A BROADER LOOK AT THE SUBJECT

Transgender women, journeys, intersections and gender-based violence

Solange Navas Torres



Illustrator: Eduardo Luzzatti

My name is Beyoncé and I'm a "chav" transgender woman. I started sex work in 2006 in the Villaverde industrial estate in Madrid. In 2001 I came to Madrid in search of a life free of the gender-based violence I had suffered from my father and some other family members, but it didn't turn out like that. In this article I have highlighted the gender-based violence that destroys the lives of transgender women drawing from the specific story of my life and the work done in the framework of the European TransR-Trans Sex Workers Rights are Human Rights project [1]. The work carried out as part of the project allowed me to see that the violence that I experienced was common to all transgender women, even though I thought that I was the only one who was suffering it. My text tells of this violence, as well as the need for repair all of it.

The transgender stigma as a barrier to fundamental rights

I was born in the late 1980s, at a time when deciding to be a transgender woman meant losing everything, including access to fundamental rights such as education. In 2000, I was in the fourth year of secondary school, specialising in accounting, but halfway through the

year I was expelled for not conforming to the student model that the school required. I wasn't able to study again until 2019, but by then my personal situation was very different, and I had to leave my studies in order to be able to earn a living and not lose my home, as access to housing is one of the difficulties that transgender women face on a daily basis.

I should point out that sex work is not legally recognized in Spain, so we have no payroll, which is a basic requirement to be able to rent an apartment. Many of us have used different strategies to get a flat and once you get one, you have to keep it. Many of my friends have had to tolerate abuses of power by landlords or real estate agencies in order to get a place to live. We also often experience abuse from the people who lend their payroll to transgender women so that they can get access to housing. Not being able to exercise our rights and the lack of protection against this situation ends up triggering situations of violence against us.

Another example of the impact of the transgender stigma and the difficulties it creates in finding housing lies in the relationship with the other residents in the apartment building, as we are often considered a "threat". Not everyone in the building wants to share space with transgender women. In my case, the other residents where I used to live collected signatures for me to leave an apartment that I shared with other trans women, since they thought that we practiced prostitution in the flat, even though neither I nor my friends brought any client home. The stigma on transgender women and sex workers was simply taking its course

> Sex work is not legally recognized in Spain, so we have no payroll, which is a basic requirement to be able to rent an apartment

For all these reasons, guaranteeing access to housing is necessary, and therefore public policies are needed, because housing is one of our fundamental rights both as a particularly vulnerable group and citizens. In the case of sex workers, especially those of us who have been working on the streets and claiming this right for many years –we have even lived in the street– this recognition is important, as it would be a reparation for those of us who have historically fought for this right and have survived.

Another area in which the rights of transgender sex workers are violated is in the workplace. Not being able to finish our studies is one of the reasons why most of us are forced into a situation of structural inequality, which significantly reduces our opportunities in life and leaves us with sex work as practically the only option to guarantee our livelihood. Many of us have no wish to be prostitutes, which is why we are always looking for work alternatives, but the doors are always closed to us because we are women who have renounced to gender. In my case, I have worked caring for the elderly and as a hairdresser, which was the type of job I most often found. However, the labour market is full of barriers for transgender women: the stigma that weighs on us severely limits our access to certain sectors. On the other hand, employers are aware of the difficulties transgender women face

in the labour market, so they usually take advantage of this vulnerability to exploit us in the workplace. Furthermore, we have to add the fact that if you do not look like a regular woman, you cannot even apply for any other kind of job.

Health care is another area where transgender women suffer violence because of the lack of knowledge about transgender people among health workers. First, in physician's offices they call us by our non-chosen name, even if we tell them that we do not want to be called that way. Second, I have noticed the impact of prejudice and ignorance in how we are treated. One example can be found in urology, where they call us mister or even treat us as if we had a mental disorder. Another example are medical diagnoses, which are largely based on ignorance; for example, if we have a problem in a testicle, the solution that is mostly offered is to remove it, because it is assumed that all transgender women have to undergo gender reassignment. They forget many transgender women decide not to undergo surgery. Due to situations like this, many transgender women have stopped using the health care system, as it puts their health and lives at risk. On the other hand, the scientific bias is also noticeable, since, for example, there is no statistical data on transgender women living with HIV+, insofar as they are pigeonholed as *men who have sex with other men* [2].

Another place where we don't feel safe is the gender identity unit (GIU), where we constantly suffer violence from employees when the stories or responses of transgender women who come to the unit are not what they expect. Our sexuality is always treated as a pathology.

During my work on the TRANSR project, I was also able to collect testimonies about the difficulties and violence that transgender women face when trying to access justice. Once again, the lack of knowledge and the stereotypes and prejudices about our gender identity, about our sexuality, about our status as migrants or sex workers, totally condition the response that we get from the justice system.

The police have also traditionally exercised an abuse of power against us, an abuse of power driven by racism, transphobia and hatred. Some of the women told us how police officers, in public spaces, go up to them just to have a laugh. One common practice is to ask for their identity documents to see the names they have on their identity cards, and on later occasions, to address them by the names they do not wish to be used, until the women have been able to change and register their real names.

> The labour market is full of barriers for transgender women: the stigma that weighs on us severely limits our access to certain sectors. Health care is another area where transgender women suffer violence

For all these reasons, transgender women do not file complaints when we suffer violence;

we do not feel protected by those who are supposed to protect us and provide us with justice. On the contrary, what we feel is that the ways to render justice are used to conceal our existence and make fun of us. Likewise, it is clear that transgender women do not only suffer violence in the family or in our close environment, which we have taken the drastic decision to leave, abandoning our families and even leaving the countries where we live due to the danger that being a transgender woman implies in these contexts. In addition, we also suffer from gender-based violence when we seek protection and come up against all these kinds of obstacles.

The necessary due diligence

A large part of society ignores and rejects the way in which transgender women live, as most of us are sex workers due to the lack of opportunities and public policies that could provide us with a safer space in society, which sidelines us. Instead of trying to understand their responsibility in what happens to us, people only assign guilt and hold us guilty for the way we live. They do not realise that with transphobia and invisibility what they achieve is precisely this, namely that we are nobody and that life will always be difficult for us.

Transgender women should no longer be consigned to oblivion. The social punishment that we experience, as we are not considered women, means that we are not seen as victims when we suffer gender-based violence, as in many institutions we are still considered men, boys and even people who exercise violence. In some feminist sectors, they consider us rapists or accuse us of “concealing ourselves” as women in order to gain access to women when the truth is that feminist spaces should be for all women, including transgender women. For all these reasons, it is very important for transgender women to be included as victims of gender-based violence. First, because it is a social and political debt, and second, so that we will no longer be excluded from spaces that are also ours and in which our testimonies should also count, be listened to and taken into account when it comes to reporting and making claims.

One of the most important actions for preventing violence is to educate and raise awareness among the population and institutions about how to treat transgender people and to collaborate and work together with them. It is important that they should stop saying we are ill and that when we need help, assistance or support, it should be provided in a context of respect and not paternalism or even violence. It is also essential to hold awareness-raising campaigns to fight against transgender stigma. In short, educating ourselves as a society.

> The social punishment that we experience, as we are not considered women, means that we are not seen as victims when we suffer gender-based violence

Transgender women first and foremost need acknowledgement as the political subjects that we are, something that has been denied so far. We know we cannot count on political representatives, who every year promise us a transgender law that will meet our needs, but so far, they have not been able to have it passed because there is no real political will. We feel instrumentalised and they treat us with the “pity” typical of their places of power and privilege.

In conclusion

To conclude, I would like to point out that transgender women need reparation for our rights that have been violated in access to housing, to education, to health and justice, and to work. We also need reparation and acknowledgement of the right to self-determination of our gender identity.

I suppose that someday, hopefully not too far in the future, we will have a place in this world, and society will start repaying its debt to us. I would like to remember Marsha P. Johnson [3] and Sylvia Rivera [4] who, as transgender women and sex workers, opened up the way for many others, and I am determined to continue the fight they began. This is a path and a moment that at times seems distant and full of difficulties; but we will not stop working to achieve acknowledgement as political subjects and true citizens with full rights. It is clear that many of us will not enjoy all this, but we will have the satisfaction of knowing that we have all, in one way or another, done our utmost, even though many times we have been on the verge of giving up.

FOOTNOTES

1 — The main goal of the TransR-Trans Sex Workers Rights are Human Rights project is the acknowledgement and protection of transgender sex workers’ fundamental rights.

2 — The term MSM (men who have sex with men) was coined in the 1990s in epidemiology in connection with studies on the spread of sexually transmitted infections in men who, regardless of their gender identity, had sexual relations with other men. Nowadays the acronym MSM is frequently used in the medical literature and in social research to describe these men as a group in research studies, without considering issues of sexual orientation. The precise use of the term and its definition have varied with regard to transgender women; some sources consider transgender women who have sex with men as MSM; see Greenwood Seneca; Mario Ruberte, 9 April 2004), “The African American Community and HIV, East Bay AIDS Education and Training Center”, while others see them as HSH (UNAIDS: «Men who have sex with men», available online). Still others are internally inconsistent (defining transgender women as MSM in one place, but referring to “MSM and transgender” in other spaces).

3 — Marsha P. Johnson was considered one of the most relevant activists in the LGBT movement since its beginnings in the 1970s. Together with her partner and activist Sylvia Rivera, she co-founded the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR), an organisation devoted to providing help for the most vulnerable minorities in the community, such as drag queens and the homeless. She was also active in the ACT UP group, which was set up in 1987 to promote scientific research and public health care in the wake of the AIDS pandemic.

4 — Sylvia Rivera was a North American activist who fought for the rights of transgender people. Rivera was a founding member of the Gay Liberation Front and is recognised as one of the pioneers in the fight for LGBT rights worldwide.



Solange Navas Torres

Solange Navas Torres is a street sex worker, rights activist since 2015 and co-founder of the Women's Association of Sexual Workers AFEMTRAS. Between 2018 and 2019, she developed the TransR-Trans Sex Workers Rights are Human Rights project, which aims to contribute to the compliance, respect and protection of the fundamental rights of trans sex workers (TSW), in particular the integral right to health. The transnational TransR project includes the implementation of interventions in five countries: Austria, Spain, Greece, Italy and Portugal.