NEW SPHERES OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Keys to understanding and dealing in a transformative way with gender-based violence in the educational sphere

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Gender-based violence in educational centres: a structural problem

There is nothing new about confirming that educational centres reflect social dynamism and that, although admitting it hurts us, there are cases of violence. If there is violence on the streets and at home, there is also at school, albeit sometimes very subtle.

In this article, we share some tools to approach gender-based or patriarchal violence, which is both the cause and manifestation of gender- and sexuality-based inequalities [1]. Far from being anecdotal and isolated acts, these inequalities are present in the daily routine of classrooms, passageways, playgrounds, sports fields, bathrooms, dressing rooms, offices and teachers' rooms, always mixed with other systems generating inequalities, like racism, ableism, and classism.

We are faced with deep-rooted structural problems with many forms. Law 17/2020, of 22 December, which modifies Law 5/2008 and concerns the right of women to eradicate gender-based violence, mainly highlights the interpersonal dimension of violence towards cisgender and trans females of all ages and establishes that, in the educational sphere, this violence takes place among members of the educational community either “among equals, from senior to junior or vice versa” (art. 4 Law 17/2020). The new legal text includes gender-violence manifestations such as “harassment, sexual abuse, and psychological, emotional or physical mistreatment” (art. 4 Law 17/2020). Therefore, the text considers that acts such as control of the partner, unwanted sexpreading, cisheterosexist or LGTB-phobic school harassment, and sexual violence perpetrated by teachers to students are forms of gender-based violence.

Likewise, it is important to be aware that these forms of direct violence we have just mentioned would not be possible without an enabling institutional context. There are widely accepted cultural and symbolic elements that make these forms of violence possible. Such forms of violence include sexist uses of language, the omnipresent gender binarism, or the unequal use of the playground by boys, girls, and other identities. There is also the lack of credibility given to girls who are victims of sexual violence, and the androcentrism and cisheteronormativity of the school curriculum, as well as the authority model in the educational relationship. In this regard, we can say that gender-based violence is enabled not only by all members of the community, but also by the structure of educational institutions itself.

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Based on this structural understanding of gender-based violence, in this article we share some keys for improving the advances made in educational centres. But first, based on more than fifteen years of experience of the Cooperativa Candela, in the following section we describe some elements that mainly characterise the daily routine of the educational centres and spaces in Catalonia, and which are worth reviewing as a first step to ensure that these actuations are indeed transforming.

Educational institutes: throwing balls out?

The first necessary step to handle gender-based violence is openly accepting it exists and that it has a structural dimension. This, however, is not an easy feat. Throughout almost twenty years of experience of the Cooperativa Candela, we have met education staff and management teams who are afraid of admiting some of their members practice any form of violence such as sexual violence. They are afraid of being wrong in their response to it, of being publicly judged and of even receiving retaliation. Consequently, their response is

often very timid or there is none at all, thereby hiding up the violence. These attitudes hinder the potential usage of the educational community as a tool to transform standards, values, and gender norms, which enable inequalities and violence [2]. Campaigns like the one initiated by l'@atuquethafet and @vetencobreix in Castellar del Vallès and led by students of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona are thus increasingly necessary to make aggressions visible.

We must not forget that educational professionals are people who were socialised in patriarchal and cisheteronormative contexts, just like the rest of individuals. This means that if there is no in-depth checking of the personal background and no transformation compromise is reached—or as Freire put, there is no critical conscience [3]—, professors and other educational agents may end up perpetuating the cultural norms that justify violence [4].

When we work with educational communities we indeed find discourses that support arguments justifying the aggressions, mainly through supposedly biological explanations ("boys have uncontrollable sexual impulses") [5]. This type of excuses usually go hand-in-hand with discourses which blame women for the violence they suffer, especially those women who clash with the "acceptable" sexual and aesthetic behaviours that the hegemonic Western moral impose ("if she goes dressed like that she must be looking for something sexual").

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All stories and behaviours concerning gender-based violence in educational centres are still loaded with judgements, myths, and racist beliefs. These beliefs are expressed in different directions like, for example, the attribution of a masculine label to some non-Western cultural practices. This act is linked to a deep ignorance about the West's own sexism and cisheteronormativity. Aggressions perpretated by socially stigmatised groups are easier to be considered as such, which generates the false notion that the supposed increase of masculinity in Catalonia is caused by greater cultural diversity.

We can identify another element linked to myths and masculine and racist beliefs which allows us to identify the structuralist nature of gender-based violence: adultism. Adultism is a social system which considers adult experience the measure to interpret all human experience [6]. There is an asymmetry in social relationships, by which the hegemony rests upon adult people, who are the model for other groups, generally children, teenagers, young adults, and older people. [7].

Adultism results into a representation of the adult person as a realized model to look up to

and through which one can fulfil social ambitions. In adultism, adolescence and youth are always depicted as preparatory phases for the emergence of individuals, thus considering young people not completed and realized beings but instead mere “projects of”. Adultism associates instability and risk to youth, in such a way that not only does adultism attribute a negative connotation to this very important time, but it also questions the validity of the criteria, opinions, and knowledge of young people.

Thus, on one hand the existence of sexism in educational centres is usually explained from an adpoint of view when stating that, without any empirical base, youths are more masculine than other age groups because youth is associated to the ideas of risk and threat. This type of interpretation can lead to consider sexism as a youth problem, when in reality the entire society should be considered responsible, including the educational community.

On the other hand, the fact that adolescence and youth are not perceived as stable stages that have value and meaning by themselves, leads to a lack of listening and recognition of young people by the adult world. This further enhances the revictimization of girls who suffer gender-based violence and, in short, makes it difficult to put comprehensive reparative processes in motion.

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Finally, in addition to sexist, racist and adultist myths and beliefs, we want to mention that teachers and other educational agents suffer from structural limitations when it comes to dealing with gender-based violence in a comprehensive and transformative way. High classroom ratios that do not allow for individualized and careful work, curricula more oriented to the labor market than to the development of critical thinking [8], and generalized training shortcomings in feminist and restorative pedagogies are examples of these deficiencies. The truth is that “no one can incorporate the gender perspective and understand the causes of inequality if they have not been equipped with the necessary tools” [9], and this is what teachers themselves say when they call for training programs on prevention of gender-based violence and for quality didactic materials adapted to their contexts [10].

Keys for a transformative approach to gender-based violence in education

Below we share seven keys to a transformative approach to gender-based violence in the educational field:

1. Work with a broad interpretative framework of gender-based violence in accordance with the law, which includes gender- and sexual-identity-based violence. Therefore, it is necessary to be sensitive to LGTBI-phobia as an expression of sexism and admit that this does not only affect subjects who identify as women (cisgender or trans), but in by no means should one reach the conclusion that masculinity and cisheteronormativity affects all people the same. We cannot forget the social hierarchies on which gender-based violence is based.

2. Develop a permanent, transversal and long-term commitment, from all levels of educational institutions, to the fight against gender-based violence and what makes it possible. It must be a very careful and sensitive task which encompasses the recognition and awareness that in different centers there are different forms of violence, and that the whole community must be involved in the transformation of this violence. When there is an aggression in an educational center, identifying it does not undermines its reputation, all the contrary, that means that the measures of the identification and approach method adopted are bearing fruit, for which we should rejoice.

3. Give credibility to girls and women who report having suffered violence, regardless of how they were dressed or what the trigger was, in order to focus the energy into stopping the violence, identifying the needs of each affected indivual, and looking for damage reparation. Breaking the silence and giving credibility is very important to stop the dynamics of violence and its naturalization.

4. When analyzing and confronting upward violence (from students to teachers), the characteristics particular to educational relationships must be taken into account. Despite the fact that sexism and misogyny are present in student behaviour, the person in front of the group is in a power position, both as a teacher and as an adult. It is thus advisable to adress the tensions produced by the blend of hierarchies in an educational way paying special attention not to reproduce racist and adultist schemes.

5. Include in the transformation of gender-based violence the following two issues: inequality and the system of social norms which makes inequality possible. Commonly known *prevention*, it requires multilevel strategies and a community perspective [11]. This means going beyond one-time violence prevention for young people in order to focus on changing the culture of educational centers, and aspects such as the sexist uses of language and spaces, the content of the CV, inclusion of affective, sexual, and emotional education in a transversal way, etc.

6. Regarding interpersonal violence, establish protocols with a restorative approach that would complement the current majority punitive logic. The repair of the damage suffered by the assaulted persons must be the main focus, rather than the revictimizing attitudes. Therefore, we recommend that the intervention protocols against gender-based violence should be adaptable to any situation. These protocols have to be known by the community and must protect people in vulnerable situations

(or, at least, must not generate unwanted levels of exposure for those who have suffered violence). People responsible for putting them into motion must be trained by specialists with a feminist and anti-racist perspective.

7. If we want the training of the education professionals in gender-based violence to be oriented towards social transformation, the inclusion of feminist pedagogies instruction should be mandatory. The formation courses must be aimed at fostering the development of critical awareness, an awareness that goes beyond understanding inequalities, to promote a commitment to overcome them. From this point of view, training is more than a merely informative activity, as it includes the implementation of reflexivity and action. To promote critical awareness and for professionals to make the content of the trainings their own, it is necessary to include methodologies with real usage. There should also be room to process everything everything caused by gender-based violence causes in the emotional, ideological or practical areas.

Conclusion

The potential of educational spaces to deal with gender-based violence is on the table. Now the institutions must assume the commitment and responsibility for making it possible. It is no an easy journey, and there are no magical recipes. Thus, networking of the educational spaces and transmission of practical knowledge acquired with experience will be essential. The inclusion of an inter-sectional feminist perspective aimed at transforming the causes of gender-based violence and dealing with them is also essential.

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