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Statement submitted by Association mondiale de psychanalyse du champ freudien, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.



Statement

Violence against women

Psychoanalytical prolegomena to the discussion

The phenomenon of human violence cannot be explained by natural or biological causes such as we invoke in the case of the animal kingdom, or through an appeal to a more or less innate instinct for aggression, dominance or survival. Human culture, because it is grounded in language as it symbolically acts upon and affects the body, so distorts the register of biological instinct that no truly human action can be understood except with reference to the symbolic register and the meanings it imposes on every subject. Still less can violence against women be explained by the use of a supposed instinctive nature underlying the symbolic world in which all subjective experience occurs. Its universality through different times and places indicates that it cuts across all boundaries of human culture: wherever culture has existed and still exists, acts of violence have been and are being perpetrated against women. Thus, it is no surprise that investigations into this phenomenon should find that transversality showing up across all ages, social classes and work situations, all cultural and even educational levels, and all media; so much so that we can even assert that education itself, however advanced, fails to prevent such violence. Why should this be so? The cross-cutting, multifactorial nature of violence against women indicates the need for an analysis that is also cross-cutting, to understand how violence arises.

In studying that question, psychoanalysis, given its purview, must deal with at least two factors found in every culture and society.

The first factor is sexual difference, the factor most closely tied to the various meanings sexuality has for humans. The locus of sexual difference in every culture is always the product of an irreducible constitutive asymmetry between the sexes. Unless we get past the myth of symmetry and complementarity between the sexes, there is no way to understand the asymmetrical, non-reciprocal frequency of violent acts against women.

The second factor, also found through all cultures and societies, is aggressivity as a formant of the subject's relationship with the images of his ego, his personality, and the images of his peers, from which that very personality is built. Neither is aggressivity something we can deduce from biology or a natural instinct in the subject. One of the earliest theses of the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan was that aggressivity is a phenomenon that "manifests itself in an experience that is subjective by its very constitution," meaning that it can only be thought of as being produced in each subject by a system of symbolic relationships. He goes on to explain it as an experience related to a "corporeal dislocation", a fragmentation of the unity of the narcissistic image, of one's own image, to the extent that that image is built up from the images of others but conceals that constitutive otherness. Put another way, in committing an aggressive act, the subject is attacking, in the other person, those elements of his own otherness that he has failed to integrate into the unitary, narcissistic image of the ego, of what we call personality. The violent act is then revealed as an absolute rejection of what is different and, in particular, what is different, heterogeneous, within the narcissistic unity. Again, what appears as an irreducible datum before violent action is taken is the perception of difference, a difference with respect to the other.

By conjoining and linking these two factors we can arrive at a coordinate axis that will allow an analysis and a possible treatment of violence against women. Treatment becomes possible when we look at the attitude taken by each subject, male and female, to this set of differences, sexual difference and the constitutive aggressivity of the ego.

For that purpose, we need to consider the condition of those who have historically been subject to segregation and violence: children, the insane, women. These are not only the three subjects traditionally viewed as weaker and in need of more protection, they are fundamentally the locus of speech denied, speech that is suppressed in the most radical sense of the term. That may seem clearer in the case of children and the insane. It may seem less obvious in the case of women, to whom psychoanalysis, right from its beginnings, restored a speech that had been muzzled in the silence of symptoms and suffering. Considered in some cultures to be sacred beings, bearers of a hidden truth, those three loci of speech denied also become the victims of violent acts, which take the place of an unsayable word, both within the family and in the wider social reality.

For the man, taking violent action against a woman is generally shown to be a way of attacking, in the other person, what he cannot find symbols for, or articulate in words, about himself. A careful analysis will show, in every case, the unconscious meaning that leads to the misapprehension by the male subject of the elements of his own being that he is attacking as though they belonged to the being of the other, his partner. For the woman, the stance of consent or even accepted submission, which is so often the furthest reach of an action that is nonetheless represented to her as socially liberating or therapeutic, shows the great difficulty she sometimes has in distancing herself from the position of her abusive partner.

Thus, we conceive of the violent act not as a mere behavioural disorder, unsuited to a familial or social reality in which is embodied a greater or lesser degree of conflict. Even the best educational and social practice reaches its limit here. The main point is to determine, through an analysis of each case, the unconscious meanings behind the overt act. Even before that act actually takes place, it is possible to find the traces of the unconscious desire, so that the subject can find another outlet for it than the violent act. Moreover, what psychoanalysis shows and allows each subject to discover is that no way of enjoyment is truer, saner or more normal than another. Each way of enjoyment (homo- or heterosexual, phallic or not...) is simply different from the others. Acceptance of this locus of difference as a logical and ethical principle can already serve as a general way of forestalling violence against what is seen to be different. However, determining how effective this prevention will be for each act is only possible with a knowledge of each subject's nature—nothing more and nothing less; it can never be done through coercion, from a standpoint that would inevitably exclude that same difference.

Given this perspective, we can state the following:

(a) Though psychoanalysis is opposed in principle to every kind of violence, by the same token it has the greatest respect for the speech of the other. Violence as a coercive way of wielding power will always be a sign of the inability to sustain true speech. In the case of violence against women, whether by men, by institutions, by States or by other women, that inability arises from their deafness to the speech of the female subject, but also to each subject's anima. Hence, there is an urgent need to create, support and develop spaces where that speech can be articulated,

heard and interpreted, from the most intimate and familiar to the most public spaces in each social reality.

(b) Only through the greatest possible respect in every culture for difference, especially sexual difference, can a valid and effectual equality be achieved in the realm of social reality and the rights that define the social subject. In this perspective, the demand for equal social rights must be accompanied by the demand for, and the treatment of, difference in the realm of sexual identities. The violent acts that are described as “macho” are shown, in the end, as efforts to erase, abolish, the difference embodied and reasserted in every bond of social reality by femininity.
