

IN DEPTH

A feminist look at the peacebuilding process

Irantzu Mendia

Teacher in the Department Sociology of the UPV/EHU and researcher of the HEGOA

In these years of renewed efforts to progress towards peace and political normalisation in Euskal Herria, Basque women from different sectors are becoming aware that denouncing human rights violations with respect to violence in the past and present can help defining new bases for coexistence, where we can speak of a peace which is just and gender-equitable. Nevertheless, this claim is still rarely collectively boosted, with little visibility and comprehension of its relevance, and, in some cases, even finds rejection. This incomprehension and rejection is the result of a certain interpretation of reality where, as a general rule, no connection is perceived between the so-called “Basque conflict” and gender relations in our society.

The inability to see this connection is not only present here, but is a particular characteristic in a vast majority of the socio-political analyses, conducted on violent conflicts in any part of the world. Since decades, feminism has criticised the exclusion of gender as one of the key variables in conflict analysis. From the perspective of International Relations, Cynthia Enloe, for instance, highlights the fact that the debates, to which priority is given by the academic and political community, are part of the dominant accounts which ignore the alternative answers, offered by the gender issue in the characterisation and explanation of conflicts¹.

Opposite to this, in order to see reality from a feminist point-of-view, we need to take into account the gender relations as relevant dynamics in the conflicts, as well as in their transformation. Along these lines, one of the main achievements of feminism is the fact of having generated an international consensus – in the shape of United

Nations Resolution 1325 – on something which should be obvious: that men and women are affected in a different manner by collective violence, that conflicts have gender-specific consequences, and that it is necessary that women participate in all peace processes.

“ In order to see reality from a feminist point-of-view, we need to take into account the gender relations as relevant dynamics in the conflicts and in their transformation ”

In Euskal Herria, there is still much left to be done with regard to the reflection on the socio-political participation of women in the recent history of our country. In the occasions where women were given visibility in the conflict, they were mainly portrayed as relatives (mothers, wives or girlfriends, sisters, daughters...) of direct victims of violence². In some cases, notoriety was given to female members of ETA, and some studies made on their choice and participation in violent acts in the past and at present. Likewise, only few female members of different political parties have made their way to the political-institutional scene, which is dominated by men and masculinised in its forms, tongue, dynamics and symbolic aspects. Even smaller is the social and institutional recognition of Basque women as direct victims of politically motivated violence (murdered, wounded, kidnapped, tortured, sexually abused, persecuted, arrested, imprisoned...), as well as of their status as political subjects in their struggle for peace and for a negotiated way out of the conflict.

On one hand, in order to know the truth about human rights violations on women in Euskal Herria, as either direct or indirect victims, quantitative data are required, disaggregated by gender in order to grasp the real dimension of their experiences, as well as qualitative data for an in-depth analysis of the levels and areas, affected by violence, whose impact, besides physical, is also psychological, family-related, emotional, social and economic. We are dealing here with an issue which is relevant to the extent that, as I mentioned, the way women experience violence is different from

men, due to the fact that society's patriarchal organisation creates different – and unequal – materialistic and symbolic life conditions for both genders.

On the other hand, as political subjects in favour of peace in Euskal Herria, in the past and at present, numerous women have been present in associations, platforms and grassroots movements, working towards the end of violence. Overall, these are mixed spaces, where the gender dimension of the conflict has never been a key element of analysis and which don't coincide with collectives of the feminist movement.

**“ Where politically motivated violence has been
dispatched, there has been no cease of violent
and discriminatory expressions against women ”**

As women's initiative, the Ahotsak Platform (2006), consisting of women of all the main political parties at that time (except the Partido Popular), later joined by others from different sectors such as trade unions, universities and the feminist movement, was an experience which received special repercussion in the media and considerable social support. The result of Ahotsak was a consensus concerning several central premises: a) peace as collective demand and political priority; b) the legitimacy of all political projects, without exceptions; c) the commitment to respect the decision of the Basque society in terms of the transformation, change or status quo of the current juridical-political framework and, as a specific proposal from the feminist movement, d) to affirm women's rights of participation in all areas of decision, related with the resolution of the conflict³.

This last agreement is a principle of central action that has supported subsequent initiatives such as Emagune⁴, which emerged in 2014 as a meeting point for women of the University of the Basque Country/EHU and of other sectors of the Basque society, participating as individuals, with the objective of opening a space for reflection around contributions we can make in the new conjuncture, after ETA declared the definitive cease of their armed activity in 2011.

In Emagune, feminism is valued as a fundamental instrument of analysis and social transformation, due to the fact that it helps us to question imposed references, reaffirm ourselves, identify oppressions, raise solidarity among women, and give meaning to what we think and experience. This is why we consider it as a necessary perspective in the interpretation of the conflict and of what it implies to live in a democratic and peaceful society.

Emagune is a new effort by Basque women to move towards a broader and polyhedral diagnostic of the “Basque conflict”. For decades, this issue has caught practically all the political and social attention, relegating other conflictive situations, which also generate violence, to a secondary role, which is the reason they have not been addressed in the same manner nor have they been considered equally relevant.

“ Feminism helps us to question imposed references, reaffirm ourselves, identify oppressions, raise solidarity among women, and give meaning to what we think ”

On the road to a broader and more complex diagnostic, a prominent aspect of the joint reflection is the fact that gender inequalities remain a constant in our society. Where politically motivated violence has been dispatched over the last years, there has been no cease of violent and discriminatory expressions against women. As such, machismo is a factor which has not only shaped the Basque women’s experience of the conflict, regardless of their degree of participation in it, but even today, it remains present as an obstacle and fundamental threat to peace and coexistence.

This takes us to the need to find links and continuities between violence against women, associated with the political conflict, and violence which is generally related to gender inequality and machismo. It is a way of thinking that carries with it the conviction that consolidating peace and coexistence must go together with a democratic expansion of all relational areas (interpersonal, communitarian, work

related, politico-institutional...), and that an actual participation of the Basque women is directly related to the redistribution of power in our society.

From where I stand, in order to achieve this democratic expansion and redistribution of power, every peace initiative by the Basque women will have some impact and strategic interest, related to the degree in which it contributes to strengthening the feminist movement as a political subject in the decision making process regarding the conflict, its consequences and the creation of a society without violence in its broadest sense.

1. Enloe, Cynthia (2005): "What if Patriarchy is 'the Big Picture'? An Afterword", in Mazurana, Dyan, Angela Raven-Roberts and Jane Partart (editors): *Gender, Conflict and Peacekeeping*, Rowman&Littlefield Publishers, Lanhan, 280-283.

2. Whether victims of ETA, the State Security Forces or vigilante and far-right groups. See the detail on the different actors, responsible of acts of violence in the *Informe-base de vulneraciones de derechos humanos en el caso vasco (1960-2013)*, commissioned by the General Secretariat for Peace and Coexistence of the Basque Government. This is a preliminary report, collecting quantitative data and containing references to the need for more research.

3. The ceasefire break in 2006 tensed the relationships among the political parties and sharpened the pressure for the return to ultra-conservative attitudes in relation to the conflict. In spite of its significance, the experience and the agreements of Ahotsak progressively lost political and media protagonism.

4. Emagune means place or space of women

Photography : Raphael Tsavkko Garcia

© Generalitat de Catalunya