers then resort to migration to wealthier countries as the only option to ensure their family's survival. In wealthier countries of the 'North' these migrants enter the labour market from a deeply disadvantaged position, which exposes them to new forms of exploitation, discrimination, and blatant racism.

Within this web of structural connections, women and girls in the Global South become a particularly vulnerable group, as they suffer from new forms of poverty and lack of access to education and jobs that pay decent wages. Their economic vulnerability makes them exceedingly susceptible to various forms of violence, including physical, sexual, symbolic, and intimate. Thus, when we trace the chain of events that connects global structural inequalities with the lives of disadvantaged populations of the Global South, we begin to realise that we are all, in one way or another, implicated. And of course, this chain of events is not new; it has been repeated multiple times in the history of the countries of the Global South. Indeed, the precarity and marginalisation in the lives of the poor in the Global South is routine and, in many cases, normalised. As such, links between marginalisation and vulnerability in the Global South and global structural forces are often left unexamined, fading from view, even from our scholarly gaze, with serious implications for analyses of gender-based violence.

The authors of this special section draw our attention precisely to structural inequalities that neoliberal regimes and globalisation make possible which, as the co-editors note (citing Elora Halim Chowdhury), 'play a role in producing both victims and perpetrators'. One connecting thread in the contributions to this special section is that in different ways and from different angles, they shed light on how gender-based violence is produced and reproduced even when the mechanisms are not visible or immediately legible. These contributions collectively open a window, anchored solidly in the humanities but with critical relevance to the social sciences and beyond, into these connections as well as into the manifold forms that violence in the lives of women takes.

And this is where a humanities lens is critical, providing much-needed perspective into forms of violence that on the surface may not seem linked. A humanities lens that examines constructions and representations in film, fiction or poetry illuminates fundamental questions of meaning and ethics and thus helps us to untangle how broader global structures, neoliberal policies, and extractive industries shape and reshape human relations and the constitution of the self. The contributors to this section place multifaceted forms of violence within a broader context, revealing connections to structural forces but also, without essentialising experiences, across groups that have been made vulnerable. Each piece helps us

to move beyond the immediate and pragmatic to contend with connections that are not always immediately observable because they lie in the realm of meaning and affect.

Significantly, a focus on representations of different forms of violence in a range of artistic expressions helps to unearth the everyday, often naturalised, understandings of violent practices that sustain overall violent structures that shape the lives of women. It is at this level, in the less visible realm, that representations of violence acquire the power to influence attitudes, minds, and responses because they contribute to naturalising violence. Entering the field of representation allows us to see how people make sense of violent practices, but also how violent practices are routinised and made part of life, a key mechanism for the enduring character of gender-based violence in the lives of women.

Although direct, physical forms of gender-based violence against women receive attention from scholars, the public, and the media, the less visible, routinised, and entrenched violence in everyday practices does not. But both manifestations of violence are mutually constitutive and the task before us is not to assess whether one form is more harmful or egregious than the other. The task is rather to draw attention to how these various forms of violence are related and to trace the links between the most intimate and subjective experiences to historical and structural factors so as to expose systematic and systemic patterns of violence that are neither natural nor inevitable. By focusing on unveiling links between structural precarity and vulnerabilities that contribute to facilitating suffering and violence in the lives of women, the contributors to this special section achieve analytical distance from individual-focused explanations of violence. They turn to elucidate the roots of violence in structures of power inequalities at multiple levels, from the global arena to interpersonal relations in the home as these are seen through representations; they do so without focusing on purely personal circumstances. And even though not all societies may recognise the same acts or practices as violent, the contributors to this special section make hidden forms of gender-based violence legible. As the contributors unveil critical links between precarity, physical violence, symbolic violence, racism, and marginalisation in the various contexts in which they work, a connecting analytical thread across contexts and situations emerges.

Different forms of violence, historical and present-day, coalesced in young Jakelin's short life. She embodied the accumulation of the historic exclusion of Indigenous peoples which is often manifested in neglect, malnutrition, low-wages, lack of access to medical care and education, exploitation, discrimination, and ultimately in their expulsion from their own lands. Her short life and tragic death in the custody of the state is also symbolic of the lives that Indigenous Maya women (and other Indigenous women around the world) live, as their lives are

seen as expendable and their needs neglected. It is cases such as Jakelin's that should remind us that violence in the lives of the vulnerable, especially poor and marginalised women in the Global South, are not far removed from ours. They do not exist in a vacuum independent of global forces and powerful wealthier countries in the north, as well as the domestic inequalities sustained by rigid class systems that assault daily the lives of the poor in the Global South.

Jakelin's life is also a reminder that subordinate groups and poor immigrants living in the north face different versions of exclusion and marginalisation than those in the south. In many ways, Jakelin's untimely death reminds us that the divide between the 'Global North' and the 'Global South' is permeable; one exists within the other, and one exists because of the other. The multifaceted structural and intimate connections and power inequalities between the Global North and Global South materialised in her migration, detention, and death. The recognition of these links, which the contributions to this special section make clear, has the potential to build the cross-national and global alliances and solidarity practices that Chowdhury envisions.

**CECILIA MENJÍVAR** holds the Dorothy L. Meier Chair and is Professor of Sociology at UCLA. Her research falls in two areas: on immigration from Central America to the United States and on violence in Latin America. Her publications include the award-winning books, *Fragmented Ties: Salvadoran Immigrant Networks in America* (California, 2000) and *Enduring Violence: Ladina Women's Everyday Lives in Guatemala* (California, 2011), *Eterna Violencia: Vidas de mujeres ladinas en Guatemala* (FLACSO 2014—adapted and translated from *Enduring Violence*), and *Immigrant Families*, co-authored with Leisy Abrego and Leah Schmalzbauer (Polity, 2016). In addition, she has published thirteen edited collections, including the most recent, *Constructing Immigrant 'Illegality': Critiques, Experiences, and Responses*, co-edited with Daniel Kanstroom (Cambridge, 2014), *Deportation and Return in a Border-Restricted World: Experiences in Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras*, co-edited with Bryan Roberts and Nestor Rodriguez (Springer, 2017), and *The Handbook of Migration Crises*, co-edited with Marie Ruiz and Immanuel Ness (Oxford, 2019). She has published over 125 articles and book chapters, which have appeared in *Social Problems*, *Gender & Society*, *American Journal of Sociology*, *Social Justice*, *International Migration Review*, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, and *Sociology of Religion*, among other journals and collections.

### Works Cited

- Abbott, Jeff, and Sandra Cuffe. 'Palm Oil Industry Expansion Spurs Guatemala Indigenous Migration.' Aljazeera News. 2019. <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/01/palm-oil-industry-expansion-spurs-guatemala-indigenous-migration-190122160154738.html>>. 7 Feb. 2019.
- Chowdhury, Elora Halim. 'Violence Against Women: We Need A Transnational Analytic of Care.' *Tikkun Magazine* 29.1 (2014): 9-10, 55-6.
- Galtung, Johan. 'Violence, Peace, and Peace Research.' *Journal of Peace Research* 6.2 (1969): 167-91.